In his Farewell Address, George Washington famously warned his fellow Americans about the dangers of political parties and factionalism. In spite of his admonition, however, the United States quickly saw the growth of an array of organized parties, some of which would endure for centuries and some that quickly faded. Even as the two-party system emerged, matured, and changed over the years, smaller factions developed. In his book *Young America: The Transformation of Nationalism Before the Civil War*, Mark Power Smith turns his attention to one of the most famous of these: Young America. By focusing specific attention on Stephen Douglas and the influential Democratic Review, Smith argues that Young America had a transformative effect on the United States, as it engendered a form of nationalism that helped to fracture the nation.

Although Young America proved unable to place Stephen Douglas in the White House, the movement has nevertheless drawn the attention of historians who have sought to capture its historical importance. Merle Curti, Siert F. Riepma, Donald S. Spencer, and William T. Kerrigan all tackled various aspects of Young America’s agenda and history in dissertations, articles, and books. More recently, Edward L. Widmer argued in *Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City* that literary Young America and political Young America were distinct movements. [1] Yonatan Eyal flatly rejected this distinction in his *The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828-1861*, arguing instead that the movement helped make “a defensive, agrarian, small-government party into a forward-looking, market-oriented, internationally conscious organization ready to fight the economic battles of the new age of steam and railroads.”[2] Given the stark interpretative differences between Widmer and Eyal, Power Smith’s *Young America* is a welcome addition to a historiography that had seemingly reached an impasse.

Like Eyal, Power Smith rejects the thesis that a divide existed between literary and political Young America. Power Smith defines its members “as both the regular contributors to the *Democratic*—
ic Review and the politicians associated with it—who were united by a more cosmopolitan, and self-consciously progressive, iteration of Jacksonian ideology” (p. 7). Young America thus included politicians such as Stephen Douglas, historians like George Bancroft, and literary figures such as John L. O’Sullivan, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Walt Whitman. Together, these men helped to craft a new vision for the Democratic Party, which enjoyed varying degrees of success until the outbreak of the Civil War.

Starting by exploring the intellectual culture of Young America in an opening chapter that spans a decade, Power Smith claims that “Young America Democrats combined politics and intellectual culture to articulate a self-consciously progressive worldview” (p. 28). Looking at the period from 1844 to 1854 and focusing primarily on the Democratic Review, Power Smith argues that Young Americans embraced a new form of nationalism that perceived of democracy as a natural right, albeit one reserved for white men. While conservative Whigs viewed “self-government as a political inheritance rather than a natural right” (p. 27), Young Americans “fused the political rights, belonging to the nation, with natural rights” (p. 50). From 1844 onward, therefore, Young Americans sought to “extend the principles of state sovereignty, local self-government, and free trade for white men around the world” (p. 7).

Readers slightly daunted by the somewhat dense discussion of natural rights in the opening chapter will find themselves in more familiar territory as the book progresses. Chapter 2 focuses on the Dorr Rebellion and the debates over democracy and representative government (p. 66). Power Smith then works his way chronologically through the annexation of Texas, the US-Mexican War, the Revolutions of 1848, and the Ostend Manifesto. In these chapters, Power Smith demonstrates that Young Americans saw themselves as progressive revolutionaries who could potentially change the course of human history. For them, “the Union was not just a nation but a model for the international order, a vehicle for liberal philosophy that would replace the balance of power with the rule of natural law” (p. 108). The expansion of the United States, whether in North America or Europe, was thus necessary to help prepare the way for the remaking of the international order.

It is in his discussion of US empire, which can be found in the central chapters, that Power Smith makes one of his most significant contributions, arguing that Young Americans were as invested as southerners in spreading the US empire. “Territorial expansion was not a southern phenomenon but a Democratic and national one,” he notes, “specifically centering around the most self-consciously progressive liberals within the party” (p. 67). By exploring why Young Americans desired to expand the boundaries of the nation, Power Smith illustrates that men like Douglas, Bancroft, and Walker had their own idea of empire and that they were hardly “mere saggy agents of the master class” (p. 17). Although it can be easier for historians to blame all antebellum expansion on southerners, Power Smith reminds us that various forms of nationalism could exist simultaneously. We should not, therefore, ignore those empire builders who happened to live north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

Northerners, like southerners, were fascinated by Cuba. Walt Whitman, to cite one prominent example, remained convinced in the 1850s that the United States would eventually include Cuba (p. 128). “Men like Gilpin, Dallas, and Ashworth could be in favor of Cuban annexation,” Power Smith poignantly observes, “suspicious of centralized power, and tolerant of slave labor as a response to the wider problem of racial inferiority, while also being abstractly opposed to slavery and even willing to stand against its extension into territory where it did not exist” (p. 122). While a certain overlap existed between northerners and southerners who desired more land, Young Amer-
ica posited that popular sovereignty could solve the question of whether future territory would be slave or free. This somewhat unsurprisingly caused a fracture within the Democratic Party as the 1850s progressed, as northern and southern Democrats disagreed over the wisdom of popular sovereignty and how the territory of Kansas should be governed.

Yet Power Smith goes beyond the mere argument that the rise of Young America caused a split within the Democratic Party and argues that it helped engender the Civil War. “The solutions the Young Americans proposed were impractical in the context of the 1850s,” he argues, “and forced Americans of all diverse political persuasions to take a stand on the issue of slavery. As such, they inadvertently fueled the growth and ambition of the Slave Power and forced the Republicans to stake out radical ground” (p. 182). By pursuing an aggressive form of nationalism that bound together territorial expansionism, popular sovereignty, racism, and natural rights for white men, Young America paved the way for the rise of the Republican Party, which crafted an alternative nationalism premised upon free labor and free soil (also for white men). Inadvertently, perhaps, Young Americans had “opened fissures in the Union by seeding nationalism in natural law” (p. 197).

Power Smith’s work is an apt reminder that various forms of northern nationalism existed and that they sometimes overlapped, and sometimes competed, with southern variations. Power Smith convincingly argues that we should not see the Slave Power as being the dominant force in the antebellum United States. Given that various forms of nationalism jostled against one another in the antebellum era, the question remains whether the Young American version truly rose to preeminence. The argument that Young America “transformed” the Democratic Party in the 1840s and 1850s has been somewhat widely accepted. This interpretation typically hinges upon James K. Polk and Franklin Pierce, two men who were young when they ascended to the White House. Neither Polk nor Pierce, however, explicitly identified with the Young America faction. Polk entered politics long before Douglas emerged within the Democracy and he firmly adhered to traditional Jacksonian policies (an unsurprising fact given his friendship with Andrew Jackson). Franklin Pierce only became the nominee for the Democratic Party when Stephen Douglas was firmly rejected as a suitable candidate. Pierce then shut Douglas out from the cabinet and placed the stalwart old fogy William Marcy into the position of secretary of state.

Indeed, Young America’s story in the late 1840s and 1850s is largely one of failure. Douglas opposed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which passed; saw a Whig win the election of 1848; opposed the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, which also passed; and then lost the nomination in 1852 and 1856. Douglas never captured the White House. The Democratic Review continually whined about the spineless foreign policy of the Whigs, but it failed to convince members of its own party that direct action was needed on Cuba, and its perpetual refrain that the United States needed to back the Ostend Manifesto and invade Cuba gained few acolytes. Power Smith’s list of politicians who supported Young America is a roster of mostly forgettable figures such as Samuel S. Cox, John Forney, William Richardson, and Pierre Soulé. O’Sullivan’s fame, of course, was largely posthumous, after it was uncovered that he likely coined the phrase Manifest Destiny.

Even those figures associated with the Young America movement who rose to prominence were well-established Jacksonian politicians. George Mifflin Dallas, for example, who appears frequently throughout the work, came from a prominent Democratic family. His father had served in Madison’s cabinet. George entered Congress more than a decade before Douglas. Robert John Walker likewise emerged as a loyal ally of Andrew Jackson in the late 1820s and 1830s. As a Jacksonian
Democrat, Walker saw territorial expansion as a popular issue that would pave the way for the founding of a mighty American empire. This is not to discount the influence of Young America, but rather to question whether truly transformed the Democratic Party. Future historians will need to grapple with the influence of the Young America movement and ascertain to what extent it influenced policy and if it caused the party to move in new directions. On issues such as territorial expansion, for example, it can easily be argued that traditional Jacksonian Democrats (men who would be derided as Old Fogies by the Democratic Review) actually implemented the measures that expanded the borders of the United States. Stephen Douglas, after all, despised the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and rarely missed the opportunity to boast that he had voted against it.

The fact that the Young America movement was perhaps more limited in scope and influence than Power Smith acknowledges should not overshadow the strengths of this book. Unlike many of those who have written about Young America over the last century, Power Smith refuses to discount the virulent racism that underpinned the movement and instead proffers an explanation as to what that racism can tell us about these politically engaged northerners. Of perhaps greater importance, in an era in which most historians study southern nationalism, the Slave Power, and southern attempts to expand the boundaries of the United States, Power Smith reminds us that northerners were hardly innocent of the sin of coveting the land of their neighbors. New Yorkers like Walt Whitman, John L. O'Sullivan, and Samuel Tilden, and Pennsylvanians like Robert J. Walker, George Mifflin Dallas, and Thomas L. Kane all embraced a bellicose form of nationalism that sought to expand the United States over North America. Instead of writing these men off as mere doughfaces, Power Smith takes them seriously as political thinkers and politicians and offers a profound interpretation as to how their aggressive national-

Notes


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58864

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