

Stephen A. Douglas and the Dilemmas of Democratic Equality

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Review

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Huston, James L. *Stephen A. Douglas and the Dilemmas of Democratic Equality*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, \$39.00 hardcover ISBN 9780742534568

Studying The Little Giant's Political Career

The purpose of James L. Huston's biography of Stephen A. Douglas is to examine the unfolding principles of democracy and equality during the middle part of nineteenth century America (viii). Huston has done an outstanding job in capturing the boldness and the subtleties of the Little Giant, as well as the complexities of the role he played in the sectional crisis. Intended primarily for undergraduate students, Huston's well-written narrative is an excellent addition to the American Profiles series edited by Norman K. Risjord.

Huston, an economic historian at Oklahoma State University, has previously examined the economic origins of the Civil War, the Panic of 1857, and the nineteenth century concept of wealth. While economic issues receive significant attention in this biography of Stephen Douglas, Huston organizes the book around several non-economic themes. One of Huston's primary themes explores how Douglas helped organize the Democratic Party in Illinois, changing it from a collection of loosely allied politicians to a formal well-managed organization. A second theme examined by Huston is how Douglas reflected the buoyant spirit of Manifest Destiny and how his drive for territorial expansion created a complicated interplay among the issues of patriotism, freedom, race, economic growth, and equality. Huston's third theme concerns the nature of the sectional conflict. He explores Douglas's view of race, popular sovereignty, the role of morality and religion in politics, the demands of the South for protection of their slave property, and the right of secession.

Huston handles these themes well, providing valuable insights into Douglas and into the nature of the antebellum American democracy. Huston's excellent analysis of early Illinois — its demography, economics, migration patterns, and

politics is a particular strength, which allows him to give a rich description and full understanding of Douglas's rise to political prominence. Tracing issues, personalities, and shifting alliances, Huston does an outstanding job in portraying the colorful and complicated political mosaic of early Illinois and Stephen Douglas's role in mastering its politics.

According to Huston, Douglas's bombastic personality fit neatly with the political style of antebellum America and was one of the reasons why the Little Giant was politically successful. More importantly, Huston contends that Douglas was successful because of his political organizational skills. Understanding the role of newspapers, mass meetings, and other political techniques to rally voters, Huston portrays Douglas as a master in developing a stable political party organization, giving special attention to the development of the convention system, an important technique for unifying political factions.

Huston also provides a careful description of Douglas's position on economic issues and their relationship to Manifest Destiny. According to Huston, Douglas unabashedly supported economic and physical expansion. He believed that internal improvements, particularly transportation, were fundamental to building a strong market economy. His vision for commercial expansion was linked to geographical expansion. New territory was not only America's destiny, Douglas believed, but necessary for the economic well-being of the nation.

Huston raises good questions regarding the Douglas's position on religion, morality, and popular sovereignty. He is careful to examine the complexity of Douglas's position on the role of religion in politics, and notes Douglas's distrust of individuals who claimed knowledge of the divine will, fearing that they would usurp the right of the people to make choices for themselves.

Huston does an excellent job in presenting Douglas as a politician of principle—a man who believed in a complex set of ideas regarding democracy and equality. By taking Douglas seriously, Huston is able to provide valuable insights into antebellum America, the dilemmas the nation faced regarding growth and freedom, and the issues surrounding race, slavery, and the sectional conflict.

However, Huston's enthusiasm for Douglas sometimes crowds his objectivity. For example, in discussing Douglas's relationship with the Mormons

in Illinois, Huston confidently stated that Douglas almost always sided with people of whom polite society disapproved (31). Such bold statements clearly overlook black slaves and Amerindians. Huston, while not apologizing for Douglas, comes close to absolving Douglas of guilt regarding race and slavery. At one point, Huston says that Douglas's letters are curiously silent on slavery (53), and at another point claims that while Douglas was hazy on slavery, he disliked it because it hindered economic expansion (79). Abraham Lincoln and other antislavery advocates would find this conclusion surprising. Huston's reading of Douglas tends to soften Douglas's strong pro-slavery and anti-Black positions.

Despite an occasional lack of balance, Huston has written an excellent biography of a critical figure in antebellum America. This book would be a fine addition to any undergraduate course and excellent reading for professional historians.

Stephen L. Hansen is Dean of the Graduate School and Associate Provost for Research at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His publications have focused primarily upon Illinois during the Civil War Era.