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## The Heart of American History (Book Review)

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# DISCUSSIONS OF RECENT BOOKS

## THE HEART OF AMERICAN HISTORY

BY EDWARD L. AYERS

*Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era.* By James M. McPherson. Oxford. \$35.

*Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877.* By Eric Foner. Harper & Row. \$29.95.

**T**he era of the Civil War and Reconstruction remains the crucible of American history, the trial that decisively defined this country and its self-perceived mission. The American people seem to recognize that fact, for no era in our history attracts the general reading public as does that between 1861 and 1877. James McPherson's book, the second volume of a new Oxford History of the American People series, attained the upper reaches of the best-seller list in hardback and is doing so again in paper. Eric Foner's book, a contribution to the long-established New American Nation series, won extravagant praise from critics and a National Book Award. Both authors have long been esteemed professional historians; McPherson holds a chair at Princeton, Foner a chair at Columbia. Their books, representing the height of scholarly achievement and popular acceptance, give us a chance to assess the relationship between intellectual currents and the general reading public.

Two vignettes capture the distance between the kinds of desires and demands that pull on historians these days. At a dinner party, a retired businessman, the sort of informed, sympathetic, and intelligent reader every writer of history

dreams of, talked about reading both McPherson and Foner. He showed a profound respect for each of the books, but he had a clear preference: the Civil War volume was deeply engaging, but he sheepishly admitted that he found the Reconstruction volume "tough going." He had been pulled through the 862 pages of *Battle Cry of Freedom*, but he wasn't sure he would be able to finish the 612 pages of *Reconstruction*. Not only was the material in the war volume more interesting, he thought, but the narrative was simply more accessible and engaging.

The next day, in a graduate colloquium, students ranging in age from their twenties to their fifties offered a different kind of assessment. Having read McPherson one week and Foner the next, they universally agreed that the latter was the far superior book. Indeed, they suggested that the next year's seminar not be subjected to the book on the Civil War while even more time might be set aside to mine the riches of the book on Reconstruction. These aspiring historians, encouraged to innovate in methods, arguments, and even narrative style, found McPherson as shockingly old-fashioned in every regard as they found Foner refreshingly bold.

The gap between these responses could be interpreted as yet another sign of the aridity of modern academic life, about which pundits have been droning of late. It could be interpreted as a sign of the intellectual compromises any author must make who would reach a popular audience. It could be seen as evidence of the inevitable lag between any creative discipline and its audience's expectations. Exploring the differences between the two books, then, can tell us not only about the latest interpretations of important American events but also about the state of historical writing in this country in the late 20th century.

James McPherson tells us in his preface that his goal is to "integrate the political and military events of this era with important social and economic developments to form a seamless web synthesizing up-to-date scholarship with my own

research and interpretations.” He self-consciously announces that he has “chosen a narrative framework to tell my story and point its moral.” By this, he means that he is following chronology rather than a “topical or thematic approach,” which “could not do justice to this dynamism, this complex relationship of cause and effect, this intensity of experience, especially during the four years of war when developments in several spheres occurred almost simultaneously and impinged on each other so powerfully and immediately as to give participants the sense of living a lifetime in a year.” And he also makes it clear that military history must lie at the heart of his book, for all the critical events and changes of the Civil War era “rested on the shoulders of those weary men in blue and gray who fought it out during four years of ferocity unmatched in the Western world between the Napoleonic War and World War I.”

So McPherson offers the ingredients that nonacademic book reviewers of history love to praise and nonacademic readers love to read: a story following a relatively linear line from problem through conflict to resolution. A longing for such a structure apparently lies deep within Western culture, for it can be seen in everything from serious novels (especially those written before Joyce and Faulkner) to situation comedies and commercials. It may have something to do with the problem-solving orientation of modern life, or with a more fundamental human urge to make sense of the chaos that continually threatens us. There is a deep satisfaction in vicariously experiencing crisis and the end of crisis—especially when we know in retrospect how important that crisis was for millions of people. And when that complex story is told with the authority and skill of an author such as James McPherson, when we know that this *really* happened and that this is the synthesis of the latest scholarship, we can feel both emotional gratification and intellectual satisfaction. It makes for a powerful combination.

Throughout the story he tells, McPherson maintains a steady point of view. He finds the most revealing vantage

point to be the generals' tents on both sides of the battle. The strategy, the twists and turns of each battle, the objectives to be won or lost—all are seen from the perspective of Grant, Lee, or their counterparts. It could well be that this is another source of fascination for readers: a chance to look over the shoulder of great men as they are forced to make decisions of almost unfathomable consequence in less time than many of us spend choosing a rental video. McPherson masterfully orchestrates this kind of story, and the military shape of the war emerges more clearly from this book than from any other single-volume study. In this regard, the scholarship truly is up to date, for McPherson knows of all the detailed accounts of each battle, all the debates over whose decisions were at fault for failure and at the center of success.

But in other ways, his account could have been written a quarter of a century ago. In those 25 years, an increasing number of historians have been expanding the cast of characters in the war. Some have stressed the role of the Southern slaves and Northern blacks in the conflict, demonstrating how fears of a slave uprising prevented the Confederacy from putting as many white men in the field as they otherwise might, how slaves rushed to the Union side to help fight as soon as they saw a chance, how Northern blacks struggled to join the war and then struggled for recognition of their efforts. Other historians have stressed the role of women on both sides, showing both how their actions on the home front sustained the armies and how their misgivings about the value of the war and the costs for hard-pressed farmers—especially in the South—helped fuel desertion. Other historians have granted religion, ideology, and other cultural values a central role, helping explain why the South began to fight and continued fighting even after the military tide had obviously turned. Other historians have stressed the experience of the men in the ranks, how their expectations and demands shaped the waging of the war and vice versa.

McPherson deals only in a cursory way with all of these, which he sees as tangential to the central conflict on the

battlefield that forms the emotional and analytical core of this book. While he has little use for self-conscious theory, McPherson does make it clear at the very end of his narrative that he has been striving throughout to stress "the dimension of *contingency*—the recognition that at numerous critical points during the war things might have gone altogether differently." And of the four points he specifies when things could have been different, all turn around major military events, contingencies that deflected the linear flow of history in a different direction.

This stress on contingency is a profound and humane one and helps give *The Battle Cry of Freedom* much of its power. Contingency seems clear in war, which in many ways is history accelerated. Normally, we have to wait months or years to see the outcome of decisions our leaders or ourselves make; in war, the results become manifest almost immediately. The person accountable for the turn of history can be pinpointed, his motivations and limitations catalogued and probed. And this is just what much of Civil War historiography is all about. McPherson faithfully reflects the standards and concerns of Civil War specialists in the shape, the judgments, and the philosophical underpinning of his book.

But how do we build contingency into explanations of periods of history when things were not so clear-cut? How do we combine a recognition of contingency with a recognition that in peacetime relatively amorphous structures of ideology, state, prejudice, party, and culture do more to shape history than discrete events possibly could? Similarly, how do we tell a story that does not have a clear sequence at its heart, that does not turn around a succession of battles? How do we make a story compelling that does not have a clear beginning, middle, and end, much less any satisfactory resolution? That does not have larger-than-life characters striding across center stage?

That is the task that Eric Foner faces in his book on Reconstruction. He gives us full and insightful accounts of the major figures—Thaddeus Stevens, Charles Sumner, An-

drew Johnson and the rest—but major entries in his index turn around things such as the black community, civil rights, class conflict, free labor ideology, the plantation system, and violence. While much of the story he tells unfolds in Washington, most of it occurred in scattered county seats and state capitals, on isolated farms and dark roads, throughout the South and North. Every state traced a separate trajectory through Reconstruction, as prewar and wartime structures of power shaped postwar decisions. The economic life of the nation was being redefined even as its political system fell into turmoil; race relations fell into tremendous flux even as fundamental reorientations were transforming ideology and culture.

Foner chooses to embrace rather than evade this overwhelming complexity. Just as McPherson announces his dedication to straightforward storytelling, Foner announces his intention “to demonstrate the possibility, and value, of transcending the present compartmentalization of historical study into ‘social’ and ‘political’ components, and of historical writing into ‘narrative’ and ‘analytical’ modes.” Throughout his study, Foner moves through various strata of American society in the 1860’s and 1870’s: government, business, freedpeople, women, international trade, the military, agriculture, and voting behavior. Every topic is treated with exhaustive attention to detail, to the historiography, and to taut and precise writing. He cites more sources than even McPherson and is the master of every phase of American history. It is an imposing display, as impressive as any book written in American history in the last decade.

Why, then, did it not go to the top of the best-seller list along with McPherson’s book? Although Foner’s study has undoubtedly sold well by the standards of history books, it did not meet with the same market response as the Civil War volume. Part of the reason has to be the subject matter: in bookstores in malls throughout the country the “history” section is really just military history, with World War II and the Civil War dominating the shelves. The few men who read

books in this country seem to have relatively narrow tastes, with war, sports, and business pretty much exhausting the list. A book whose cover depicts 19th-century blacks lined up to vote should not be expected to compete with a book that shows a phalanx of Union soldiers firing point blank into the chests of Confederate soldiers; a book whose subtitle is a guilt-inducing "America's Unfinished Revolution" cannot compete with a book whose title begins with "battle cry."

But the gentleman at the dinner party had obviously transcended such mundane influences. His reluctant boredom with Foner's book had more to do with matters of substance than with a book's cover. I suspect that it was Foner's determination to write a truly comprehensive account, with shifting points of view and with attention to people whose decisions were not larger than life, that slowed the reader down. Foner's narrative structure demands that the reader be interested in the story of Reconstruction for its own sake, for the issues it illuminates, rather than for the arc of its narrative. The book begins with a series of problems, but instead of passing through a period of crisis and then resolution, its actors pass through a period of crisis only to return to the status of problems; the revolution was "unfinished" in 1877, and remains unfinished over a century later. Not the sort of thing a person might want in recreational reading.

But just the sort of thing an uncompromising professional historian would admire. Not because it is more exhaustive and pedantic, but because it better reflects the complexity of the past that historians are committed to understanding. Not because it excludes the lay reader with arcane inside knowledge, but because it takes us places we have not been before. It may be that the tension between profession and general audience may not be resolvable, because the two audiences need and admire different things. Or it may be that some gifted historian will be able, through some means, to engage a wide readership on a topic of the history of common people at the same time it truly excites a professional audience.



It seems unlikely that anyone will soon surpass the achievement of either McPherson or Foner; their accounts of the Civil War and Reconstruction will be the ones that both professional historian and general reader will turn to in the foreseeable future. But their books highlight a continuing dilemma for people interested in understanding the past in its fullness: must history, alone of the arts and humanities, remain dedicated to 19th-century ways of thinking and writing? Depending on your point of view, that dedication is either the strength of this ancient art or its greatest limitation as the 20th century draws to a close.