

The Man Who Punched Jefferson Davis: The Political Life of Henry S. Foote, Southern Unionist

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Review

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Southern Honor Has Some Issues

If you were planning a party in the 1850s, I would suggest you leave Mr. Henry S. Foote off the guest list—unless, of course, you want one of those parties that people talk about for years. Literally years. Foote is one of the strangest fire-eaters in the South. He was born in Virginia but made his mark as a Unionist politician in Mississippi, Texas, California, and Tennessee. Whether he was welcomed in any of these places or was eventually asked to leave, this is the story of this unusual man.

Author Ben Wynne, usually seen in his role as a professor of history at the University of North Carolina, is also the author of *In Time: Charley Patton, Jimmie Rodgers, and the Roots of American Music*. Wynne brings us a fascinating book about one of the innumerable "B-list" players in the time before and during the Civil War—lawyer, senator, Texas revolutionary, political contrarian, and turncoat Henry S. Foote.

Foote loved a fight. He fought with words, dueling pistols and his fists, and he never backed down from a challenge. He remained convinced that he was smarter than anyone else in any room. Foote's ego backed him up when nothing or no one else did so. He fought with Senate colleague Jefferson Davis over the Missouri Compromise—hence the opportunity to “punch” Davis. He worked with Henry Clay on the Compromise of 1850, and he quarreled with Thomas Harte Benton every chance he got. Fights followed him to Texas where Foote supported Governor Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar and fights won him the governorship of Mississippi over Davis in 1852. Foote ran as a Unionist, but as the South moved toward secession, he found this position to be insupportable.

After moving to Tennessee after the outbreak of the war, Foote represented that state in the Confederate Congress, where he spent his time criticizing every move made by the Davis administration. Late in the war, he even tried to broker a peace with the Lincoln government on his own, which got him sent to Europe for a time. During his life, Henry Foote made few friends. He was considered a traitor by most southern Democrats for not supporting secession. He joined the Republican Party after the war and spent his last years writing a personal history of the Civil War as well as a memoir entitled *Casket of Reminiscences*, but nothing he did endeared him to either side. Foote died in 1880.

The Man Who Punched Jefferson Davis is an essential contribution to a growing amount of resources concerning the mentality and actions of southern men and women before the Civil War. Good, new work is appearing in this area. Books such as Joanne Freeman's *The Field of Blood*, James Broomall's *Private Confederacies*, Diane Miller Sommerville's *Aberration of Mind*, and Jarret Ruminski's *The Limits of Loyalty* join Tony Horowitz's seminal *Confederates in the Attic* as the waning of the Lost Cause pushes us to more clearly understand the hearts and minds of southerners who fought in the Civil War. Ben Wynne's book makes a significant contribution to this worthy effort.

Meg Groeling received her Master's Degree in Military History, with a Civil War emphasis, in 2016, from American Public University. Savas Beatie published her first book, The Aftermath of Battle: The Burial of the Civil War Dead, in the fall of 2015, and she has written First Fallen: The Life of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, which Southern Illinois University Press has contracted for publication sometime within the next two years. She is a regular contributor to the blog Emerging Civil War.