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Noble E. Jr.. Cunningham. *The Presidency of James Monroe.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996. xvi + 246 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-0728-0.

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Feeling Good About the Era of Good Feelings

Given this new format, I have decided to take a new tack in reviewing this book, trying something less formal and more personal. First I must acknowledge that I had read several reviews before I was asked to do this. They were very favorable and I, as a result, purchased a copy of the book since I teach the period, have used other volumes in this series, and am doing a study related to the Missouri controversy which is featured in the book. On the dust jacket Robert A. Rutland calls it "the best book on Monroe ever written" and Ralph Ketcham proclaims it to be "a superb book ... lucid, concise, and full of insights." Not only did Cunningham promise to synthesize the secondary sources on this crucial period but add some new primary source material and critical new interpretations.

Unfortunately, the book is a tremendous disappointment. I had occasion recently to reread Turner's *The Rise of the New West* and it is a vastly superior book, as are the two volumes by Dangerfield on the period and Harry Ammon's biography, which devotes about as many pages to the presidency as does Cunningham and is also praised on its dusk jacket by Ketcham as "the book on Monroe to which all will turn."

This book is organized in a pedestrian fashion with a breezy essay on Monroe's career, then a chapter on the truly uneventful election of 1816 and a snappy page-turner entitled "The First Months in Office." These are followed by chapters on "Andrew Jackson and the First Seminole War," "The Missouri Compromise," "The Monroe Doctrine," and a catch-all "Domestic Concerns," and finally, "The End of an Era." If Cunningham has a thesis, it is that this period "was more critical than is often recognized" (p. xv) and that Monroe was his own man, the major force in making his administration. Cunningham keeps saying that Monroe was not Jefferson or Madison, but at each turn he made the decisions. In fact, this argument is more repetitive than convincing.

The best chapters in the book are those on "Monroe as Chief Executive" and "Life in Monroe's Washington," which give some sense of how small the government was and what a boring place the new republic's capital was, although James Sterling Young's *Washington Community* does the job in a far more interesting fashion.

Cunningham's style–as in his other books–is disconcerting. While it is rooted in primary sources–he relies extensively on John Quincy Adams's diary–the book is devoid of analysis. In his handling of the Seminole War, the Missouri controversy, and the Monroe doctrine, Cunningham rehearses the facts and presents Monroe's perspective, but never faces most of the critical questions that have interested scholars. Cunningham tries so hard to keep Monroe in the center that he writes the other great men of the day out. Clearly he dislikes Clay, whom he sees only as a thorn in the president's side. It would be easy to forget that they were members of the same party.

Cunningham has every right to his opinions about Clay or Jackson or Calhoun or Adams, but he fails to come to grips with the details of public policy, whether he is handling Latin American independence or the American System–which is not in the index. The throwaway catchall "Domestic Concerns" is easily the worst chapter in the book. Land policy, tariffs, Indians, colonization, the Bank of the United States were all of immense importance at the time. Yet they were technical questions deserving sophisticated analysis. Ron Formisano once said that the 1820s were one of the neglected periods of American history and this book does not add much to our understanding, because Cunningham does not take the issues of the day seriously enough to provide detailed analysis.

Usually when I write reviews I desire more space to discuss a book whether I like it or dislike it. For once I have no space limits and I really have nothing else to say. I liked and have used Cunningham's books on the rise of the Republicans. I wanted to like this book and hoped to

learn from it. I even thought that it might be just the book to cover this period in my course. Previously in various courses, I have used both of Forrest McDonald's books in the series, also Donald B. Cole on Jackson, Phillip Shaw Paludan on Lincoln, and Lewis L. Gould on TR and James N. Giglio on Kennedy. But I will give this one a miss.

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