

The Impeachers: The Trial of Andrew Johnson and the Dream of a Just Nation

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Review

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Wineapple, Brenda. *The Impeachers: The Trial of Andrew Johnson and the Dream of a Just Nation.* Random House, 2019. \$32.00 ISBN 9780812998368

Impeachment has been receiving much attention these days. I speak not of current events, however. As the United States continues its commemoration of the sesquicentennial of the Reconstruction Era, and as new scholarly works appear on all manner of subjects from that era, it is to be expected that impeachment would get a much needed reexamination. To that end, Brenda Wineapple's *The Impeachers* is a welcome—and one might say timely—addition to the emerging scholarship on this dark period in our nation's past.

Andrew Johnson's impeachment has enjoyed a long history of scholarly examination. Works in the early twentieth century tended to portray the seventeenth President of the United States as a victim of an aggressive cabal of Congressional Radical Republicans. Starting in the early 1970s, as a reaction to the Watergate investigation, modern scholars took a more balanced approach to the question of Johnson's behavior in office, as well as that of his Congressional adversaries. They largely plotted two basic approaches to the matter. The first was to argue that impeachment was an unnecessary overreach of power by the Radicals. In *The Presidency of Andrew Johnson* (University Press of Kansas, 1979), Albert Castel concluded that assertions that Johnson was a bad man deserving of removal from office were not convincing, mainly because many of the impeachers themselves later regretted their votes in the Senate trial. Castel built off of conclusions made by Hans Trefousse four years earlier in *Impeachment of a President: Andrew Johnson, the Blacks, and Reconstruction* (University of Tennessee Press, 1975). Here Trefousse wrote similarly that Radical Republicans believed that their policy would be successful without Johnson's obstructionist agenda, but in that they were mistaken. Ultimately, Trefousse concluded, the rise of conservatism in the South and the end of Reconstruction in 1877 were directly related to the Radicals' overstep in 1868. Nearly fifty years later, this approach to

the Johnson impeachment is alive and well. It is essentially the conclusion taken by Richard White in his broad, yet monumental *The Republic for Which It Stands* (Oxford, 2017).

There is, however, a second train of thought that legitimized the impeachment of Andrew Johnson because it was undertaken by persons who wished to safeguard black Americans and preserve Congressional power. In *The Impeachment Trial of Andrew Johnson* (Norton, 1973), Michael Les Benedict suggested that impeachment was necessary, but that greater issues affecting the future of American economic prowess undermined the process. Moderate and conservative Republicans feared a Benjamin Wade Presidency, and its implications for the expansion of paper currency more than they did Johnson's pettiness toward his Secretary of War and the Radicals, or his seeming racism. Likewise, in *The Reconstruction Presidents* (University Press of Kansas, 1998), Brooks Simpson argued that Andrew Johnson may have committed impeachable offenses, but that they were not among the articles of impeachment voted upon by Congress. The failure of the impeachment trial to convict and remove him was not Johnson's resilience, but Congressional Republicans' ineptitude.

Brenda Wineapple should be counted among the latter group of theorists. Concluding that most previous works on the impeachment of Andrew Johnson leave off with the same thought--that the impeachment was a tragic moment in a tragic era, and best forgotten--she instead asserts that "slavery and thus the very fate of the nation lay behind Johnson's impeachment." (xxiv) We should therefore study it, not ignore it, because it tells us a great deal about ourselves as a republic governed by men.

Wineapple's book is part biography. All of the major characters of the period are here--from Andrew Johnson to Thaddeus Stephens, William Seward, Ulysses S. Grant, and even such minor players as Benjamin Butler, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain. It is also part history of the Reconstruction Era, devoting much space to describing the horrendous conditions facing African Americans in the South. These aspects of the book are certainly enlightening and place Johnson's impeachment in context, but one could argue that the book suffers from too much exposition. A book with the word "Impeachers" and "Trial" in the title could be expected to get to the main event a little sooner. As it is, the movement to impeach Andrew Johnson does not come up until over 170 pages in. Still, this is likely to be overlooked and forgiven by a reader who will undoubtedly be captivated by Wineapple's narrative style.

And what an enjoyable style it is! For example, when discussing the War Department under Simon Cameron, she writes that it was “unvarnished...with its odor of stale tobacco and panic.” (10) Later, when discussing Cameron’s replacement, Edwin Stanton’s desire to be nominated to the United States Supreme Court, she writes, “Stanton stayed, and he stayed, and he stayed. It may be accurately said that, after the war, Edwin Stanton was but one more casualty of it.” (12) Then there is her description of Mark Twain in Washington: “since he already distrusted cant, pretense, and candy-box mawkishness--as well as racial violence--he didn't much like the place.” (226)

Nonetheless, there are aspects of the book that could have used just a bit more editing. A glaring inaccuracy, for instance, presented itself early on in the text. When covering President Lincoln’s assassination and Johnson’s ascension to the Presidency, Wineapple notes Johnson’s swearing in as happening “a little more than a year” after his inauguration as Vice President when, in reality, it was little more than a month earlier. (14) Another inaccuracy appeared later when, quoting Secretary of State Seward as saying, “irreconcilable conflict.” What Seward actually said was “irrepressible conflict.” (240) Call it splitting hairs, but the correct presentation of these facts matters.

In the end, there is not much new in the form of information about the impeachment and trial of Andrew Johnson, but the narrative is fresh, and seems almost eerie in its parallels with modern debates about Presidential power and Congressional oversight. This book drives home the old adage that history doesn't repeat itself, but it echoes.

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