

Pen of Fire: John Moncure Daniel

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Review

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Bridges, Peter *Pen of Fire: John Moncure Daniel*. Kent State University Press, \$28.00 ISBN 873387368

Diplomacy and journalism:

A life of letters with the *Richmond Examiner*

Selecting a subject about which to write is an important decision that historians make, especially those who tackle biographies, which often present unique challenges. In the case of **Pen of Fire: John Moncure Daniel**, Peter Bridges seemingly made the right choice. Bridges' experiences as a former American diplomat and resident of Italy allow him to bring a knowledge to the life of Virginian John Moncure Daniel, who served as the editor of the *Richmond Examiner*, the American envoy to the Kingdom of Sardinia, and a soldier in the Confederate army, that other biographers might not have possessed.

Daniel's short life (he died in March 1865 at the age of thirty-nine) was filled with many achievements, most of which could be attributed to the influence of his great-uncle, Supreme Court Justice Peter V. Daniel. Justice Daniel introduced his great-nephew to important politicians, including William L. Marcy and John Y. Mason, who later impacted Daniel's career. It was also undoubtedly he who helped the aspiring writer to secure the editorship of the fledgling *Richmond Examiner* in 1848. That position ended in 1853, when President Franklin Pierce appointed John Moncure Daniel, probably with Peter Daniel's insistence, as chargé d'affaires to the Kingdom of Sardinia at Turin. He served in that capacity until 1861, when he returned to Virginia to resume the editorship of the *Examiner*.

Bridges believes that, despite his youth, John Moncure Daniel was an influential figure in supporting the Confederate cause during the Civil War. As the *Examiner's* editor, Daniel played an important role in keeping the residents of the embattled Confederate capital informed about military, political, economic,

and social happenings. Daniel also often used his editorial platform to criticize Jefferson Davis' administration. His outspokenness eventually led to his death from a duel with Confederate Treasurer Edward C. Elmore, whom the *Examiner* had implicitly accused of financial misconduct.

Bridges' storytelling ability is apparent from the beginning. His time as ambassador to Somalia and as an Italian resident add much to his description of Daniel's diplomatic tenure in Turin, although Bridges' extensive knowledge sometimes causes his story to wander down inconsequential paths. He also capably uncovers much of Daniel's personal life, illuminating the importance of the relationship between the younger and elder Daniels.

Despite his engaging narrative, however, Bridges' account of Daniel's life contains some shortcomings. For example, on page 162, he opines that Daniel had for long had a kind of mental fever, a rage that only rarely broke out in the open, but that continued to tell on his work and fiery writing. Bridges only offers two instances of this rage however, and both of them occur in early 1861. This hardly seems to constitute a long-standing mental fever. In fact, despite his participation in several duels, Daniel strikes the reader as a very sensible individual. Another problem appears on page 200, where Bridges offers a muddled discussion of Daniel's involvement with women. He vacillates over whether the young man was a misogynist, never coming to a definite conclusion. Bridges' earlier evidence, however, clearly indicates that Daniel did not hate women; in fact, he apparently enjoyed good relationships with them.

Other problems with Bridges' study undermine his argument for Daniel's importance during the Civil War. He attributes Daniel's decision to support secession when he returned to the United States in 1861 to a brief conversation that he had with Secretary of State Jeremiah Black. Bridges does not, however, sufficiently explain Black's position, nor does he indicate why his opinion would have had such an impact on Daniel, who had corresponded only briefly with the secretary of state about minor diplomatic details before leaving Turin. Understanding Daniel's fierce devotion to the Confederacy is too important to Bridges' argument for him not to provide a more conclusive answer. A second difficulty involves Daniel's influence over the change in the Confederate capital from Montgomery, Alabama, to Richmond, Virginia. On page 171, Bridges argues that the decision owes something to John Moncure Daniel and provides an *Examiner* editorial, in which Daniel urged the move of the capital to Richmond, as his evidence. He does not, however, produce a shred of proof that

Daniel's column had any impact on the Confederate Congress' decision. Daniel may indeed have played a role in the decision, but the evidence, as provided by Bridges, does not show it.

After reading **Pen of Fire**, one comes away dissatisfied. Daniel was obviously an important figure in the 1850s and 1860s, but Bridges, despite his gifted writing, does not sufficiently explain his influence and impact during the Civil War period. This failure is unfortunate for those interested in antebellum diplomacy and wartime media.

Mark R. Cheatham received his Ph.D. from Mississippi State University and is currently revising his dissertation, a biography of antebellum diplomat, newspaper editor, and politician Andrew Jackson Donelson, for publication. He also serves as co-list editor and book review editor for H-Tennessee, a discussion network devoted to Tennessee history and culture.