



Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam (Pivotal Moments in American History)

By James M. McPherson

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The Battle of Antietam, fought on September 17, 1862, was the bloodiest single day in American history, with more than 6,000 soldiers killed--four times the number lost on D-Day, and twice the number killed in the September 11th terrorist attacks. In *Crossroads of Freedom*, America's most eminent Civil War historian, James M. McPherson, paints a masterful account of this pivotal battle, the events that led up to it, and its aftermath.

As McPherson shows, by September 1862 the survival of the United States was in doubt. The Union had suffered a string of defeats, and Robert E. Lee's army was in Maryland, poised to threaten Washington. The British government was openly talking of recognizing the Confederacy and brokering a peace between North and South. Northern armies and voters were demoralized. And Lincoln had shelved his proposed edict of emancipation months before, waiting for a victory that had not come--that some thought would never come.

Both Confederate and Union troops knew the war was at a crossroads, that they were marching toward a decisive battle. It came along the ridges and in the woods and cornfields between Antietam Creek and the Potomac River. Valor, misjudgment, and astonishing coincidence all played a role in the outcome. McPherson vividly describes a day of savage fighting in locales that became forever famous--The Cornfield, the Dunkard Church, the West Woods, and Bloody Lane. Lee's battered army escaped to fight another day, but Antietam was a critical victory for the Union. It restored morale in the North and kept Lincoln's party in control of Congress. It crushed Confederate hopes of British intervention. And it freed Lincoln to deliver the Emancipation Proclamation, which instantly changed the character of the war.

McPherson brilliantly weaves these strands of diplomatic, political, and military history into a compact, swift-moving narrative that shows why America's bloodiest day is, indeed, a turning point in our history.

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Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #314197 in Books
- Published on: 2002-03-05
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.10" h x .70" w x 9.10" l, .70 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 224 pages

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

The bloodiest day in United States history was September 17, 1862, when, during the Civil War battle at Antietam, close to 6,500 soldiers were killed or mortally wounded and another 15,000 were seriously wounded. Moreover, James M. McPherson states in his concise chronicle of the event *Crossroads of Freedom*, it may well have been the pivotal moment of the war and possibly of the young republic itself. The South, after a series of setbacks in the spring of 1862, had reversed the war's momentum during the summer, and was on not only on the "brink of military victory" but about to achieve diplomatic recognition by European nations, most notably England and France. Though the bulk of his book concerns itself with the details--and incredible carnage--of the battle itself, McPherson raises it above typical military histories by placing it in its socio-political context: The victory prodded Abraham Lincoln to announce his "preliminary" Emancipation Proclamation, freeing slaves. England and France deferred their economic alliance with the battered secessionists. Most importantly, it kept Lincoln's party, the Republicans, in control of Congress. McPherson's account is accessible, elegant, and economical. --*H. O'Billovich*

From Publishers Weekly

Contributing significantly to Oxford's new academic series *Pivotal Moments in American History* and to the literature on the Civil War, McPherson convincingly establishes the Battle of Antietam as the conflict's pivotal moment militarily, politically and morally. His depiction of the spring 1862 Confederacy shows it reeling under blockade while the North was learning how to practice "hard war." Yet McPherson tracks Robert E. Lee in the Seven Days' Battles and the Second Manassas campaign, placing him, by September, in Maryland and threatening Washington. Foreign nations were poised to recognize the Confederacy, and Lincoln had postponed his plans to liberate its slaves. With an election coming in November, demoralized Northern voters were in position to give control of Congress to a Democratic party with a vocal peace wing. The Union general George B. McClellan never took a risk he could avoid; on September 17, at Antietam, he failed to commit his full force, yet managed to get a defeated, demoralized army to the field at the end of the single bloodiest day in American history: over 6,000 men from both sides dead. Before the battle, McPherson carefully demonstrates (with the aid of 30 duotones and seven maps), the Civil War's outcome had been disputable. In Antietam's aftermath, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. France and Britain discreetly backed away from recognition. The Republicans kept control of Congress and of most state governments. The war was now the Union's to lose.

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From Library Journal

An appropriate selection for the publisher's "Pivotal Moments in American History" series, this pithy monograph by McPherson (history, Princeton; *Battle Cry of Freedom*) argues that the bloody clash at Antietam on September 17, 1862, in which over 6000 Union and Rebel troops perished, would ultimately determine the outcome of the Civil War. Earlier in the year, Lincoln's armies appeared near victory with such successful western campaigns as Shiloh and Forts Henry and Donelson and the surrender of New Orleans and Memphis. However, during the summer months, the pendulum of battle swung toward the Confederacy, culminating in the Army of the Potomac's drubbing in the Seven Days Battles and the enemy's drive into Maryland. McPherson brings alive Gen. George McClellan's overtaking of "Bobby" Lee near the village of Sharpsburg, thereby checking his invasion of the North. The Federal victory at Antietam, limited as McPherson concedes it was, blunted Lee's momentum, eclipsed the likelihood that foreign countries would recognize the Confederacy, reversed a disastrous plunge in the morale of Northern troops and civilians, and

afforded Lincoln the chance to issue his long-awaited proclamation of emancipation. A fine study; recommended for the classroom and all libraries. John Carver Edwards, Univ. of Georgia Libs., Cleveland
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