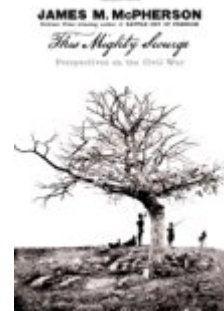


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James M. McPherson. *This Mighty Scourge: Perspectives on the Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. xii + 260 pp. \$28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-531366-6.

Reviewed by Gregory J. W. Urwin (Department of History, Temple University)  
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## McPherson Light Recycled

When James M. McPherson published *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* in 1988, he pulled off a feat beyond the powers of most professional historians. He succeeded in synthesizing the vast historical literature on a complex historical period in a form that appealed to ordinary readers. *Battle Cry of Freedom* not only became a best seller, but also went on to win the Pulitzer Prize.

These achievements established McPherson as the dean of American Civil War studies, and he has retained that title without serious challenge for nearly two decades. During that time, McPherson has produced works of original scholarship worthy of a leading scholar. Perhaps the most important of these is *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (1997). He has also turned out popularized treatments of various Civil War topics aimed at the buffs who comprise so much of his readership, such as *Gettysburg: The Paintings of Mort Kunstler* (1993) and *Hallowed Ground: A Walk at Gettysburg* (2003).

The work under review does not fit easily into either of the aforementioned categories. *This Mighty Scourge: Perspectives on the Civil War* is a collection of sixteen diverse and wide-ranging essays. McPherson wrote three of them expressly for this volume, but the other thirteen were published previously. Seven appeared originally as review essays in the *New York Review of Books*. The remaining six chapters first saw print as articles in various magazines and journals or as contributions to other essay collections. McPherson revised and updated that material, and he claims that the resulting mélange as-

sesses the Civil War's causes, aims, leadership, outcome, impact, and legacy.

McPherson began his career writing about the black experience in the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction, but that is not the main focus of *This Mighty Scourge*. The hordes of enthusiasts who turned McPherson into a one-man industry do not want to consider the central role that race and racism played in America's most murderous conflict. Clinging to a romanticized vision of mass murder, they prefer to read about wizardly generals, daring campaigns, and desperate battles. McPherson does not disappoint that constituency. He offers chapters on Jefferson Davis and Confederate strategy, the failure of Robert E. Lee's Antietam Campaign to win foreign recognition for the Southern nation, and Lee's goals in the Gettysburg Campaign. McPherson's discussion of Confederate leadership exudes a romantic quality that is distinctively old-fashioned. Fans of *Billy Yank* will enjoy McPherson's treatment of the curious friendship of Generals Ulysses S. Grant and William T. Sherman, the Union Army's shift from a war of conciliation to one that deliberately targeted civilian property, Abraham Lincoln's support for Grant during the Vicksburg Campaign, the privileged young gentlemen from Massachusetts who sacrificed their lives for the Union cause, and Lincoln's willingness to abridge civil liberties in wartime. McPherson's observations on the effect newspapers had on soldier morale will appeal to devotees of both the Blue and the Gray.

McPherson remains true to his intellectual roots by

arguing that slavery operated as the main cause of the Civil War, and he skillfully surveys the historiography that tried to bury that fact in the decades following Appomattox. An intriguing essay on antebellum slave flight and resistance wrestles with whether John Brown was a freedom fighter or a terrorist. McPherson takes an unsentimental look at outlaw Jesse James, dismissing the myth that this Confederate guerrilla morphed into a chivalrous Robin Hood after the war. One of the book's most entertaining chapters traces the efforts of the United Confederate Veterans and United Daughters of the Confederacy to ensure that Southern schools taught only a pro-Confederate interpretation of American history by censoring textbooks, libraries, and teachers.

McPherson's mastery of vivid prose and the intricacies of Civil War studies are on display on every page of this readable and engaging collection. On the other hand, there is no disguising the fact that *This Mighty Scourge* is primarily an exercise in recycling—an attempt to get extra mileage out of largely pedestrian material. The book's most exciting ideas and most arresting revelations are those McPherson paraphrased from the works of other historians. Those chapters that McPherson wrote for this volume seem to merely echo his earlier books. While it is convenient to have McPherson's thoughts on so many different topics assembled in one place, it is impossible to turn the last page without wishing this book had more to offer. Yet there is no denying that even crumbs brushed from master's table can make for a delightful repast.

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