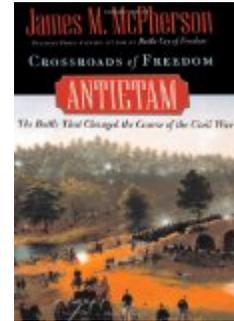


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James M. McPherson. *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 203 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-513521-3.

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Antietam: The Pivotal Battle?

Antietam: The Pivotal Battle?

James M. McPherson, acknowledged by many to be the dean of Civil War historians, offers this work as part of a series identifying pivotal events of American History. This book is sub-titled “The Battle that Changed the Course of the Civil War” and McPherson sets out to diligently prove his case. Featuring a battle print and lots of red lettering, the cover could lead many novices to mistake this for a “who shot at who” book. What McPherson really does is make a compelling case for why the Maryland Campaign of 1862 was so important in shaping the outcome of this four-year war. It is decidedly not a “battle” book, but instead a compelling and cogently argued case for why the events played out in the bucolic setting of Western Maryland in 1862 proved so pivotal in the war.

In his first chapter McPherson lays out the shifting fortunes that marked the early months of the conflict. In his usual blending of political and military events, McPherson shows how the events of the first year of the war affected both the Union and Confederate governments as well as the European powers of the time. The early failures of the Union Army to conquer Southern forces and the Lincoln administration’s clumsy handling of the “Trent Affair” are juxtaposed with the success of Union armies and navies in the early months of 1862. Mirroring the bungled Union efforts in the “Trent Affair,” the Confederate failure to use King Cotton to raise the blockade marks the shifting tides of war in its early days. McPherson cites the usual sources—Charles Francis Adams, Mary Boykin Chesnut, Elizabeth Blair Lee and

John B. Jones—to chronicle the progress and personalities of the various players.

The theme of rising southern fortunes and the resultant tensions dominates Chapter Two, which McPherson titles “Taking Off the Kid Gloves, June-July of 1862.” By firmly placing the diplomatic goals of the respective governments within the context of the military events of 1861 through 1862, McPherson illustrates the burgeoning support for Confederates’ views among European leaders and citizens, neatly making his case for the pivotal nature of events in the fall of 1862. The lack of Federal success, McPherson argues, triggered a wider and deeper commitment in the Union to wage a different sort of war. His theme here is that the Emancipation Proclamation grew from a need to re-ignite Northern enthusiasm by radicalizing the war. Not surprisingly, McPherson places the creation of an army under Union General John Pope as a step towards a total war on Southern interests and most importantly, property.

The events in the Mississippi River region along with those on the eastern seaboard all turned favorably for the South in the summer of 1862. McPherson’s point here is that the invading Confederate forces in the summer of 1862 provoked a crisis both within the Union government and also across the Atlantic in Great Britain. Consistent with his overall theme, the premise that the events of September 1862 could have dramatically changed the course of the war is finely honed through the narration of the defeat of Pope by R.E. Lee and Jackson, the success of Confederate Generals Braxton Bragg and Kirby Smith,

and the possibility of European mediation. McPherson correctly points out that the British proposal was not for alliance, but more of a truce, enforced by the major powers of that era. Several less-thorough authors have overlooked this point. McPherson also cites Southern hopes for Maryland's liberation as a goal of Lee's campaign north of the Potomac and includes evidence (p. 91) that Lee thought the campaign could have a huge impact of the upcoming fall elections in the northern states. In early September all these goals seemed within Confederates' grasp.

The pivotal points of the campaign identified by McPherson center on the military events of September of 1862. After Union General George B. McClellan's pursuit of Lee through the dramatic and bloody battle on September 17 near Sharpsburg Maryland, the tide would turn. Known to Southerners as the Battle of Sharpsburg, and to their counterparts as Antietam, this epic battle remains the bloodiest single day in American history. Beyond that notoriety, McPherson's point is that it was the culmination of a very real chance for Lee to ensure the diplomatic and military goals of the Confederacy. Chapter Four is devoted to the tactical study of this campaign and especially the battle of Antietam.

Ironically, McPherson's treatment of this portion of the campaign is very traditional and relies heavily on some of the more unscholarly, earlier studies of the campaign and battle. For example, McPherson concludes that McClellan's caution and lethargy were the reason why eighteen hours elapsed from the discovery of the Lost Orders to the marching of his forces to exploit them (p. 109). He even suggests that the Southerners would have acted differently if in possession of similar Federal intelligence. McPherson completely overlooks the fact that McClellan did move troops within hours of the discovery, and verified the information through his cavalry commander before acting upon it, a sound military practice both then and now.[1] At Sharpsburg, McPherson suggests that Hooker's movement across Antietam Creek "alerted Lee to the point of attack the next morning" (p. 117). This line of thought was advanced by James Murfin in *Gleam of Bayonets* (1965) and Stephen Sears most stridently in his 1984 *Landscape Turned Red*, but was discredited by Joseph Harsh's *Taken at the Flood* (1999). McPherson also falls into the old cliché that McClellan had 20,000 men "in reserve" during the battle that he was unwilling to commit to the battle. Close examination of this claim, again taken from older studies of the battle, shows that

this is more myth than reality.

Nevertheless, McPherson deems the battle as pivotal to the results of the war and in his last chapter he narrates the impact of the battle on the progress of the war as well as on foreign relations. McPherson properly describes the profound effects of the Emancipation Proclamation, both domestic and abroad. His case, that Antietam was the pivotal campaign and battle, is cemented by the results of both the fall elections and the cooling off of British ardor for mediation. After Antietam everything changed and, although the war continued for another two and half years, the Confederacy was never closer to achieving its goal of independence than it was in September of 1862.

McPherson breaks no new ground in this book. His major sources are all well known and well used. His premise is a modification of the turning points he identifies in his college-level *Ordeal by Fire*. In his previous work McPherson argued for three turning points; the fall of 1862, the summer of 1863 and the fall of 1864. In developing those points, McPherson always emphasized the Maryland Campaign as critical. Here he extends that view to make it the pivotal event of the war, joining those who have argued this case for many years. Arguably the first to say so were veterans themselves, but Murfin made this point a clear tenet of his *Gleam of Bayonets*, later it was seconded in Sears' *Landscape Turned Red* and Harsh's *Taken at the Flood*. However, none of these authors have surpassed McPherson in mustering the evidence nor stating as eloquently the case for the Battle of Antietam as the turning point of the Civil War.

Note:

[1]. For a thorough recounting of this process, see Joseph Harsh, *Taken at the Flood: Robert E. Lee and Confederate Strategy in the Maryland Campaign of 1862* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1999), pp. 238-239. For an acknowledgement of Pleasanton's role, see Stephen Sears, "The Twisted Tale of the Lost Order," *North & South Magazine* 5:7 (October 2002), p. 59.

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