

# H-Net Reviews

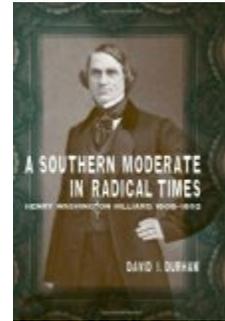
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David I. Durham. *A Southern Moderate in Radical Times: Henry Washington Hilliard, 1808-1892*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008. xv + 241 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3328-6.

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## Of Lives Lived Moderately

David I. Durham was cognizant of the challenge he faced as Henry Washington Hilliard's biographer: "Biographies frequently focus on prominent figures who were remarkable successes or great failures. More rarely, writers tell the stories of sympathetic individuals who represent the common human experience. These categories, however, exclude a large number of historically important individuals" (p. 1). Hilliard was just such a person: an erudite orator, educator, lawyer, and minister, Hilliard served as a moderate Whig representing Alabama in the United States Congress during a time when moderation became increasingly difficult to maintain. His conservative abhorrence of sectionalism did not win the day, nor did he make a great mark on the course of the Civil War. But, as Durham persuasively demonstrates, Hilliard's life nonetheless highlights many of the essential contingencies shaping the course of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. "Hilliard allows us to understand his world, big and small, and to observe the tragedy of a visionary who understood the dangers lurking in the conflicts he could not control" (p. 4). In keeping with such works as Daniel W. Crofts's study of Upper South unionists (*Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* [1989]), or Edward L. Ayers's examination of the "Great Valley" region of Virginia and Pennsylvania (*In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863* [2003]), Durham's portrait of Hilliard reminds us of the complexities involved in maintaining a moderate position during the sectional crisis.

Hilliard was born in 1808 in North Carolina; raised and educated in Columbia, South Carolina; and made his career first in Augusta, Georgia, and then in Montgomery, Alabama. Classically trained in the early 1820s at the University of South Carolina by such professors as Thomas Cooper and Henry Nott, Hilliard came of age just as some of his teachers and mentors were formulating new sectionalist theories. Nevertheless, he consistently took a nationalist position on the issues of the day, rejecting nullification and embracing the Whig Party. In the early 1830s, already a lawyer, Hilliard was made the chair of the infant University of Alabama's English department, and soon after commenced an active career in journalism as a part-owner of the *Alabama Journal*, the Whig organ in the state. He also served in a number of elective and political offices, first as a state legislator, then as minister to Belgium under President John Tyler, and finally, in 1845, as a member the U. S. House of Representatives. Scholars will find particularly interesting three aspects of Hilliard's political history: his views on territorial expansion in the 1840s; his intimate and fierce rivalry with fire-eater William Lowndes Yancey in the late antebellum period and his ultimate choice to "go with the state" when Alabama seceded; and his postwar work as ambassador to Brazil under President Rutherford B. Hayes.

As a member of the House during the debates surrounding the annexation of Texas and conflict with Mexico, as well as the contest with Britain over the Oregon

Territory, Hilliard made his mark by championing—in unlikely fashion for a southerner—the claim for Oregon, while rejecting a concomitant demand for Mexico. In taking this stance, Hilliard refused to see Mexico and Oregon solely through a sectional lens, a position that became increasingly difficult to manage once the war with Mexico was fully underway. Moderation became virtually impossible to maintain, of course, after the Wilmot Proviso hardened sectional lines over western territory even further. While uneasily supporting southern rights and prerogatives, Hilliard also strove to convince his northern colleagues that an aroused southern radicalism posed serious dangers to the nation, claiming, “This hall should not be converted into an arena for hot controversy, by bringing for discussion here a subject which does not fairly come within the range of our deliberations, and which must shake, not only this Capitol, but this republic” (p. 95). Durham presents a man painfully wedged between colleagues increasingly unable or uninterested in cooperation: “Hilliard was a determined nationalist who found himself unsuccessfully attempting to negotiate a middle course between his duty as a southerner and his position as a committed Unionist as well as a friend of northern Whig Party leaders” (p. 95). Asserting both that the federal government had exclusive jurisdiction over the territories, while at the same time opposed firmly to the Wilmot Proviso as unconstitutional, Hilliard tried to defend ground (and a party) that was slipping out from under him. Not surprisingly, he became one of the Congress’ strongest advocates for extending the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific Ocean.

It was during the debate over the Wilmot Proviso that Hilliard’s rivalry with Yancey began in earnest. Over the subsequent years, through the Crisis of 1850 and the Nashville Convention, and into the 1851 congressional elections in Alabama, Hilliard and Yancey sparred over the South’s course. A particular moment for Hilliard’s political career was his refusal to support John C. Calhoun’s “Southern Address,” of which Yancey was a leading champion. The stance made Hilliard the focus of much ire from Alabama’s Democratic press, and it did not endear him to the state’s fragmented and wounded Whigs, either. Public admission by Hilliard of the South’s perilous position as a supporter of a dying and antiquated institution—“The civilized world is against us. I know it; I comprehend it; I feel it.... Our moral condition at the South resembles the physical condition of Holland, where dikes, thrown up by the ingenuity of man, hardly protect the habitations of man against the incursions of the sea”—did nothing to improve his situation politically

(p. 105). A final, belated endorsement of the address sealed his reputation as a vacillator, a fatal political weakness. By 1851, Hilliard’s congressional career was over; he returned to a state deeply divided, but increasingly radical in its politics. His last political foray involved acting as a surrogate for another Whig congressional candidate, on whose behalf he engaged in a lengthy series of debates with Yancey, who was also acting as a surrogate for a Southern Rights candidate. The debates were rhetorical feats—the last continuing for five hours—and resulted in the election of Hilliard’s candidate. But, as Durham notes, Hilliard “had reached the height of his oratorical and political success at the same moment that his political party had begun to dissolve” (p. 125). Despite the loss, Yancey’s secessionist ideas had gained considerable exposure and currency during the campaign and ultimately proved more durable in the heated political climate to come. The secession winter eight years later found Hilliard clinging to unionism, only to abandon it in April 1861, after which he acted as an ambassador from Alabama to Tennessee, whose secession he helped to negotiate. His brief time as a commander of “Hilliard’s Legion” in the Civil War was unimpressive; he served for only six months before resigning.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, we see Hilliard’s star rising anew as the national political scene shifted away from Reconstruction toward reconciliation, in a situation where his moderate tendencies were again deemed valuable assets. As a minister to Brazil under President Hayes, Hilliard enthusiastically worked to improve the country’s relations. In this capacity, the Alabamian helped to negotiate new trade and copyright treaties, ameliorated the conditions of expatriate Confederates who had fallen on hard times in their newly adopted country, and influenced in important ways the emancipation policies of the Brazilian government. Durham shows us a man who worked doggedly in this position, utilizing the range of his life experience and intellectual abilities to accomplish notable achievements.

There are a few quibbles. The section devoted to day-to-day life as a professor at the University of Alabama verges on the picayune. Occasionally, Durham seems to attribute ideas or thoughts to Hilliard with little evidence—such as, “He imagined himself posed to become the next great American orator, following in the footsteps of [Henry] Clay, [Daniel] Webster, and Calhoun,” a conclusion for which Durham offers no real evidence (p. 83). Such flourishes intrude rarely, however, and are almost always reasonable deductions based on what is known about Hilliard overall. In general, this is a well-

written, deeply researched, and thoughtfully contextualized study. Durham treats his subject with care and thoroughness and allows us to see the tumultuous mid-nineteenth century through the eyes of a fully engaged—if relatively obscure—participant. The perspective is a valuable one.

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