

mounting a response, he writes, "A particularly inventive religious genius, an American talent for defining new religions and revising old ones . . . has infused and saturated culture at all levels. In fact the period from World War II to the present has seen one of the longest sustained religious revivals in American history."

A closely related theme, again more implied than stated, is that the seemingly "distant reaches of American culture" are really quite close. For example, in 1951 Bell Telephone Laboratories invited Hollywood film director Frank Capra to produce four television films on scientific subjects. A devout Catholic as well as a graduate of the California Institute of Technology, Capra wanted to incorporate a religious perspective. The debate over whether he should do so occurred across a wide social spectrum, from professional physicists to network executives, university theologians to parish priests, journalists to ordinary viewers. By telling such tales in all their complexity, Gilbert suggests that American culture is created "not by isolated subcultures operating according to their own rules in self-styled obscurity, but by groups and individuals reacting to questions that discharge like sheet lightning across the sky."

—Ken Myers

**FOR CAUSE AND COMRADES:**

***Why Men Fought in the Civil War.***

By James M. McPherson. Oxford University Press. 256 pp. \$25

A perennial question about Civil War soldiers, one that especially haunts the post-Vietnam American psyche, is Why did they fight? Why did Northerners shed blood to preserve an abstraction, "the Union"? Why did Southerners fight to preserve an institution, slavery, that did not directly benefit most of them? With the publication of *Ordeal by Fire* (1982) and *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988), McPherson, a historian at Princeton University, established himself as America's most eminent and accessible chronicler of the Civil War. But he has not rested on his laurels. The present book, his fourth since *Battle Cry*, concentrates not on battlefield tactics and leaders but

on the experiences of men in the field. McPherson does not deny the existence of shirkers and skulkers. But his concern is with those who did fight, and continued to fight, whether enthusiastically or dutifully, until death, defeat, or victory.

Drawing on the vivid, poignant diaries of more than 1,000 soldiers, this account cuts against the conventional wisdom about the motives of Civil War soldiers. To be sure, those reasons were varied. Some soldiers felt a sense of masculine adventurousness, like the Wisconsin captain who craved to "lead [men] into danger to see what they are made of & if I would run," or the South Carolina planter's son who fancied himself "a knight in a beleaguered fortress" who must, "when the castle is to be stormed . . . put on my harness & wield my blade." Others harbored an unholy thirst for vengeance, such as the Louisiana cavalry sergeant who asserted in 1863 that the only thing keeping him going was "absolute hatred" of "the hyperborean vandals with whom we are waging a war for existence. . . . I expect to murder every Yankee I meet if I can do so with impunity."

But at bottom lie the factors named in McPherson's title. Time and again, he finds sentiments similar to those of a New York private who wrote in 1865 that the sacrifice of his friends had been worthwhile because they had fought "against cruelty and oppression" and had "proven to the world that the American people can and will govern themselves." On the southern side, McPherson finds idealistic affirmations of "liberty" and "the dear rights of freemen" against the "vassalage" and "degradation" being threatened by the North.

In short, McPherson concludes that there is no plausible way to reduce the motives of Civil War soldiers to low or self-interested goals. These men understood what was at stake, and a steely sense of honor made them persevere to the bitter end. The reader comes away with lasting admiration for the soldiers on both sides—and a lingering uneasiness about the mettle of our own cynical age.

—Wilfred M. McClay

