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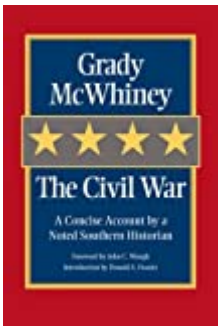

Grady McWhiney. *The Civil War: A Concise Account by a Noted Southern Historian.* Abilene: McWhiney Foundation Press, 2005. 142 pp. $12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-893114-49-4.

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Capstone to a Prominent Southern Historian's Career

In just 137 pages of text, esteemed Civil War scholar Grady McWhiney presents his succinct narrative of the nation's most important historical event. McWhiney's final work offers readers a fast-paced yet factually packed history of the coming of the Civil War as well as a brief overview of the military activities of both Union and Confederate armies. McWhiney's long and controversial career as a southern historian will likely be remembered for his provocative interpretations about the origins of southern nationalism, especially his widely debated arguments that white southerners drew their cultural heritage from Scots-Irish-Welsh immigrants and that this Celtic heritage led Confederate troops to be more tactically aggressive during the Civil War. This final work of McWhiney's is synthetic and does not forward any major new cultural interpretations. The book's primary goal is to introduce the Civil War to a new generation of readers, an objective consistent with the goals of the Grady McWhiney Research Foundation that, according to its website, purports "to further education on topics regarding the history of the middle years of the 19th century in American history and topics in military history."[1] In sum, *The Civil War* is primarily a reflection on the entire era from the perspective of one who has written extensively on numerous topics in southern history and remained throughout his life an advocate for the region.

McWhiney's current work actually pulls back somewhat from his disputed earlier claims about the cultural origins of southern nationalism and Confederate military strategy. In this work, he does not reiterate his Celtic determinism as a rationale for the Army of Northern Virginia's offensive warfare. Here McWhiney blames Jefferson Davis for choosing the aggressive Confederate military policy and shields Robert E. Lee and other prominent commanders from direct blame. The author's narrative is strongest in its analysis of Confederate martial prowess, which he credits with winning many battlefield victories but also with the ultimate demise of the manpower-strapped Confederacy. McWhiney continues to assert here, as he and Perry D. Jamieson did in *Attack and Die* (1982), that it was this penchant for the offensive that cost Confederates an irreplaceable number of men and officers. In this concise account, McWhiney even goes so far as to argue that since the Union army "had only a three-to-two manpower advantage over the

Confederates" southerners could "have remained in their entrenchments and ... destroyed the federal army" (p. 93). In short, the author seems to have digested (if not completely accepted) his critics' rejection of his cultural claims for aggressive southern military policy. Nevertheless, he preserves his strongest assertions about the devastating nature of Confederate military assertiveness; he maintains that "taking the tactical offensive in nearly seventy percent of the major battles" ultimately cost the Confederacy the war (p. 95).

The volume does suffer somewhat from a particularly pro-southern interpretation of several important events during the conflict. McWhiney blames Abraham Lincoln for not seeking more accommodation with the South during the secession crisis and for not supporting the Crittenden Compromise more forcefully. He lets President James Buchanan's administration off far too lightly for letting the South go in peace, an act that some argue bordered on treason, especially in the case of Secretary of War John Floyd, who allowed vast military stores to fall into southern state government control on the eve of the war. Furthermore, McWhiney goes out of his way to emphasize that the war was really about the conflict between states' rights and federal power, even if the most important state right was the right to own human chattel. Many historians will read this analysis as simply an apologia for the institution of slavery that brought on the conflict. In one section, the author even questions the constitutionality of the Emancipation Proclamation as a legitimate war power permitted to the executive branch (pp. 112-113). Nevertheless, he is clearly right about the expansion of U.S. federal and executive power during the war; even if he neglects to mention that Confederate federal government went even further in centralizing executive power, as historian Paul Escott has shown.[2] McWhiney is also quick to point out that the U.S. government failed to do enough to protect the rights of black southerners in the postwar era, yet he curiously does not mention that it was from the local and state governments in the redeemed South that they needed protection. Overall, it is McWhiney's tone, emphasis, and factual omissions that some readers will find problematic.

McWhiney's concise account also leaves out some of the less flattering dimensions of the Confederate cause. He mentions the massacre of black troops at Fort Pillow but takes great pains to minimize the event's implications for white Confederates' racial ideology. He plays down the evidence of other racial atrocities during the war entirely, despite excellent scholarly evidence to the contrary (p. 115).[3] Although McWhiney offers a complete discussion of the Confederate debate over using black soldiers, he presents virtually no information on the approximately 180,000 black troops that served in the Union army. Two glaring absences are the lack of any discussion of the internal guerrilla conflicts across the Confederate home front and the absence of even a single paragraph on southern Unionism.[4]

For scholars of the Civil War and the nineteenth-century American South, McWhiney's volume offers very little that is new, but it will impress upon all scholars many of the remaining lines of debate. For new students of the war, the narrative provides a quick introductory overview, albeit with a pro-southern interpretation of secession, states' rights and federal power, and actions taken by the Lincoln administration, especially regarding emancipation. With this in mind, the book still offers careful readers several interesting but often overlooked historical facts, like the statistical data on swine production in the South and the percentage of Confederate generals killed in relation to Union commanders. In sum, McWhiney's book is a fitting capstone work to his unique career as a "noted southern historian," encapsulating many of his strongest arguments and seasoned with his sympathetic southern point of view.

Notes

[1]. Gary W. Shanafelt, "The Grady McWhiney Research Foundation" (August, 14, 2004), www.mcwhiney.org (June 2, 2006).

[2]. Paul D. Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

[3]. For a good introduction to racial atrocity, see Gregory J. W. Urwin, *Black Flag Over Dixie: Racial Atrocities and Reprisals in the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004).

[4]. A good reference for southern Unionism is John C. Inscoe and Robert Kenzer, eds. *Enemies of the Country: New Perspectives on Unionists in the Civil War South* (Athens: University of Georgia, 2001). For guerrilla warfare, see Daniel E. Sutherland, ed., *Guerrillas, Unionists and Violence on the Confederate Home Front* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999).

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