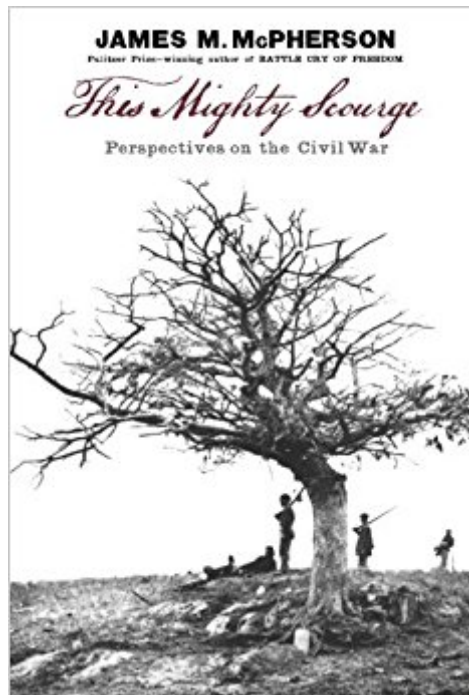




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# This Mighty Scourge: Perspectives On The Civil War



## Synopsis

The author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Battle Cry of Freedom* and the New York Times bestsellers *Crossroads of Freedom* and *Tried by War*, among many other award-winning books, James M. McPherson is America's preeminent Civil War historian. In this collection of provocative and illuminating essays, McPherson offers fresh insight into many of the enduring questions about one of the defining moments in our nation's history. McPherson sheds light on topics large and small, from the average soldier's avid love of newspapers to the postwar creation of the mystique of a Lost Cause in the South. Readers will find insightful pieces on such intriguing figures as Harriet Tubman, John Brown, Jesse James, and William Tecumseh Sherman, and on such vital issues as Confederate military strategy, the failure of peace negotiations to end the war, and the realities and myths of the Confederacy. This *Mighty Scourge* includes several never-before-published essays--pieces on General Robert E. Lee's goals in the Gettysburg campaign, on Lincoln and Grant in the Vicksburg campaign, and on Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief. All of the essays have been updated and revised to give the volume greater thematic coherence and continuity, so that it can be read in sequence as an interpretive history of the war and its meaning for America and the world. Combining the finest scholarship with luminous prose, and packed with new information and fresh ideas, this book brings together the most recent thinking by the nation's leading authority on the Civil War.

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## Customer Reviews

Prolific and much-honored historian McPherson (*Battle Cry of Freedom*, etc.) weighs in on the Civil War in this compilation of 16 essays, most of which have appeared in print before—seven of them in *The New York Review of Books*. Revised and edited for this collection, the essays read like chapters in a smooth narrative that addresses some of the biggest questions of the Civil War: why did it start? why did the South lose? what motivated the men who fought on both sides? how do we evaluate the top leaders—including Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee and Ulysses G. Grant? McPherson goes about answering these and other questions in his usual graceful style, underscored by a thorough grasp of myriad primary and secondary sources on virtually every aspect of the conflict. He forthrightly expresses his opinions while backing them up with well-reasoned arguments, whether challenging the "Lost Cause" argument about why the South lost, or supporting the proposition that it was slavery—and not states' rights—that was the main cause of the war. This strong addition to the massive Civil War canon will appeal to all readers. (Feb.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

James M. McPherson has written and edited nearly 30 books, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Battle Cry of Freedom*. Turf battles aren't uncommon in Civil War studies, and McPherson has a wide reputation as a thoughtful, fair, and readable historian whose insight brings fresh perspective to some often-scrutinized topics. Although McPherson intended some of the essays for an academic audience, each is accessible and worthwhile, and "displays an admirable transparency, showing the historian at work" (*Baltimore Sun*). All pieces have been updated and revised, and each bears the stamp of McPherson's keen intellect applied to topics that continue to generate discussion among Civil War historians and buffs. Copyright © 2004 Phillips & Nelson Media, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

It's a collection of sixteen independent essays addressing questions and legends relating to the Civil War. McPherson writes in an easily followed popular style, meaning it doesn't look like somebody multiple-footnoted doctoral dissertation. I have no idea what McPherson's reputation is among historians but judging from those of his works that I've read he seems balanced, sensible, and unpretentious. One of his books won a Pulitzer Prize, which speaks well for him but probably doesn't earn him universal acclaim from his colleagues. At least it wouldn't in my field. (It's called "envy.") Was Ulysses S. Grant the drunk everyone seems to think he was? Probably not, according to McPherson. He drank, true, but there is no evidence he hit the bottle more than his fellow officers,

except perhaps when he was isolated from his family in California. Did Harriet Tubman perform miracles in sneaking slaves out of the South? Well, yes, but not of Biblical proportions. The numbers of individuals she helped free is considerably smaller than the number assumed and, despite rumors, there doesn't seem to have been a million-dollar reward for Tubman's capture. Was John Brown -- whose body lies a-mouldering in the grave -- a hero or a terrorist? More of a hero among the victors, more of a villain among white Southerners in the post-war period. It's easy for us now to applaud John Brown's character while not condoning his methods. He used violence but it was in a just cause. Well, that's what Timothy McVeigh thought, and the lunatics who flew airplanes into American buildings on 9/11. Every cause is just, from the perspective of the individual who commits murder to promote it. In the end, McPherson leaves the judgment up to the reader. How about Jesse James and the gang -- Robin Hoods of the West? Nope. They were murdering, racist, greedy swine who killed without mercy and kept everything for themselves. The myth of James as exploited by the railroad was bunkum. He and Frank, like many of his gang, came from prosperous slave-owning families in Missouri and applied the ruthless guerrilla tactics they learned during the war to their criminal enterprises. They robbed the railroad not in protest against the exploitation of the South but because that's where the money was. Was Sherman's march to the sea a matter of butchery and war crimes? No, again. If you're going to win a war, perhaps the most humane way of doing it is to destroy the enemy's ability to fight, while avoiding major battles and calamitous casualties. It isn't that McPherson is opinionated. Not at all. He considers the previous literature dealing with each issue and assesses its reliability and its historical context. And his judgments aren't nearly as emphatic as mine have been in this review. I found it to be an enjoyable, informative, and easy read. If these kinds of questions interest you, you'll probably find it rewarding too.

There are dozens of remarkable men and women who write intelligently and prolifically about the Civil War, and many of them have been mentored directly or indirectly inspired by James McPherson. His prose is lucid, graceful, and at times dryly humorous, and his insights frequently penetrating and always courageous. This *Mighty Scourge* collects a handful of his essays, most of them previously published in one form or another. About half of the reprinted pieces are redone book reviews that originally appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, and half are published essays that appeared in journals or anthologies. Many of them will be more than familiar to followers of McPherson's work. For those less familiar, they serve as a good introduction to McPherson's take on the Civil War. There are three new pieces in the collection: one on Lee's hopes for winning the peace at Gettysburg, one on the Vicksburg campaign, and a fascinating piece on Lincoln and

presidential powers during wartime (especially timely today, I might add). For my money, though, the most riveting essay in the book is "Long-Legged Yankee Lies: The Lost Cause Textbook Crusade." Shortly after Appomattox, followers of the Lost Cause, trying to salvage something from southern defeat, began to insist that the war was fought exclusively over constitutional issues, and that slavery had nothing to do with the struggle. With the formation of the United Confederate Veterans (UCV) and United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), "educational" committees were established to watchdog textbooks used in primary and secondary schools as well as colleges and universities to make sure that "long-legged Yankee lies" weren't passed off as truth. Northern publishers who offended were lobbied to modify their texts, and public campaigns to expunge offending books (including Encyclopedia Britannica, for example) from libraries were launched. Mildred Rutherford, historian general of the UDC, was a driving force in all this. In 1919, she published a list of instructions to teachers and librarians that advised them on which history books to keep and which to stay away from. Her recommendations included rejecting books that claimed the south fought to keep slaves, described slaveholders as cruel or unjust to slaves, glorified Lincoln or vilified Jefferson Davis, or neglected to tell of the "South's heroes and their deeds" (p. 102). Extraordinary stuff. McPherson's tale of the textbook wars alone is worth the price of the book.

Excellent, I learned a lot

Great set of essays on various aspects of the Civil War. And clearly lays to rest that the CW was about slavery, not simply 'states rights'.

In depth history parsing witnesses and ranking their reliability abcd. Even with my degree in American history. I felt this was over the top and don ferenbacher was a prof in my department. Nevertheless a facile writer with some cogent views on the civil war. It was well worth the read.

This is a very good book. But I got the Kindle edition which is wonderful except that when writing a reference for a school paper, trying to figure the page number is next to impossible. What I finally figured out, is to take a sentence from the Kindle book, go to , find the same book, look inside and search for the same sentence. That works but it does slow down getting my papers done.

This book is a great read for those who want a mile wide and one inch deep knowledge of this period in American history. Written and paced by a true sage of the subject period, the book will

leave the curious hungry for greater knowledge in many possible different directions. Along with fine treatment of the focus areas, other authors works on specific subjects are discussed and, to a minor degree, critiqued qualitatively. The book's closing has the symmetry of a master's touch. Having read extensively on this historical period, I nearly passed on this work. My insight has been strengthened for having invested the time.

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