

### The Civil War Political Tradition: Ten Portraits of Those Who Formed It

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## Review

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**Escott, Paul D.** *The Civil War Political Tradition: Ten Portraits of Those Who Formed It.* University of Virginia Press, 2023. Paper. \$35.00 ISBN 9780813949680 pp. 199.

This fast-paced, accessible volume consists of biographical sketches of ten prominent Civil War era political and public leaders. Acclaimed historian Paul Escott drew his inspiration explicitly from Richard Hofstadter's classic *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*, and he concludes that the "Civil War political tradition ... emphasized individual ambition, short-term thinking, compromise, and a pragmatic approach to problems." (2) Few experts would disagree that these characteristics defined many mainstream party politicians before the Civil War. Escott also teases out the history of Civil War America through the ten narratives, using each sketch as a means to connect with political, social, and cultural forces beyond party politics or national policy debates. The organization and focus on well-known figures should make the book readable, engaging, and interesting for beginning college students or anyone looking for an introduction to this period.

Escott's primary thesis is most evident in the lives of the leading politicians he profiles: Henry Clay and Stephen Douglas, and, to a slightly lesser extent, Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, John C. Calhoun, and Horace Greeley. In their lives he notes the tendency for "a political rhythm ... of conflict, evasion, and partial solutions." (4) Leaders focused on national expansion, economic development and the creation of wealth, and preservation of white and male privileges. They recognized the country's great challenges and the contradictions between the ideals of the Revolutionary generation and Declaration of Independence and the realities of Civil War

America, Escott concludes, but ultimately they could not muster the convictions to resolve them through politics. The result was civil war, which of course finally forced the nation to settle its contradictions over slavery and majority rule. The tradition of short-term, partial solutions continued into Reconstruction, though, leaving behind a legacy of structural inequality for the next century. Escott's chapter on Horace Greeley, for instance, is one of the most fruitful. Greeley was at times a reformer and idealist, but ultimately "his temperament revealed weaknesses that were both personal and societal. Greeley was a man who discerned serious problems but preferred to discount conflict and promote harmony," with his own "erratic" nature typically ending "in inconsistencies, shallow analysis, and an unjustified, blithe optimism." (130) Escott's chapter on Lincoln, too, will undoubtedly be one of the most satisfying for general readers.

This guiding political tradition is much less evident in the personal histories of reformers and activists Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Albion Tourgee. They did not compromise or delay hard decisions, of course, but rather were unable to effect the changes they wanted, often due to the political tradition Escott emphasizes. The biographies, in some ways, can be read independently of one another as discrete topics. As much, or perhaps more than a study of political tradition (in Hofstadter's conception), Escott's approach actually is broader and makes the book more like a social and cultural history. Still, his analysis is subtle when dealing with someone like Stowe. He notes her moralistic impulses that allowed her to humanize enslaved people, which also allows him to weave in antebellum religious history; but her own limitations did not let her argue forcefully for racial equality. In that way, as all students of the period know, she was like many other antebellum whites, even abolitionists. Douglass probably fits least of all with Escott's overall themes—he was "a prophet,"

the author concludes, who pushed the nation toward justice even though it could not be fully achieved. Even when Escott's narrative seems to stray from more traditional politics and policies he is able to trace out the reasons why compromise happened, although the subject of the chapter did not want to compromise. This volume is a good introduction to the period and its politics and will be useful in a range of classes on nineteenth-century America.

Christopher J. Olsen is Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs and Professor of History at Indiana State University. He is the author of *Political Culture and Secession in Mississippi* and other works that focus primarily on the political history of the nineteenth-century United States.