

## The War That Forged A Nation: Why The Civil War Still Matters

**Review Number:** 1887

**Publish date:** Thursday, 4 February, 2016

**Author:** James M. McPherson

**ISBN:** 9780199375776

**Date of Publication:** 2015

**Price:** £18.99

**Pages:** 232pp.

**Publisher:** Oxford University Press

**Publisher url:** <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-war-that-forged-a-nation-9780199375776?q=the%20war%20that%20forged&lang=en&cc=gb>

**Place of Publication:** New York, NY

**Reviewer:** Susan-Mary Grant

It was hardly to be expected that the sesquicentennial might come and go without the Civil War's most preeminent historian offering his thoughts on the subject, and James McPherson has not let us down. Not that *The War that Forged a Nation* is in any direct sense a comment on or reaction to the sesquicentennial; it is neither. Instead, this is a collection of review essays and articles that, with the exception of the opening, introductory chapter, have all been previously published; several in the *New York Review of Books*, others in various edited collections that have appeared over the last decade. In several senses, therefore, this collection traces, although it does not always reflect, the shifts in Civil War scholarship that the last few years have witnessed, providing an overview of McPherson's personal perspective set in the context of his professional response to the work of several of his colleagues.

The introductory essay sketches out McPherson's own growing interest in the Civil War from his graduate days at Johns Hopkins, his developing sense, as the Civil War centennial got underway in an atmosphere of civil rights agitation, school desegregation and mounting racial tension, that there was a clear connection, indeed almost a direct line of sight, between America's Civil War past and the racially riven nation of the late 1950s and early 1960s. That connection, for McPherson, still pertains today. Over 'matters of race and citizenship; regional rivalries; the relative powers and responsibilities of federal, state, and local governments', he argues, the shadow of the Civil War still falls, even if it is no longer cast by one of that war's most emotive symbols, the Confederate battle flag, flying over the statehouse grounds in Columbia, South Carolina. For McPherson, however, the Civil War still matters, less for the perennial reinterpretations of its meaning as that plays out in popular and political culture, and more for what, in his view, it achieved at the time in terms of the roadmap provided by the national mission statement in which all men are created equal, all entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This is not to suggest, of course, that he fails fully to appreciate how far the nation has, at various points in its history, veered so far off that track as to be negotiating an entirely different racial, class and gendered terrain altogether. Far from it. The Civil War is not just relevant today, McPherson suggests, but inspirational for the future, and as much for what it failed to achieve as for all that it actually did achieve.

Largely viewed through a Union, in places really a Lincoln lens, McPherson's Civil War is both purposive

and substantive. It was fought to hold a Union together, to transform a nation, to free that nation's slaves and, in a wider sense, to free that nation from slavery. It was a war that brought to the fore issues that the nation's founders had effectively shelved for future generations to deal with: the political power and economic efficacy of free versus slave labour in the broader context of contested constructions of liberty, positive and negative (on which subject McPherson invokes Isiah Berlin's famous essay on the 'Two Concepts of Liberty'). Having been deftly delineated in the opening chapters, these themes are pursued throughout the volume, beginning with a revised review of Leonard L. Richards' monograph, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War* and moving through adapted reviews of, among others, Harry Stout's *Upon the Altar of the Nation* and Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering*, alongside chapters on the war's main political and military leaders, but with the focus mainly, in the second half of the volume, on Lincoln. [\(1\)](#)

In organizational terms, this balance, and this emphasis on Lincoln, has the effect – one assumes deliberate – of merging many of the wider arguments concerning the Civil War as McPherson himself has conceptualized and considered these over the years, and certainly in the last decade, with his more focused work on Lincoln. This is unsurprising since this was a decade that covered not just the Civil War sesquicentennial, of course, but the bicentennial anniversary, in 2009, of Lincoln's birth. And so the focus here, inevitably for a historian whose political awakening took place in the civil rights era and whose first work was on *The Struggle for Equality* [\(2\)](#), is on Lincoln and freedom; on both the military and the moral aspects of the Union president's move to establish emancipation as a 'non-negotiable' component of the northern war effort and the subsequent transformation of the north's troops into 'an army of liberation' (pp. 99, 102).

The context for the crux of the argument in this volume is a review of David Blight's *A Slave No More* [\(3\)](#) that presents the autobiographies of two mixed-race slaves, John Washington and Wallace Turnage, both of whom escaped to Union lines and freedom during the Civil War. These enable McPherson to (re)emphasise the need for balance in our understanding of the process of emancipation, a process that has, at times, been described as occurring almost wholly independently from state intervention. It was during 'the 1980s [that] this self-emancipation thesis became dominant', McPherson notes, and it was mainly, although not exclusively, driven by the research conducted by the Freedmen and Southern Society scholars working out of the University of Maryland (p. 101). But it is an interpretation that McPherson has consistently challenged, most directly in an essay, 'Who Freed the Slaves?' published in his collection *Drawn with the Sword* [\(4\)](#); and there are echoes of that earlier argument here.

Of course there always were, and are, several distinct questions that come together in the debate over emancipation: whether it was the intended purpose or the unintended by-product of the Union War; whether Lincoln had long determined to issue the Emancipation Proclamation as precursor to what became the 13th Amendment or whether he was drawn to do so reluctantly, accepting that, as he himself had put in in the course of his famous debates with Stephen Douglass in 1858, the nation simply could not survive 'half slave and half free'; and above all, whether there can ever be any successful resolution of the tension between public and academic history, between the broad-brush, popular understanding of emancipation, informed by, for example, Ken Burns's hugely successful PBS documentary on the Civil War [\(5\)](#), and the more complicated narrative that pertains within the academy. McPherson does not attempt to address all of these issues here. He simply reminds us that, in the chaos of civil conflict, the individual act informed federal policy, but federal policy, and military deployment, also created a conceptual space within which the individual act could achieve its best possible outcome: freedom.

In some respects, of course, this particular debate over emancipation is no longer at the forefront of Civil War historiography. What has replaced it, however, may be more closely related to it than at first seems obvious. Because implicit in the tension between the academic and the popular as far as the Civil War is concerned is, first, that the subject has traditionally attracted greater interest in those states that, 150 years ago, banded together to form the Confederacy and, second, that it is the War's military history that the public is drawn to in much the same degree as many academic historians recoil from the subject as if it were

contagious. Within those economic and cultural parameters, it may seem as if the problems of slavery and emancipation can never achieve as much traction in the public mind as, say, a study of Robert E. Lee, or another book about Gettysburg. So there is an imperative to position the Civil War on the bookshelves (physical or virtual) in such a way as to make it both real and relevant. All publishers want historians to address the question of why the Civil War still matters; but the results have not always been as successful nor as straightforward as McPherson's own work has sometimes made the subject seem.

There are, however, few hints in this particular collection of just how far Civil War historiography has shifted in the last decade. This is partly because McPherson addresses this shift obliquely rather than directly; and partly because the organization of the essays locates McPherson's response to it in two of the earlier chapters that might, to achieve maximum impact, have been better positioned at the end. Both chapters relate to the larger meaning of the war, not specifically in regard to emancipation, although this is implicit in the debate, but around two conjoined issues: morality and mortality. The first, that examines the extent to which the Civil War might be classified as 'A Just War', was prompted by the publication of two works that adopted, to varying degrees, an anti-war position through their focus on the Civil War's religious dimension: Harry Stout's *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War*, and David Goldfield's *America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation*.<sup>(6)</sup> Both, however, as McPherson points out, rather wanted to have their cake and eat it as far as the process of national construction is concerned, a process that is inevitably as destructive as it is constructive.

Nations are not omelettes, of course, but few are made without something being broken. And for Stout and Goldfield, what was most notably broken in the case of the Civil War was the power of the slaveholder; both identify emancipation as the main, possibly the sole, redeeming feature in a war that, at least as Stout perceives it, became less justifiable as it became more total in its impact on the South, its property and its people. For Goldfield, similarly, the Civil War 'was both the completion of the American Revolution and the beginning of a modern nation', and, simultaneously, 'America's greatest failure', a failure he quantifies in its death toll: 'the deaths of over 620,000 young men, the misery of their families and friends left to mourn their loss, the destruction of homes and personal property, the uprooting of households, and the scenes of war haunting those who managed to live through it' represent, for Goldfield, the damning, indefensible cost of the Civil War.<sup>(7)</sup>

And it is this focus on the war's destructiveness, on the numbers of dead and, in recent years, on the wounded, too, that represents the real change in the historiographical landscape of the Civil War. This forms the subject of the third chapter in this volume that explores 'Death and destruction in the Civil War'. The argument that McPherson offers here is, in fact, a merged version of two separate reviews originally published in the *New York Review of Books*: the first, that appeared in February of 2008, was on Mark E. Neely, Jr.'s *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction*, and the second, in April of the same year, on Drew Gilpin Faust's *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* and Mark Schantz's *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death*.<sup>(8)</sup> At first glance, these may not seem an ideal fit, arguing, respectively, that the Civil War was not as destructive as traditionally thought and that its impact on America was far greater than we ever imagined. And all three works had their problems: Neely's deployed a relative argument unavailable to the Civil War generation, for whom the war was, simply, the most devastating experience of their lives; Faust's study was, in its theoretical approaches, awkwardly located between the *ars moriendi* tradition of Puritan England and the European response to the First World War; and only Schantz attempted to trace contemporary sensibilities regarding the last great necessity. But he did so with a view to challenging what he described as 'the over-arching master narrative of the Civil War', one that he credited McPherson and Ken Burns with articulating, 'a narrative of heroism on all sides, with the forces of authentic liberty and American nationhood triumphing in the end'.<sup>(9)</sup>

It was perhaps inevitable that McPherson would take issue with this downbeat turn in Civil War scholarship, not, as he stresses, because of its 'apparent morbidity' but because, he argues, 'the legacy of the Civil War went beyond its cost in human lives' (p. 63). In this respect, however, McPherson is rather out of step, and possibly out of sympathy with much of the current scholarship which, building on the work of Faust and

Schantz, among others, presents an increasingly grim and gruesome picture of the Civil War. This was a conflict, Michael C. C. Adams' argued, defined by 'pain, heartbreak, and tragedy,' and he directs our attention to 'the terrible infliction of physical and mental wounds, the misery of soldiers living amid corpses, filth, and flies' produced. Indeed, less than a decade after historian Mark Neely confidently concluded that historians were no longer 'at risk of underestimating the destruction of' the Civil War, he was contradicted both by J. David Hacker's census-based revision of the war's white, male death toll and by Jim Downs' analysis of the dire health implications attendant upon emancipation for many thousands of African-Americans. What Downs' work revealed was that even that central element of the Civil War that Stout and Goldfield accepted as positive – emancipation – was less of a triumph than we had long supposed. Emancipation, even self-emancipation, was a process fraught with fear and misery, disease and death. Having been deftly removed from the emancipatory equation in the 1980s, federal authorities are today whisked back into it to stand accused of not doing enough, as if the 19th-century American state had at its disposal the full panoply of support services, medical and material, that the 21st century enjoys; not that these always make much difference to refugees today.<sup>(10)</sup>

Judging by the media coverage that some of this work has received, however, this particular angle on the war clearly appeals to a wide audience. No news is good news, of course. And the headline-grabbing assertions of, for example, Downs' study suggests that its findings have a resonance that goes well beyond the Civil War; that they speak to contemporary reactions to conflict as well as contemporary expectations of the relationship between state and soldier and the power of any state to alleviate the inevitable refugee crisis that most wars produce. None of this is to suggest that the Civil War no longer matters. In some respects the historiography, casting its backward reflection from the wars of today into the Civil War past reveals that it may matter more than ever. But does it matter in the way that McPherson believes it does, and argues that it does in this volume? Possibly not. In some senses what we have here is a generational divide. Historian Stephen Berry has said as much in the process of contemplating the future of Civil War scholarship. Citing what he describes as the 'recent quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan,' he proposes that, Americans 'have yet to fight a war that makes sense to a majority of us in our lifetimes. The wars we've witnessed' he argues, 'aren't even tragic; they just reek of farce and failed policy'.<sup>(11)</sup>

Clearly, what both the academy and the wider public audience want from Civil War history at the moment is confirmation that, as William Tecumseh Sherman famously put it, 'War is Hell'. Quite why anyone might ever have believed it to be anything else may be something of a mystery, but contemporary outrage over the 'dark side' of the Civil War, the real crux of the generational, and interpretative divide, may be as problematic as the more triumphal narrative that it seeks to supplant. It is certainly true that McPherson has long argued, as this current volume makes evident, that the Civil War combined triumph with tragedy, but as the final essay in this volume makes clear, not on its own. The Civil War was, he concludes, just one part of a much 'larger conflict' over the multiple, and sometimes contradictory meanings that the idea of freedom has been accorded in American history (p. 191).

McPherson's reminder that, for example, both John Washington and Wallace Turnage had nothing but praise for the support they received when they escaped to Union lines during the war does not, of course, diminish the terrible conditions that many former slaves experienced in the refugee camps; no more does it excuse or explain away the widespread racism of the era. Such individual stories can do no more than qualify, as McPherson suggests, the larger narrative of suffering and struggle that defined the Civil War for many of those caught up in it (p. 106). In the end, McPherson's Civil War still matters, not because it is a story of valour and national vindication, but because it is a story comprising many individual stories within a broader national, and nationalist narrative arc; a story with several discrete trajectories, some triumphant, some tragic, but all of which have played their part in the 150 years since that war terminated; a story that, for the United States, has not yet ended.

## Notes

1. Leonard L. Richards, *The California Gold Rush and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York, NY,

- 2007); Harry Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (London, 2006); Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York, NY, 2008).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Princeton, NJ, 1964).[Back to \(2\)](#)
  3. David Blight, *A Slave No More: Two Men who Escaped to Freedom : Including Their Own Narratives of Emancipation* (Boston, MA, 2007).[Back to \(3\)](#)
  4. James McPherson, *Drawn with the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War* (Oxford, 1996).[Back to \(4\)](#)
  5. Ken Burns, *The Civil War* (TV series, first broadcast 1990).[Back to \(5\)](#)
  6. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation*.[Back to \(6\)](#)
  7. David Goldfield, *America Aflame: How the Civil War Created a Nation* (New York, NY and London, 2012) p. 1.[Back to \(7\)](#)
  8. Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction* (Cambridge, MA, 2007); Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*; Mark Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death* (Ithaca, NY and London, 2008).[Back to \(8\)](#)
  9. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country*, p. 4.[Back to \(9\)](#)
  10. Michael C. C. Adams, *Living Hell: The Dark Side of the Civil War* (Baltimore, MD, 2014), p. ix; Neely, Jr., *The Civil War and the Limits of Destruction*, p. 218. J. David Hacker has revised the generally accepted figures for the Civil War dead upwards, from c.620,000 to a top figure of c.851,000, with c.750,000 soldier deaths, a rise of 20 per cent. See Hacker, 'A census-based count of the Civil War dead', *Civil War History*, 57 (2011), 307–48; this was challenged by Nicholas Marshall, 'The great Exaggeration: death and the Civil War', *The Journal of the Civil War Era*, 4, 1 (March 2014), 3–27; and see Hacker's response, 'Has the demographic impact of Civil War deaths been exaggerated?', *Civil War History*, 60, 4 (December 2014), 453–8; Jim Downs, *Sick From Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, NY, 2012).[Back to \(10\)](#)
  11. Stephen Berry, 'The future of Civil War era studies' <<http://journalofthecivilwarera.com/forum-the-future-of-civil-war-era-studies/> [2]> [accessed 23 October 2015].[Back to \(11\)](#)

#### Other reviews:

Wall Street Journal

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/book-review-the-war-that-forged-a-nation-by-james-m-mcpherson-1425854886>  
[3]

Boston Globe

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/books/2015/04/11/review-the-war-that-forged-nation-why-civil-war-still-matters-james-mcpherson/pXdv5tBdAtvdjUqmRtAf8L/story.html> [4]

Miami Herald

<http://www.miamiherald.com/entertainment/books/article15464939.html> [5]

HistoryNet

<http://www.historynet.com/interview-with-civil-war-historian-james-mcpherson.htm> [6]

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1887>

#### Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/142283>

[2] <http://journalofthecivilwarera.com/forum-the-future-of-civil-war-era-studies/>

[3] <http://www.wsj.com/articles/book-review-the-war-that-forged-a-nation-by-james-m-mcpherson-1425854886>

[4] <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/books/2015/04/11/review-the-war-that-forged-nation-why-civil-war-still-matters-james-mcpherson/pXdv5tBdAtvdjUqmRtAf8L/story.html>

[5] <http://www.miamiherald.com/entertainment/books/article15464939.html>

[6] <http://www.historynet.com/interview-with-civil-war-historian-james-mcpherson.htm>