

H-Net Reviews

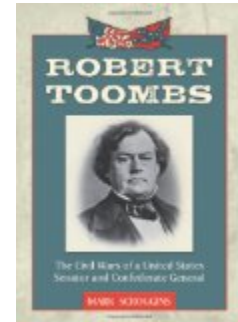
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark Scroggins. *Robert Toombs: The Civil Wars of a United States Senator and Confederate General*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2011. 242 pp. \$40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-6363-3.

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A Georgia Firebrand in the Midst of the Sectional Crisis

While not possessing the same profile as fellow southern politicians, such as Jefferson Davis or Alexander H. Stephens, Georgian Robert Toombs nevertheless played a similarly significant role in the political wrangling of the Civil War era. Unlike his contemporaries, however, Toombs remains largely understudied. Over forty years ago, William Y. Thompson provided a biographical sketch of Toombs with *Robert Toombs of Georgia* (1966), while William C. Davis's more recent *The Union That Shaped the Confederacy: Robert Toombs and Alexander H. Stephens* (2001) analyzed Toombs's friendship and political alliance with Stephens. With *Robert Toombs: The Civil Wars of a United States Senator and Confederate General*, historian and archivist Mark Scroggins has sought to fill this historiographical gap by illuminating Toombs's political career and personal life against the backdrop of mid-nineteenth-century American politics. Scroggins provides a rendering of both the public and private Toombs that paints the Georgian as a bullish politician whose blend of acerbic wit, fiery demeanor, and political tact aroused the full spectrum of emotions from his constituents and colleagues.

Throughout his study of Toombs's political evolution, Scroggins emphasizes the extent to which the Georgian could not balance his volatile personality with his otherwise keen political skill. The author traces these traits to Toombs's formative years, as the young Georgian struggled to obtain a university education and law degree. Nonetheless, Toombs's quick wit and bullishness found an outlet in politics, as he rose through the ranks of Geor-

gia's States Rights Party and its larger national successor, the Whig Party. Toombs's rise to national prominence, Scroggins claims, eventually placed the Georgian within the mainstream of the southern Whig Party, where he sought to balance the promotion of southern rights with the maintenance of the Union. However, with the deepening sectional crisis that led to the collapse of the Whigs and the rise of the Republican Party, Scroggins posits that Toombs's ideology underwent a radicalization, a reality most evident in his gravitation toward the Democrat Party and his eventual embrace of secession. Following Georgia's ordinance of secession, Toombs served as an architect of the nascent Confederacy and then as a member of the Davis cabinet and as a general. Scroggins asserts that Toombs's Confederate experience irrevocably spurred a shift in his political sensibilities, with the Georgian becoming, in many ways, the quintessential contrarian in the postbellum years. Likewise, Scroggins notes that Toombs's temperament augmented his postwar disdain for northerners and modernizing southerners, a turn that left Toombs unreconstructed and bitter to the end.

Scroggins avers that his interpretation of Toombs's life aims to "tell an interesting story about an interesting man in an interesting time" (p. ix). While Scroggins achieves some success in this respect, his work is otherwise hampered by poor organization, a neglect of larger historiographical considerations, and prose that is littered with colloquialisms. In attempting to provide an analysis of both Toombs's political career and personal life, Scroggins's narrative lacks cogency and cohesive-

ness as it variably alternates between the two spheres without providing any sort of fluid transition. Moreover, scholars looking for analysis that places the Georgian within a number of broader debates within Civil War historiography will find this study lacking. For example, the author gives only cursory attention to Toombs's political ideology during the transition from the Second to Third Party System, his drift toward radicalism and embrace of Confederate nationalism, and the role of race in shaping Toombs's prewar and postwar politics. Given the paucity of recent biographical work on Toombs, Scroggins's decision to avoid engaging other biographers is understandable. Yet his inability to use Toombs's career to engage other historians and broader theoretical frameworks limits the scholarly appeal of his analysis.

Ultimately, by eschewing the salient issues in Civil War historiography that intersect with Toombs's life, Scroggins's stated goal of telling a story about an "interesting man in an interesting time" is undermined. Indeed, Toombs was "interesting"—but the same might be true about any number of other Civil War era figures. As a biography predicated on describing Toombs's personality and political career against a cursory telling of the political events of the era, Scroggins's analysis fails to make Toombs appear transcendent when measured against his contemporaries. Thus, while Scroggins's analysis is useful due to its laudable primary research and for its place as the most recent biography of Toombs, its limitations make the work something less than definitive.

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