

Thaddeus Stevens and His Biographers

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Biographies are an important conduit between historians and the public. In the case of Thaddeus Stevens, historians have used his lifestory to engage in a dialogue about the nature of Reconstruction and the motives of Radical Republicans. Obviously, his historical legacy has been determined by the outcome of this debate. How did it develop? Where does it stand now?

This survey will consider the major biographical sources on Stevens: Samuel McCall's 1899 *Thaddeus Stevens; Old Thad Stevens*, published by Richard Current in 1942; the 1955 *Thaddeus Stevens* written by Ralph Korngold; Fawn Brodie's *Thaddeus Stevens, Scourge of the South* of 1959; and Eric Foner's 1974 essay, "Thaddeus Stevens, Confiscation, and Reconstruction." It will also give some attention to the myriad other publications which have presented interpretations of Stevens. There are two important points to bear in mind when considering these works. First, they all concern themselves with the question of just what made Thaddeus Stevens tick. Were his motives derived from principle or from personal experience? Were they pure or, rather, more complex? The two are generally presented as mutually exclusive. Biographers of Radical Republicans always try to uncover the motives of their subjects, seeking as they do to understand the rationale behind Reconstruction policy. Second, in the case of studies on Stevens, there is a strong interplay between biographers and current historical trends. Biographers are writing either to reinforce or counter historical orthodoxy.

The first biographical treatments of Stevens, an article by Alexander Hood in the 1872 *Biographical History of Lancaster County* and a sketch in Lancaster County historian Alexander Harris's 1876 *Political Conflict in America*, were both written by men who had known Stevens.¹ While Hood's work was warm and admiring, Harris's denounced him as a destructive revolutionary. These works set up a powerful dichotomy reflected in the works of later authors. These contradictory images of Stevens are also echoed in the inverse relationship between his historical reputation and that of his nemesis, Andrew Johnson.

The first full-scale biography of Stevens still used and cited is McCall's 1899 work, a contributing entry to the popular *American Statesmen* series.² McCall

relied heavily on the Congressional *Globe*, newspapers, and government documents for his story. He reviewed Stevens's actions favorably and pointed to ideology as the motivating force in his political career.³ For McCall, Stevens's significant public acts were his role as chairman of the Committee on Ways and Means during the war and his later work on the Committees on Appropriations and Reconstruction. Financial measures, the Reconstruction acts and amendments, and the impeachment of President Andrew Johnson dominate McCall's pages. In some ways, his work is as much a thumbnail sketch of Reconstruction as a biography of Stevens. McCall provided a strong factual framework for Stevens's political career, but did not contribute much to our understanding of the man. "A truer democrat never breathed. . . . Privilege never had a more powerful nor a more consistent foe," he concluded of his subject.⁴

In 1913, James Albert Woodburn published a biography of Stevens. He made an impassioned plea for understanding his subject in light of "the times of strife and passion in which he lived."⁵ To Woodburn, Stevens was a politician who stood firmly for racial equality and fought hard for it. While Woodburn's is not the best account of Stevens and his times, it nonetheless marks the first systematic attempt to examine both the man and his times. Like McCall, Woodburn tied Stevens's motives to principle, but he would be the last historian to do so for some time.

Through the early years of the twentieth-century, the interpretation of Reconstruction advanced by historian William Dunning and his eponymous school reigned supreme. This interpretation taught that Reconstruction had been a "tragic era" wherein radical politicians, motivated by hatred, imposed their will on the South, empowered unprepared and uncivilized freedmen, and encouraged unscrupulous carpetbaggers to pillage and plunder what Sherman had left unburnt. Dunning and his acolytes specifically and repeatedly contrasted the "vindictive" Thaddeus Stevens with the "heroic" Andrew Johnson who acted to save states' rights and the Constitution.⁶

William Dunning fired the opening salvo in this war on Stevens's reputation, describing him as "truculent, vindictive, and cynical" and possessing "a keen and relentlessly logical mind, an ever-ready gift of biting sarcasm and stinging repartee, and a total lack of scruples as to means in the pursuit of a legislative end."⁷ Subsequent historians not associated with Dunning tended to accept this view. For example, James Ford Rhodes characterized him as "a natural radical and a violent partisan" who could be "bitter and vindictive."⁸ These themes were elaborated by Claude Bowers in 1929: "Had he lived in France at the time of the Terror, he would

have pushed one of the triumvirate desperately for his place, have risen rapidly to the top through his genius and audacity and will, and probably have died by the guillotine with a sardonic smile on his face."⁹ George Fort Milton went even farther the next year, describing Stevens as "this Pennsylvania Caliban," "an apostle of proscription and hate."¹⁰ This interpretation had reached its popular zenith in 1915 with the release of D. W. Griffith's movie *Birth of a Nation*. The appearance in the film of a villainous northern politician, whose physical appearance matched that of Stevens down to his bad wig and limp, reinforced and perpetuated the prejudices many Americans had toward the congressman.¹¹

Late in the 1930s two biographies of Stevens challenged historical orthodoxy and sought to rehabilitate him both as a man and as a politician. The first was the 1937 work of Thomas Frederick Woodley. But while Woodley admired Stevens, he attributed the driving force behind his career to an "unnatural pent-up bitterness" caused by his clubfoot.¹² By finding a personal motive for Stevens's actions, he ironically echoed many historians of the Dunning school, the very men he sought to discredit. Two years later, Alphonse Miller opened his biography by declaring that "I shall be satisfied if I succeed in salvaging at least part of the contemporary acclaim which his efforts aroused and deserved."¹³ Though he had relied heavily and explicitly on the earlier work of Woodley, Miller differed on the question of Stevens's motivation. He was certain that an inherent sense of justice informed Stevens's public and private lives: "No one," he said, "devoted himself so consistently to patriotic purposes or the salvation of the underdog."¹⁴ In spite of their differences, both these authors were certain that Stevens had not received his due in recent works on Reconstruction.

It is the more recent biographies with which anyone with a serious interest in Stevens has to reckon. The first of these is Richard Current's 1942 study, *Old Thad Stevens: A Story of Ambition*, which reflected rather than challenged historiography.¹⁵ Like those historians who had gone before him, Current sought to explain Stevens's motives. Unlike those other historians, Current found an explanation beyond equality and disability: economics. In this he was influenced by the work of Charles Beard, Howard Beale, and his advisor William Hesselstine, who had tried to demonstrate that the northeast and its capitalists had exploited their political power during and after the Civil War for their own enrichment. Current emphasized Stevens's extensive and occasionally questionable business practices more than his work on Reconstruction. While Current pointed out that no one had previously shown "the simple fact that [Stevens] was, above everything else, a man of

Courtesy of Civil War Institute, Gettysburg College.



Thaddeus Stevens during his Adams County years. Portrait by Jacob Eichholtz.

politics seeking always to get and exercise the powers of public office," he showed even more carefully that Steven's "public actions were determined not so much by mysterious motives as by frustrated personal ambitions and an understandable and outspoken desire to keep his party in power and make it a vehicle for industrials like himself."¹⁶ To Current, Stevens was a career politician and a pragmatic businessman who had used political influence for personal gain. To those living in a post-Watergate society, cynical about the motives and honesty of politicians, this may not seem like much of a revelation. But in the early 1940s, Current's work was the expression of an influential school of historiography that sought to explain American history through the motivation of economic interest. Current argued that

Stevens had personal motives for his behavior during Reconstruction, but suggested that they were economic rather than emotional. At the end of his book, he pondered the significance of Stevens's gravestone inscription, "Equality of man before his Creator." It was ironic, Current concluded, that "none had done more than he to bring on the Age of Big Business, with its concentration of wealth and its diffusion of poverty, its inequalities and its inequities."¹⁷

While Current's work reflected prevailing historiographical trends, the next biography of Stevens offered a forecast of future trends. Ralph Korngold's 1955 book presaged a newly "revisionist" school of Reconstruction history, a school which reversed the earlier archetypes of rascalion carpetbaggers and saintly redeemers and suggested that postwar reform had not gone far enough.¹⁸ Korngold's previous work, *Two Friends of Man*, was a laudatory account of the careers of William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips and their relationship with Abraham Lincoln.¹⁹ Seeking to further glorify those men and women who had fought to abolish slavery and secure civil rights, Korngold turned his time and energy toward the rehabilitation of Stevens's career and sought to exonerate him from past charges of vindictiveness and greed.²⁰ But in these efforts to reclaim Stevens's honorable motives, Korngold discounted any but the purest motives for his actions and was excessively laudatory. Korngold had no doubt that these motives were a result of Stevens's sense of justice, not his personal experiences.

1959 saw the publication of Fawn Brodie's *Thaddeus Stevens: Scourge of the South*.²¹ Brodie, a practitioner of the school of psychobiography, sought to analyze Stevens. Taking scrupulous care to record and examine his family background, upbringing, physical deformity, schooling, and early career, she painted a portrait of a consummate underdog who identified with the oppressed. Stevens's intelligence brought him economic and professional success while his clubfoot retarded his social development. Most important, however, to an understanding of Stevens and his career was his relationship with his black housekeeper Lydia Smith. In Brodie's mind there was no doubt that theirs was an intimate relationship of long duration, and she spent much more time on their connection than had any previous biographer. She argued that while he had always sympathized with blacks, it was the fact that society would not allow him to acknowledge Smith's true place in his life that forced him to see the just how cruel and unfair a racially-segregated society was. The root of his fervent hatred of the South and its oligarchy and his impassioned championing of blacks lay in his status as an

outsider and the lover of Lydia Smith. Using the tools of modern psychology to interpret and understand the actions of a historical character, Brodie reflected an increasingly common trend among twentieth-century historians. Her work also offered Americans a new way to view Stevens and his career. By examining Stevens's views of blacks and southerners and linking them to psychological landmarks in his own life, she made the man more sympathetic and human. But she also made it clear that his motives were rooted in personal relationships and circumstances, not in external events or principles. She thus discredited Stevens's purity of motive at the same time she humanized him.

Brodie's was the last full-length biography of Stevens to appear. But since she wrote on the "Great Commoner," our understanding of Reconstruction has changed significantly. In 1960 the new "revisionist" school of historiography began with Eric McKittrick's work on Andrew Johnson and continued through the decade with the works of historians such as John Hope Franklin, John and LaWanda Cox, James McPherson, W. R. Brock, Hans Trefousse, Kenneth Stampp and others. These historians sought to overturn the Beard and Dunning schools, minimizing the role of economic imperatives in Reconstruction policy and recasting the Radicals as men motivated by ideals, not a thirst for vengeance. Stampp commented that "In fact, radical reconstruction ought to be viewed in part as the last great crusade of the nineteenth-century romantic reformers," while Hans Trefousse added of Thaddeus Stevens that "his one abiding passion was equality."²² According to revisionists, the ultimate tragedy of Reconstruction was that it did not go far enough to overturn the antebellum order in the South. As Stevens's stock rose in their estimation, Andrew Johnson's fell. The seventeenth president was increasingly portrayed as narrow-minded and racist. At the same time, some historians began to say that too much of the credit for Reconstruction had been given to Stevens. McKittrick stated, "It would be most misleading—indeed, simply wrong—to think of those changes as having been the work of Thaddeus Stevens."²³ W. R. Brock wrote a few years later that Stevens "could compel no man to do what he did not wish to do."²⁴ Instead, these historians saw moderate Republicans, such as John Sherman of Ohio, as the true authors of Reconstruction legislation.

The revisionists were soon followed by the postrevisionists in the 1970s. These historians, scholars such as Michael Les Benedict, Michael Perman, and William Gillette, took issue with the ultimate conclusions of their predecessors. This group vehemently disagreed that Reconstruction had done anything significant to

transform the American South. They focused instead on the continuities of power structures in the South and in Congress. It was their contention that aside from a brief burst of post-war legislation, the Radicals were impotent to change anything and politics remained "business as usual." Furthermore, Northerners themselves were reluctant to improve the lot of blacks in their states or to ensure their civil rights north of the Mason-Dixon line.²⁵

The most significant work on Stevens to come out of this period was Eric Foner's essay "Thaddeus Stevens, Confiscation, and Reconstruction."²⁶ Foner's work acknowledged Stevens's role in anticipating the frontiers of Reconstruction policy and his efforts to push Congress in his direction. But Foner believed Stevens's confiscation policies were too radical for Republicans—they could not accept a redistribution of property under the auspices of the federal government. Thrown into disarray by their losses in the state elections of 1867, the party turned away from Stevens and his radical colleagues and "toward respectability, conservatism and Grant."²⁷ Foner attributed Stevens's loss of influence to his inability, both political and ideological, to keep in stride with moderate Republicans. Yet Foner also reenergized the connection between Reconstruction and economics. He emphasized that Stevens's confiscation plans were to have been more than a punishment for rich white southerners. They would have been primarily a scheme to give freedman autonomy, to begin the dismantling of the antebellum economic order to make way for a more just society. Foner did not question the purity of Stevens's motives, only the feasibility of his plans.

Since Foner's essay, the most important article on Stevens appeared in 1985 in the journal *Civil War History*.²⁸ Historian Donald Pickens, influenced by the large and significant body of political and intellectual history known as "republicanism," attempted to place Stevens's political ideology squarely into a body of classical political thought that many scholars believe had profoundly influenced early American history. Although laudable in his attempt to find a home for Stevens in the tradition of American political thought, Pickens did not perceive that Stevens was instead heir to a strain of more radical beliefs reflected in the philosophy of John Wilkes and Thomas Paine, which appeared around the time of the American Revolution and which existed side by side with republicanism and challenged it from time to time in the American political arena.²⁹

Since Foner's essay, many works on Reconstruction history have appeared and the historiographical tide has shifted. Most recently historians have stressed the experience of the freedmen and have demonstrated a growing appreciation

for the accomplishments of the federal government in light of the intransigence of the South and the growing weariness of the North with the costs of winning both the war and the peace. We have seen clearly that Stevens's historical legacy as conveyed to us by his biographers has generally reflected or challenged current historiographical wisdom. None of them broke new ground in the debate over Reconstruction. But at this time, the two biographies still in wide use are Current's and Brodie's. Both of these works minimize the role of principle in his life and portray him as a deeply-flawed man whose personal life determined his politics. This interpretation has been challenged, and largely superceded. The new work raises several questions about Stevens's legacy. Stevens has been called both a pragmatic politician and a radical idealist, and indeed appears to have been both. There is also a strong case to be made that he was motivated by both principle and personal experience. Why have biographers been unable to reconcile these seeming contradictions? Stevens was universally acclaimed as a master of parliamentary procedure, "the most powerful dictatorial party and congressional leader with one possible exception in American history."³⁰ However, he failed to enact much of his legislative program for Reconstruction. Why did he succeed on one hand and fail on the other?

Alphonse Miller observed in 1939, "Thaddeus Stevens has become little more than a name even to well-educated Americans."³¹ At some levels, a discussion of Stevens and his legacy is futile in the face of public ignorance. While some could argue that Stevens has been trivialized because he was not important to the process of Reconstruction, others could say that he has not yet found the biographer to put him in his proper context. Surely there is room for another Stevens, one who both reflects the historians' new and richer appreciation of his times and more forcefully conveys his legacy.

Notes

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1. Alexander H. Hood, "Thaddeus Stevens," *A Biographical History of Lancaster County* (Lancaster: The Lancaster County Historical Society, 1872), and Alexander Harris, *A Review of the Political Conflict in America . . . Comprising also a Resume of the Career of Thaddeus Stevens* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1876). Several other articles of interest on the life and career of Stevens appeared in a local publication, the *Lancaster County Historical Society Papers*, now known as the *Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society*. These articles, in alphabetical order by author, are: Benjamin C. Alee, "Thaddeus Stevens and Slavery," *Lancaster County Historical Society Papers*, 15 (1911): 167-187; W. U. Hensel, "Thaddeus Stevens as a Country Lawyer," *Lancaster County Historical Society Papers*, 10 (1906): 247-290, and "The Christiana Riot and the Treason Trials of 1851," *Lancaster County Historical Society Papers*, 15 (1911): 30-39; Robert J. Hoelscher, "Thaddeus Stevens as a Lancaster Politician," *Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society*, 78 (Michaelmas, 1974): 157-213; Charles I. Landis, "A Rafutation of the Slandorous Stories Against the Name of Thaddeus Stevens . . .," *Lancaster County Historical Society Papers*, 28 (March 1924): 49-52; and Andrew Robertson, "The Idealist as Opportunist: Thaddeus Steven's Support in Lancaster, 1834-1866," *Journal of the Lancaster County Historical Society*, 84 (Spring, 1980): 49-110.
2. Samuel W. McCall, *Thaddeus Stevens*, in *The American Statesmen Series* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1899).
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 305-308.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 353.

5. James Albert Woodburn, *The Life of Thaddeus Stevens* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1913), p. 607.
6. William Dunning's major work on Reconstruction was *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865-1877* (1907; rpt. New York: Harper & Row Co., 1962). The best recent historiographical survey of Reconstruction is Eric Foner's "Reconstruction Revisited," *Reviews in American History, The Promise of American History: Progress and Prospects*, 10 (Dec. 1982): pp. 82-100.
7. Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic, 1865-1877*, pp. 86-87.
8. James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States, 1850-1877*, vol. 5, *1864-1866* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), pp. 543-544.
9. Claude G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era: The Revolution After Lincoln* (Cambridge, MA: The Literary Guild of America, Inc., 1929), p. 67.
10. George Fort Milon, *The Age of Hate: Andrew Johnson and the Radicals* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1930), p. 262.
11. One of the few positive pictures of Stevens to emerge from this period was in W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: S. A. Russell, 1935). DuBois, however, was a voice in the wilderness.
12. Thomas Frederick Woodley, *Great Leveler: The Life of Thaddeus Stevens* (1937; rpt. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), p. 9.
13. Alphonse B. Miller, *Thaddeus Stevens* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1939), p. ix.
14. Miller, p. 22.
15. Richard Nelson Current, *Old Thad Stevens: A Story of Ambition* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1942). See also Current, "Love, Hate, and Thaddeus Stevens," in *Arguing With Historians: Essays on the Historical and Unhistorical* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), pp. 83-96; the piece originally appeared in *Pennsylvania History* 14 (October 1947). In this essay, Current emphasizes Steven's political ambi-

tion more explicitly than his economic.

16. Current, pp. iii and iv.

17. Current, p. 320. Current's theories were challenged in 1959 by Robert Sharkey. Sharkey concluded that Steven's espousal of high tariffs and soft money actually favored labor and was more radical than historians had hitherto believed. See Robert P. Sharkey, *Money, Class, and Party: An Economic Study of Civil War and Reconstruction* (1959; rpt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), pp. 285-8.

18. Ralph Korngold, *Thaddeus Stevens: A Being Darkly Wise and Rudely Great* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1955).

19. Ralph Korngold, *Two Friends of Man: The Story of William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips and Their Relationship with Abraham Lincoln* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1950).

20. Korngold, *Thaddeus Stevens*, p. 442.

21. Fawn M. Brodie, *Thaddeus Stevens: Scourge of the South* (1959; rpt. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1966).

22. Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), p. 101, and Hans L. Trefousse, *The Radical Republicans: Lincoln's Vanguard for Racial Justice* (1968; rpt. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975), p. 344.

23. Eric L. McKittrick, *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 269.

24. W. R. Brock, *An American Crisis: Congress and Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (1963; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 81.

25. Eric Foner, "Reconstruction Revisited."

26. Eric Foner, "Thaddeus Stevens, Confiscation, and Reconstruction," in Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, eds., *The Hofstadter Aegis: A Memorial* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), pp. 154-183.

27. Foner, "Thaddeus Stevens," p. 180.

28. Donald K. Pickens, "The Republican Synthesis and Thaddeus Stevens," *Civil War History*, 31 (Mar. 1985): 57-73.

29. For a discussion of the significance of John Wilkes and Thomas Paine, see John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Isaac Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America* (Uthaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); and (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992). Steven's radicalism is best summarized in Foner, "Thaddeus Stevens, Confiscation and Reconstruction."

30. Bowers, *Tragic Era*, p. 67.

31. Miller, *Stevens*, p. ix.