

# Civil War Book Review

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## Feature Essay

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## Feature Essay

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**McPherson, James M. *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: The Illustrated Battle Cry Of Freedom*. Oxford University Press, \$65.00 ISBN 195159012**

Classic revival:

A new take on great work of scholarship

Two decades ago, James M. McPherson's one-volume **Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era** was a best-selling winner of the Pulitzer Prize. McPherson's history has stayed the course and attained monumental status. It served very well as the textbook for the first course on the Civil War that I ever taught. To publish an illustrated version (only 20% of which is abridged) was a smart and welcome publishing decision, a great benefit to his readers, past and future. I recommend it in the strongest terms.

The North's industrial capacity was far greater than the South's for waging war. Because of the ever-increasing scarcity of photographic materials, art supplies, and newspapers in the South, far more Northerners than Southerners drew, painted, and photographed the war. And so, no book can illustrate the Civil War in a truly balanced way. Histories that are primarily pictorial are less a history of the Civil War than of the North's battle with the South. There is no good reason why they should not be read and looked at in that light--and in that light, Professor McPherson's book is magnificent. I am glad to stress the fact that he seems to have made a deliberate effort to balance the number of Southern and Northern images, especially during that time late in the war when the South was far less able to produce them.

No less than the average rifleman—no less than certain generals on both sides—artists, mapmakers, and photographers performed a crucial service. Their direct involvement in the war, sometimes as combat artists and as military photographers, was quite often not only colorful but meaningful. Their works are

simultaneously factual documents and enduring inspirations—inspiration in the sense that the impact of these images played a major part in arousing and sustaining the public's interest in the war and in moving many historians to write about it in the first place, as they themselves have sometimes testified. Professor McPherson does do his duty by naming creators of the images that inspired this new edition, sometimes with a line or two about the artists. A good example is on page 549, under a painting by one of America's foremost artists, Francis Millet, who had been a drummer boy and surgeon's assistant in the Union army. Millet went down with the *Titanic* in 1912.

Similar brief stories could be told about other artists, such as Winslow Homer, Theodore Davis, Alfred R. Waud, Edwin Forbes, and Conrad Wise Chapman and about photographers, such as Mathew Brady, Alexander Gardner, and George N. Barnard. Professor McPherson devotes more attention to them than do most historians. The captions to the 700 illustrations are more informative and expressive than those in most histories. Comprising 35,000 words in all, they do not offer only mere statements of fact, but often tell a coherent, sometimes unusual story, as on page 28 under the cover of a magazine published by the young unmarried women hired to work in the mills of Lowell and on page 95, under a drawing of Anthony Burns, a Virginia slave. The character studies under the photographs of generals and civilians, Union and Confederate are excellent. On page 244 appears a photograph of Parson Brownlow, a Methodist Circuit Rider turned newspaper editor, notorious for exhorting East Tennessee Unionists to burn bridges from Alabama to Virginia. On the opposite pages is one of the book's most powerful drawings—flag waving bridge burners meeting to plan the burning of nine bridges in the only massive synchronized Union guerrilla raids of the war. Many of the illustrations and photographs have been reprinted in numerous histories and pictorials but enough are less familiar and so give the book a fresh look. We are rewarded with such striking photographs as the one on page 548 that I don't remember ever having seen before: Elderly T. C. Lewis posing at the mouth of the Vicksburg cave where he survived the siege as a boy.

Civil War photographs, it should be stressed often, could never capture battle. Sketch artists were often eyewitnesses, who with rapid-fire strokes caught the battle action photographers could not, given the slow exposure of film to light; they could capture only the aftermath, and the stiffly posed generals and groups of soldiers posing, dead or alive. There is an excellent example of this contrast on page 312. A painting (artist unknown) shows the battle between the

*Monitor* and the *Merrimack*, while below it we see a photograph of the *Monitor* that shows only a faint trace of the battle.

Mapmakers such as Jedediah Hotchkiss gave generals such as Jackson a kind of omniscient view, often flawed, of terrain, providing what I call Map-omniscience. Professor McPherson, a scholar of maps, provides the viewer-reader with 27 modern maps by a single artist, Hal Just. But we must be grateful, that he, unlike too many others historians, does not include any present-day, idealized battle paintings (except for N. C. Wyeth on page 288, whose style somehow conveys an aura of times gone by) or photographs of battlefields and monuments and re-enactments.

That fully one-fourth of his book is devoted to the antebellum story, North and South, and to the causes, economic and otherwise, sets Professor McPherson apart from many authors of one volume histories of the war; this valuable component of the book demonstrates his apparent conviction that the war did not begin with the first shot. I often argue that point myself, although I prefer to go further and argue that the term Civil War should include antebellum-battle-reconstruction eras.

His past work on the causes of the war and the cause for which it was fought and the achievement of the 1988 edition of this book made Professor McPherson the most famous and influential Civil War historian of our time. This renowned history has now earned praise in the pages of the *New York Times Book Review* and several other major newspapers as the best ever one volume illustrated history. I am glad of the opportunity to join in that praise, and to speculate that if one were to compare this book with all one's other illustrated one-volume histories of the Civil War, one might decide that this is all one really needs now, and right on through the Sesquicentennial (2011-2015).

*David Madden is founding director of the United States Civil War Center and founder of the Civil War Book Review. For further commentary on Thomas Nast, Parson Brownlow, and the Sultana sinking, see his previous Rediscovery columns. He is the author of the Civil War novel Sharpshooter and co-editor of Classics of Civil War Fiction and of a series of the same name with the University of Alabama Press. Among his forthcoming books are Thomas Wolfe's Civil War and Touching the Web of Southern Novelists, which contains several essays on the Civil War. He has written the introduction to the forthcoming reprint of the classic work Losses of the Sultana. Recently, he interrupted work*

*on a novel, London Bridge Is Falling Down to write a novella, Abducted By Circumstance.*