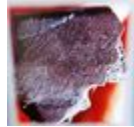




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THE VIRGINIA GAZETTE

Books on John Tyler provide look at W&M alum and U.S. president

By WILFORD KALE
VIRGINIA GAZETTE | AUG 25, 2020



FEEDBACK

President without a Party

THE LIFE OF JOHN TYLER



FEEDBACK

CHRISTOPHER J. LEAHY

Only once in United States history have presidential and vice presidential candidates come originally from the same state, much less the same county. Such was the case in 1840, when William Henry Harrison and John Tyler, both born in small Charles City County, ran on the Whig Party ticket and won.

The Whig presidential slogan in that 1840 campaign has gone down as one of the most appealing and attention-gathering political catchphrases in history:

“Tippecanoe and Tyler Too.” Richard Ellis has written a very detailed and somewhat heavy-going, academic account of the election, “Old Tip vs. the Sky Fox: The 1840 Election and the Making of a Partisan Nation” (University of Kansas Press, 520 pgs., \$39.95).



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Ellis’ election account, however, makes a thoughtful and definitive prologue to the Harrison-Tyler presidential term, 1841-1845. The book is part of a series on important presidential elections produced by the University of Kansas press.

President Harrison, however, lived only 32 days after his inauguration and it fell on Tyler to become the first person to succeed a president who died in office.

A stunning biography of Tyler and a thorough interpretation of his presidential term are detailed in Christopher J. Leahy's "President without a Party: The Life of John Tyler" (Louisiana State University Press, 512 pgs., \$39.20). Together, these volumes, published within four weeks of each other, cover a part of U.S. presidential history ignored for many years.

LSU Press' public relations bravado proclaimed the book: "the first full-scale biography of Tyler in more than 50 years." Unfortunately, that statement overlooks the masterful account of "John Tyler: The Accidental President," written in 2006 by College of William & Mary Professor of History Emeritus Edward P. Crapol.

"Old Tip vs. the Sky Fox: The 1840 Election and the Making of a Partisan Nation" University of Kansas Press, 520 pgs., \$39.95 (HANDOUT)

Sources," Leahy does credit Crapol with providing biographical data, but "is more concerned with President Tyler's foreign policy and his belief in America's 'national destiny.'"

If by full-scale you mean in pages, 512 compared to 332, then Leahy wins hands down. In his "Notes on

It is vital that credit is given where credit is due. Leahy, professor of history at Keuka College in northwestern New York, deftly presents a highly researched volume of Tyler's public and private life that takes steps to humanize Tyler — considered by many presidential historians as one of the least understood chief executives.

In his private life, Tyler produced a prodigious number of children. With his first wife, Letitia Christian, he had eight children and with his second wife, Julia Gardiner, he had seven children. The last child was born to Tyler at age 70 just seven months before his death. His 15 children are the most sired by any U.S. president.

The family legacy continues today with the remarkable fact that two men — Harrison Ruffin Tyler, 91, of Charles City County and Lyon Gardiner Tyler Jr., 96, of Franklin, Tennessee, are two living grandsons of a man, who was president nearly 180 years ago. (I also knew another grandson, D. Gardiner Tyler Jr., likewise of Charles City, who served for 30 years as assistant attorney general of Virginia. He died in 1993 at age 93.)

Tyler's public life seemingly was a quest for political recognition and power, described in detail by Leahy.

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A graduate of William & Mary, Tyler served as a member of the Board of Visitors, 1840-1862. He was elected rector of the college, 1849-1862, and chancellor, 1859-1862.

Earlier this year, the Wall Street Journal said Tyler “occupies an awkward place on the presidential spectrum, somewhere between James Buchanan-bad and Chester Author-obscure.” Leahy, in fact, describes Tyler as “a man at odds with himself.”

A career Democrat, Tyler served multiple terms in the Virginia House of Delegates, in the U.S. House of Representatives, a short term as governor and finally in the U.S.

Senate (1827-1936).

Leahy stressed, “Tyler derived tremendous personal satisfaction from his position as a U.S. senator,” but he resigned when he could no longer support President Andrew Jackson. “Tyler had drifted into the Whig (party) camp out of default. ... He thus became a ‘states’ rights Whig”—a political marriage of convenience.

In 1840 when the Whigs selected William Henry Harrison of Ohio as their presidential candidate — after the nation’s first political party national convention outlined by historian Ellis — Tyler was elected because he was a southerner and a supporter of Henry Clay, whom Harrison had defeated for the party’s nomination. Ultimately that election, Ellis points out, was also the first of which it might be said, “It’s the economy, stupid.”

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Tyler was finally on the national stage, but his presidential years were fraught with difficulties and ultimately, the Whig Party abandoned him because he opposed many of their policies. Tyler considered creating a third party in an attempt at re-election, but idea collapsed. He retired in 1825 to return to his Charles City home, which he named Sherwood Forest because Tyler “fancied himself as a Robin Hood-type figure who enjoyed his outlaw status with the Whig Party,” Leahy writes.

Leahy craftly lays out Tyler's support of slavery through not only his legislative years, but also in the presidency. Through Tyler's life story he is confronted by debts and often dismayed at his inability as a plantation owner to escape them.

Tyler's legacy, which he spent years nurturing, as Leahy demonstrates, was irreparably damaged when he agreed to run for a seat in the provisional congress of the Confederate States of America Congress. Tyler's "sense of duty (and) the lure of public life" propelled him, as it had done in the past, Leahy writes. Following the Civil War, Tyler was often termed "a traitor" despite being a former U.S. president.

For those already interested in Tyler or who want to know more about this enigmatic figure, Leahy's volume is a MUST!

Have a comment or suggestion for Kale? Contact him at Kaleonbooks95@gmail.com

Topics: "John Tyler: The Accidental President," John Tyler, "Old Tip vs. the Sky Fox: The 1840 Election and the Making of a Partisan Nation", Richard Ellis, Christopher J. Leahy, "President without a Party: The Life of John Tyler"

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