

A Southern Moderate in Radical Times: Henry Washington Hilliard, 1808-1892

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Review

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Durham, David I. *A Southern Moderate in Radical Times: Henry Washington Hilliard, 1808-1892*. Louisiana State University Press, \$40.00 hardcover ISBN 9780807133286

An Alabamian's Life During the Civil War and Reconstruction

As an Alabama slaveholding politician who opposed secession and later encouraged abolition in Brazil, Henry Washington Hilliard combined seemingly conflicting impulses in a remarkable life and career. David Durham, curator of archival collections at the University of Alabama law school who also teaches in that university's history department, is well suited to examine the life of the wide-ranging Hilliard: Durham teaches courses not only in the history of law and of Alabama, but also in Brazilian history.

Hilliard led one of those marvelously full and peripatetic nineteenth-century lives, and Durham ably tells his story. A native North Carolinian, Hilliard grew up in South Carolina, from whose state college he graduated. He spent his antebellum career in Alabama, but made Georgia his home after the Civil War. In terms of occupations, over time he was a Methodist minister, a college English professor, a newspaper editor, an attorney, an Alabama Whig congressman, the U.S. minister to Belgium in the 1840s, a Confederate colonel, a postwar Republican politician, and finally the U.S. minister to Brazil.

Obviously talented, Hilliard could never quite "find his place," so that he spent his life "in the restless pursuit of some great accomplishment, some defining moment, which kept eluding him" (201). Despite significant contributions, particularly in education and politics, Hilliard suffered disappointments. His seven-month career in the Confederate Army proved him a poor soldier, for example. Particularly humiliating was the scandal surrounding his second marriage: he wedded his first wife's best friend just weeks after the first wife's death, and the second Mrs. Hilliard's quick pregnancy revealed she

and Hilliard had been sexually intimate during the final stages of the first Mrs. Hilliard's fatal illness. Ultimately, though, he experienced his defining moment – and personal redemption, at least in his own mind – through his efforts late in life in support of abolition in Brazil.

Durham does a great service by bringing Hilliard, a relatively little-known figure, to our consideration and reminding us of a type of antebellum southern figure often neglected: a Deep South Unionist. Political moderation is, as the book's title suggests, key to understanding Hilliard, and Durham provides many examples of it, including his devotion to the Whig party, his refusal to sign John C. Calhoun's Southern Address, his opposition to the Nashville Convention, and his consistent Unionism during the secession crisis until Abraham Lincoln's call for troops in the wake of the Fort Sumter battle.

Yet, in his treatment of the Compromise of 1850, Durham misses an important opportunity to explore Hilliard's moderation at a clearly radical moment when the nation faced its first secession crisis. Durham notes Hillard's participation during the spring of 1850 in congressional debates over various elements of the Compromise. Starting out sounding like a states' rights Democrat, Hilliard toned down his rhetoric over the next few weeks. Then, Durham writes, "[a]s the various measures that made up the Compromise of 1850 were being adopted, Hilliard traveled home to Montgomery" (112). Based on that wording, a reader might reasonably assume that Hilliard failed to vote on the Compromise because he was out of town – an assumption strengthened by Durham's silence on whether Hilliard voted. But, in fact, Hilliard was in Washington in August and September 1850 as Congress took the yeas and nays on the various Compromise measures, and the Alabama congressman cast largely pro-Compromise votes. Why Durham neglects this is puzzling.

Durham devotes a good deal of attention to Hilliard's service as U.S. minister to Brazil from 1877 to 1881, during which time he was on a "quest for redemption" as chapter seven's subtitle suggests. As the top U.S. diplomat in Brazil, Hilliard became close to Emperor Dom Pedro II. Most importantly, though, Hilliard was drawn into the circle of Joaquim Nabuco, a Brazilian attorney and abolitionist. Although Brazil had adopted gradual emancipation in 1871, the law contained loopholes that kept slavery entrenched. Nabuco enlisted Hilliard in an effort to push immediate abolition. The former slaveholder and Confederate veteran gladly complied by penning a public letter touting the advantages of free labor over slave and suggesting rather harmonious race

relations in the post-emancipation South. His public correspondence with Nabuco, according to Durham, helped to revive abolitionism in Brazil. Although criticized by conservative Brazilian planters for meddling in the nation's internal affairs, Hilliard became the darling of abolitionists. He left Brazil before final abolition occurred in 1888, but Hilliard took great pride in his role in bringing about that result.

Helping to achieve abolition was, Durham suggests, the great moment for which Hilliard had longed all his life. The effort also helped Hilliard "to rid himself of various personal demons," as Durham puts it on page 181. Precisely which demons abolitionism exorcised from Hilliard Durham does not name. Hilliard did not, for instance, seem to harbor much guilt about his own or the South's slaveholding. Rather, it seems that he finally saw himself as having made a worthy contribution to humanity, thereby repairing a reputation sullied by a lackluster performance in the Civil War and his controversial second marriage (which caused him to lose a Methodist pulpit).

Occasionally, Durham (or perhaps his editor) places material in footnotes that really should be in the text itself. For instance, he discusses important aspects of the origins of Hilliard's political moderation in a footnote on pages 11 and 12; he notes, in an explicit way, Hilliard's vote against the Wilmot Proviso only in footnote 50 on page 92; and he tells readers of Hilliard's move from Augusta across the state to Columbus, Georgia, to run for Congress exclusively in a footnote on page 161.

These small complaints aside, Durham's solid biography brings welcome attention to Henry Washington Hilliard and enhances our understanding of nineteenth-century southern, and even Brazilian, history.

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