

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Quentin Scott King. *Henry Clay and the War of 1812*. Jefferson: Mcfarland, 2014. 468 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-7875-0.

Reviewed by Spencer Roberts (George Mason University)

Published on H-War (October, 2017)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

The War of 1812 has received less scholarly attention than other wars in US history, and most of the literature falls into one of three categories: military biography, military history, and political history. Biographies depict the lives of such men as William Henry Harrison and Andrew Jackson, who built political support through military success, or such politicians as James Madison and John Quincy Adams, who helped guide the nation through its second conflict with Great Britain in thirty years. In his biography of Henry Clay, Quentin Scott King argues that Clay, the fiery Kentucky lawyer and politician, deserves a place in the history of the war as “the greatest political personality of the early 19th century” (p. 1).

King’s biography begins with Clay’s early life in Virginia and his relocation to Kentucky, where he began his career as a lawyer and state politician. Drawing primarily from collections of papers and published memoirs or diaries, King provides detailed accounts of Clay’s legal and legislative work, his day-to-day activities, and his movement through political landscapes. King’s first eight chapters depict Clay’s rise from country lawyer to the US Senate, a period in which tensions continued to rise between the United States and Great Britain. In chapters 9 through 24, King details Clay’s leadership as Speaker of the House of Representatives during the war until his resignation in January 1814. At the request of President Madison, Clay traveled to Europe as commissioner in peace negotiations with Great Britain, helping to draft the Treaty of Ghent that brought an end to the war. King devotes the last thirteen chapters to this period of Clay’s life, detailing each round of negotiations and personal conflicts among the commissioners.

The title of King’s book suggests a combination of political biography and military history, but Clay’s distance from the actions of the war causes difficulty in bringing the two topics together. King’s biography about a wartime politician suffers from imbalanced levels of detail and lack of connection between Clay’s politics and the war. King does not engage with historiography about Clay’s legislative influence leading up to the war, nor does he provide examination or critique of Clay’s positions and arguments in the Senate, despite the common depiction of Clay as a war hawk. Likewise, King’s descriptions of military campaigns and battles leave much to be desired. While the burning of Washington, DC, and the Battle of New Orleans receive full chapters, entire campaigns on the northern frontier are glossed over in a single paragraph or page. As a result, King overwhelms the reader with lengthy sections about Clay’s political debates and rhetorical battles but gives many important military actions only dissatisfying summaries.

In his preface, King writes that he was motivated to research Clay’s life when he could find no biography in his local libraries in the Washington, DC, area. However, King seems to have overlooked Carl Schurz’s two-volume biography, *Life of Henry Clay* (1887), and several more recent publications.[1] Bernard Mayo’s *Henry Clay, Spokesman of the New West*, published in 1937, is the most recent monograph about Clay in King’s bibliography. Although King digs more deeply into the source material than most biographers to paint a detailed portrait of Clay’s early life, the work is limited by a lack of engagement with other depictions and histories of the primary subject.

Despite these shortcomings, King's biography remains useful for general readers, who will enjoy the detailed accounts of Clay's life, especially the lengthy but insightful excerpts from his speeches and letters about wartime politics, peace negotiations, and personal reflections. Historians of the War of 1812 will find useful King's painstaking reconstruction of the treaty negotiations, which includes both the interactions between US and UK delegations, and the tensions that arose among the charismatic, spirited US representatives. Similarly, King's extracts and notes from the personal papers of Clay, Albert Gallatin, James Madison, and James Monroe, among others, provide an excellent starting point for scholars of early nineteenth-century US politics. Readers hoping for detailed accounts of the War of 1812 and its military actions may be disappointed with King's lack of

consistency but may also find that this account of Clay's life during the War of 1812 fits well alongside more traditional military histories.

#### Note

[1]. Clement Eaton, *Henry Clay and the Art of American Politics*, The Library of American Biography (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957); Robert Vincent Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991); Maurice G. Baxter, *Henry Clay and the American System* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995); Maurice G. Baxter, *Henry Clay the Lawyer* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000); and David Stephen Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American* (New York: Random House, 2011).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Spencer Roberts. Review of King, Quentin Scott, *Henry Clay and the War of 1812*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2017.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47868>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.