

Civil War Senator: William Pitt Fessenden and the Fight to Save the American Republic

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Recommended Citation

Summers, Mark Wahlgren (2011) "Civil War Senator: William Pitt Fessenden and the Fight to Save the American Republic," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 3 , Article 35.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol13/iss3/35>

Review

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Summer 2011

Cook, Robert J. *Civil War Senator: William Pitt Fessenden and the Fight to Save the American Republic.* Louisiana State University Press, \$48.00 ISBN 978-0-8071-3707-9

An Updated Look at Senator Fessenden

William Pitt Fessenden was a senator's senator. Dyspeptic, diligent, incorruptible and on some subjects indispensable, an aggressive debater and constructive force in committee, the Maine Republican came close to what the Founders must have envisioned when they designed a Senate. Only a temperament as cold as a Portland winter may have kept him from getting so good a biography as he deserves – at least, until now. Robert J. Cook's sympathetic, well-researched account, will stand as the best among a small handful in the last century and, indeed, one of the best biographies of any Civil War senator in forty years.

Fessenden seemed born to politics. Daniel Webster acted as his godfather, and his father, Samuel, went from Federalism to abolitionist activism. The son was made of more cautious stuff. Subordinating his distaste for slavery to the success of the Whig party, he went to Congress as an advocate of internal improvements and an enemy of southern expansion. His moderation and good judgment destined him for greater things. When parties splintered over the Mexican cession and temperance, a coalition carried him into the Senate, just in time to defy the "Nebrascals" overturning the Missouri Compromise restriction. An early Republican, Fessenden ranked with the radicals, and continued doing so all the way into Reconstruction, though his colleagues appreciated him more for his pragmatism in taking what he could get and his parliamentary skill in getting as much as he could. They respected his abilities, though many complained at his prickliness. Fessenden was all too ready to lecture those who fell below his own intellectual standard, and he was quick to take offense. Long in indifferent health, Maine's senior senator tended to grumble, and he never got

along well with so informal and unrefined a backwoodsman as Lincoln, though his real animus was to weak-kneed conservatives in the party like Secretary of State William Seward. Even in wartime, one could see inklings of the limits to his radicalism: his hostility to the government's power to issue greenbacks as legal tender and his insistence that emancipation must come through indisputably constitutional means.

But there was no doing without him. His speeches were severe, not ornate, and his skill in mustering and mastering facts made him particularly effective in legislation paying for the war. When Salmon P. Chase resigned from Lincoln's Cabinet, Fessenden's probity and dedication made him a reassuring choice at the Treasury, but this was only an interlude between Senate terms. As head of the Joint Committee on Reconstruction and the Senate Finance Committee, the senator from Maine shared at least some of the radical commitment to equal rights, but his radicalism increasingly was tempered by an awareness of the complexity of creating new southern state governments that could survive on their own and an alarm over the way his colleagues were stretching a Constitution already given a severe workout in wartime. His vote to acquit Andrew Johnson may have influenced others to do so, though, as Cook makes clear, so voting did not finish Fessenden's career: he was not made of the stuff of martyrs, and by the time he died in 1869, his political recovery seemed well under way.

Cook's Fessenden comes close to life, a figure difficult to like and impossible not to admire. Musing about the influence that illegitimate birth, family relations, and possible romantic liaisons with his cousin may have had, *Civil War Senator* does what it can with a pretty unsensational and unstormy personal life, which hardly matters: it was "our modern Pitt's" public role that matters most to us, and presumably, also to him (v). There were no scandals. Fessenden's integrity went soul-deep, although he never forgot that a statesman, to survive, has to know the political skills of rewarding his friends and shoring up his alliances. The biographer has the good fortune that the Maine senator left a broad paper-trail of letters, including family correspondence with his father, his wife, and his cousin Elizabeth Warriner. Newspapers lavished particular attention on Fessenden in his later years, because he was so clearly one of the movers and shakers of a Senate discovering new realms in which it could exercise power. Nor is the *Congressional Globe* short on material; the senator spoke often, ably, and at length.

No review can be considered respectable unless, like Fessenden himself, it finds fault. This one will not do so with the basics in the book, although there is enough evidence in the record to have read Fessenden rather less charitably than Cook has done. The senator could be petty, vindictive, persnickety, self-serving, and vain, and radicals had stronger reasons than Cook credits in 1867 for suspecting that Fessenden was a cloaked enemy of Reconstruction posturing as the friend of a just settlement. But Cook's reading of the facts is perfectly fair, too. Less excusable is the lack of illustrations. Fessenden deserves more than a single portrait at the frontispiece, the better to have brought him to life. But when a reviewer starts making quibbles about pictures, and only complains that he wants the book to have been longer than it is, that is as good as giving the author a clean bill of health – which is, as this account makes clear, better than Fessenden himself had.

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