



The War That Forged a Nation: Why the Civil War Still Matters by James M. McPherson.

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James McPherson (Princeton Univ.) is the dean of Civil War historians, best known for his Pulitzer Prize-winning masterpiece *Battle Cry of Freedom*.¹ The present book assembles twelve of his essays; some of them will be familiar to readers of the *New York Review of Books*. While a few chapters “have been substantially revised,” only the eponymous essay appears here in print for the first time. Taken together, they offer crisp, discerning, accessible, sometimes pungent meditations on Civil War historiography at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

McPherson opens with an original, somewhat autobiographical piece on the enduring relevance of the Civil War, a case he first argued in the 1960s against the backdrop of the modern black freedom struggle. If the nation’s costliest conflict in no way resolved the “tension between negative and positive liberty” (13), it nonetheless “accomplished a historic shift in American values in the direction of positive liberty” (12), a shift, the author stresses, symbolized by the addition of the three “Civil War amendments” to the US Constitution.

Faintly echoing “revisionist” histories written in the early decades of the twentieth century, some recent scholars have emphasized the war’s “dark side” and questioned whether the struggle was “worth” its enormous toll in human life and suffering. Considering the unsightly history of Reconstruction and the Jim Crow years that followed, did Union victory accomplish anything at

1. Subtitle: *The Civil War Era* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1988).

all? McPherson has no patience for such proponents of this line of questioning as Harry S. Stout² and David Goldfield.³ He stresses that the war's (admittedly horrific) costs in blood and property were justified by its transformative effects on the Constitution: "the meaning of the war inhered at least as much in its results as in its cost" (63).

Two of the essays treat the Civil War at sea.⁴ In the first, he maintains that "the actions of Union and Confederate navies [were] the single most important factor that directly or indirectly shaped Anglo-American and Anglo-Confederate relations" (66). Foreign recognition of the Confederate experiment was "a very near thing," as McPherson demonstrates in his persuasive analysis of the *Trent* affair, the federal blockade, and the rebels' persistent attempts to acquire European-built warships. But (uncharacteristically during a civil war) politicians and diplomats on both sides of the Atlantic "acted rationally to prevent" the rebellion from metastasizing into a wider conflict (65–66, 78–79).

The second naval essay is a welcome appreciation of David Farragut, the "wiry" rear admiral whose feats "entitle him to virtually equal status with [Ulysses S.] Grant and [William T.] Sherman in winning the war" (80). McPherson casts the hero of New Orleans and Mobile Bay into sharp relief, comparing him favorably with the once promising yet ultimately dissatisfying Adm. Samuel DuPont.

Several essays concern the life and legacy of Abraham Lincoln, whose "trajectory ... had propelled him from the gradualist and colonizationist limitations of his antislavery convictions in earlier years toward the immediatist and egalitarian policies" (115) he espoused in a White House speech just three days before John Wilkes Booth fired his fatal bullet. McPherson marvels at the relative dearth of scholarship on Lincoln as commander in chief,⁵ especially the dramatic story of his self-education in military strategy, his management of recruitment, and his frustrating dealings with languorous, borderline mutinous generals (123–43) like the so-called "young Napoleon" Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan, the politically minded commander of the Army of the Potomac (1861–62). McPherson argues that Lincoln's keen "sense of history" fostered his guiding conviction that the fate of the Union was likewise the fate of republican democracy in the world (169, 164).⁶

In the book's final essay, summarizing the Reconstruction years, McPherson forcefully debunks the myth that "the North won the war, but the South won the peace."

In the war of 1861–65 the North had prevailed and unequivocally achieved the principal goals of that war: preservation of the United States as one nation, indivisible, with liberty for all. A third goal, justice for all, was achieved on paper with the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Moreover, it had come tantalizingly close to success on the ground for a few brief years. In the end, justice was sacrificed for the unjust peace ushered in by "redemption" of the South, a peace marred by

2. *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (NY: Viking, 2006).

3. *America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2011).

4. See, further, McPherson's recent *War on the Waters: The Union and Confederate Navies, 1861–1865* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2012).

5. A void he helped remedy with his Lincoln Prize-winning *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief* (NY: Penguin, 2008).

6. See, further, Gary W. Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2011), and Don H. Doyle, *The Cause of All Nations: An International History of the American Civil War* (NY: Basic Books, 2014).

disfranchisement, Jim Crow, poverty, and lynching. Yet the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments remained in the Constitution.

This “more interpretive than monographic” anthology of articles is a fine, superbly well-informed introduction to key questions, debates, and tensions in the study of the US Civil War. Occasional (unavoidable) overlap aside, all the essays brim with the sort of judicious and acute insights we have come to expect from their author. They will provide students, general readers, and experts alike with needed models of clear-eyed and civil scholarly discourse. At a time when the democratic virtues of decency, rationality, and compromise appear to be on life-support, James McPherson reminds us “why the civil war still matters.”