



William C. Davis. *Breckinridge: Statesman, Soldier, Symbol*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010. 712 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8131-9255-0.

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## To Duty and to Nation: The Extraordinary Life of John Cabell Breckinridge

There have been those among us who were born to lead remarkable lives. From an early age their endeavors became noteworthy in some manner. Lives so touched by accomplishment leave the most enduring legacies of history, for they provide an illustration of courage, commitment, and moral fortitude.

One of those remarkable people was John Cabell Breckinridge of Kentucky. Within a brief lifespan of fifty-four years, he served his nation successfully as a member of both houses of Congress, vice president, Confederate cabinet secretary, and commander of soldiers on the battlefield. When the Civil War ended, and his cause defeated, from exile he became a forceful advocate for reconciliation and reunification. His notable life can be savored once again through the reissue by the University Press of Kentucky of William C. Davis's extensive biography, *Breckinridge: Statesman, Soldier, Symbol*.

Davis's biography is organized into three separate books: Breckinridge as politician, as soldier, and as reconciliator. Each section is painstakingly structured with every page steeped in factual information with detailed analysis. Every chapter flows nearly effortlessly from start to finish, with each stage of the subject's life placed in careful context of time, place, and circumstance. These elements combined with a charismatic subject not only produce a sound piece of historical work, but also provide a fascinating reading experience.

The Breckinridge family was deeply engaged in Kentucky politics. John Breckinridge, the subject's grandfather, served in both the House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate, and held the position of U.S. attorney general under President Thomas Jefferson prior to his death at age forty-six in 1806. His father, also named John Cabell Breckinridge, was a rising star in state politics, serving as Kentucky's secretary of state prior to his own untimely death in 1823 at age forty-five, when his son and namesake was two years old. From this legacy, according to

Davis, Breckinridge "developed an intense respect for authority which he never lost" (pp. 11-12).

Perhaps due to the family tradition of public service Breckinridge felt the tug toward a life in politics. Trained in law at Kentucky's Transylvania University, Breckinridge graduated at seventeen years old and began to practice his craft by age twenty. Afterward, he rose swiftly through the ranks of state politics as a states' rights, pro-Union Democrat. Before his thirtieth birthday he had been elected to the House of Representatives, serving two terms (1851-55). During his tenure the congressman's most notable action was to guide the Kansas-Nebraska Bill to successful passage in the House in 1854. As a compromise candidate between the James Buchanan and Stephen Douglas factions, Breckinridge won the vice presidential nomination at age thirty-five; yet, it proved to be a hollow victory, for though he served Buchanan with sincerity and purpose, the president often ignored his counsel. As Buchanan's term was winding down and Breckinridge became increasingly dissatisfied with the candidacy of Senator Douglas from Illinois, Breckinridge became the presidential candidate on the Southern Democratic ticket in 1860. He was sent back to Washington DC, only this time as a U.S. senator representing his home state; but after nine months of service his seat was abolished due to his outspoken advocacy of states' rights.

The next phase of Breckinridge's career was that of a military commander serving the Confederate cause, at which he proved adept. As with most Civil War generals, he had gained battle experience during the Mexican War. When given his own command in the eastern theater, Breckinridge led successful campaigns throughout the Shenandoah Valley, and was especially noteworthy for his victory against a superior force at New Market, as well as for his role as a strategist at Cold Harbor. The sole blemish on the general's war record was an antagonis-

tic relationship with his superior officer, General Braxton Bragg, whom he publicly accused of being incompetent. Finally, during the Confederacy's final months, Breckinridge served as its last secretary of war, his most notable action in this position being the preservation of that government's war records.

Following the death of the Confederacy, Breckinridge fled to Cuba to avoid capture and trial for treason. After nearly five years abroad, in which he resided in the United Kingdom and Canada, he returned home to Kentucky after receiving a presidential pardon to resume the practice of law. Prior to his own passing from cirrhosis of the liver on May 17, 1875, he had accepted a position as vice president of the Big Sandy Railroad Company for a few years, working to develop a rail line that linked Lake Superior with St. Louis. It is astounding that these accomplishments were wrought within fifty-four years of life.

As for the book itself, there is but one blemish. With such an extraordinary life to recount it is difficult for any author not to be filled with a certain amount of admiration. Yet, just as with his tome of Confederate president Jefferson Davis, Davis has allowed his obvious high esteem for Breckinridge to emerge too fully. It is the historian's duty to remain aloof from personal regard in order to get to the true significance of the subject at hand. One instance where the author crosses this line is in his ac-

count of Breckinridge's actions at Murfreesborough, and later at Chickamauga. At the orders of General Bragg, Breckinridge led the Kentucky regiment into a suicidal attack that cost the lives of many Confederate soldiers. Davis laid the blame for the slaughters solely on Bragg's poor disposition of the Kentucky troops without offering any substantive proof that this was, indeed, the case. A further instance is in the final paragraphs; the author recounts his subject's demise in which "all of Kentucky went into mourning" (p. 638). The description that Davis gives of Breckinridge's funeral and legacy are laced with glowing superlatives, though earlier in the same chapter he had mentioned a premature obituary that heavily criticized the former vice president.

In closing, this biography of Breckinridge is well worth the time investment. Despite its flaws the story of this man's rise to prominence in two countries in two separate careers within such a short time is nothing short of astounding. Few histories have been filled with such overbearing elements: the weight of the Breckinridge legacy, the expectations of mother and grandmother, and the man's own drive to succeed in every field he touched were such a burden on Breckinridge that it ultimately turned his meteoric success into a shadow existence at his death. Furthermore, the author's attention to detail allows the story to unfold as it should, making its significance obvious. In tales of duty and nation, this book ranks among the most vivid.

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