

Stephen A. Douglas, *Western Man: The Early Years in Congress, 1844-1850*

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Review

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Ankrom, Reg. *Stephen A. Douglas, Western Man: The Early Years in Congress, 1844-1850.* McFarland & Company, Inc., 2021. PAPERBACK. \$49.95 ISBN 9781476673769 pp. 367

In 2015, Reg Ankrom published *Stephen A. Douglas: The Political Apprenticeship, 1833-1843*, a valuable study of Stephen A. Douglas's early career in Illinois politics. Now, in this second installment of a projected four-volume biography, he carries the story through Douglas's first six years in the U.S. Congress, including his two terms in the House of Representatives and his first three years in the Senate. Ankrom's first volume delved into the Illinois communities where Douglas rose from obscurity to local prominence, situating the Little Giant in raw western towns like Jacksonville, Quincy, and Springfield. In *Stephen A. Douglas, Western Man*, Ankrom follows his subject into what for many readers will be the more familiar setting of antebellum Washington, DC, and into the arena of congressional politics. The Douglas who emerges from Ankrom's narrative matches the title: a self-proclaimed spokesman for the West and, in particular, a relentless expansionist who dreamed of western empire even as slavery drove a wedge between North and South. This is an apt characterization of Douglas's political vision, and the book ably recounts his congressional labors in considerable detail. Yet it does miss some opportunities to engage with the vibrant field of nineteenth-century American political history.

Douglas was first elected to Congress in 1843, just as his Democratic Party embraced a hardline expansionist program soon to be enshrined in the slogan "Manifest Destiny." In the years to come, Douglas proved himself both a party stalwart and a voracious imperialist. He stumped tirelessly for Democratic presidential nominee James K. Polk, pushed for Texas annexation, demanded all of the Oregon territory, rattled his saber at Mexico, and eagerly supported the conquest of New Mexico and California. Territorial expansion inflamed sectional disputes over slavery, however, and forced Douglas to address the most contentious of all antebellum issues. By the time Douglas pushed the bills collectively known as the Compromise of 1850 through the Senate, a process covered in the final portion of Ankrom's book, he had

staked everything on the doctrine of popular sovereignty that he would champion throughout the final decade of his tumultuous career.

Many readers, of course, will already be well acquainted with the intertwined political histories of slavery and expansion in the 1840s. Thus, while Ankrom's first volume excavated a history that was familiar primarily to Illinois specialists and Douglas biographers, the current installment revisits comparatively well-trodden terrain. But there is much to commend in this book. Ankrom knows Douglas well and illuminates the interpersonal and institutional talents that fostered Douglas's political success. Douglas was both a glad-hander and a party-builder, a combination that proved especially effective within the intimate setting of the U.S. Senate. Ankrom understands the legislative process and recounts with wonderful clarity several key congressional dramas, including the long struggle to create the Oregon Territory. Like Douglas, Ankrom recognizes the centrality of slavery to the national politics of the 1840s, but does not neglect other issues, particularly internal improvements, that preoccupied the Illinoisan and his constituents. And while Ankrom admires his subject more than most contemporary historians do, he readily identifies some of Douglas's sophistries and deceptions, including his convoluted explanation for missing the final vote on the Fugitive Slave Act.

Ankrom clearly demonstrates Douglas's immense importance to the nation's rancorous pre-Civil War politics. Because I share that view, however, I regret that two limitations of this book may diminish its influence among academic historians. One is that the text would have benefitted from more thorough proofing and editing. Some inaccuracies are more vexing than disruptive—wrong death years for Douglas (p. 9) and Daniel Webster (p. 267), for example, or placing the First Seminole War in the wrong decade (p. 22)—but others, such as the conflation of the Treaty of Ghent (1814) with the Anglo-American Convention of 1818, which established joint occupancy of the Oregon Country, are more systematic. Additional vetting of the manuscript would minimize errors (a few of which are inevitable in any lengthy text) and encourage readers to rely on this book as confidently as they have depended on previous Douglas biographies by Robert Johannsen and James Huston.

The other drawback is the uneven selection of primary and secondary sources. Ankrom has scoured relevant published primary material, making superb use of memoirs, edited correspondence collections, and the *Congressional Globe*. But the notes and bibliography reflect minimal use of archival sources. Especially notable is the absence, outside of one reference to

Douglas's copy of an invitation to Andrew Jackson's funeral, of material from the voluminous Stephen A. Douglas Papers held by the University of Chicago. This sprawling collection, which unfortunately has not been microfilmed or digitized, is indispensable to anyone studying Douglas or the northwestern wing of the antebellum Democratic Party. Although it contains less outgoing correspondence than one might wish, the Douglas Papers offer a trove of incoming letters, including constituent correspondence, updates from political allies around the country, and firsthand accounts of conventions and other proceedings that dotted the political calendar. This material illuminates what Douglas knew about key issues, events, and people at any given time and would enrich Ankrom's analysis of important milestones in Douglas's career, including his embrace of popular sovereignty and his clashes with southern Democrats over infrastructure spending.

Similarly, while the notes reflect deep research in venerable secondary works by scholars like Hermann von Holst, Hubert Howe Bancroft, and Frederick Jackson Turner, many more recent and extremely relevant studies pass unnoticed. Novelty is no guarantee of quality, of course, and there is still much to learn from historians like Frederick Merk or Eugene Berwanger. (Augustus Buell, whose work was thoroughly debunked in the 1950s, is another matter.) But any study of Douglas's early congressional career could benefit from—and contribute to—recent discussions in the thriving field of antebellum political history. Thus, it would have been productive for Ankrom to engage with scholars like Martin H. Quitt and Christopher Childers on popular sovereignty, Peter Guardino on the U.S.-Mexican War, and Rachel A. Sheldon on sociability and politics in Washington's tight-knit community. Not every book needs to stake out a contentious historiographical position, but it would be good to see new Douglas-related scholarship enter more directly into vibrant conversations about partisanship, slavery, and the coming of the Civil War.

In sum, while this book does not break as much new ground as the first installment of Ankrom's multivolume Douglas biography, it does contain valuable material that will be of interest to Civil War buffs, Illinois history aficionados, and academic historians. But it is not likely to supplant Robert Johannsen's biography as the standard treatment of the Little Giant.

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Jefferson Davis, and the Struggle for American Democracy (*University of North Carolina Press, 2020*).