

Sons Of Liberty: A Tale Of One Family's Intersection With History

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Review

SONS OF LIBERTY

A tale of one family's intersection with history

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Polk, William R. *Polk's Folly: An American Family History*. Doubleday, ISBN 385491506

Among the more prominent family names in American history are Adams, Lee, and Roosevelt. Aside from the notice given to 19th century expansionist president James K. Polk, the surname Polk has failed to receive comparable historical attention. Historian William R. Polk is out to end this oversight in a new family history entitled **Polk's Folly**. Delivering more than a simple family tree following the exploits of his ancestors, the author, by placing the reader close to each member of the Polk family and to the perils that were faced and often overcome, contributes to a comprehensive understanding of our nation's history.

The story of the Polk family in America begins with Robert Pollok, who fled England after the Restoration of Charles II. Trying his fortune in the promise of the new world, Robert found himself on Maryland's Eastern Shore a century before the American Revolution. Names like "Polk's Folly" and "Damned Quarter" attest to the difficult conditions he faced in the unknown land. Sons and grandsons of Robert fared better, starting new lives in search of opportunity closer to the Appalachian Mountains. There Robert Polk's grandsons, Thomas and Will Polk, became involved in the political battles that led to the American Revolution, as well as in the debates between Federalists and Republicans.

This participation in politics carried over to perhaps the best known of the Polk clan, the 11th president of the United States, James Knox Polk. As chief executive during the critical war with Mexico, Polk committed the United States to continental expansion in the Southwest, a policy that fueled the sectional differences that ultimately resulted in the Civil War. His presidential diary represents an amazing record that attests to his micromanagement of executive

matters during the White House years. The president literally worked himself to death by keeping long hours and agonizing over the most trifling details. Within a few months of finishing his term, he succumbed to cholera at the age of 54.

Students of the Civil War will also recognize the name Leonidas Polk, a West Point graduate and later Episcopal bishop of the Louisiana territory who, after repeated pleas by Jefferson Davis, accepted command of the Confederate forces assembling in Mississippi. There Leonidas faced an untested Ulysses S. Grant in the opening battles of the Western Theater. Scouting William T. Sherman's lines outside Chattanooga in 1864, Leonidas was killed by an enemy cannon shot. In a strange twist of fate, distant relative William Harrison Polk, fighting for the Union, stood only a few yards from the field piece directed at Leonidas. In succeeding generations, members of the Polk family included a leader of the Populist party, an acting secretary of state, a tank commander in Europe during the Second World War, and a civil rights attorney.

Reading **Polk's Folly**, one appreciates the impressive amount of contextual information that Polk provides in his narrative. The scarcity of family records in the opening chapters makes this a necessity. In the absence of writings from the Polks on first impressions of the New World, the author utilizes the utopian texts of Sir Thomas More and the propaganda of Richard Hakluyt as background information. Polk continues this practice throughout the rest of his book, offering vignettes on contemporary topics such as the first party system and presenting a charming portrait of the antebellum South.

Throughout the book, the Polks are confronted with choices and themes we commonly associate with the unfolding story of America: the promise of the West, the lure of big profits, and the agonizing decisions made in war. Whether discussing the Populist movement or American diplomatic affairs, Polk strives to place the reader close to each of his subjects. There, weaving primary sources with those of contemporaries, he affords readers the opportunity to better understand the historical setting of each of his family members. Especially touching are the letters that Jimmy Polk, a tank commander in George Patton's Third Army, scribbled to his wife, discussing the burdens of ordering men into dangerous battles.

More than an exploration into William R. Polk's roots, **Polk's Folly** is an obvious labor of love, proving that the evolution of the United States can be charted through the adventures and escapades of unique individuals in a

matchless family. In the end, Polk has given us a lively and readable account of our nation seen through their eyes.

James Mac Donald is currently working toward his Ph.D. in American history at Louisiana State University.