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Class: HST209

Date: January 11, 2014

It is difficult, at best, to come to a conclusion as to the veracity of any historical text. The copyright of “Battle Cry of Freedom”(1988) by James McPherson, comes 123 years after the end of the American Civil War. All who were there to witness those events are long dead, so any historian has only their words, deeds, various statistical data, government documents of the time etc.. to fashion a narrative that not only encompasses the events that have occurred but also set them in proper relation to one another, to weigh their relative importance, to establish the causal relationships between them, and, in so doing, give clarity and insight to the ebb and flow of events. To do so requires not only the honed instincts and skill of a scholar, but also a considerable immersion in the subject at hand. The list of James McPherson's books in the front of our text certainly shows he has “plowed the field” of this subject for a considerable time. No less impressive is his position as professor of American history at Princeton University, one of the most prestigious institutions of higher learning in this country, if not the world. While these facts give weight and credibility to “Battle Cry of Freedom”, they cannot, in and of themselves, establish its contents beyond doubt, or render his narrative of events beyond challenge.

But how can one not similarly endowed by experience and knowledge render judgment on such a text? Certainly through careful reading we detect flaws in his reasoning, a sequence of events that seems contradictory, or a cause, or series of causes, that does not seem sufficient to produce the effect that he ascribes to them. We can also fact check. This has been made easier with the internet but has it's own pitfalls due to loads of bad information. But without the primary sources at hand or knowledge of several different interpretations given to the same subject, our attempts to do so seem inadequate at best, as if we were trying to summit Mt. Everest with tennis shoes. This same difficulty applies to the reviews given as well. How are we to know what criticism is valid and what is not? Would we not have to know the qualifications of the reviewer as well? How knowledgeable are they?

There is one other facet that is of importance, that is mentioned in several critical reviews, and that is of bias. Several of the Amazon reviews harped on McPherson's “anti-southern” stance and that his book was “not balanced”. But if the reviewer was biased than anything that disagreed with their point of view would look biased, would it not? I have actually had some experience with this having lived in North Carolina for 20 years. There they still call the Civil War “The War of Northern Aggression” and insist that slavery was not the true cause of the war nor was it what southerners were fighting for.... they were fighting for the right of self-determination. While I can see their point of view, and know for a fact that they were not racist and know that they considered slavery

abhorrent, it still seems evasive. It as if they can spin enough verbiage the elephant in the room (slavery) will shrink to insignificance, giving them the right to a long sought victim-hood and, therefore, moral ascendancy over those damn Yankees. If slavery did not exist in the south, would the civil war have ever occurred? I doubt it. As for the term “balanced” I have always had a problem with this. The idea that the “truth’ lies between two opposing opinions is problematic at best. Truth relies on facts. Of course, interpretation is the tricky part. But as long as belief proceeds analysis the process will always be corrupted.

The New York Time's reviewer criticism of the titles of chapter 7 and 8 seemed a bit labored. If you read chapter 7 the word “revolution” was used by the people of the time so it did not seem so much a judgment on the part of McPherson as it was an “embedding” of the history within his chapter title. The other review takes on McPherson’s contention that the outcome was not certain:

“While there is a certain merit to this contingency-based approach, and the doubt about the outcome of the war that follows as a consequence makes McPherson's narrative that much more engaging to read, it is possible he takes it too far. The North had a tremendous advantage in industrial capacity that allowed it to turn out guns, uniforms, and other military supplies while still keeping the citizenry prosperous; the Southern army was desperate for shoes and other staples by the end of the war. The Union also held a considerable edge in population, so that it could afford to wage a war of attrition against the Confederacy and simply wear it down. “

This does not take into account the war wariness that the north felt at the end of the conflict and that the will to continue fighting is just as important. By the reviewers reasoning the U.S. should have never lost the Vietnam war.....but we did.

I personally have an admission to make...I have read the text about 15-20 years ago. I enjoyed it then and I am really enjoying it now (I went ahead and read the first 7 chapters anyway). I have always enjoyed history and have been reading it for nearly 35 years now. I would like to think I have become a more critical reader with time so I will approach the text with a watchful eye.