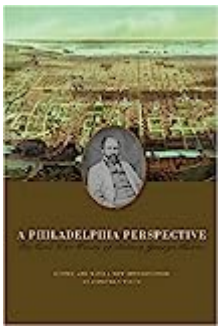
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jonathan W. White, ed. *A Philadelphia Perspective: The Civil War Diary of Sidney George Fisher.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2007. xiii + 294 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-2727-3; $28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-2728-0.

Reviewed by Nicholas Cox (Department of History, University of Houston)

Published on H-CivWar (January, 2008)

A Record of the Events of the War

Sidney George Fisher offered readers a snooty, but representative, line when he wrote "history is dull compared with philosophy and poetry." Fisher understood that "one is induced to postpone the effort to read merely for the sake of acquiring knowledge" (pp. 27-28). Reviews of volumes like this should not encourage the same postponement of effort among Civil War scholars because Jonathan White's abridgment of Fisher's diary is full of interesting, valuable, and yes, even entertaining insights.

Editor Jonathan W. White returns to the diaries of the Philadelphian aristocrat and pamphleteer.[1] White includes just the Civil War years from Fisher's enormous personal record and provides Civil War historians with an insightful personal account of a Northern urban experience during the conflict. White amplifies this edition with new and expanded footnotes, improved faithfulness to the original diaries, and a wonderful introduction to the intellectual, political, and social milieu of Sidney George Fisher.

Sidney George Fisher inhabited an ideal situation for a scholar: he could read, reflect, and write about his life and times without concern for his finances. In addition to providing his moderate or conservative political perspective on the events of his day to various newspapers, journals, and pamphlet campaigns, Fisher recorded his day-to-day life experiences beginning in 1834 and included his political ruminations and reading digests until 1871. Editor White's focus on the Civil War years, with concern for accessibility to general readers, prevents him from including much of Fisher's diary. However, White's new introduction identifies the most interesting intersections of the diary and Fisher's world.

An interesting diary must retain that diarist's unique voice; indeed the diary must convey the human presence within the historical events by capturing the diarist's personality. Fisher never fails to elicit both shock and amusement with his blatantly antidemocratic comments. As early as 1839 Fisher recorded "I always vote *against* the popular side on principle" (p. 3). During the campaign year of 1860 Fisher attended a rural fair to deliver an address on new agricultural techniques and disparaged "the inferior class" and a "vulgar crowd" for being attracted to races and games instead of his lectures

(pp. 50-51). Fisher refused to vote for Lincoln in 1860, in part because the Republicans had become popular, a party of the masses, at least in the North. And in 1863, commenting on the New York draft riots, Fisher blamed the Democratic Party "whose incendiary harangues have inflamed the people and given to the rabble a pretext for disorder" (p. 199).

Fisher, like many moderate commentators prior to secession, blamed abolitionism and radicalism for alienating the South. But he also argued that the South must recognize its safety in the Union, but cease its efforts to expand slavery into the West. For Fisher the slaveholders generated antislavery radicalism. Fisher also shared much of the North's discomfort with the "peculiar institution" and recorded private disapproval of the human degradation and family destruction of slavery.

Fisher's analysis of the competing factions within the Republican Party is striking, and his dismissal of William H. Seward as an unelectable threat to Southern honor is not surprising given Fisher's opposition to abolition and popular vote-seekers like Seward. Also of interest is Fisher's lack of familiarity with Lincoln. And what of Fisher's opinion of Lincoln? When the Republicans nominated Lincoln, he recorded only: "I never heard of him before" (p. 35). Unless this statement is untrue, it casts doubt on the conventional wisdom that the Lincoln-Douglas debates spread Lincoln's reputation throughout the nation: if anyone should have known Lincoln's abilities and attitudes prior to 1860 it would have been an observer like Fisher.

By December 21, 1861 however, Fisher had embraced Lincoln: "He is certainly in my judgment the best man we have had for President since Jno. Q. Adams" (p. 125). In December 1860, following Lincoln's election, Fisher summarized the sentiment of many in the North in an article published on New Year's Eve which postulated his "plan of legalizing secession" and letting the South go (p. 68). But Fort Sumter changed his perspective greatly and he vocally stood behind Lincoln. Fisher praised Lincoln's first inaugural address in his diary before publishing his own explication of it.

Fisher's widely inaccurate estimation of the cost of the impending war may cause modern readers to attach little credit to his comments: after hearing from a friend that the demands of the war required fifty thousand soldiers to protect Washington, Fisher stated in his diary that "he talks rather wildly ... for I cannot imagine that the South has resources for a long war or even a short one" (p. 88). This hubris underscores just how wrong observers like Fisher could be. This is pertinent when considering Fisher's support for the suspension of civil liberties during the war by Lincoln and the army. Even though Fisher later praises the civilian authorization to suspend civil liberties, an action previously authorized by the military only, there are still proto-authoritarian strains in his comments on martial law.[2]

The diary is an invaluable source for those immediately interested in Northern Democrats during the war.[3] Fisher's intimate connections to the Ingersoll family provide a fascinating glimpse into the frustrations of these Doughfaces and Copperheads. The diary provides first-hand accounts of the effects of the suspension of civil and political rights on dissenters as well as Fisher's own incisive critique of the Copperhead political program. Routinely throughout the war, members of the Ingersoll family published, lectured, and stood trial for potentially treasonous behavior and beliefs. These relatives–many of whom had deep connections to the South–frequently dined, visited, and discussed current events with the diarist, and unwittingly provided him with debate practice prior to publication of his pro-Lincoln arguments. Fisher frequently worked out his own rebuttals to his family members' Copperhead arguments in the diary before entering the publishing fray himself. Fisher recorded his despair at the breaking of ties, the secession of friends and family, and the abandonment of Union among his relations, but he also voiced his fears for their happiness and safety as many moved South.

Fisher also offered many observations on matters other than the political. He frequently noted the connection between the war and his son, Sidney, only five to nine years old during this period. Fisher celebrated the martial spirit of the nation at war and took his son to military parades and public civic ceremonies. He noted the excitement of Christmas and the gifts to be left by "Kriskinkle" in young Sidney's stocking during the height of the secession crisis: "Last night Sidney was so excited at the expectation of Christkinkle's visit & of the good things he was to bring him that it was long before he went to sleep" (p. 209). Christmas, even when shared with the Ingersoll Copperheads, remained a pleasant celebration of family. Fisher also noted the frequent ups and downs of the business climate in general and those of his wealthy brother Henry specifically. Fisher frequently commented on his and his family's health, sickness and treatment, doctors and dentists. His health regimen included, at least in November 1863, the use of "Indian hemp, or Hasheesh," which "caused me an agreeable

mental excitementâ¦. It is certainly a very pleasant way of curing gout" (p. 207).

In April 1865 Fisher, like many in the North, was filled with sadness at Lincoln's murder. Fisher presciently noted that while reunion and reconstruction under Lincoln's stewardship were animated by "feelings of good will & conciliation," now "his death is a terrible loss to the country, perhaps even a greater loss to the South" because "the North ... will now be checked & converted in the minds of many into resentment & rage" (p. 252). On the other hand, Fisher accurately predicted as early as 1865 that "the South ... will again hold the balance of power, will make another bargain with a northern party, as they did before, the condition of which will be as before–support in all southern plans for governing the Negro race, and again the South may control the country" (p. 262). Fisher died in 1871 and did not live to see that "northern party"–Lincoln's party–bargain with the South and abandon Reconstruction in 1877.

Notes

[1]. Other excerpts of Fisher's diary appeared initially in periodical installments in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, and then in editor Nicholas Wainwright's *A Philadelphia Perspective: The Diary of Sidney George Fisher, Covering the Years 1834-1871* (Philadelphia: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1967).

[2]. Later published during the war, his *The Trial of the Constitution* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1862) sought to vindicate the use of martial law by Lincoln as well as to sustain faith in the Constitution as the foundation of any resolution to the Civil War. In addition to revising and publishing that work, Fisher also worked out the central arguments of other published articles during the war in his diary.

[3]. Recent examples include Adam I. P. Smith, *No Party Now: Politics in the Civil War North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Jennifer Weber, *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Own Opponents in the North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); and the conference panel "Identity, Ideals, and Politics in the Civil War Era," presented by Jean Baker, Matthew Mason, Mark Neely, diary editor Jonathan White, and Jonathan Earle at the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, January 3-6, 2008 in Washington, D.C.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar

Citation: Nicholas Cox. Review of White, Jonathan W., ed., *A Philadelphia Perspective: The Civil War Diary of Sidney George Fisher*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. January, 2008.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14046

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.