

This Mighty Scourge: Perspectives on the Civil War

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Review

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McPherson, James M. *This Mighty Scourge: Perspectives on the Civil War*. Oxford University Press, \$28.00 hardcover ISBN 9780195313666

A Noted Historian's Thoughts on the Civil War

Non-fiction books, especially history, rarely earn praise as page-turners. James M. McPherson makes the feat seem routine. Equal parts synthetic narrative, historiographical essay, and book review, *This Mighty Scourge* accomplishes despite being a collection of essays, an especially tricky genre by which to gain, much less keep, readers' attention. While thus not achieving the coherence of a monograph, McPherson's essays offer perspectives on the Civil War era that demonstrate not only his mastery of the most written-about subject in American history, but his enduring curiosity about the war and its aftermath. What he has offered is a satisfying and insightful set of ruminations that will appeal to both specialists and general readers.

Academics especially will recognize a number of the selections included in this volume, for six of these sixteen essays are reprinted, having first appeared in published collections and academic journals, including the prestigious *American Historical Review*. Readers of the *New York Review of Books* will recognize seven other pieces, for they were first published there as discrete book reviews, with McPherson serving as a long-time reviewer, as did his mentor, C. Vann Woodward. The remaining essays are original. The book then is more compilation than collection, and lest readers are inclined to criticize its derivative nature, one will find the concentration of McPherson's insights, gleaned from a long, distinguished, and award-winning career, well worth the effort. In truth, the writing is so clean that little effort is required.

As one might expect of a book of this type, its scope is far-flung. With five loosely-tied sections on slavery and the coming of the war, the Confederacy, its leaders, and the postwar Lost Cause, leading Union generals and their strategies, the home and battle fronts, and Abraham Lincoln, McPherson weaves together

military, political, and social history with enviable ease. Essays focus variously on the Confederacy's inner divisions, federal policy toward southern civilians, guerrilla warfare and its legacy, prominent New England abolitionists who went to war, the press and its influence on military morale, Lincoln's unprecedented expansion of presidential prerogative as commander-in-chief, and the campaign of former Confederates, men and women, to secure an enduring Lost Cause myth by means of the adoption of southern-centric textbooks and encouraging like academic historical writing. Choice grist, this.

As McPherson himself admits, after more than forty years of research and writing on the Civil War, he has winnowed a blend of old and new interpretations on the controversial subject, and his mind has changed about some of them over that span of time. (Younger historians can only hope, as I do, that his or her writing has influenced McPherson's deep thinking. Clearly some of it has, and readers can be certain that if it has been written about the war, he has read it. Caveat: he suffers fools not gladly, as his reviews attest.) But he is far more often a mentor, and a don, to the profession who invites discussion and even dissent. I welcome disagreement and dialogue, he writes, for that is how scholarship and understanding advance (iv). Reading his book of essays might be no substitute for having attended his former seminars at Princeton University, but it might be as close as a book—and most readers will get to doing so.

Christopher Phillips is professor of history at The University of Cincinnati. He has authored or edited numerous books, most recently The Union on Trial: The Political Journals of Judge William Barclay Napton, 1829-1883 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005). His current project is a study of the Civil War on the middle border and its social and cultural effects on regional identity, to be published by Oxford University Press.