
William Blount was a large land speculator in the early Southwest, the governor of the Territory South of the River Ohio, and a member of the United States Senate. From the latter position he was expelled because of involvement in foreign negotiations which seemed disloyal. The present volume, which is the first thorough and critical biography of the man, replaces an earlier work by Marcus J. Wright entitled The Life and Services of William Blount (1884).

Although Blount is frequently thought of as a land speculator, his political career was by no means insignificant. He was a member of the North Carolina House of Commons in 1781, 1783, and 1784; of the state senate in 1788 and 1789; and of the Confederation Congress in 1788 and 1789. He was a delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 which drafted the Constitution of the United States and a member of the convention in North Carolina which ratified the Constitution. President George Washington appointed him Governor of the Territory South of the River Ohio and Superintendent of Indian Affairs in the Southern Department in 1790, positions which he held until 1796. He was president of the convention which formed the first constitution of the state of Tennessee. He then became one of the first members of the United States Senate from the new state. After expulsion from this body he was elected to the senate of Tennessee and was chosen speaker. Such achievements have led Thomas P. Abernethy to comment in his volume, From Frontier to Plantation in Tennessee, "As long as [Blount] lived, he dominated directly or indirectly the politics of the section in which he made his home" (p. 168).

Masterson on the other hand presents a more minute picture of Blount, details of which are exceptions to Abernethy's generalization. For instance Blount was defeated for re-election to the Confederation Congress late in 1786 and on February 2, 1787, was defeated for the presidency of Congress by Arthur St. Clair. Two years later he was defeated in his efforts to be elected United States Senator from North Carolina. After his expulsion from the Senate, July 7, 1797,
he was able to effect his election to the Tennessee senate and
to its speakership, but he was not able to control Governor
John Sevier or make himself governor. He and his brother,
John Gray Blount, were able narrowly at various times to
avoid prosecution for financial irregularities.

Masterson presents Blount as the big business man or
speculator who ruthlessly swept aside political principles as
well as smaller men in his campaign for riches. Yet he re-
lates many details of his career which form exceptions to
this generalization. Blount excelled chiefly in taking private
advantage of official position. His profits must have exceeded
his losses, but he was generally short of cash. He lost heavily
from the failure of a partner, his firm was near bankruptcy
in his last days, his brother John Gray was indicted for
"high crimes," and another accomplice escaped prosecution
after arrest in Natchez. No attempt was made by the author
to estimate the value of his estate after final settlement.

On the whole Blount was a very successful territorial
governor. He identified himself with the territory. He
sought to protect the people from Indian attack and to per-
suade the federal government to obtain more land from the
Indians in order that it might be available for settlement. It
did not disturb the people of the territory that he stood to
profit as a result of his actions, for they too would profit.
During this period, he was also very astute in overcoming
opposition by means of concessions, a policy which tended
to preserve unity in trying times.

The author’s style is suited to the subject, somewhat
rugged in some of the early chapters, but flowing and smooth
in the period of Blount’s greater prominence. Throughout the
volume the author is frank with his readers, presenting
Blount as he was, not glossing over his offences. Only at the
very end does he succumb to the vice of biographers and pic-
ture his subject as a statesman. The volume is a very success-
ful piece of work. It fills a gap in the knowledge of the early
Southwest and adds a worthy volume to the already success-
ful Southern Biography Series.

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