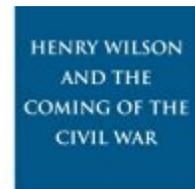


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John L. Myers. *Henry Wilson and the Coming of the Civil War*. Lanham: University Press of America, 2005. x + 565 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7618-2608-8.

Reviewed by Thomas G. Oey (Independent Scholar)
Published on H-CivWar (July, 2007)



John L. Myers

The Civil War and Reconstruction Career of Massachusetts Senator and Vice President Henry Wilson (1812-75) will be familiar to many. During the Civil War, Wilson was chairman of the Senate committee on military affairs. After the Civil War, he was an opponent of President Andrew Johnson and supported radical Reconstruction measures. He was a leader in securing legislation and constitutional amendments to protect blacks. Later, he was defeated as vice-presidential candidate in the 1868 Republican convention, but was nominated and elected for the office during Grant's second term. Wilson died in office from a paralytic stroke on November 22, 1875. He was well known for his work *History of the Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in America*, 3 vols. (1872-1877).

J. Daniel Loubert wrote his Ph.D. dissertation "The Orientation of Henry Wilson, 1812-1856" in 1952, yet Myers is the first to publish a work exclusively dedicated to examining Wilson's life and career up to 1861. As a half-biography, it is strictly occupied with Wilson's political career up until the firing upon Fort Sumter. The author's stated propose is to model his work after David Donald's *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* (1960). Other works in the coming of the Civil War genre include James L. Huston, *The Panic of the 1857 and the Coming of the Civil War* (1987), and Harry V. Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War* (2000).

Henry Wilson was born February 12, 1812, the son of farming parents in Farmington, New Hampshire. Living in poverty, he became an indentured farm laborer in August 1822, at the age of 10, and served until his twenty-first birthday. Born with the name Jeremiah Jones Colbath, he petitioned the New Hampshire legislature to

change his name in 1833. In December 1833, he migrated to Natick, Massachusetts where he became a shoemaker, and in 1838 he became a shoe manufacturer. In 1840 he married Natick native Harriet Howe. He was a member of the Congregationalist church, and taught Sabbath school.

In 1834 or 1835, Wilson became one of the founders of the Natick Debating Society, where abolition became one of the topics. After encountering slavery while visiting Maryland on his way to Washington, D.C. in May 1836, he began to pronounce abolitionist views in June 1836. Besides his interest in abolition, he supported temperance legislation—his father was an alcoholic. After developing an interest in politics and abolition, in 1840 he was elected a Whig representative to the Massachusetts House. He was particularly vexed by the 1845 annexation of Texas as a slave state into the Union. As a "Conscience Whig" he opposed American military action in the Mexican War and was disturbed by the possibility of admission of new slave-holding states. In 1848, when the Whig party failed to take a strong stance in support of abolition, he helped form the Free Soil Party that supported Martin Van Buren's candidacy for the presidency.

From 1848 to 1851 he was editor and publisher of the *Emancipator and Republican* newspaper. He opposed the Fugitive Slave Act which Massachusetts senator Daniel Webster acceded to in the Compromise of 1850. Wilson chaired the Free Soil Party's national convention in 1852 that nominated John Hale for the presidency. In 1853, Wilson led a constitutional convention movement to reform the Massachusetts constitution, but it was rejected by the voters due to the opposition of several key leaders.

Wilson played a very active role in the anti-Kansas-Nebraska bill movement of 1854 rejecting Stephen Dou-

glas's doctrine of popular sovereignty, under which territorial candidates for statehood could choose whether or not they could permit slavery. In 1854 he accepted the Massachusetts Know-Nothing Party's nomination to the U.S. Senate, where he was elected and served from 1855 until 1873. However the next year he left the Know-Nothing Party when it refused his demand to espouse abolition. He was in favor of fusion of anti-abolitionist groups and one of the 1854 founders of the Republican Party, and he played an influential role in John Fremont's presidential nomination in 1856.

On May 22, 1855, Representative Preston Brooks from South Carolina physically attacked Wilson's colleague Charles Sumner in the senate; Wilson himself refused Brooks's challenge to a duel. Although he had met John Brown prior to his raid of Harper's Ferry, he disowned any connection with him. Although predicting the need for a moderate candidate, he did not play a significant role in Lincoln's presidential nomination but heartily approved of it. The work concludes with the secession of the states of the Lower South and the failure of the Washington peace conference.

There is no doubt that Henry Wilson was an important figure of late antebellum American politics, and Myers has indeed performed a commendable service in bringing details of Wilson's antebellum career to light. This will undoubtedly become a standard reference work for scholars interested in Henry Wilson, American constitutional abolitionism, late antebellum Massachusetts, late antebellum national politics, the free soil movement, and the early history of the Republican Party. Because of limited primary sources on Wilson during the period, Myers has created a biographical reconstruction from other primary sources relating to Wilson and his contemporaries. Because of great attention to detail, it makes for quite challenging reading. There are copious references to Wilson's role in economic, trade, and foreign policy legislation.

Although there are numerous useful references to Wilson's relations with political, social, and religious leaders and movements, the work lacks up-to-date historiographical information; it seems that the manuscript was completed in the late 1980s as the bibliography contains no items dated after 1987. It would have been interesting to know more about the religious-social background of the history of abolition in Massachusetts. In particular, what was the actual influence of feminist

abolition leader Lydia Maria Child on Wilson? What was the influence of Massachusetts' religious leaders on the senator? What role did Massachusetts capitalists have in introducing slavery to the South, in the first place? Some works that may shed light on these questions include Bruce Laurie, *Beyond Garrison: Antislavery and Social Reform* (2005), Carolyn L. Karcher, *The First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child* (1998), W.E.B. Du Bois's 1896 classic, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*, and John R. McKivigan, *The War Against Proslavery Religion: Abolitionism and the Northern Churches, 1830-1865* (1984).

Myers does make clear, however how the populist, pragmatic, and unionist Wilson related closely to the disunionist principled abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison. He points out that Wilson was the only mainstream Massachusetts politician who regularly attended abolitionist meetings. Yet unlike Garrison, Wilson was willing to make compromises in order the further the abolitionist cause. He was therefore the main bridge between Garrison and the real world of American national politics. During his twenty-five-year abolitionist career up to 1861, Wilson mainly confined himself to opposing slavery in the new western states and in the District of Columbia and in opposing the Fugitive Slave Act. He did not believe Congress had the power to abolish slavery in states where it already existed.

Wilson's brief relationship with the Know-Nothing movement is well analyzed in this context. He felt that Catholic immigrants were not strong supporters of abolition and did not possess a strong sense of American identity, whereas generally the northern Know-Nothings also strongly supported abolition. Moreover, he was a moderating influence on the American movement by resisting secrecy and extensive residency requirements prior to naturalization. Similarly, while Wilson supported the dignity of Indians, and thought their rights had been trampled by "the slave power," he was influenced by manifest destiny and asserted that western migrating white Christians should displace the Indians. Notionally he supported the right of women to vote but he did not see the practicability of political activism for their rights. He supported abolition of capital punishment except for in cases of murder. Additionally he supported legislative measures for the political and educational rights of blacks even though he was not convinced of their full equality with whites.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Thomas G. Oey. Review of Myers, John L., *Henry Wilson and the Coming of the Civil War*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. July, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13354>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.