

Jim Lane: Scoundrel, Statesman, Kansan

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Recommended Citation

Foote, Lorien (2008) "Jim Lane: Scoundrel, Statesman, Kansan," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol10/iss1/13>

Review

Footnote, Lorian

Winter 2008

Collins, Robert *Jim Lane: Scoundrel, Statesman, Kansan*. Pelican Publishing, \$29.95 hardcover ISBN 9781589804456

Jim Lane and the Border War

Robert Collins, the author of *Jim Lane: Scoundrel, Statesman, Kansan*, is not a professionally trained historian. This fact does not automatically demand the attention of a reviewer; writers outside of academe have produced outstanding historical biographies that both entertain and meet scholarly standards. In this case, the fact seems relevant. Collins and his publisher have failed to meet a basic expectation for any book published in the field of history: citation of sources. Because of this fundamental flaw, Collins's biography has no scholarly merit. General readers will likewise question the book's worth; problems within the narrative make this biography confusing.

Collins is the author of several books on Kansas railroads and historical attractions, and he has recently published a biography of Gen. James G. Blunt. Considering his interest in Kansas history, the choice of Jim Lane as his next subject is understandable. The controversial Lane played an instrumental role in the events of Bleeding Kansas, served as Senator for the state during the Civil War, and briefly commanded a brigade that operated in Kansas and Missouri. Lane's life, fascinating in its own right, crosses many of the themes significant to recent historians, yet Collins fails to place his subject within the wider historical context of the Civil War era. Two glaring examples suffice to illustrate the point. As Brigadier General of Volunteers in Kansas, Lane recruited African-American soldiers in August 1862 without authority from the War Department. Earlier, in September 1861, Lane had led portions of his brigade into Osceola, Missouri, where his forces burned and looted the town. Collins never consulted the wide scholarship available on the Union's transition to hard war and its employment of African-American soldiers to provide context and analysis for these episodes in Lane's life. When Collins does make reference to national context, his statements

are often simplistic: The country was split between the states where blacks were held as slaves, largely in the South, and the states where slavery was outlawed, mainly in the North (21).

Collins chooses to revolve his narrative around facts and anecdotes taken from contemporary newspaper articles, some manuscript collections in Kansas, previous biographies of Lane, and scholarly works on Kansas. Collins did not conduct exhaustive primary source research and relies heavily on other author's conclusions. Often his narrative becomes a tedious recitation of what other authors have found: Milton Reynolds, a man who knew Lane and whose article on Lane was published in [Thomas L.] Connelley's 1899 book [a biography of Lane], said that Mrs. Mary Lane was a very remarkable woman as well as a very accomplished lady' and added that she was a born politician' (20). When Collins does challenge previous authors' interpretations of Lane, he does so by sorting through sequentially what each previous biographer has concluded about the incident or about Lane's motivation. This narrative technique distracts from the story and focuses attention on the author's process rather than the story he has to tell. Lane's political enemies wrote some of the earliest biographies, and Collins hopes to rehabilitate Lane's reputation through this new biography. Without extensive new research and without an interpretative framework of his own to guide his narrative, however, Collins has failed to produce the modern biography that he believes Lane deserves.

Lorien Foote is an Associate Professor at the University of Central Arkansas. She is the author of Seeking the One Great Remedy: Francis George Shaw and Nineteenth-Century Reform and is currently writing a book about manhood and military justice in the Union Army.