The Lost President: A.D. Smith and the Hidden History of Radical Democracy in Civil War America

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At the very outset of her deceptively titled book, Ruth Dunley admits that the subject of her biography, A.D. Smith, is a person of “secondary historical importance” (p. 1). Even so, she is drawn to him by the mystery involved in attempting to uncover his life story. Her journey of discovery, recounted in The Lost President, is a long and challenging one. Her persistence in pursuit of that story is impressive and unyielding. In the end, Dunley succeeds in uncovering a life dedicated to republicanism as a would-be president of Canada, a judge who declared the Fugitive Slave Law unconstitutional, and a tax commissioner in the Sea Islands of South Carolina who sought to give land to former slaves during the Civil War. Throughout, Smith, argues Dunley, was a representative man of the Jacksonian era. He was moved by its vision of the possible and subject to its many contradictions. But, above all, he was a radical Democrat, committed to the principles of majority rule and opposed to the empowerment of the few.

Dunley begins her biographical pursuit by asking three questions: How does Smith reflect his era? How does he transcend his era? And, finally, what impact did Smith have on his era? Dunley goes about attempting to answer these questions by sharing with her readers her efforts at discovery, giving the account of her investigative endeavors and speculative musings as she presents her quite limited findings. This unusual approach at times turns her book into a story of historical exploration and speculation, rather than a work of historical analysis. Frequently, her
quest ends in failures and dead ends. Too often, she resorts to block or otherwise lengthy quotations from classic historical works to offer context, while presenting little on Smith himself.

Hampered by a paucity of information and documentation, Dunley struggles to answer the three analytic questions she has posed. In her sections on Smith’s youth and on his role in the Republic of Canada movement, she relies heavily on conjecture and frequently offers only a general account of the period based exclusively on secondary literature. Yet Dunley’s book title, *The Lost President*, suggests the centrality of an effort at the presidency that she cannot document. Why title a book on an attempt that the protagonist not only losses but whose details are, indeed, *lost* to history? She has found that Smith does occasionally surface during his early years in Wisconsin, but her evidence provides little basis for any kind of well-anchored analysis.

Still, Smith’s rulings as Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice are available to Dunley and here she gains some insight into Smith’s strong antislavery and states’ rights convictions. Most notably, Smith’s ruling in the Joshua Glover fugitive case allowed him to deem the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 unconstitutional based on his belief in the compact theory of government, in which each state maintained its sovereignty. The Fugitive Slave Law, Smith insisted, violated the sovereign right of the state of Wisconsin to presume free those charged with being fugitives. As a radical, Barnburner Democrat, this decision was consistent with Smith’s general opposition to the consolidation of power in the federal government, a belief he employed to further his belief in Black freedom. In the end, the Supreme Court would unanimously overrule Smith’s decision, relying on its judgement of the Constitution’s supremacy clause and on the constitutionality of the Fugitive Slave Law.

The Civil War gave Smith another opportunity to assert his antislavery beliefs. In 1862, he became federal tax commissioner in the South Carolina Sea Islands. In that role, Smith saw to
it that some of the confiscated lands there were reserved for the newly freed slaves.

Unfortunately, his work was quickly mired in controversy, with endless infighting among other members of the tax commission and by charges of Smith’s abuse of alcohol.

Smith clearly did not easily fit the political categories of his time. He was a strong antislavery advocate and a believer in racial equality, but also a vigorous defender of states’ rights. The former beliefs made Democrats uncomfortable, and the latter was at odds with Republican doctrine. Yet Smith did have an important role in two of the most significant controversies of the time: the Fugitive Slave Law and the question of land distribution to the freedmen.

Dunley does a useful job of presenting Smith’s place in the history of these two events. Her treatment of Smith’s role in them constitutes her central contribution. However, as with many of history’s actors, a complete account of Smith’s life is illusive and hard to achieve. As a consequence, a majority of Dunley’s book remains a chronicle of her often-unsuccessful quest for specifics rather than a comprehensive analytic treatment of a complete life fully lived.

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