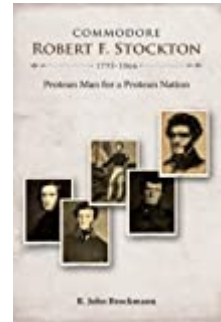




R. John Brockmann. *Commodore Robert F. Stockton, 1795-1866: Protean Man for a Protean Nation.* Amherst: Cambria Press, 2009. xx + 622 pp. \$144.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-60497-630-4.



Reviewed by Henry Goldman

Published on H-California (December, 2010)

Commissioned by Eileen V. Wallis (Cal Poly Pomona)

Commodore Stockton and California

R. John Brockmann's biography of Commodore Robert F. Stockton is the only complete biography of this "protean" naval officer and politician available. In fact, it is the only biography of Stockton done by an academic and scholarly researcher. (Brockmann is on the faculty of the University of Delaware). There are numerous short pieces easily obtained from the Internet and several older articles in such works as *Harper's Encyclopedia of United States History*, volume 8 (1905), the *Dictionary of American Biography* (1964), and *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1945* (1950), but none are complete while dealing with Stockton's career.

I found the book to be rather difficult to follow which, I suspect, is the result of the author's style of writing. It is, however, a useful tool for the understanding of a complex and, sometimes, misguided individual. There is no doubt that Stockton was an innovator and an early advocate for a "propeller-driven, steam-powered navy." Brockmann's description of his subject as "a protean man for a protean nation" suggests that Stockton was almost a "shape-shifter," taking different forms to suit the situation (pp.

2-4). But the author points out that the nation itself was growing, changing shape and form as it grew and that Stockton was a mirror of this for his times. Brockmann also crafts a very different portrait of Stockton than that found in other biographies. Tom Chaffin, in his 2002 biography of John C. Fremont, *Pathfinder*, describes Commodore Stockton as a pragmatic officer and leader, a very different perspective than that presented here by Brockmann.

Without this well-researched and complete biography, our understanding of Commodore Stockton's contributions to United States history might be limited to discussions of the explosion on board the USS *Princeton*. This tragedy occurred when the naval gun that Stockton had purchased for the ship (and named the "Peacemaker" because of the crises in the Northwest over joint control of the Oregon Country with Great Britain) exploded during a ceremony celebrating the first United States naval vessel steam-powered and propeller-driven (pp. 108-112).[1]

For this reviewer, the best and most valuable parts of the book are those dealing with Stockton's roles in the Mexican War and the California Conquest (pp. 157-238). Brockmann also summarizes the work of nineteenth-century historians who dealt with Stockton's activities. However, some of the "historians" Brockmann cites were really not historians at all but writers and philosophers who happened to mention the commodore in their writings (Thomas Hart Benton's *Thirty Years' View* [1854] and Josiah Royce's *California from the Conquest* [1886] are examples). For example, Hubert Howe Bancroft's 1886 depiction of Stockton was challenged in 1894 when the Society of California Pioneers, "many of whom had participated in the war with Stockton ... took issue with Bancroft's work and specifically with his comments on Stockton's career in California (p. 232).

I was particularly impressed with the author's research. As far I can determine he has woven into his narrative as much original material as was possible (see the appendix, "Essential Stockton Documents," pp. 403-468). His bibliographical essay on revisionist historians (p. 553) really hit home. I have been battling "revisionists" for many years, without much support. That section was much appreciated by this reviewer. Historians of the American West, California, the Mexican War, and the U.S. Navy will find this Stockton biography to be a valuable contribution to the field.

Note

[1]. A better description of the event can be read in Alfred Hoyt Bill's *Rehearsal for Conflict, The War with Mexico, 1846-1848*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), 3-6.

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

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-california>

Citation: Henry Goldman. Review of Brockmann, R. John, *Commodore Robert F. Stockton, 1795-1866: Protean Man for a Protean Nation*. H-California, H-Net Reviews. December, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30031>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.