

Assignment 1

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In answer to the crux of the assignments question, my early instinct is to approach the book quite hopeful of a great read and a useful piece of scholarly-based work. My bias, right from the beginning, is that I am already a fan of McPherson's work. I have read other books authored by him and have found them to be engaging, factually sound works that fuel my desire to learn more about the subject. My other bias, if all cards are going on the table, is a distinct aversion to Southern apologist/revisionist history that, I believe, can paint a much more favorable picture of pre/post-war Southern states than is historically accurate (based on my understanding of the subject). I have never found McPherson to demonstrate those qualities., and my reading of chapters 8-9 confirms this to my satisfaction.

My primary reason for having such great concern over southern revisionist attitudes toward the Civil War, known more specifically as the “Lost Cause” movement, is because much of the work done during the post-war period and into the 20th century was written in this flavor, including historical fiction novels such as “Gone With The Wind”. I remember reading “The Red Badge of Courage” in school, which is a distinctly Lost Cause book. A quick wikipedia search of the subject (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lost_Cause_of_the_Confederacy) indicates that Lost Cause was a pervasive intellectual movement within the reconstructed states, and I always approach the subject of the Civil War with this in the back of my mind.

On that note, it is worth mentioning that I approach any area of Civil War discussion with this in the back of my mind, including book reviews. I felt the New York Times review was frank and honest about the books strengths and weaknesses. The author of the review clearly enjoyed the book, but still had enough impartial sense to acknowledge that nothing is perfect, including this book. I agree with his criticism of the chapter titles as well. I think the term “revolution” is not quite appropriate for the election of 1860; although it represented the beginning of a major change in American politics, that change would only come about much later and largely as a response to what I believe the review author correctly describes as the “real” revolution, that being the secession of the states. This type of honest insight makes me trust the author more than I would without it.

The second review author did not seem to be of particular use to me. He gave a short summary of some areas covered by McPherson, but most of what he said could be summarized with “Good book. I like it”.

The negative reviews were, not surprisingly, largely critical of McPherson's bias. While it is clear to me that the McPherson does, indeed, have bias in his writing, I would

challenge the authors of these reviews (if it was possible to speak to them) to find me a single piece of scholarly work that is 100% free of bias. As Professor Escobar points out at the beginning of each term, *authors have bias*. The important part is to determine what that bias is and then make a conclusion as to how reliable you believe their work can be based on it. I have concluded that McPherson's bias does not take away from the historical accuracy of his claims and his work. The negative review that cited a number of historical inaccuracies in his work, ironically, failed to cite their own sources for that information. I'm sure McPherson got some things wrong, somewhere in such a complicated book, but another quick wikipedia search (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_M._McPherson) indicates that he is very highly regarded in the area of Civil War history, with numerous published scholarly works over several decades of academia.

That is good enough for me.