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Confederate Reckoning: Power And Politics In The Civil War South



Synopsis

The story of the Confederate States of America, the proslavery, antidemocratic nation created by white Southern slaveholders to protect their property, has been told many times in heroic and martial narratives. Now, however, Stephanie McCurry tells a very different tale of the Confederate experience. When the grandiosity of Southerners' national ambitions met the harsh realities of wartime crises, unintended consequences ensued. Although Southern statesmen and generals had built the most powerful slave regime in the Western world, they had excluded the majority of their own people-white women and slaves-and thereby sowed the seeds of their demise. Wartime scarcity of food, labor, and soldiers tested the Confederate vision at every point and created domestic crises to match those found on the battlefields. Women and slaves became critical political actors as they contested government enlistment and tax and welfare policies, and struggled for their freedom. The attempt to repress a majority of its own population backfired on the Confederate States of America as the disenfranchised demanded to be counted and considered in the great struggle over slavery, emancipation, democracy, and nationhood. That Confederate struggle played out in a highly charged international arena. The political project of the Confederacy was tried by its own people and failed. The government was forced to become accountable to women and slaves, provoking an astounding transformation of the slaveholders' state. *Confederate Reckoning* is the startling story of this epic political battle in which women and slaves helped to decide the fate of the Confederacy and the outcome of the Civil War.

Book Information

Paperback: 456 pages

Publisher: Harvard University Press; Reprint edition (May 7, 2012)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674064216

ISBN-13: 978-0674064218

Product Dimensions: 9.2 x 6.4 x 1.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars 47 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #100,196 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #13 in Books > History >

Americas > United States > Civil War > Women #52 in Books > History > Americas > United

States > Civil War > Confederacy #81 in Books > History > Americas > United States > Civil War

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Customer Reviews

Combining the best of the tradition of writing history "from the bottom up," with prodigious research, and a red thread of analytical brilliance, *Confederate Reckoning* dramatically reshapes our understanding of the history of slavery and the Civil War. (Walter Johnson, author of *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*) This is a major book [that] permanently rewrites the history of the Confederacy. (James L. Roark, author of *Masters Without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction*) Analyzing the experience of women, African Americans, and others often placed at the margins of Confederate history, McCurry powerfully challenges readers to get beyond high politics and storied military campaigns to engage a profoundly complicated, and often surprising, story of struggle and change amid seismic events. (Gary W. Gallagher, author of *The Confederate War*) McCurry strips the Confederacy of myth and romance to reveal its doomed essence. Dedicated to the proposition that men were not created equal, the Confederacy had to fight a two-front war. Not only against Union armies, but also slaves and poor white women who rose in revolt across the South. Richly detailed and lucidly told, *Confederate Reckoning* is a fresh, bold take on the Civil War that every student of the conflict should read. (Tony Horwitz, author of *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War*) [McCurry] has written a staggeringly smart analysis of the politics of the Confederacy--indeed, she has written one of the most illuminating and creative studies of 19th-century American political life, period...I have been waiting for McCurry's second book to be published since I read *Masters of Small Worlds* over a decade ago; it is a triumph of political history, and it was well worth the wait. (Lauren Winner Books & Culture 2010-04-28) Forceful and elegantly written...this book [is] a landmark piece of Civil War historiography. (Jim Cullen History News Network 2010-06-11) Good history teaches readers about the past, excellent history offers perspective on the present. By this standard, Stephanie McCurry's *Confederate Reckoning* surely achieves excellence...McCurry offers a carefully researched and well-grounded frontal assault, examining secession's causes and actualities. She quickly disposes of the claims that the war was really about anything other than slavery, demonstrating that fanciful patinas such as "states rights" merely meant linguistic obfuscation of that brutal reality...As modern citizens decry government actions and hearken back to an ideal that never was, so too did the South assert a wish to return to a fictional revolutionary era utopia. This desire allowed them to not only ignore the long odds against their success, just as Tea Partiers fail to consider their program's (such as it is) absurd contradictions...McCurry shines a light on the South's brutal reality and thus encourages us to cast a cold analytical eye on our own. (Jordan Magill San Francisco Book Review 2010-06-22) The sesquicentennial of the Civil War now looms on the horizon, promising its own

deluge of books of every size, shape and description. We will be fortunate indeed if in sheer originality and insight they measure up to Confederate Reckoning...McCurry challenges us to expand our definition of politics to encompass not simply government but the entire public sphere. The struggle for Southern independence, she shows, opened the door for the mobilization of two groups previously outside the political nation--white women of the nonslaveholding class and slaves...Confederate Reckoning offers a powerful new paradigm for understanding events on the Confederate home front. (Eric Foner The Nation 2010-07-14)Building upon her work over almost two decades, McCurry presents a new history of the South's experience during the war. It is an account that foregrounds social history as contrasted with military history, and in this respect it is of a piece with much of the pathbreaking new scholarship on the war. It moves political history from the study of elected politicians and government institutions to an exploration of power in all its dimensions...Perhaps the highest praise one can offer McCurry's work is to say that once we look through her eyes, it will become almost impossible to believe that we ever saw or thought otherwise...Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South is a book about politics that stretches far beyond the ballot and the statehouse, all the way into plantations and farms and families and communities across the South...McCurry has helped to transform our understanding of the Confederacy--and of its impossibility...At the outset of the book, McCurry insists that she is not going to ask or answer the timeworn question of why the South lost the Civil War. Yet in her vivid and richly textured portrait of what she calls the Confederacy's "undoing," she has in fact accomplished exactly that. And in doing so McCurry has written also a paean to social justice and to democracy, commitments and aspirations we would be well-served to make the heart of our Sesquicentennial commemorations. (Drew Gilpin Faust New Republic 2010-10-28)

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Confederate Reckoning provides a refreshing new take on the well-established historiography of the Confederate South. McCurry shows how the dream of a white man's republic that propelled the South into secession was undermined by those typically deemed powerless. Although white men expected to use white women and slaves as instruments of war, they proved instead to be parties with which the powerful had to reckon. McCurry argues that though they have been largely left out of the conversation, women and slaves were influential in the political

landscape of the Confederate South. She provides convincing evidence for this argument through a variety of primary sources including letters, political documents and first-person narratives.

Unfortunately, her tendency to draw from historical and theoretical literature rooted in different time periods distracts the reader from her argument. Lack of organization is also an issue in this book, which attempts to merge two stories—that of white women and slaves—into a single historical narrative. McCurry begins with the women's story and then with no real warning moves on to that of the slaves, leaving the reader confused when approaching the epilogue as to which party she is referring. Her writing style is also problematic. It reads a bit like stream of consciousness, and is often repetitive and sometimes shallow. Many of her points lack development, even though they are reiterated on numerous occasions.

It seems to me that, it was a book just waiting to be written. The author covers topics very rarely considered in any detail in other books on the Civil War. She helps cut through some of the romantic mysticism and points out reasons why, as we all suspected, that most of the South (especially the poor) were very much victims of the Confederacy. She also explains in greater detail the way of thinking of the Planter class of the Old South, which still exists today--you can even hear it in the speech of the elites of the Deep South today. The problem I had with this book, is that the author repeats herself. Some here have said that they don't understand why people are saying that. Let me paraphrase just a couple examples of what I mean. She says, in one paragraph, that "soldiers wives started to become a political constituency for the first time" and explains how. A paragraph later, she ends the paragraph with "becoming a political entity was something new for poor white soldiers' wives". On the next page it says "for poor soldiers' wives, the Civil War was a huge burden, and they came into their own politically". In three pages she might say, "the term soldiers' wives' began to take on political meaning for the first time". Now, that is not repeating yourself with the same words, exactly. But it is repeating concepts that are not that hard to grasp. The book could have been much shorter and, IMHO, much better. I am not sure why the author feels the need to repeat certain points over and over. Another concept "done to death" was how the Planter class had not considered that a full 1/3 of their population would not only not be soldiers, but also would, in all likelihood, be opposed to them. Now, this would seem obvious to us now, so it is important that she point it out. But once is enough. I hope I am explaining the "repetition problem" a little better here....the topic and concepts were great. Repeating concepts over and over made for, in some places, a very long read.

This is one of the most original books on the Amer. Civil War that I've ever read and I've read a good many of them. McCurry asks not only why did the Confederacy lose the war, but maybe more importantly: why did they decide to risk war by leaving the Union, in the first place. Then she goes on to answer the question as to the loss of the war by focusing on two groups that have not been focused upon, to my knowledge, by any other historian: namely, average-to-poor white women (so-called "soldiers' wives") and African-American slaves, both men and women. McCurry points out that these two groups were not even considered when the "leaders" of the Confederacy started the "Revolution." However, along with the issues usually considered by other historians -- e.g., comparative population sizes, military strategy, tactics and weapons as well as battles -- those who were left out of the equation came to play a very decisive role in the prosecution and outcome of the war. The activities of the soldiers' wives and the slaves, made it impossible to prosecute the war efficiently; i.e., on less than two-fronts, all the time! In addition to the above I found this book most valuable because it answered two questions for me; one, I didn't even know I had and another that has always puzzled me. I'd always assumed, unconsciously, that the states of the Confederacy decided to leave the Union through legitimate, democratic means and that the vast majority of Southerners (except those in what is now West Virginia) supported that move. In *Confederate Reckoning*, I learned that in several of the states, the Planters used the same tactics used by the Klan in the post-Civil War period to coerce the exit upon those white Southerners who didn't agree with the move. Second, I'd always wondered why the average Southern white male, most of whom didn't own slaves, was willing to fight for those slave owners who did. McCurry explains this by describing the dynamic of getting all Southern white men to buy-into the notion that they were fighting to protect Southern white womanhood -- their mothers, sisters, wives and sweethearts. As before the war, so after the war. One thing that Southern white men and women were not taught widely in the South, either before or after the Civil War; i.e., to think critically and for themselves, 600,000 people died as a consequence of this lack of education. The only reason I didn't give McCurry 5 stars is because she repeats the same information far too often. That, however, is my only significant criticism. (It would not have hurt to have had more, but shorter chapters, instead of such long ones.)

I am neither a historian or scholar. I found this book redundant during Prof. McCurry's discussion of women's roles prior to and during the civil war. Six chapters could have been three. However, Prof. McCurry's discussion of the tension within the Confederacy over the possibility of using slaves as soldiers and the implications of doing so, makes the book very worthwhile.

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