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Scott S. Greenberger. *The Unexpected President: The Life and Times of Chester A. Arthur.* New York: Da Capo Press, 2017. 336 pp. $28.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-306-82389-3.

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I confess to a good deal of sympathy for Greenberger's effort to save the twenty-first president from the obscurity of the bearded and moustached batch of late nineteenth-century politicians. I had a dog named Chester A. Arthur, who in his prime might have been described, like his namesake, as "beefy but not unpleasant." I once agreed to write an article for an encyclopedia covering the American presidency if I could provide the Arthur entry. The point of this volume was a focus on context, and with Arthur, there is almost only context. I have told students that Arthur is my favorite president because his abbreviated term demonstrated that with respect for the office, nearly anyone could be a competent president, certainly in the nineteenth century and probably in most of the twentieth. And I admire the clean prose, feel for how to tell a story, and in many cases, research and insight we find in journalists' and writers' political histories. Candice Millard's ***Destiny of the Republic*** (2011), which covers some of the same ground as ***The Unexpected President***, is one example of a good read that is also solid history. I would not be at all sheepish about passing it on to interested undergraduates and certainly not to history buffs. Indeed, I'm thankful that such writers helped keep political history alive for a wider public as it lost ground in the academy.

The book I hoped to read would have updated Thomas C. Reeves's ***Gentleman Boss*** (1975), an outstanding and eminently readable biography. Reeves did the difficult work of locating sources—Arthur torched most of the papers he could easily lay hands on toward the end of his life. Reeves's finds included a fascinating group of letters from a young New Yorker, Julia Sand. She wrote a small stack of letters to Vice President and then President Arthur, offering advice (she supported civil service reform and vetoing Chinese exclusion legislation) and encouragement. Arthur, she believed, could rise above his machine politics background and become a great president. Still, Reeves's book appeared in 1975, and a couple of generations of historians and political scientists have revised our understandings of late nineteenth-century politics and government. Finding new Arthur sources is unlikely, but updating the "times" of the "life and times" would have been welcome.

Greenberger does not do this. This book structures Arthur's story around morality lost and found. The son of a minister and abolitionist, Arthur strayed early from his family's stiff-backed rectitude and self-denial. While a bit of a dandy even in his college days, Arthur, as Greenberger tells it (with a bit of exaggeration), nonetheless retained his family's abolitionist leanings and was

an antislavery Republican from the start. His moral fall began with his post-Civil War connection with machine politics, which Greenberger describes as a politics shorn of all stakes other than winning office and distributing the spoils. Arthur merely followed the Republican Party's descent. So Arthur, once a competent and apparently honest administrator as New York's quartermaster general during the Civil War, rode his political connections to become state boss Roscoe Conkling's second in command. So while Arthur as a young lawyer took part in or took the lead in two New York City civil rights cases, the postwar Arthur looked to cash in. For Greenberger, Arthur's marriage also followed the same downward moral trajectory: hanging around with his Democratic and Republican political cronies through late nights at some of the city's unsavory haunts, Arthur cruelly ignored his wife and children.

Arthur's unlikely ascent from the New York Customs House to the presidency allows Greenberger to trace a tale of redemption. When in 1880 Arthur accepted the vice presidential nomination despite Conkling's disapproval, he did not break with the New York boss. The split occurred after President James A. Garfield's death by the bullet shot by an assassin who claimed that it was his sad duty to defend the faction of the Republican Party Arthur and Conkling represented. Here was the chance for Arthur to rise above mere and vicious politics, and with the inspiration of Julia Sands, he grasped it. Not only did Arthur fail to reward his faction, but he signed the Pendleton Act, inaugurating a federal civil service system, and administered it honestly. If he signed a revised Chinese exclusion act after an initial veto, he also vetoed a pork-ridden rivers and harbors bill, refrained from involvement in New York politics, and either out of illness he kept secret or a sense of his high office, forbid federal officeholders to work for his reelection. Sand cheered on such moments of doing good.

Perhaps it is churlish to criticize a book because it is not the one the critic wishes the author had written. But it is difficult to identify the right audience for this book. I would not recommend or assign it to undergraduates. The scholarship is simply too weak and out of date. It might be too much to ask that Greenberger would have mastered the histories of the Republican Party, civil service reform (subject of a lively literature in economics and political science as well as history), and New York State politics. But for a book that relies so heavily on the press and on a good-and-evil tale of corruption to lack a nodding familiarity with Mark Summer's work is troublesome. And to simply take civil service reform as a cause at face value—that is, to not take the measure of the cause in the context of the Republican Party's southern policy—points up the simplistic personality and morality structure of the book. So, too, does the absence of nuance in the treatment of machine politics and the political parties of the late nineteenth century. Greenberger flings our understanding of the "times" back five decades at least, while attempting to remind us of a life that was not that worthy of condemnation.

So if this is not a book for academics or students, we are left with a general readership. They would not be harmed to learn that the twenty-first president should not be thought of as belonging in the bottom rank. But even they would be better served by Reeves's biography. The good sign I suppose is that a trade press published a biography of Chester Arthur. There is indeed a healthy market for political history among general readers.

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