

A Secession Crisis Enigma: William Henry Hurlbert and "The Diary of a Public Man"

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Review

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Crofts, Daniel W. *A Secession Crisis Enigma: William Henry Hurlbert and "The Diary of a Public Man"*. Louisiana State University Press, \$42.50 ISBN 978-0-8071-3591-4

Unearthing a Hidden Identity

Dan Crofts must have had a wonderful time researching and writing this book. How could it not be fun to solve what Jacques Barzun and Henry Graf called "the 'most gigantic' problem of uncertain authorship in American historical writing" (1)?

First, some necessary background. In 1879, the *North American Review* published a four-part series entitled "The Diary of a Public Man" (the four installments are reprinted in full as an appendix to this volume). No author was identified, but the "Diary" seemed to have been written by someone with unfettered access to the highest levels of the American government, including the White House, between December 28, 1860, and March 15, 1861—those critical days when the fate of the Union was hanging in the balance. Included in the entries were three supposed conversations with Abraham Lincoln as well as numerous reports on similar meetings with the likes of William H. Seward, Stephen A. Douglas, Charles Sumner, and Edwin M. Stanton on the northern side and southerners Judah P. Benjamin, James L. Orr, and James A. Seddon.

The reported conversations with Lincoln were clearly the most intriguing. Historians have desperately wanted to know what was going through Lincoln's mind during these tumultuous times, and the diarist seemed to have critical information here. As a consequence, a number of prominent scholars—David M. Potter, Allan Nevins, Roy F. Nichols, and David Donald, to name only four—could not resist the temptation to quote the "diarist" as a legitimate source. The passages reporting Lincoln's words certainly seemed to have the ring of authenticity about them. Take, for example, the President's supposed description

of the sanctimonious Senator from Massachusetts. "I have never had much to do with bishops down where we live," Lincoln supposedly said, "but do you know, Sumner is just my idea of a bishop" (240).

Other scholars have been more cautious. Don Fehrenbacher, Michael Burlingame, Douglas Wilson, and the author himself (whose superb *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* remains the definitive study of this region during this time period), for example, distrusted "The Diary of a Public Man" and ultimately decided not to use it. "I was both intrigued and baffled by the Diary," Crofts writes. "The author plainly knew a great deal about what was going on behind closed doors in Washington, D.C." Tempting, surely, but not quite alluring enough for him and these other doubting historians, and Crofts puts his finger squarely on the crucial unknown: "who was the diarist?" (12).

We now have the answer. Crofts acknowledges that one of his undergraduate students at The College of New Jersey, Ryan Christiansen, played a key role in getting him to take another look at the "Diary." Christiansen was intrigued by the challenge of identifying the author and even enlisted the help of a faculty computer expert at the school to do a statistical analysis of the unknown author's literary style. Christiansen suspected, and Crofts subsequently proved, that the diarist was a gifted New York newspaper man by the name of William Henry Hurlbert. Crofts also found that the document was in no sense a diary, composed during those dark days of 1860-61; Hurlbert was in New York, not Washington, during the time the diary was supposedly written. What appeared in the *North American Review* in 1879, Crofts convincingly argues, was an extraordinary blend of what turned out to be remarkably accurate information (supplied largely by someone who was in Washington then, Hurlbert's close friend and consummate Washington insider, "King of the Lobby" Sam Ward) and the fruits of Hurlbert's own amazingly fertile imagination. The entire "Diary" was put together in the year it was first published, Crofts believes, but it was laced with intimate details almost no one outside a very small circle of Lincoln's closest associates knew in 1879--his secretaries, John G. Nicolay and John Hay, for example.

I do not want to spoil the detective story of how Hurlbert was finally nailed as the author, and if his name was not in the book's title, I would be tempted to omit it altogether and let each reader take this fascinating journey of discovery on their own. And even if the cat is out of the bag on the dust jacket as far as

authorship of the "Diary" is concerned, there is still Hurlbert himself, living proof of the cliché that truth is stranger than fiction.

The details of William Henry Hurlbert's life I shall again leave largely in Crofts' exceedingly capable hands. But here is the tease: onetime chief editorial writer for the *New York Times*, then editor of the *New York World*, author of numerous books, world traveler, speaker of multiple languages, the inspiration for the leading character in no less than three novels by other writers, spellbinding conversationalist, charismatic man about town, and an inveterate chaser of skirts. It was this last that finally proved his undoing.

So, in the end, what are we to do with the "Diary" itself, this remarkable blend of fact and fiction? Can it serve in any sense as a guide to what was happening inside Washington's corridors of power during the Great Secession Winter of 1860-61? Crofts' final word is yes, it can be used, but very carefully. He admits that Hurlbert's "construction technique was unorthodox—indeed deceitful—but the materials with which he built appear to meet the historical test" (207). It may be "a 'stretch' to get the 'Diary of A Public Man' back into the historical lexicon," he concludes. "But that is where it belongs" (215). After reading, and thoroughly enjoying, *A Secession Crisis Enigma*, I am inclined to agree with him.

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