BOOK REVIEWS

President James Buchanan, a Biography. By PHILIP SHRIVER KLEIN.
(University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962. xviii, 506 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. $7.50.)

On the basis of his four years in the Presidency, James Buchanan has not for the most part fared well at the hands of the historical profession. In the opinion of the historian James Ford Rhodes, "of all our Presidents, with perhaps a single exception, Buchanan made the most miserable failure." To Edward Channing he appeared irresolute and "infirm in body and mind." Commenting on Buchanan's Kansas policy, T. C. Smith concluded that "No President has a record of more hopeless ill-success." In his Emergence of Lincoln, Allan Nevins states that neither vision nor boldness were part of Buchanan's nature and criticizes him for his failure to unify his Administration and press for a bold national plan. In a recent poll (1962) of seventy-five leading historians who were asked to evaluate America's Presidents on the basis of their achievements in the Executive Chair, Buchanan was rated "below average" in the company of Fillmore, Pierce, Tyler, Coolidge, and Zachary Taylor. The persistence of the popular stereotype of Buchanan as weak and timeserving at best, if not a tool of the slave power, is perhaps explanatory of the fact that Professor Klein is the first scholar to make a comprehensive study of Buchanan's career since the publication of George T. Curtis's adulatory two-volume Life of James Buchanan in 1883.

The depth of Philip Klein's research is such that he could, if this had been his purpose, have written a large-scale account of Buchanan's career running through several volumes. Instead he has sought rather, in modest proportions, to shed light on the first forty years of a public career about which comparatively little is known, to explain Buchanan's role in party politics, especially Pennsylvania politics, and to explore the many ramifications of his legal career and private business affairs. Only the main outlines of Buchanan's participation in foreign affairs are given, and the space allotted to his Presidency has been foreshortened in view of the extensive attention devoted to this phase of Buchanan's career by Roy Nichols, P. G. Auchampaugh, and other scholars. The result is a compressed but highly perceptive and beautifully written narrative, well deserving
of the prize awarded to the author by the Pennsylvania State University, where he has been Professor of History since April 4, 1946.

Buchanan was born near Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, of North Ireland Presbyterian stock at the beginning of the last decade of the eighteenth century. From his storekeeping father, who was never satisfied, he learned the virtues of precise bookkeeping; from his devout mother, who was always satisfied, he acquired an attitude of resignation toward adversity which was illustrated by his favorite expression, “Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.” Following graduation from Dickinson College in 1809 he took up the profession of law with a sufficient degree of success that a Lancaster judge wrote of him: “He was cut out by nature for a great lawyer, and I think was spoiled by fortune when she made him a statesman.”

Buchanan entered politics in 1814 as a Federalist member of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. In 1820 he was elected to Congress, thus placing his foot on the first rung of a public career in the Federal Government which included diplomatic missions to Russia and Great Britain, eleven years in the United States Senate, the position of Secretary of State under Polk, and finally the Presidency. “Patience, acquiescence, logically contrived procedure, the appearance of consistency, refusal to make irretrievable commitments, and a ready willingness to capitulate in matters of minor political advantage — these constituted Buchanan’s political temperament,” according to Professor Klein. Although in serious debate “Old Buck,” as he came to be known, was formidable, stump speaking and the editorial column were not his political métier; he preferred the private letter and the personal conference. When someone remonstrated with Clay because of a particularly disparaging remark about Buchanan in the Senate, the Kentucky Senator retorted: “Oh, damn him, he deserved it. He writes letters!”

To qualify for the Presidency, Buchanan needed the united support of the Pennsylvania Democracy, and three times Pennsylvania failed him before, in March 1856, he received the unanimous endorsement of the Harrisburg Convention. Simon Cameron was his chief stumblingblock; Henry Muhlenberg, John W. Forney, and the hard-drinking Irish postmaster of Pittsburgh, David Lynch, were Buchanan lieutenants among the Pennsylvania Politicos. Although at no point in his legislative career was his name attached to an important bill, Buchanan helped to originate Van Buren’s Sub-
Treasury system, and his Berks County Letter of August 1847 was allegedly "the first formal pronouncement by a major political figure" on the question of the status of slavery in the Federal Territories (p. 202).

Although Professor Klein is obviously sympathetic toward his subject, he does not fail to point out errors of judgment on the part of Buchanan which created political animosities and contributed to the failure of his attempts at peacemaking on the eve of the Civil War. Buchanan's own legalistic conception of the Presidential office, one gathers, was quite as instrumental as the intransigence of Northern and Southern extremists in depriving the nation of responsible and dynamic leadership at the time of its greatest internal crisis.

Through the buying and selling of real estate around Lancaster over the years, and other business transactions, Buchanan accumulated a fortune that made it unnecessary for him to depend upon politics for a living and that amounted to nearly three hundred thousand dollars at the time of his death. As the rich uncle who never married, he had the major responsibility of caring for a small army of nieces and nephews whose parents were peculiarly susceptible to tuberculosis. The most interesting of his orphan dependents was the glamorous Harriet Lane, who became his ward when she was fourteen and functioned with éclat as the mistress of the White House while her uncle was President. A sister-in-law of Buchanan, Anna Eliza Foster, was the sister of the young Pittsburgh song writer, Stephen Collins Foster.

In describing the ruminations that supposedly ran through Buchanan's mind as he lay awake at night in the Coleman house in Lancaster and again during an Atlantic crossing, the author makes use of the technique of imaginative reconstruction that is becoming more common in biographical writing. That such practices, formerly confined to the historical novel, enhance the readability of a biographical narrative is indubitable, but are there not elements of risk when fancy is used to supplement the evidence gleaned from historical documents?

In a book review written some thirty-five years ago the historian James G. Randall expressed the view that a re-examination of Buchanan's administration was needed. Not simply does the volume under review provide such a re-examination; it illuminates all phases of Buchanan's significant career and adds a new dimension to our
knowledge of the period to which the author has devoted life-
long study.

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J. Cutler Andrews

*A Bibliography of American Autobiographies.* Compiled by Louis 
Kaplan and others. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 
1961. 372 pp. $6.00.)

This work is the result of approximately 15 years of what must 
have been painstaking research into all the obvious and many un-
obvious bibliographies. The list reflects great care in compilation and 
is remarkably extensive (6,377 citations). The entries are as full 
as one could want, and coverage includes material written to 1945.

When possible each entry includes all the usual bibliographical 
data: the author's full name and his dates, title, place, publisher, 
date of publication, number of pages, a brief annotation, and a letter 
key to a library which owns the book. This last is quite valuable in 
that about 25 per cent of the books fall in the rare to almost un-
obtainable category.

A second section of the book is a subject index of some 60 pages. 
Citation is not by page but by entry number. The main breakdown 
is by profession, but the index includes groupings by broad geographic 
areas (those areas determined by the U. S. Census Bureau — New 
England, East North Central, etc.) and by historical involvements 
(Civil War, Pioneers, Suffragists, etc.). The index also includes 
autobiographies which do not fall under a specific occupation, such 
as Childhood reminiscences, Mentally ill, foreigners in U. S. (ar-
ranged, of course, by country), and the like. Under a given subject, 
entries are listed by a broad period classification (1800-1850, 1850-
1900). Workmanlike and logical, the index saves the compilation 
from the realm of the well-intended and interesting, but largely useless 
bibliography.

If one were to quarrel with any part of this work it would be 
with the annotations. The intention was to show only the author's 
vocation and the state or states he lived in. Quite often the an-
notations are good; many times they are miserable. One has a right, 
I think, to expect something more than "Kentucky felon," or "Na-
aturalist," or "Travelling salesman in the South." However, the criticism