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James McPherson

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Interview

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McPherson, James

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Interview with Dr. James McPherson

by Christopher S. Freeman

*James McPherson was born in North Dakota, grew up in Minnesota, graduated from Gustavus Adolphus College in that state in 1958, Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University in 1963. He has taught since 1962 at Princeton University, where he is currently the George Henry Davis '86 Professor of American History. Author of more than a dozen books mostly on the Civil War era and editor of almost another dozen. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1989 for *Battle Cry of Freedom* and the Lincoln Prize in 1998 for *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War*. He is a member of the Civil War Sites Advisory Commission 1991-1993 and on the advisory boards of several Civil War preservation and museum organizations. He has also served as President of the Society of American History 1999-2000 and of the American Historical Association 2003-04. **Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Over the last five years, what trends have you observed in Civil War scholarship and publications? Do any hold any particular promise or are you troubled by any of these recent trends?***

James McPherson (JM): The main trend in academic scholarship on the war has continued to focus attention on the home front and the impact of the war on local communities, civilians (especially women and children), and the socio-economic structure of both Union and Confederacy. In the broader field of scholarship that includes both academic and non-academic scholars, studies of strategy, command, and narratives of particular campaigns and battles continue to pour off the presses. Many of these relate military events to the broader social and political context. I think all of these trends are good; I don't find myself

troubled by any of them.

CWBR: What are the most important Civil War books of the last five years? Are there any aspects or approaches to the history of the Civil War Era that have been neglected by contemporary historians?

JM: So many good books have been published in the past five years that it would be impossible—and invidious if it were possible—to single out a few for special mention. On the question of what aspects of the war might have been neglected, I would say that Civil War prisons and the prisoner experience are still understudied, despite the appearance of a few books on these subjects during the past decade.

CWBR: Historical interpretation affects and is affected by contemporary politics and events. How will recent events alter the types of questions historians will contemplate about the Civil War?

JM: The most important recent and current event that might impact the questions we ask and the perspective we bring to bear on the Civil War is the war in Iraq. Just as the Vietnam War thirty-five years ago caused many historians to take a new—and often very critical—look at the history of American wars, including the Civil War, the current quagmire in Iraq may have a similar impact. In particular, questions about the relationship between politics and war—the Clausewitz theme of war as the continuation of politics by other means—is raised by the Iraq adventure and will sensitize historians to similar questions about the Civil War.