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Franklin Pierce

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Review

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Holt, Michael *Franklin Pierce*. Henry Holt, \$23.00 ISBN 978-0-8050-8719-2

Reexamining President Pierce

Many, many years ago, I had a high school teacher who taught American History by presidencies. Every president got equal treatment. James Madison received no more attention than James Garfield; Andrew Jackson no more than Andrew Johnson. (I'm not sure how she handled William Henry Harrison or Millard Fillmore.) We didn't make it to FDR, since he was too recent and too controversial. (This was Nebraska, after all.) But if we had, Franklin Roosevelt would have received no more coverage than Franklin Pierce.

This was the apparent plan for the American Presidents series, published under the general editorship of the late Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Professor Sean Wilentz, of Princeton University. Each book in the series runs between 125 and 175 pages of text. Schlesinger and Wilentz managed to put together an unusually eclectic group of biographers, both academic and non-academic. But when it came to Franklin Pierce, they recruited one of the leading scholars of the pre-Civil War era, Michael Holt.

Professor Holt brings to his task his considerable knowledge of the ins and outs of party politics in the 1850's. This is the book's greatest strength. It is also its weakness, for not all readers will be eager to fight their way through the thickets of partisan intrigue within the Democratic Party before and during Pierce's presidency. But then, what else is there to write about?

Pierce was born in 1804 and educated at Bowdoin College, where he became a life-long friend of his fellow classmate Nathaniel Hawthorne. Unlike the presidents who came before and after him, Pierce was little known before he took office. The youngest president ever to be elected up to then, he had served briefly as a congressman and U. S. senator, and had seen service in the

Mexican-American war, but had held no cabinet appointment, nor diplomatic post. There were dark and tragic parts of Pierce's life, including his fragile and reclusive wife, Jane, and the deaths of all of their children. As for Pierce's alleged weakness for alcohol, Holt makes the case that it was real enough, but that it played no role in his presidential years.

Holt does not challenge the conventional wisdom that Franklin Pierce was one of the greatest of presidential failures. It is his interpretation of that failure that distinguishes this book from earlier assessments. Quite simply, Holt argues that Pierce's commitment to party unity – in this case of course that of his own Democratic Party – is what led to his undoing. And of course contributed to the undoing of the Union.

Pierce hoped to maintain and strengthen the already dominant Democrats through patronage – by distributing plums to all the factions: North, South, and West; pro-slavery, anti-slavery, and those in between. He also became convinced, according to Holt, that what the party needed in order to maintain its strength against the floundering Whigs was an issue around which they could rally, that would clearly differentiate them from their rivals. Both strategies backfired. His cabinet and other appointments served only to annoy members of his own party, many of whom had supported him earlier, as they watched their rivals receive unearned rewards. When Stephen Douglas promoted his Kansas-Nebraska Act, repealing the thirty-four-year-old Missouri Compromise, Pierce grasped it as the very issue that would draw the line between the parties, and to the Democrats' benefit. It drew a line all right, but between the sections, not the parties. And it would hardly be to the Democrats' benefit.

Holt takes the occasion to re-state his thesis, first advanced thirty years ago, that the partisan realignment that doomed the Democrats in the 1850's was as much a product of nativism as it was antislavery sentiment. Not all would agree, but it is certain that whatever the causes, the party that had carried all but four states in the presidential election of 1852 faced a serious crisis four years later.

Remarkably, Pierce saw himself as a viable candidate for a second term in 1856, and actively sought it. His greatest support at the Democratic convention in Cincinnati came from the South, whose affection for this Bowdoin-educated Yankee from New Hampshire would continue through the end of his life. He was defeated by James Buchanan, who had the good luck to be absent from the country as Minister to London during the agitation over Kansas-Nebraska. As

Holt points out, Pierce thus became the only incumbent president, thus far, to be denied re-nomination for a second term by his own party. Buchanan went on to win the election, but twenty-eight years would pass before the Democrats would win another.

Pierce's post-presidential years passed quietly. He and his wife travelled to Europe extensively during the late 1850's before returning to New Hampshire. He never abandoned the traditional nineteenth-century Democratic stance on states' rights and strict construction. He became a critic of the Lincoln Administration during the Civil War and did not lower the flag at his home following Lincoln's assassination. Following his wife's death in 1863, and Hawthorne's a year later, Pierce's life began a downward spiral. By 1867 his drinking had increased, undoubtedly hastening his death in 1869, one month short of his sixty-fifth birthday.

Those wishing for a full examination of Pierce's entire life might want to turn to Roy F. Nichols *Franklin Pierce: Young Hickory of the Granite Hills* (1931 and 1958), or the more recent study by Peter Wallner, *Franklin Pierce: Martyr for the Union* (2007). As their titles suggest, Pierce receives more sympathetic treatment in each, but Holt's book presents a more incisive and more realistic understanding of his fateful presidency.

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