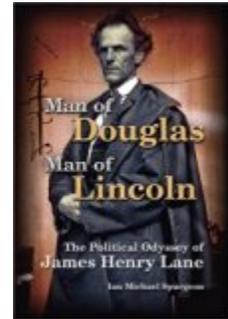


Ian Michael Spurgeon. *Man of Douglas, Man of Lincoln: The Political Odyssey of James Henry Lane*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008. x + 291 pp. \$42.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1814-8.

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Senator Jim Lane, a Consistent Politician

In the last few years, a handful of books have appeared profiling Senator James Henry “Jim” Lane, Kansas’s first U.S. senator and a key leader in the “Free State” movement when the territory experienced a violent struggle over slavery. Ian Michael Spurgeon’s *Man of Douglas, Man of Lincoln* takes a unique approach to the subject. Instead of a standard biography, Spurgeon focuses on Lane’s political career to show “that Lane embraced democratic principles, that his larger actions were more consistent to those principles than generally believed, and that his political career consisted of a series of pragmatic responses to prevailing events” (p. 2). Spurgeon presents a solid argument in support of his premise, but not everything adds up.

Spurgeon does not write much about Lane’s upbringing or personal life beyond a few basics. Instead, he starts with Lane’s one term as congressman representing Indiana and voting in favor of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. From there the author covers Lane’s appearance in Kansas, his rise to leadership of the free state movement, and his efforts to advance that cause. Spurgeon devotes a few more chapters to Lane’s time as a U.S. senator as well as his political and military work during the Civil War, concluding with his suicide in 1866.

Central to Spurgeon’s argument is the first chapter, which looks at Lane’s one term as congressman. Of particular note is a committee meeting Lane attended in March 1854. At the meeting he got into a verbal spat

with a southern representative and made remarks critical of slavery. This incident supports the modern view that Lane, like his constituents in Indiana and later in Kansas, opposed the institution of slavery on political and economic grounds, in contrast to the moral opposition to slavery typical of abolitionists.[1]

Of equal importance to Spurgeon’s premise is the chapter devoted to Lane’s presentation of a “Kansas Memorial” to the United States Senate in April 1856. It allows the author to advance his thesis that Lane was entirely consistent when he left the Democratic Party. The memorial consisted of the antislavery Topeka Constitution and a petition supporting the admission of Kansas Territory as a free state. Pro-slavery senators were opposed to the memorial, but the main reason for its failure was due to the criticism of Senator Stephen Douglas, the original author of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. This incident has gone down in history as one of the setbacks the free state cause suffered in 1856 as well as a blow to Lane’s personal and political prestige.

Spurgeon starts his chapter on the memorial by writing that Lane was “confident that the [National] Democratic [Party] leadership would support” it because it reflected majority sentiment in the territory (p. 64). Lane was a “devoted party man” who expected his party to support his efforts, even if he was not specifically advancing the interests of the Democratic Party in Kansas (p. 80). Yet, as Spurgeon writes, when Douglas “branded the

free-state Kansas legislature as revolutionary, the Kansas Memorial a forgery, and James Lane as a political traitor, all of Lane's perceptions and relations with his beloved party shattered" (p. 80). This evidence supports Spurgeon's point that Lane did not abandon the Democratic Party due to opportunism or a change of heart. In Lane's view, the party had betrayed Kansas and its principles, and he could no longer remain a Democrat.

This view is also reflected in the final chapter of Spurgeon's book, specifically the section on Lane and President Abraham Lincoln's renomination in 1864. The author goes into some detail about Lane's powerful speech at the Grand Council of the Union League meeting in Baltimore on June 6, 1864, and on Lane's actions at the Republican National Convention the next day. Two important issues arise in this section. First, the speech advances Spurgeon's overall premise that Lane was a loyal party politician, even if he had changed from a Democrat to a Republican. Second, the author considers recent evidence about whether or not Lincoln's renomination was a certainty and how important Lane was to Lincoln's renomination.

This chapter is among those that reinforce Spurgeon's basic argument that Lane was no opportunist as his critics often claimed, but a man with a consistent political ideology. Other chapters, however, contain omissions that undermine the author's case. Significant among those is the omission of any mention of General James G. Blunt. Blunt was an abolitionist from Maine via Ohio whom Lane had accepted as an officer in the "Lane Brigade."^[2] When Lane had Blunt elevated to command all military forces in Kansas in 1862, Blunt was viewed as being "merely Lane in a different body and under a different name."^[3] Spurgeon does mention in passing that Lane "labored to retain his seat" in 1864, but writes little beyond that (p. 249). One of the main factors endangering Lane's reelection was his link to Blunt. Specifically, Blunt was accused of taking part in the wholesale corruption of the military supply system on the frontier.^[4] The omission of the Blunt-Lane relationship is puzzling since it figures prominently in other works about Lane. The reader is left to wonder what the author thinks about this relationship that exerted an important influence on Lane's political career during the Civil War.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of Spurgeon's premise is Lane's view of blacks. One part of the 1855 Topeka Constitution that Lane helped to draft was a "black law" that would bar any black, free or slave, from entering Kansas. Spurgeon notes that the "black law" was

supported by "a large, conservative midwestern element led by Lane" (p. 53). He later writes that the vote on the "black law," which was separate from the vote on the constitution, was 1,287 to 453 in favor (p. 54).

Three years later, Lane presided over another constitutional convention in Kansas. The meeting began in a tiny town named Minneola that had aspirations of becoming the state capital. Supporters of Minneola's goal at the gathering clashed with opponents who accused them of fraud and corruption. Lane supported an effort to move the convention. He used his power at public speaking to shoot down Minneola and to accuse its supporters of disunity to the free state cause.

Consequently, the convention moved to Leavenworth. The constitution drawn up there abandoned the "black law." At one point delegates discussed whether or not the word "white" should be inserted into a provision on the right to vote. Lane supported efforts to table the move, but he and other delegates backing the right of black men to vote were defeated.

To explain his apparent change in view, Lane claimed that he was now part of the abolitionist wing of the Free State Party. This transformation subjected Lane to charges of hypocrisy. Spurgeon argues that Lane made this statement to "appeal to the important abolitionist contingent" of the convention (p. 145). The appeal to those abolitionists was not to endanger the unity of the convention over the issue of black suffrage. Identifying with them was Lane's way of reaching out so they would listen to his advice and "delay the suffrage issue until *after* the constitution passed" (p. 145).

The coming of the Civil War saw Lane's views change again. As early as November 1861, Lane supported changing the national war aim from restoring the Union to ending slavery. At the same time he expressed support for a presidential emancipation proclamation.^[5] The following year, Lane used power that he gained from Lincoln's administration to recruit two regiments of black soldiers.^[6]

In 1864, in the weeks leading up to the Republican Convention, many radical Republicans accused Lincoln of not moving fast enough to embrace emancipation and the enlistment of black soldiers. Lane came strongly to Lincoln's defense. He argued that the president had shown the wisdom to employ such policies, but also the temperate nature not to do so before the more conservative general public was ready to support those policies.

Spurgeon admits that these incidents point to “some transformation” in Lane’s attitude toward blacks (p. 239). But this change was “pragmatic, rather than truly humanitarian or opportunistic” (p. 239). “He saw a war against the institution of slavery as a blow to the Confederacy and armed black men as a great tool for the Union,” Spurgeon writes. “As long as national and party peace required recognition of slaveholding interests, Lane acquiesced. But when slavery and its advocates defied the democratic process and then made war against the Union, he no longer tolerated the institution” (p. 239). Yet one could also argue that Lane’s changing views on race could have been humanitarian due to a process of ongoing life experience. It would also not be demeaning to Lane to suggest that his changing views might have reflected similar changes in the views of the people he represented.

Overall, though, Spurgeon’s book is an important step forward in reassessing the character and actions of Lane. For too long Lane was dismissed as a violent radical

or a power-hungry opportunist. The author’s case is not entirely perfect, and suffers from some flaws and omissions. By and large, though, Spurgeon presents his case logically and with a good amount of historical evidence. *Man of Douglas, Man of Lincoln* is a solid addition to the literature on Lane and early Kansas history.

Notes

[1]. Robert Collins, *Jim Lane: Scoundrel, Statesman, Kansan* (Gretna: Pelican Publishing, 2007), 46-47, 61.

[2]. Albert Castel, *Civil War Kansas: Reaping the Whirlwind* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 82.

[3]. *Ibid.*, 83.

[4]. Collins, *Jim Lane*, 253-254.

[5]. *Ibid.*, 194-195.

[6]. Castel, *Civil War Kansas*, 90-94.

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