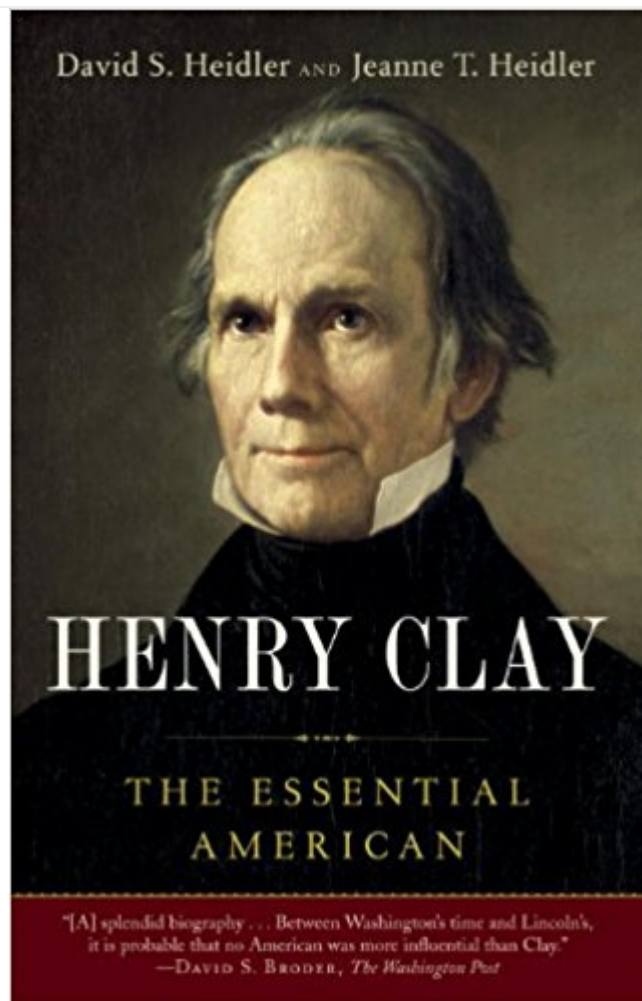


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Henry Clay: The Essential American



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Reviewed Work(s)

Henry Clay: The Essential American. By David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler (New York: Random House, 2010). Pp. 595. Cloth, \$30.00.

The recently renewed interest in American political history makes David S. Heidler's and Jeanne T. Heidler's excellent new biography on Henry Clay a timely work. *Henry Clay: The Essential American* is a lively narrative of Clay's rich political experience and private dramas. Drawing on both Clay's personal papers and a prodigious number of secondary sources, the Heidlers synthesize a great deal of research into a highly readable monograph. Updating the fine work of Robert V. Remini, this book paints a more complete portrait of Clay's personal life, and does an exemplary job of breathing life into the character of Lucretia, his wife.

[1] The picture of Clay that emerges is thus a richly detailed one, melding fascinating personal events with a deep analysis of his political contributions. The Heidlers argue that Clay's life "had been the mirror of his country and its aspirations. And in that, it was an extraordinary life" (xxiv).

The Heidlers portray Henry Clay as a farm boy with a burning desire to better his station. A sixth-generation Virginian, he was born on April 12, 1777 in Hanover County. In the mid-1780s, his mother and stepfather moved to Woodford County, Kentucky and young Henry was left behind to find employment. Taking a modest job as an assistant law clerk in Richmond, this position ultimately launched a long and storied law career, introducing him to a tight-knit circle of other rising young political stars including Littleton Waller Tazewell and Thomas Ritchie. Always ready with a joke, even at his own expense, he mixed easily with these wealthy, prominent men. Famed Virginia attorney (and signer of the Declaration of Independence) George Wythe noticed the young clerk's quick wit and impossibly neat handwriting, and appointed him his apprentice. Via this stroke of fortune, Clay's firm professional grounding in the law was assured, not only by his favorable connections but also by his hard work. He possessed an intensely analytical and practical mind, outstanding public speaking skills, and a hunger to better himself. It was this ambition that drove him to leave Richmond in 1797

for Lexington, Kentucky, where he could not only rejoin his family but also make his mark on the fast-growing “Athens of the West.”

The Heidlers depict Clay as a man who was conscious of his influence and public legacy. He married Lucretia Hart, member of a prominent Lexington family, whose prominent status was not lost on Clay. Indeed, the authors remark that “Clay’s rising star in Lexington was not an accident, and all of his actions bear the mark of calculation: his humble entry into legal circles, his associations with important men, his displays of oratorical prowess, his diligent toil in dull but lucrative casework...all indicate a young man scaling a ladder one social, economic, and political rung at a time” (40). He first ran for public office in 1803 and won his bid for a seat in the Kentucky legislature where he would spend the next six years. His eventual election to the U.S. Senate in 1811, subsequent installment as the youngest ever Speaker of the House, and later stint as Secretary of State from 1824 to 1828 were simultaneously the greatest coups and the greatest constraints of his political life.

As senator and Speaker, Clay was a passionate advocate not only for federal internal improvements and tariffs but also for states’ rights within the federal system. His politics made him extraordinarily popular with the “common man,” but his brilliant speeches and brash style irritated some of his political colleagues. Indeed, he was not above goading his political enemies, sometimes to the point of fighting duels. The enmity between Clay and Virginia senator John Randolph was the stuff of political tabloid fodder. His bitter contempt for the Andrew Jackson administration made for tense negotiations during various crises including the Bank War and South Carolina’s efforts at nullification. Yet the Senate was Clay’s “political home” and one where “he left his mark indelibly on it...He brought finely honed parliamentary talents to bear, employed charm, used sarcasm, and hurled invective to wield a level of influence that made him peerless” (250).

The “Western Star” was especially brilliant in his management of the Whig party and in his ability to broker interparty compromise through the sheer force of his jovial personality and shrewd negotiation skills. His commitment to preserving the Union was always paramount, driving him to use his conciliatory skills to their utmost. Though Clay knew he was talented, his political genius often rang hollow to him, for he felt it keenly that his multiple bids for the Presidency were utter failures. The

1824 “corrupt bargain” with Presidential winner John Quincy Adams in exchange for the Secretary of State position sobered him immensely. He wrote, “I injured both him [Adams] and myself and I often painfully felt that I had seriously impaired my own capacity of public usefulness” (185).

Clay was as complicated an individual as he was a politician. He bought and owned slaves, but he publicly despised it as an institution and served as president of the American Colonization Society. He had married his wife Lucretia possibly for political and financial reasons, but the union proved to be a loving partnership that lasted fifty-three years. Clay loved nothing more than a good party and a stiff drink, but he drew his strength from the quiet peace of his farm at Ashland where he spent years breeding sheep and horses. Though he was frequently and voluntarily away from his eleven children, he loved them deeply. The untimely deaths of all six of his daughters, his son Henry Clay’s death in the Mexican-American War, and the bouts of his sons Theodore and John with mental illness left him with a personal sorrow masked by his usually cheerful disposition.

The title *Henry Clay: The Essential American* implies both the indispensable role that Clay played in the country’s early national period and the “everyman” that he was. The great irony of Clay’s life was that his last great testament to preserving the Union – the Compromise of 1850 – would hasten the illness that led to his death in 1852. The Compromise itself would also hasten the country to civil war. Despite the ultimate failure of the Compromise, Clay “was a titanic symbol of the Union to the very end, promoting compromise to [save] his country until its muscles and sinews could weather a terrible civil war...” (xxiv). His failures, foibles, and inconsistencies balanced a man that was a good husband, father, friend, and tireless champion for his country. The Heidlers have produced a book worthy of both Clay the man, and Clay, the “beau ideal” of a statesman.

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[1] Robert Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991).



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