

tive that moves along with a certain momentum that mirrors Tomlinson's journalistic life—all fits and starts, going somewhere yet barely going anywhere. In that sense, Donohoe's book succeeds in developing the nature and status of journalism during the American Civil War, through the words of an ordinary newspaperman and those of his wife. It was a time when almost all newspapers had small circulations, were located in small cities or towns, and had relatively

short existences. Yet they were vital to the public discourse that brought the Civil War—and its major issues, especially slavery—to the forefront.

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### *Lincoln's Autocrat: The Life of Edwin Stanton*

By William Marvel

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. Pp. xi, 466. Illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.)

Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton is one of the most recognizable members of Abraham Lincoln's cabinet, his bespectacled face framed by a graying, chest-length beard. Although a cabinet member who wielded tremendous power in organizing and directing the Union war effort, Stanton has not been the subject of a major biography since 1962. William Marvel meets that need with *Lincoln's Autocrat*, a biography which presents Edwin Stanton in all his complexity, mendacity, and ruthlessness—a book that is certain to become the standard treatment of Lincoln's controversial war minister for years to come.

Obscurity surrounds much of Stanton's early life and antebellum career, making Marvel's ability to reconstruct both at length all the

more impressive. Marvel charts the Ohio native's rise as a lawyer and Democratic Party loyalist. In the courtroom, Stanton played to emotion when law or logic were not on his side, a tendency on full display when Stanton joined the defense team in the sensational murder trial of Daniel Sickles, the New York congressman (and future Civil War general) who in 1859 shot to death his wife's lover. Following Simon Cameron's disappointing performance as Lincoln's first secretary of war, Stanton succeeded him in early 1862, inaugurating his transition from Breckinridge Democrat to Radical Republican, and from "fawning hanger-on" to "grasping bureaucrat" (p. 155).

Some biographers grow too close to their subjects and blind to their

faults, but Marvel thoroughly avoids that pitfall. Instead he paints a warts-and-all portrait of Stanton as a man “insincere, devious, and dedicated to self-preservation” (p. xii), one who played the obsequious toady to those in power and the domineering bully to those in his power. Marvel does credit him with organizing and managing the War Department more efficiently than Cameron, often through micro-managing and sheer force of will. Yet, Stanton’s foibles and misjudgments defined much of his service. He foolishly closed recruiting stations early in 1862 when Union victory seemed assured, a decision that Marvel faults as a “stupendous blunder” (p. 179), arguing that it possibly delayed Union victory. Marvel reserves his most biting criticism, however, for Stanton’s track record on wartime civil liberties. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles wrote that “Mr. Stanton was fond of power and its exercise” (p. 187), and Stanton wielded that power with authoritarian zeal in suppressing Northern critics of the war and the Lincoln administration, making him responsible, in Marvel’s judgment, for “some of the most shameful injustices in American history” (p. xiv).

At times Marvel privileges narrative over analysis, with the result that a clear interpretation of Stanton’s working relationship with Lincoln, and of its implications for Lincoln’s legacy, does not always emerge. The author does recount Stanton’s often

blatantly insubordinate behavior toward Lincoln, and he suggests that Lincoln may have naively overlooked Stanton’s capacity for duplicity. Marvel clearly believes that Lincoln allowed his Secretary of War to wield far too much power, but readers may wish the author had explored and interpreted more fully the interactions between Lincoln and Stanton.

As a biographer, Marvel absolutely excels in judging and interrogating historical sources—no easy task with as polarizing a personage as Edwin Stanton. Perhaps most notably, he dismisses the legend that in 1855 Stanton rudely snubbed Lincoln when the two lawyers found themselves working together in the McCormick-Manny reaper case. While Marvel acknowledges that both Stanton’s vindictiveness and Lincoln’s forgiveness in the story ring true to each man’s character, he argues that spotty evidence makes Stanton’s role in dismissing Lincoln from the case unlikely.

*Lincoln’s Autocrat* offers a much-needed modern reassessment of Edwin Stanton, one which raises difficult questions about the man to whom the sixteenth president entrusted so much power, for good or for ill.

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