The Civil War *and* New York City

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In memory of my brother

DONALD STUART MCKAY

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Preface

The Civil War and New York City are two popular and enduring subjects for both scholars and general readers. Countless books have been written about each of them, and their fascination appears to be endless. Oddly, despite such massive attention over the years, this is the first comprehensive book about the city during the war. A few aspects have been well treated by others such as the draft riot and the attempt to burn New York, but none has covered the effect of the war on the life of the city from start to finish. Such a synthesis, I believe, provides a fresh perspective along with new material based on previously unused manuscript collections.

The purpose of this book is to tell about the thoughts and actions of important and unimportant people who lived through the tragedy of these terrible years. It is presented as a panoramic view in a chronological manner to give a sense of events, and reactions to them, as they unfolded. The facts produce many surprises and frequently lay bare the inconsistencies of human behavior. And underlying the facts were the persistent illusions held by both supporters and critics of the war. Sudden shifts of opinion, often founded on misinformation, confusion, and ignorance of the future, caused innumerable ironies among New Yorkers who saw a war with different eyes than those of us who look backward in safety with clearly defined principles and loyalties.

Since the days of the Dutch, Manhattan was a heterogeneous place where clashes of ideas commonly produced vitality in a city mainly devoted to commerce. Prejudices and differences existed, but they were usually set aside to conduct the work of the day and created a semblance of tolerance. As the Civil War approached, tensions between the North and South sharpened sentiments within the city about war and peace. In a city traditionally friendly to the South, the new strains and crosscur-

rents of thought were amplified and sometimes seemed intolerable. These imbalances of ideas were an additional burden to the more normal complexities of urban life amid a rapidly growing population. Health, housing, poverty, and the most recent wave of immigrants were among the multitude of municipal problems that still had to be borne, war or no war.

New York City has always defied logical classification, but particularly so in the years between 1860 and 1865. A close look at the city in that troubled time exposes the errors of false images. Stereotypes of hardheaded businessmen and hard-boiled politicians frequently failed to follow expected patterns. Unquestioned devotion to the Union and seeds of sedition or near sedition were habitually voiced by striking personalities. Sometimes realists, wrongheaded or not, desperately sought peace while more ethereal individuals called for blood. The city had no shortage of articulate saints and sinners who contributed color along with confusion and conviction. Fernando Wood and his brother Benjamin were only two among many dramatic figures who were adept at stirring furious emotions. The city dwellers, in the main, gave their support to the Union, and they gain our admiration, but it was not an easy decision for them. Even after minds were made up, many remained disturbed and disconsolate.

Heroics took a holiday from the city now and then, but searching for solutions to the imponderable questions of war and peace was eternally energetic. Freedom of expression existed regardless of arbitrary arrests, and attempted restrictions on speech and press were futile. The discordant voices were an embarrassment to the Union more than once. At the same time, they were a living demonstration of freedom. It was America's strength, not its weakness.

Consistently, among the many inconsistencies, irony continually flaunted logical expectations. One instance was the behavior of one of the most vocal groups who opposed the war—the recently arrived Irish-Americans. Their bitter criticism of the war and the national administration was more than offset by their casualties in the ranks of the Union army. In battle after battle they numbered among the maimed or killed. Consistency of thought and action was truly a paste jewel.

Indifference to the immorality of slavery seemed prevalent throughout the city. Yet within four years there was almost an unconscious evolution of thought among many citizens. Imperceptibly they

reached new viewpoints that were more sensitive to the evils of slavery and the condition of blacks. The transformation, as one diarist revealed, usually took place quietly in people's inner lives without public fanfare.

New York City was filled with compromisers before and during the war. Their efforts were in vain, and they often seem ignoble to us, but their prescience about the horror of war may teach us some lessons for the future. We automatically condemn war while we continue to glorify it wittingly and unwittingly. Despite our protestations, we still take more pride in combat and less pride in efforts to prevent bloodshed. We lose patience with compromisers when war seems to be the only alternative. The historical interpretation that politicians failed to prevent the Civil War is not new, but perhaps the compromisers stopped trying too soon. As J. H. Plumb once wrote, "First we must get rid of the insane notion that all negotiation is preliminary to appeasement."

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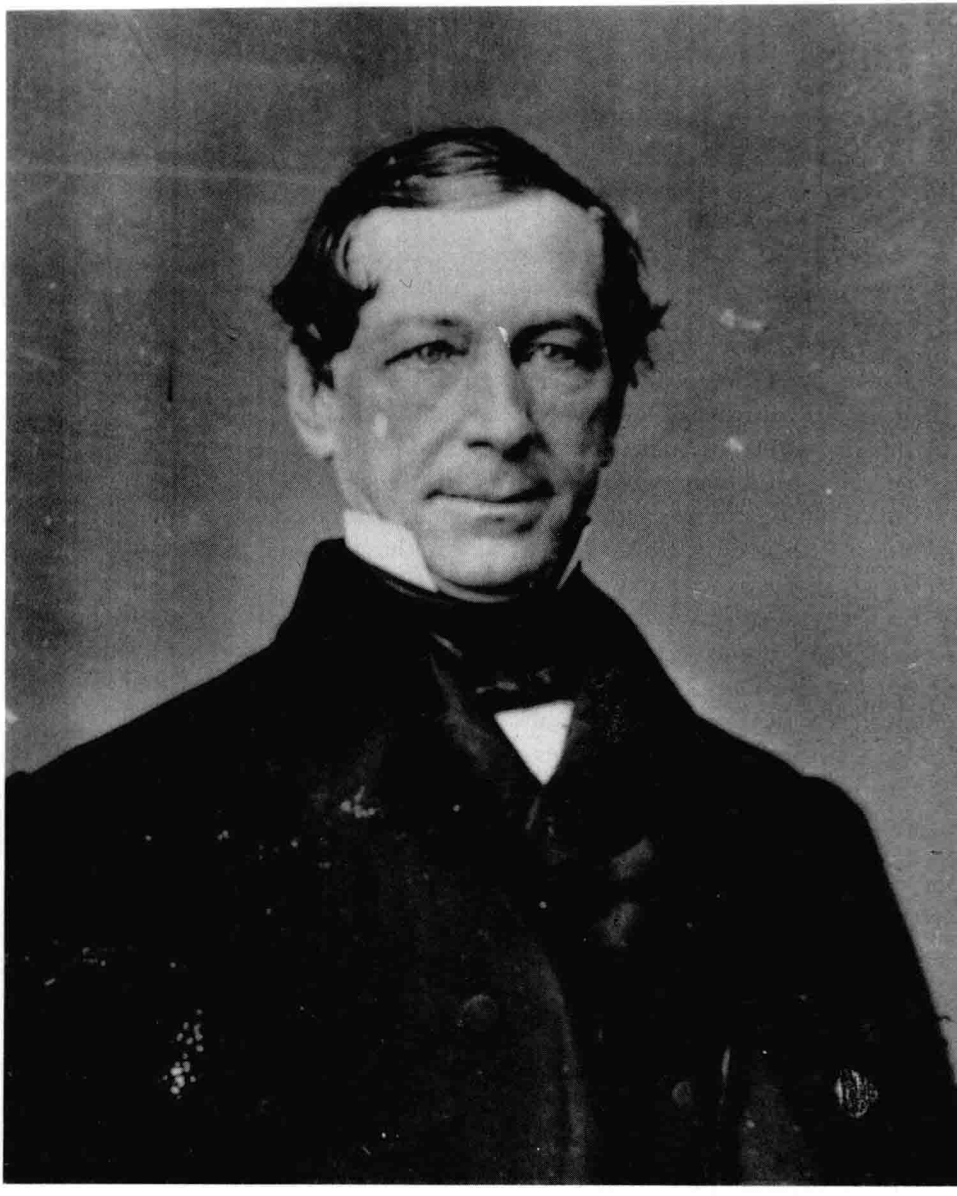
The Long Wait

The mayor of the City of New York was the picture of an aristocrat dining at Delmonico's. The deep blue eyes, sleek hair, slender build, and polished manner of His Honor Fernando Wood blended with the fashionable surroundings and favorably impressed people of refinement. Yet this same man was equally at ease drinking beer with his less elegant but ardent admirers at the Volks Garten or claiming the affection of the Dead Rabbits, the most notorious gang in the city. Some people said that the mayor was the handsomest man they had ever seen. Others said that he was the most corrupt. John Bigelow, a prominent editor, was sure he was both. It was certain, however, that Wood was a far more perplexing person than anyone had reason to believe from the appearance that emanated from his ever affable, always unruffled ways.

So many scandalous tales circulated about this mayor who led the city into the new decade of the 1860s the wonder was that he had been elected. The stories that floated around about his wicked doings made it easy to suspect that there must be some truth to the murky rumors. Before turning to politics, Wood had been engaged in a series of business ventures that hardly increased his reputation for honesty. His charm and duplicity had carried him a long way from the wine and cigar store on Pearl Street and the grocery and grog shop at Washington and Rector streets that he operated as a young man. Contemporaries said that he arranged to have stevedores paid off in his shop and then sold them bad malt liquor. Later, he entered the shipping business, and one of his ships was among the first to reach San Francisco after the discovery of gold in California. But his success was always accompanied by shadowy stories of swindles and false pretenses.[1]

In a rough city known for its rough politics, Wood served two terms as mayor from 1855 to 1857. When vicious infighting with jealous mem-



Fernando Wood, mayor of New York City at the start of the Civil War. (Courtesy of the New-York Historical Society)

bers of Tammany Hall led to his defeat for reelection in 1857, he walked out of their midst and formed his own greedy tribe, Mozart Hall. His audacity paid off, and Wood won a third term at City Hall in 1859. He was well placed to shape public opinion. His Quaker background might have been taken as a sign of his absolute integrity and birthright interest in peace in a troubled time, but skeptics saw him in a different light. Politics had not interfered with Wood's interest in business. To the contrary, they went hand in hand as his political friends helped him prosper in real estate. William Marcy Tweed, a young, energetic politician with his own ambitions, begrudgingly envied Wood's enterprise. "I never yet went to get a corner lot," he said, "that I didn't find Wood had got in ahead of me."[2] And in Wood's second term, the state legislature took the police out of his control because the department was so debased and inefficient.

Fellow Democrat Samuel Tilden, cool and analytical, tried to explain Wood's most recent victory at the polls to his friend the elder statesman Martin Van Buren. Horrified by Wood's behavior, he readily admitted that he could not compete with Wood's finely honed organization. He told the former president that Wood had the support of "the lower stratum of Irish" combined with special interests and some job-seeking Republicans.[3] It was an unbeatable alliance.

The appearance or reality of corruption did little to harm Wood's blossoming career. Even the White House did not seem to be outside the range of possibility as the mayor cast his eyes on the national arena. During the year, Wood, ever on the make, had bought the *Daily News* to help boost his chances for the Democratic nomination for vice-president of the United States. And in December 1860, the forty-eight-year-old Wood, once divorced and once widowered, strengthened his ties with the best people of the city by taking for his third wife the cultivated sixteen-year-old Alice Fenner Mills, daughter of a rich New York merchant. His new father-in-law was well established with the thriving Broad Street grocery firm of Atwater, Mumford and Company, and he had great expectations for the new member of his family.

The contradictions in the character of Fernando Wood reflected the contradictions in the city itself. Any elegance, integrity, or leadership that emerged from the largest city in the Union was frequently marred by ugliness, rascality, or subservience. Virtue and vice, energy and lethargy, luxury and poverty were in continual combat. The rest of the na-

tion reacted to the city with a mixture of respect and disdain. To some, it was a symbol of success, to others a symbol of greed. There was never unanimity of thought whenever New York City was the subject. Still, for all its sore spots and provincial pride and prejudice, New York was a place of power and home for some of the most influential citizens in the country. Their thoughts and actions affected the entire nation. Wall Street's premiership in finance was well established, but by 1860 prominence in other fields was equally important. The words of clergymen, intellectuals, and editors echoed throughout the land while the labors of manufacturers, shipbuilders, and merchants found markets in every corner of the country. And there was politics. The city seemed to breed politicians. Although some never raised their sights above seeking favors for clubhouse cronies, others more shrewd and durable sharpened their talents on the broader scene. As sectional tensions increased between North and South, New York politicians had much to say to a national audience even though they rarely spoke in unison.

These voices came from a disparate city of eight hundred thousand people that Wood ruled, or at least reigned over. It was a partially settled Manhattan that had always vibrated with well-defined contrasts and never projected a homogeneous image such as Quaker Philadelphia or Calvinist Boston. Instead, differences had historically clashed within its borders, ethnic, economic, political, and religious. Strong resentments and violent opinions were a part of daily life. Yet somehow the residents endured each other side by side.

Above Fifty-ninth Street there were few buildings except flimsy squatter shacks. Joseph Choate, a young New Englander starting a law practice in the city, walked to 100th Street one day and for the first time saw the wretched living conditions of Irish workingmen who typified the recent wave of immigrants. It was a rude shock for a young man who spent his evenings with the elite Schuylers, Morrisses, and Jays. The Irish lived with their pigs in "miserable cabins," and Choate seriously believed that his old pigsty would have made a better home.[4] Not surprisingly, New York was considered one of the unhealthiest cities in the world.

Central Park, a project the mayor supported, was taking shape under the eye of the architect Frederick Law Olmsted, but it had a long way to go before completion. Nevertheless, it was a major attraction. A dreary area, twice the size of Hyde Park in London, was becoming trans-

formed into a beauty spot that rivaled the loveliness of the Thiergarten. The winding walks of the Ramble, the graceful bridges, and the carefully tended flowers and shrubs fascinated visitors. One of the projects under construction in the park was a reservoir. In the not too distant future, sluices would open to let 107 acres of Croton water rush into the tremendous pool that was called the greatest piece of masonry in the country.[5]

Since the arrival of the Dutch in the seventeenth century, the movement uptown from the Battery was unrelenting. The untidy and raucous city was always under construction. The demolition of old structures disturbed some sensitive New Yorkers who realized that historic relics of another time were lost forever. Nonetheless, they were unable to stop the destruction. Pleas for preservation were abruptly dismissed. Buildings were torn down, others were put up. Blasting the rockbound earth for new foundations never ceased. Steadily the town crept northward. Even Columbia College moved to Forty-ninth Street.

Most of the prosperous families had given up their pleasant residences at the foot of the island and left it to financiers during the day and saloon keepers at night. Commerce, of course, was the main reason for the city's existence. It gave the city vitality and excitement, and there was no doubt that New York was the financial and commercial center of the country. It was more than a mere municipality limited by geographical demarcations. The beautiful view of the harbor from downtown clearly announced that the city meant business. And the city's business was really the nation's business. The bay and East and Hudson rivers were alive with clipper ships, steamships, and assorted riverboats and barges loading and unloading cargo. Shipments from all parts of the country were sent abroad. Wheat arrived from the West through the inland waterways, and cotton came from the South by coastal ships. Exports of produce and merchandise from the port were 30 percent higher in 1860 than any previous year on record at the customhouse. At the same time, increasing quantities of products arrived from the rest of the world for transfer throughout the republic. A. A. Low and Brothers was the nation's largest importer of tea, an old staple. But more and more machinery arrived from Europe to meet the demands of the new industrial world. Estimates claimed that 75 percent of the nation's imports passed through New York harbor.[6]

In the past five years, activity in sugar refining, machine and en-