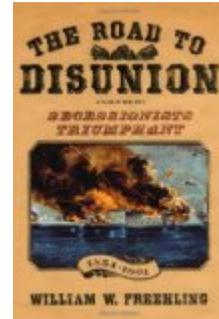


H-Net Reviews

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William W. Freehling. *The Road to Disunion, Volume 2: Secessionists Triumphant, 1854-1861*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. xx + 586 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-505815-4.

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The Neurotic Generation

The sectional conflict has long been one of those fields in which the top practitioners often collect years of scholarship into sweeping accounts of the causes of the great conflagration. This has given rise to the great schools of thought familiar even to undergraduate history majors, with advocates of the “irrepressible conflict” and of the “blundering generation,” to name two, sparring about the inevitably or the foolishness of the war. *Secessionists Triumphant*, the second volume of William W. Freehling’s extraordinarily detailed interpretation of the forces driving the South toward secession, is the most recent example of this genre of grand histories of the coming of the Civil War.

Although they differ in many ways, Freehling’s newest work resembles another big book on the war’s origins: David M. Potter’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (1976). Both demonstrate their authors’ complete command of the pertinent secondary scholarship and primary sources. Both make shrewd connections between the private ambitions and public activities of the major actors. Both imbue their books with a highly personal tone and celebrate the use of narrative in making sense of the spiral toward war. Yet they can be distinguished in several ways, not the least of which is that Potter’s work still retains a hint of the old Revisionist notion that the war was brought on by a “blundering generation” of politicians; his application of irony to the events of the 1850s provides insight as well as entertainment. Freehling, on the other hand, suggests that slavery was, indeed, an important and divisive enough issue to lead to a nearly irrepressible conflict. He also tends

to emphasize a different literary approach than Potter by looking at tragic flaws in the character of the dozens of hard, ambitious, and sometimes delusional men who appear in two or three page biographies throughout the text.

Several elements of Freehling’s book stand out. First of all, he never hesitates to argue that slavery was the number one issue dividing the North and South. He shows that all other conflicts flowed from the peculiar institution, whose maintenance required a despotism that undermined the democratic principles of the nation and whose support inspired intellectual gymnastics that ultimately, if temporarily, pulled most southerners into the Secessionists’ camp. Secondly, he stresses the role played by the border states, as their resistance to radical sectionalism ultimately led the radical sectionalists to forsake cooperation and push for separate state secession. Thirdly, he loves to find meaningful coincidences in the course of events. For instance, the celebration of the completion of the railroad between Charleston and Savannah occurred just as South Carolinians wavered on the secession issue in December 1860; the banquet and speeches provided a very public and effective venue for the Radicals and proved to be a turning point in the debate in South Carolina. Fourthly, given his earlier work, he somewhat predictably—but not unfairly—features the role of South Carolina in the story of secession. But the Palmetto State’s path to revolution is not simply a matter of extremists seizing control of a power vacuum; nothing is that simple in this complex society of class divisions, in which any slight or future threat to its bedrock institu-

tion, slavery, sent shivers of fear through the collective spine of the elite low country planters who controlled the state. South Carolina provides the most powerful example of the fifth distinctive feature of the book, namely Freehling's emphasis on internal divisions within the slave states: between the Border South, the Old South, and the Southwest; between upcountry and low country; between slave owners and non-slave owners; between rich and poor. At different times these divisions both impeded and propelled the activists' efforts to stir in their fellow southerners the right mix of fear, outrage, and backbone.

The book is organized into many, rather short chapters, each providing a sharp narrative of a specific event or a capsule biography of a key figure. Many of the incidents and people are familiar to everyone; others appear far less often in typical histories of the period. For instance, in a section that begins with the oft-told tale of John Brown's ill-fated Harpers Ferry raid and his ironic martyrdom, Freehling includes chapters on "Three Other Men Coincidentally Named John," who all had different, less violent plans for bringing free soil sensibilities to the border South: John Fee, John Underwood, and John Clark (p. 203). Although these men do not normally appear in histories of the sectional conflict, they are examples of the detail Freehling packs into the narrative, showing the complexities of the issues and attitudes that alarmed and inspired southerners.

Freehling makes it clear that he purposefully rejected "academic historians' tendency to maximize abstract analysis and to minimize dramatic writing." "Where many academic historians dismiss epic stories as old-fashioned fluff," he writes somewhat defensively, "I believe that classic tales of headline events, when retold from fresh angles, help sort out the culture's underlying forces" (p. xvi). Although the writing style is striking and the narrative is ultimately persuasive, Freehling's tone can become a little gossipy and he sometimes inappropriately applies modern terms to 1850s politics. (Without the technology to record sound, can politicians really speak in "sound bites?") Readers may also tire of his excessive use of adjectives and other modifiers, which oc-

asionally make the narrative a little hyperactive. Yet *Secessionists Triumphant* is, at its best, an epic story grandly told. Freehling offers paragraph-long précis of his arguments at the beginning of each section and effectively summarizes the story so far at crucial intervals. Big issues are debated by men with bigger personalities and although this is one of the most detailed and sprawling accounts of the road to secession published in generations, Freehling is generally successful in cutting through the always interesting mounds of facts with incisive comments and confident judgments.

Perhaps the most appealing—and most quirky, in some ways—feature of the book is Freehling's insistence that the inner lives of the men involved in these great controversies matter. These range from the sexual issues that helped to shape James Henry Hammond's brilliance, ambition, and indecisiveness; to the inferiority complex of Albert Gallatin Brown, Mississippi's less well-known U.S. Senator; to James Buchanan's pandering to Southerners at least partly because he enjoyed their cheery conviviality at the White Sulphur Springs resort; to Hinton Rowan Helper's rage at the unfairness of his economic failure in California. To Freehling, this generation of politicians, activists, and provocateurs are less a "blundering generation" than a "neurotic generation." This will appear superficial to some readers, who may conclude that the Civil War was caused by narcissistic sectionalists acting on impulses nurtured by private, even subconscious disappointments, resentments, and ambitions. But there is a ring of truth to the amateur but sophisticated psychology the author uses to explain the road to civil war.

Indeed, Freehling's last few pages are a "Coda," as he calls it, on how slavery caused the Civil War. In his mind, "That slavery above all else caused this historic war ... seems indisputable." But only by exploring "personality, accidents, timing—in a word, contingency," can that abstract notion be converted into a concrete explanation of "how" slavery caused the war (p. 531). His focus on how the personal became the political generally works; it certainly lends a unique tone to this wide-ranging and convincing account of the South's many paths to secession.

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