James Ford Rhodes Biography

James Ford Rhodes

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Biography

James Ford Rhodes (1848-1927), American historian, wrote an influential multivolume political narrative of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

James Ford Rhodes was born on May 1, 1848, in Ohio City, Ohio, now a part of Cleveland. His father was a prosperous businessman. After a year of education beyond high school, Rhodes went into business. The business proved to be very successful, and Rhodes, who had literary interests, was able to retire in 1884 to pursue his desire to write history. He had in mind a general history of the United States from 1850 to 1888. After completing the first two volumes, covering the period from 1850 to 1860, in Cleveland, he moved to Cambridge, Mass., in 1891, hoping to find more congenial surroundings and a more intellectual atmosphere.

When the first two volumes appeared in 1892, they received almost universal acclaim. Rhodes, being a thoroughly middle-class American, found it easy and natural to say what middle-class America wanted to hear. According to Rhodes, the Civil War was a moral contest over slavery in which the North was entirely justified, although the South fought nobly to defend its views. Reconstruction was an unmitigated disaster; he believed, caused by the misguided attempt to elevate "inferior" African Americans to supremacy over superior whites.

Rhodes viewed history as a branch of literature, and he had an intensely personal view of the field. To Rhodes, the essence of history was the struggle between good people and bad people and not the result of conflicts between broad social forces. His historical views were attractive to the general reading public. As his subsequent volumes appeared, Rhodes came to be acknowledged as the leading authority on the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Despite declining health and his concern over World War I, Rhodes managed to publish the last two volumes of his history in the early 1920s, bringing his account up to the end of Theodore Roosevelt's first presidential administration. These books were not received as favorably as his earlier ones. Critics noted his exclusive preoccupation with political history, his failure to dig deeply into the forces causing historical change, his partiality for conservative business ideals, and his antipathy toward African Americans, immigrants, and workers.

Rhodes was one of the last men to write American history as a multivolume political narrative. He was also one of the last important amateurs in American historical writing. He died on Jan. 22, 1927.