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Confederate Reckoning



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

OK

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 "solders' 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 solders' 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 Souther 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 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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