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THE BLOODIEST OF WARS

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Byline: By HUGH BROGAN; Hugh Brogan is the author of "The Longman History of the United States of America."

BATTLE CRY OF FREEDOM The Civil War Era. By James M. McPherson. Illustrated. 904 pp. New York: Oxford University Press. \$30; after July 1, \$35.

No doubt someone in the Library of Congress knows exactly how many books have been published on the Civil War, but everyone knows, without counting, why a new one is to be greeted somewhat warily. The Civil War is the most worked-over topic in United States history, one of the most written about in the history of the world. It is therefore a particular pleasure to report that "Battle Cry of Freedom" easily overwhelms all such doubts. It is the best one-volume treatment of its subject I have ever come across. It may actually be the best ever published. It is comprehensive yet succinct, scholarly without being pedantic, eloquent but unrhethorical. It is compellingly readable. I was swept away, feeling as if I had never heard the saga before. It is most welcome.

I am conscientiously bound to report that it is not quite perfect. The maps are accurate and intelligent, but they are printed on a gray ground that makes the gray lines and arrows of the Southern forces hard to see. "These defenders of the South doth protest too much" is a horrible solecism. And there never was such a place as the "Kingdom of Palermo."

I can think of nothing else to complain about. It is easier work to summarize James M. McPherson's many merits as a historian. Of these the greatest is surely his literary skill. It shows in little things and great. For instance, he knows how to use precise details to bring the past, even the overfamiliar past, to vivid life again. I was aware that the Army of the Potomac suffered shocking ill health (largely from bad sanitation) until Gen. George McClellan took it in hand, but I had never heard that in 1861, in the western Virginia theater of war, the Confederates suffered as badly because their farm-boy recruits went down with measles and mumps, to which they had never before been exposed. Unfairly (these children's complaints are killers for adults), "measles and mumps" has a slightly ludicrous ring; precisely because of that I shall never again forget how Robert E. Lee was dealt his first defeat, and how West Virginia got its statehood. Mr. McPherson is wonderfully lucid. Again and again, hopelessly knotty subjects (for example, Lincoln's relations with the radical Republicans) are painlessly made clear. Above all, everything is in a living relationship with everything else. This is magic. Accounts of the Civil War usually sacrifice either detail (often important detail) to narrative flow, or narrative to detail. Mr. McPherson does neither. Omitting nothing important, whether military, political or economic, he yet manages to make everything he touches (say, Union finances or the prisoner-of-war camps) drive his narrative forward. And though no one could write less like those ostentatious Civil War buffs (Bruce Catton springs to mind) whose prose is unrelentingly oratorical, at times he adds to the reader's pleasure either by quiet touches of humor or by literary contrivances so bold as to force themselves on our attention. The supreme example is his omission of Lincoln's assassination. One moment the President is making a speech, with John Wilkes Booth snarling in the crowd ("Now, by God, I'll put him through. That is the last speech he will ever make"). In the next sentence a new chapter begins; Good Friday, 1865, is already in the past and Mr. McPherson is pressing on to describe the very last incidents of the war. It is breathtaking, almost insolent; but it is right. Everybody knows the story of the murder. Lincoln's sudden disappearance from the book gives us something of the shock that his contemporaries

felt when he died - and the author has no space at his disposal for redundant details.

The book is opened with equal, though less obtrusive, skill. This is not only an account of the Civil War, it is a volume in the Oxford History of the United States, and so it begins with a masterly description of the republic at midcentury - a divided society, certainly, and a violent one, but not one in which so appalling a phenomenon as civil war is likely. So it must have seemed to most Americans at the time. Slowly, slowly the remote possibility became horrible actuality; and Mr. McPherson sees to it that it steals up on his readers in the same way. This is historical writing of the highest order, conveying perhaps the most important lesson of all: that we are not always masters of our fate, even when we most need to be.

It is for this and similar reasons that the Civil War must still be accounted a great and necessary theme, mattering more to citizens of the United States than any other in their past. In the right hands, it teaches inescapably the dreadful truth that it is possible for no more than ordinarily sinful men and women, and for politicians of conspicuous ability and patriotism, and for a country enjoying unrivaled prosperity and freedom, to make deadly and irretrievable blunders. Americans did it to themselves. Nobody else can be blamed. Unless every generation receives the lessons of the Civil War in all humility they may commit such blunders again (as indeed the war in Vietnam showed). But the story has often been perverted to teach other lessons (the wickedness of capitalists or damyankees, the righteousness of the Southern cause) or to teach no lessons at all, to be an entertainment for drum-and-trumpet hobbyists. Worst of all, it has been pridefully asserted that, since it belongs to a world now remote, it is unimportant and irrelevant. It is a very good thing that "Battle Cry of Freedom" is now available to refute all such heresies.

I do not think that this epic of doom, this tale of a disaster perhaps implicit in the failure of the Founding Fathers to put slavery into the way of extinction, can be fully conveyed except in narrative form. Mr. McPherson argues that narration is the only mode by which what he calls the contingent factor in the Civil War can be made clear. For he does not think Northern victory was inevitable. The Confederacy had the simpler war aim - to survive until the Union gave up in despair. The Northern will to go on fighting was thus the essential precondition of victory, and if Antietam, or the Gettysburg campaign, or the election of 1864 had gone the other way, as they easily might have done, that will might have cracked.

Only after the fall of Atlanta and Sheridan's defeat of Jubal Early had insured Republican victory in 1864 did the defeat of the South become certain, or so Mr. McPherson thinks; and by his narrative he argues his readers into thinking so too. Events, he reminds us, are frequently unpredictable, and frequently they master men. The lesson is not new, but he handles it freshly, and so rebukes a generation of historians infatuated with theory, structure, numbers and the mere accumulation of data.

On only one matter of importance did I feel inclined to take issue with Mr. McPherson. His seventh chapter bears the title, "The Revolution of 1860," by which he refers to the election of Abraham Lincoln. Chapter Eight, which deals with secession, is called "The Counterrevolution of 1861." Here, I think, he lets his vocabulary run away with him. "Revolution" is a much abused word. In politics it must surely mean something more than a victory in a regular election. No one can deny that the Republicans stood for something new in American history, but the forces they represented - liberalism, urbanism, industrial capitalism, nationalism - had been steadily gaining ground for decades, and some of the groups that gave them victory at the polls, especially the Western farmers, had been around for longer than the Republic.

True, these forces had been held in check for a few years by Southern obstruction, but in 1860 all they

actually did in revenge was to elect Lincoln, and they were much assisted by the collapse of the Democratic Party. They were not given time to attempt more, for their victory was immediately followed by the real revolution of 1860 -the planters' revolution - the secession of South Carolina and her sister states, which were as committed to breaking up a long-established Government as the Bolsheviks were in 1917, and more so than the French revolutionaries of 1789. They could only be defeated by war and the emancipation revolution (or counterrevolution); as Lincoln said, "We must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued." The work of dismantling racial segregation in the North was begun; the national Government was greatly strengthened to meet the needs of war; and the complete Republican economic program was passed into law. It was indeed the second American Revolution; but it would not have happened nearly so fast, even under so astute and patient a President as Lincoln, if the South had remained in the Union. In short, to my mind the election of 1860 was only a step on the way to revolution (just as the election of 1932 was), not a revolution itself.

To be sure, Jefferson Davis said it was an abuse of language to call secession a revolution. He and his followers had left the Union "to save ourselves from a revolution," an assault on property in slaves. But Davis was not a very wise man or an accurate reasoner. He had helped launch an onslaught on the old American political structure, which had sheltered slavery so comfortably; it is hardly surprising that others - abolitionists, Republicans, blacks - for their own purposes enlarged the gap thus opened. As Davis contemplated the ruined postwar South, he should have acknowledged his responsibility. But I don't think he ever did.

Disagreements on points of emphasis do not deserve much emphasis themselves. "Battle Cry of Freedom" is in every respect a deeply satisfying book. Its illustrations are particularly good. The scholarship is as up-to-date and complete as anyone could reasonably wish. If at various places it is surprising not to find reference to a particular scholar or treatise, it is on the whole much more surprising to see how much reading and reflection Mr. McPherson has been able to cram into a life of no more, presumably, than the usual number of hours per day. The notes at the bottom of the page (hooray!) will help explain to scholars why Mr. McPherson is so often able to make fresh sense of old puzzles. The bibliographical note at the end will provide the novice with an excellent guide to further reading. And at only \$30 until July, the book is even cheap, or at least wonderful value for the money.