

Isham G. Harris of Tennessee: Confederate Governor and United States Senator

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Review

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Elliott, Sam Davis *Isham G. Harris of Tennessee: Confederate Governor and United States Senator*. Louisiana State University Press, \$48.00 ISBN 978-0-8071-3490-0

A New Look at a Wartime Governor

Students of the Civil War have paid little attention to governors. William B. Hesseltine's *Lincoln and the War Governors*, published in 1948, remains the standard work. Joseph H. Parks, massive *Joseph E. Brown of Georgia* was published in 1977, but there needs to be a new and more interpretive biography of that fascinatingly complex figure. Gordon McKinney's 2004 biography is the best of several works on North Carolina's Zebulon Vance. The lesser-known governors have been even more neglected, but now Sam Elliott has offered a substantial work on Tennessee's Isham G. Harris.

At first glance, Harris would seem to have little in common with the better-known Brown and Vance. After all Harris was a strong supporter of Jefferson Davis and of the Confederate cause while Brown and Vance clashed with the President and often became defenders of individual liberty and states' rights against the Richmond government. Yet all three had long careers in public life, and all three showed a great ability to survive the vicissitudes of turbulent times.

Governors were of course political animals and Elliott has written a relentlessly political biography. One suspects he had little choice given the available sources. There is no large body of Harris manuscripts, and aside from occasional glimpses in the comments of others, the reader gets no strong sense of Harris the man. His wife remains a shadowy figure and even though the couple had seven sons, they often lived apart for reasons that never become entirely clear. There is a great deal missing from the record, and the author deserves significant credit for thorough research, most impressively in newspapers.

Harris was a successful lawyer and staunch Democrat in heavily Jacksonian West Tennessee. Serving in Congress, he strongly defended the expansion of slavery. Elected governor in 1857, Harris could accomplish little in that constitutionally weak office until mounting sectional troubles offered an opportunity for leadership. Despite a resurgent unionism early in 1861, Harris brought Tennessee down the path of secession by making military preparations to join the nascent Confederacy before the voters had agreed that the state should leave the Union. Even as he tried to avoid needlessly antagonizing East Tennessee Unionists, Harris became quite active in raising troops and preparing the state's defenses. But after the Federals captured Forts Henry and Donelson and the Confederates had to abandon Nashville, the governor had little left to govern. These disasters, however, hardly deterred him. While serving as a volunteer military aide, he rushed to the side of the mortally wounded Albert Sidney Johnston on the Shiloh battlefield. For the rest of the war, Harris would travel with the Army of Tennessee and its various commanders. Remarkably Harris managed to get along with Braxton Bragg, Joseph Johnston, and John Bell Hood--no small achievement in itself. Nathan Bedford Forrest lauded him as a "fighting governor," and his tireless recruitment of Tennesseans must have greatly pleased Confederate officials. Harris accompanied Jefferson Davis on a western speaking tour and served with Hood during the disastrous Tennessee campaign. Even after Appomattox, he remained a bitter ender who hoped to keep the war going in the Trans-Mississippi theater.

He eventually fled through Texas with a price on his head and joined other Confederate exiles in Mexico City. After the ill-fated colonization effort there collapsed, Harris resumed practicing law in Tennessee, but he could never stay away from politics for long. During much of the Reconstruction period Harris battled with his bitter antebellum rival Andrew Johnson for supremacy in the Tennessee Democratic Party. Elected to four terms in the United States Senate, Harris long remained a dominant figure in state politics.

Elliott at times tells readers more than they may wish to know about the byzantine factionalism of the Tennessee Democratic party, and there are places in the book where Harris himself largely disappears. Too much context and not enough text would be a fair criticism, but much of the background information is both interesting and informative. All in all, Elliott has nicely filled a gap in Civil War biography.

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