



Richard McMurry

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“A Georgian Looks at Sherman”

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The Civil War Roundtable of Chicago
Chicago, Illinois

by: Bruce Allardice



“War is Hell.” “War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it.” “I can make this march, and I will make Georgia howl!” These and other colorful quotes made the outspoken William T. Sherman one of the most sought-after speakers of the 19th Century. They also contributed to Sherman’s image among southerners as a remorseless, ruthless war leader, who wrecked the state of Georgia. Words such as “arson” and “pillaging” are often thrown around when talking about Sherman, especially by Georgians. As one Georgia historian later wrote of the March to the Sea, “The limits of this chapter do not permit of an adequate description of the ruin wrought throughout Georgia. The imagination, acting upon the basis of the outline here given, cannot exceed the reality”.

On April 8th Richard McMurry will present his perspective of General Sherman. As a long-time Georgia resident, McMurry grew up hearing the local stories and opinions of General Sherman and his alleged murderous, destructive rampage through Georgia in 1864. McMurry will ask whether the image of Sherman’s announced “total war” policy, matches the reality, and indeed whether this image of Sherman is actually shared by most Georgians. He’ll explore why many Georgians have this view even today, when modern scholarship has, at a minimum, dispelled many of the myths regarding Sherman. As McMurry has observed, “Sherman’s bark was worse than his bite.”

Dr. Richard McMurry is a respected historian, humorist, author and lecturer in Civil War circles. Richard is a native of Atlanta, Georgia, a graduate of Virginia Military Academy, and received a Ph.D. in history from Emory University under Bell Wiley. He is the author of numerous books and articles on the Civil War, including *Two Great Rebel Armies: An Essay in Confederate Military History*; *John Bell Hood and the War for Southern Independence*; *The Fourth Battle of Winchester: Toward a New Civil War Paradigm*; and *Atlanta 1864: Last Chance for the Confederacy*. Dr. McMurry has spoken several times to our Round Table.

By: Jackie Wilson

At the 700th meeting of the Chicago Civil War Round Table, on April 8, 2011, Richard McMurray gave an engaging talk on “the most hated man in Atlanta.”

According to McMurry, any school child from 1870 to 1970 would be taught that there are 21 despicable men in Atlanta. Nine belonged to the Birmingham Barons and another nine belonged to the Nashville Balls. The nineteenth was football coach Wally Butts who created a scandal in conjunction with his fellow coach from Alabama, Bear Bryant. Notice all 19 of these men are from the field of sports. The last two however are Civil War Generals – John Bell Hood and Sherman. Hood is hated because he lost Atlanta to Sherman and Sherman for taking it and then his March to the Sea.

Thus began McMurray’s description of Sherman’s reputation and the reality of his actions. Georgians believed that Sherman was responsible for every fire that occurred even if it was 200 miles away from his route through the state. He was blamed for all fires between 1733 and 1946 – quite a feat since he died in 1891! Every house that burned but had chimneys left standing were called Sherman chimneys. That is 213 years as a fire starter!

What was Sherman really like as a general? Sherman’s adult life before the war found him in the South and California and thus most of his political convictions agreed with the southern point of view with one exception: he did not believe in succession. His 13 years in the army did not teach him to be a good combat general, but it did teach him to be a great mind when it came to logistics, supplies and looking at the big picture. However, he was a grand strategist.

When Sherman reached Atlanta it was already in flames thanks to the Confederates. He did not destroy Macon, Augusta or Albany. He states that if the house was occupied, it probably was not destroyed – unless the owner fired on the Union soldiers. As he marched through Georgia with his army in four columns with 60 miles between each side thus covering only 12% of the state. McMurry questions the reports that he burned everything in the state by asking the question: Where did all those antebellum mansions come from if he destroyed every house in the state?

One interesting point is that the white pro-secession population of Georgia was in the minority and the slaves welcomed Sherman as their savior. However, he attempted to turn them away and did not encourage them to follow his army. In fact, he would destroy a bridge so that the slaves could not follow.

In conclusion, McMurray opines that it was Joe Johnston that lost Atlanta based on a horrible campaign, not Hood who had good plans to defend the city but the execution was poor and his physical condition did not help. Hood looks good next to Braxton Bragg who lacked the moral courage to take risks. Neither Sherman nor Hood really belongs on the Georgian most hated list.