

Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election That Brought on the Civil War

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Review

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Egerton, Douglas R. *Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election That Brought on the Civil War.* Bloomsbury Press, \$29.00 ISBN 978-1-59691-639-7

Examining the Crucial Election of 1860

Walt Whitman called 1860 the “Year of meteors! brooding year!” In this volume, Douglas R. Egerton describes the major events of that year’s presidential election campaign and the subsequent secession crisis. The author, who teaches history at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, New York, and has published studies of Denmark Vesey, the Gabriel slave rebellion, and blacks in Revolutionary-era America, emphasizes the key role played by southern extremists like William Lowndes Yancey and Robert Barnwell Rhett Sr. and Jr., who wished to destroy the Democratic Party as a prelude to destroying the Union. Also looming large in the narrative is Stephen A. Douglas, whose duplicity, inordinate ambition, drunkenness, and demagoguery receive proper attention, as does his statesmanlike attempt to rally support for the Union after the bombardment of Fort Sumter. Egerton rightly concludes that the premature death of the 48-year-old Douglas in June 1861 deprived Lincoln of “a seasoned, mainstream rival,” one who would never “have engaged in the sort of ugly race-baiting and outright distortion that became the standard rhetoric of too many Democrats during the war years” (332-333).

In a thoughtful appendix on “1860 Election Scenarios and Possible Outcomes,” Egerton sensibly argues that “even had it been possible for southern delegates at the Charleston and Baltimore conventions [of the Democratic party] to ignore the fire-eaters’ machinations and nominate Douglas with an electorally attractive running mate, the Democrats would have been unlikely to win” (336).

Though Egerton’s study, based largely on published sources, is generally competent, it is not especially well-written nor does it offer much in the way of

new information or fresh interpretations. The election of 1860 resembles that of 1976, when the voters basically decided to “throw the bums out.” In the latter year, public disenchantment with the Watergate scandals enabled Jimmy Carter to defeat Gerald Ford. Similarly, in 1860, the scandal-ridden administrations of Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan gravely undermined the Democrats’ chances. Lincoln won largely because the electorate wished to rebuke the Democrats. Edgerton misses this essential point.

The author also makes a number of factual errors. (Dean Richmond of New York was chairman of the Democratic national committee, not head of the Illinois delegation to the party’s national convention; Carl Schurz did not greet Lincoln upon his arrival in New York to deliver an address at Cooper Union, nor did Schurz write articles for the Springfield, Illinois, *Staats-Anzeiger*; copies of the Lincoln Douglas debates did not sell for the exorbitant price of \$2.50; Francis P. Blair Jr., not Sr., was called Frank; Lincoln did not welcome his wife’s advice on important government appointments.) Readers seeking modern, scholarly studies of the election of 1860 should consult Gary L. Ecelbarger, *The Great Comeback: How Abraham Lincoln Beat the Odds to Win the 1860 Republican Nomination*, Michael Green’s *Lincoln and the Election of 1860* (Southern Illinois University Press), and Jonathan Earle’s forthcoming study of the election in the Oxford University Press’s “Pivotal Moments in U.S. History Series.”

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