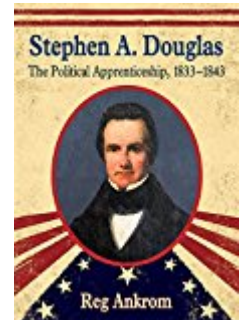


Reg Ankrom. *Stephen A. Douglas: The Political Apprenticeship, 1833-1843.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2015. 240 pp. \$45.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-9807-9.



Reviewed by Gregory Peek

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Stephen A. Douglas remains one of the most recognizable and enigmatic figures in US history. A well-documented political career, situated in perhaps the most pivotal time in nation's history, has generated scores of books and articles. Interpretations of Douglas have varied as widely as causal explanations for the Civil War. Blundering self-serving politician, conservative nationalist, and pliant tool of the Slave Power are labels all affixed to Douglas by scholars over the years. Reg Ankrom's *Stephen A. Douglas: The Political Apprenticeship, 1833-1843* reminds his audience that Douglas's political principles were born of the Old Northwest. Rejection of the ossified and stratified New England society of his youth meant personal and professional rebirth on the frontier prairies of Illinois. Douglas believed democratic egalitarianism embodied the culture of his adopted home; it fostered his personal development and success. The preservation and projection of this culture became the goal of his political life's work.

Committed to his new western life, Douglas moved swiftly to define himself. Apprenticed as a

cabinetmaker in Vermont, he eschewed the trades for academic and legal work instead. In Ankrom's telling, the rapidity of Douglas's ascendancy is truly remarkable. A newly credentialed lawyer, he won election as state's attorney for First Judicial District in 1835. This office translated into election as state representative from Morgan County to the General Assembly the following year. In 1837 President Martin Van Buren, as reward for his tireless work on party building, appointed Douglas federal land register in Springfield. Named secretary of state in 1840, Douglas then won election to the Illinois Supreme Court the following March, quickly followed by election to Congress in 1843. Manipulation of party machinery contributed to his success, and the author does not ignore Douglas's opportunistic streak. Yet, argues Ankrom, it would be remiss to ignore the real talent that lay behind this rise. Even his Whig opponents, Abraham Lincoln included, recognized Douglas's ability to mingle freely with the state's democratic masses.

These masses, Ankrom reminds us, were hardly uniform, and party competition for votes highlights Illinois's ethno-cultural diversity. Internal sectional divides, between Upland Southern communities in the southern half of the state and "Easterners" settled to their north, proved the most enduring. Differences between the two were largely predicated upon divergent values on policy and personality. Douglas excelled in bridging the two, supporting integrative economic policies without alienating the yeoman farmers that represented his core constituency. Foreign-born immigrants also checkered the landscape, sometimes strategically, with their support often making the difference between victory and defeat. Nativist feeling made targets of these communities, which Douglas, in his egalitarianism, rushed to defend. His protection of Irish canal and rail workers from disenfranchisement not only ensured their participation in the election of 1840 but increased their odds of voting Democratic. When Douglas narrowly won election to Congress in 1843, Whigs and Democrats alike attributed his victory to foreign votes. Similar tactics characterized his relationship with members of the Mormon community. Joseph Smith's sect relocated to Nauvoo in Hancock County after their expulsion from Missouri. Douglas labored on their behalf to secure the community's city charter, one remarkably free from outside state interference. Later, as district judge, Douglas denied an extradition request from Missouri to hand over Smith, earning praise from the prophet and his endorsement of local Democratic candidates.

As a disenfranchised community, African Americans received no such overtures from Douglas, instead resorting to political statements through direct action against slavery. The author correctly emphasizes the frequency with which slavery and race infused Illinois's political discourse, despite party efforts to bury them. No effort is made to hide the racial prejudice of Douglas or his colleagues. Hardships imposed by the state's black codes, vigilante attacks on antislav-

ery papers, and the conscientious return of runaway slaves are all subjects identified and explored. The question of fugitive slave law impacted Douglas directly and receives special attention. In both Jacksonville and Quincy, African Americans and their white allies protected fleeing slaves via the Underground Railroad. In 1843 Judge Douglas had before him the case of Richard Eells, a Connecticut-born doctor accused of aiding slaves fleeing from Missouri. Illinois governor Thomas Ford's refusal to extradite Eells for punishment in Missouri cast a broad shadow over the case, as did the recent Supreme Court case *Prigg v. Pennsylvania*, which the defense argued protected his client from prosecution. Douglas ruled against Eells, citing his violation of the state's black code that prevented him from harboring a person held to service in another state. Eells appealed the ruling all the way to the US Supreme Court, which in 1853 upheld Douglas's decision.

The author's love of the subject is evident through his rich and colorful descriptions of the environment Douglas inhabited. Sights, sounds, and smells of frontier Vandalia, Jacksonville, Quincy, and Springfield are carefully detailed: hogs rooted in alleys and front yards, the incessant pounding of hammers and humming of saws as indicators of growth, the press of wagons and visitors on court and election days, and the pervasive and equalizing constrain of mud following the spring thaw or a summer storm. The rusticity of town life bled into the informality of political and civil conduct. Judicial proceedings included dozing dogs and distracted jurists, floors bespattered with tobacco juice, and the occasional mob intervention in pursuit of "justice." Political campaigns were no different as the canvass imposed regular hardships, including inadequate food, rest, and shelter, on the candidates. Acrimonious debates gave way, only hours after their conclusion, to shared meals from the same table and shared slumber in the same bed. This closeness reflected not only the sparseness of the physical environment but the smallness of the candidates'

social world. Ankrom often reminds his reader that Douglas knew everyone and everyone knew Douglas. His frequent late-night gatherings with ambitious young lawyers and politicians fostered a sense of fraternal comradery that transcended party affinities. Policy and partisanship mattered in this world, but not as much as personal relationships.

Occasionally Ankrom's dedication to descriptive precision becomes a liability. Point-by-point accounts of debates or the listing of significant people at a particular incident could have been streamlined. Events covered in prior chapters are, perhaps in an effort to refresh the reader's memory, meticulously revisited in later pages. Greater historiographical emphasis could have been substituted here without compromising the overall fluidity of the narrative. More attention to the work of historians James Huston and Martin Quitt would deepen the author's understanding of Douglas's early life and his attraction to the ideologies of democracy. While both are cited in the footnotes and bibliography this reviewer felt more connections with their findings could have been made. Works by John Craig Hammond and Matthew Mason on slavery's expansion in the early republic are similarly missing. The process by which Illinois became free soil, the memory of that process, and the context it provided for the debates of 1830s and 1840s is addressed only marginally. These criticisms aside this work is a valuable contribution to the literature on Douglas and the political culture of the frontier Midwest. Ankrom's work allows the reader to see and evaluate Douglas before fame and controversy would embroil his life.

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