

Edmund G. Ross: Soldier, Senator, Abolitionist

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Review

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Ruddy, Richard A. *Edmund G. Ross: Soldier, Senator, Abolitionist*. University of New Mexico Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9780826353740

An Idealistic Reformer in an Unforgiving Political World

History recalls Edmund G. Ross—when it recalls him at all—as the freshman senator who braved Republican intimidation to cast the deciding vote in Andrew Johnson’s impeachment, saving Johnson’s presidency but dooming his own congressional career in the process. Now, in the first scholarly biography of Ross, Richard A. Ruddy provides a much more revealing portrait of a western reformer whose life embodied the idealism and corruption of nineteenth-century America.

Ross’s varied experiences as a printer, abolitionist, soldier, and politician were marked by a rigid sense of justice and frequent clashes with those who fell short of his high standard. Raised in a family of Ohio abolitionists, Ross moved to Kansas in 1856 to aid the Free-State cause. As Ruddy notes, Ross was a rarity among mid-nineteenth-century whites: an “altruistic” abolitionist who fought to free the slaves and give them equal rights because he genuinely believed it was the right thing to do (p. 18). In 1866, after Ross gained recognition as a Union Army officer and newspaper printer who wrote in favor of Radical Reconstruction, the governor appointed him to fill the Senate seat left vacant by the death of James Lane. Ross, “a quiet, undemonstrative man who was not inclined to be a politician,” suffered much at the hands of his fellow Republicans in the Senate (p. 84). Infuriated at Ross’s refusal to bend to pressure during the impeachment vote, Radicals led by fellow Kansan Samuel C. Pomeroy smeared him with trumped-up charges of bribery. Ross fought to clear his name but lost his Senate seat anyway. In later years, he salvaged his reputation by serving a dynamic term as territorial governor of New Mexico, where he spoke in favor of ordinary settlers against special interests and attempted to reform the land-claims system. Shortly before his death in 1907, Ross received a well-publicized tribute

from an eccentric known as the Kansas Hermit, who collected numerous letters written by Kansans praising Ross's vote against Johnson's impeachment, then traveled to New Mexico to deliver them to Ross in person.

In Ruddy's capable hands, Ross emerges as an admirable but somewhat quixotic figure. He could be pragmatic at times (as seen by a compromise he reached with Johnson prior to the impeachment vote), but in the end, Ross's obstinacy and righteousness limited his achievements in the rough-and-tumble world of nineteenth-century politics. Yet Ruddy argues that Ross deserves wider recognition as a man and politician who faced numerous choices throughout his life and almost always made his decisions based on ethics rather than convenience. Ruddy elsewhere demonstrates that his subject achieved much more in his all-but-forgotten term as Governor of New Mexico than other historians have acknowledged.

The biography—which relies heavily on an unpublished memoir by one of Ross's daughters—is also notable for its detailed descriptions of Ross's family life. The soldier and legislator was painfully aware that his frequent moves and misfortunes affected his wife and children as much as they did him, and the narrative provides fine descriptions of just how precarious life on the Great Plains could be for a public figure's family. Ruddy does not engage much with the works of other historians, but his work fills a gap in Reconstruction studies and gives an excellent sense of what it sometimes cost to be a reformer in a nation and era rife with injustice.

William D. Hickox is a graduate student in American history at the University of Kansas and a contributor to the New York Times Disunion blog. He is working on a dissertation about military recruitment in New York State during the Civil War.