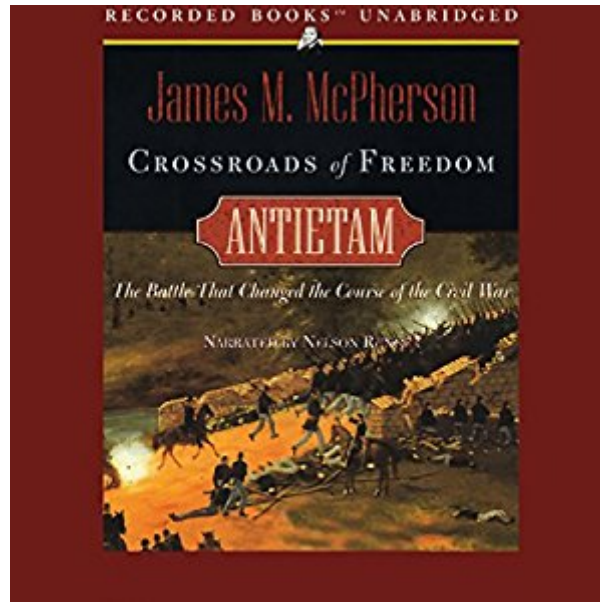




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Crossroads To Freedom: Antietam



Synopsis

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. --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

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Customer Reviews

As author of *Battle Cry of Freedom*, a Pulitzer Prize account of the complete Civil War and its related events, James McPherson is well-qualified to write about individual Civil War battles. But, McPherson makes it clear that Antietam is about more than a battlefield. He frames the battle, not just in its horrendous scope, but in the perspective of its importance. Lee believed that he needed early dominance, because the Union's depth of resources would eventually turn the tide. So, when the Union suffered a series of losses and Lincoln shifted troops away from McClellan resulting in general demoralization, Lee took the opportunity to act. In September 1862, he crossed the Potomac with intentions to invade the North. But, Lincoln had reinstated McClellan, and his popularity with the troops boosted morale on the eve of battle. Then, the improbable happens: two Union soldiers discover a misplaced copy of Lee's "Special Orders 191" containing details of the Confederate Army's troop movements, including the timing and roads to be taken. This event played a role in the Antietam outcome. But even with this foreknowledge, the results were offset by McClellan's bias toward caution and his tendency to overestimate Lee's strength. The result, historically bloody but not decisive, was "good enough." As a consequence: 1. Lincoln had his "victory" with the military support needed to proceed with the Emancipation Proclamation, making slavery a major war issue. 2. Congressional pressure subsided to sue for peace. 3. European governments shrunk from their inclinations to support the Confederacy. In this concise book, McPherson presents a comprehensive picture of both this battle and its effects, which make the Battle of Antietam a turning point in the war.

Superb, fascinating history that doesn't mince words on opportunities, failures, and the small events (contingencies) that can change outcomes. I think he proves his thesis that it is Antietam that marks a turning point in the war, though the battle itself was indecisive, mainly because it halted a movement in Europe to intervene, and recognize the Confederacy, and also helped the Republicans hold on to power in the elections. Its attention to newspaper accounts, letters, and journals is refreshing, in an analysis of the morale factor on each side.

"Crossroads of Freedom" is essentially a brief history of the events leading up to the September 17, 1862, battle along Antietam Creek, followed by an analysis of how the battle changed the course of the war. Informed readers will find little that is new, and those looking for a detailed tactical and strategic account of the battle will be sorely disappointed. McPherson devotes only 15 pages to the actual fighting. The lack of focus on the actual fighting is not, however, a flaw in this book. Focusing on Antietam as one of the important "turning points" of the Civil War needs little argument.

McPherson effectively steers the reader through the important events and central themes during the first two years of the war, from the perspectives of both the Union and the Confederacy. By the late summer of 1862, the Army of Northern Virginia, under the leadership of its new commander, Robert E. Lee, was pushing north; the Confederacy was on the verge of European recognition; and Lincoln was pushing for emancipation, though he was looking for a Union military victory as political leverage. Additionally, important Northern elections loomed in November. McPherson's ability to integrate these themes through the thoughts of the relevant participants gives the reader a robust sense of the uncertainty of the times and, more importantly, just what was at stake for both sides. According to McPherson, "No other campaign and battle in the war had such momentous, multiple consequences as Antietam." McPherson is surely correct in this assessment. However, there is a danger in misinterpreting what McPherson means in describing the event as a "turning point." The Battle of Antietam did indeed have "multiple consequences," including the failure of European countries to officially recognize the Confederacy, the Union army's ability to push Lee's army back across the Potomac, and Lincoln's issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation. McPherson does not conclude that Confederate defeat was inevitable after Antietam. Antietam was one event among others, where the course of the war could have gone either way. The Confederate army and the will of white Southern citizens remained formidable well into 1864. Engaging, informative account of one of the more traumatic periods in American history!

Abraham Lincoln issues the Emancipation Declaration after this battle in Maryland. Lee was planning to invade Pennsylvania as he did later at Gettysburg. Interestingly William C. Davis author of *Crucible of Command* does not call the battle a Union victory but Lee's army was repulsed by of all people General McClelland. This was the battle where Lee's battle plans were lost and discovered by a Union soldier and brought to McClelland's attention. This is a short book of just 200 pages. The author McPherson is a gifted writer and well recognized historian having been a history professor at Princeton for about 40 years.

THIS Book is an easy read and provides very helpful review of the early campaigns leading up to the battle of Antietam. It provides a full understanding of just how important this battle was for both North and South, and convincingly portrays it as THE DECISIVE BATTLE OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR. No other history of the Civil War has taught me so much as McPherson does in CROSSROADS OF FREEDOM: ANTIETAM. This is a "must read" for all citizen-scholars of the Civil War.

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