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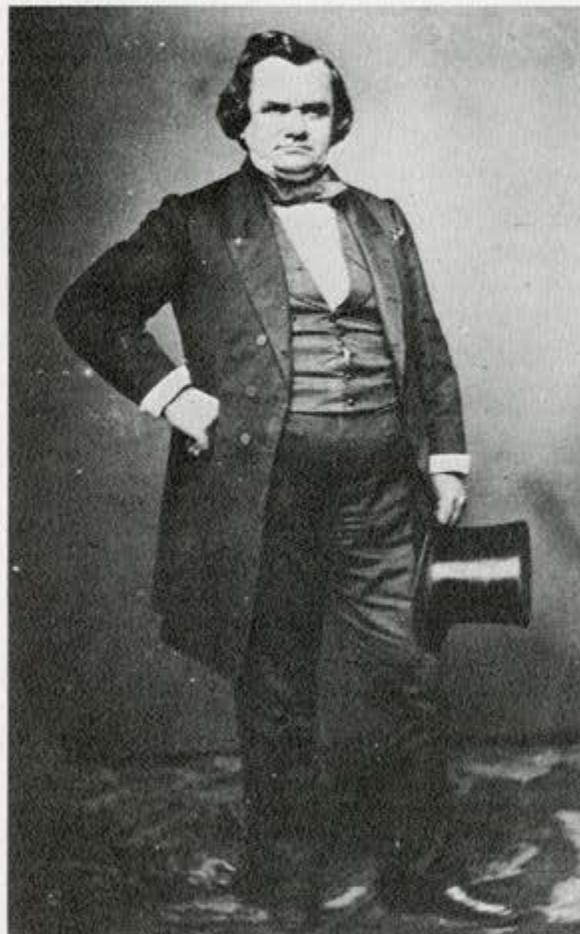
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ROBERT W. JOHANNSEN ON STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS A REVIEW

In the preface to *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), Robert W. Johannsen observes—by way of explaining the difficulties involved in writing a biography of a man who was “not introspective”—that “in Douglas’ story is revealed the America in which he lived.” Nevertheless, Johannsen’s is not a sweeping reinterpretation of the causes of the Civil War with Douglas as merely a handy focal point like George Fort Milton’s earlier (1934) biography, *The Eve of Conflict: Stephen A. Douglas and the Needles War*. Johannsen does focus primarily upon the issues of sectional conflict, devoting two-thirds of the book to treatment of the last eleven years of Douglas’s life (from the Compromise of 1850 to the early days of the Civil War), but Douglas is always front-and-center in the book.

Even though Johannsen’s new biography does not bristle with the contentious language of self-conscious revisionism, it can by no means be said that the book eschews interpretation for objectivity and non-controversial, straightforward narrative. Reviewers who say so were simply fooled, and one would do well to take the advertisements for the book, which have featured blurbs from reviewers who term it “objective” and “magisterial,” with a grain of salt.

In a field so saturated with books and articles as the history of the events leading to the American Civil War, the very choice of subject matter itself often betrays interpretive assumptions. The era of greatest interest in Douglas began, ironically, in 1928 with the publication of a Lincoln biography—Albert Beveridge’s. The hero of that biography was Douglas and not Lincoln. Douglas’s heroic stature was increased by Milton’s above-mentioned book in 1934 and did not begin to diminish until the late 1940’s, when Allan Nevins found Doug-



From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Stephen A. Douglas was born in 1813 and died in 1861. In his forty-eight years he enjoyed an almost unbelievably successful career. His mother was widowed when Stephen was but an infant, and his early years were not easy. In 1833, he left New York for the West, eventually settling in Jacksonville, Illinois. Douglas became a lawyer and a supreme court judge before he was twenty-eight. In 1843, he won an election for a seat in the United States Congress. In December of 1847, he took his seat as United States Senator from Illinois. In the same year he established residence in Chicago and became closely identified with that city’s commercial prospects. He played a key role in delivering the votes that brought about the Compromise of 1850. From that time on, he was a major contender for the Democratic nomination for President, achieving that goal in 1860, but his own Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854) occasioned the birth of the party that defeated him in that historic election.

las “morally obtuse” on the slavery question. In these years (and after as well) the lion’s share of historical effort in the area of the coming of the Civil War went into study of the Democratic party and Stephen Douglas in the 1850’s. The assumption that lay behind much of this effort was basically nationalistic: the Civil War was bad because it threatened to kill the nation, and what was interesting was to study the last national institution—the Democratic party—to see who tried heroically to keep it together and malevolently or narrowly-mindedly to destroy it. Within this frame of reference, those who compromised to save the Democratic party and the nation from sectional split were heroes; there was something wrong with those who let their abstract moral principles (whether they be pro- or anti-slavery) obscure the overall purpose of saving the nation. With those assumptions one would naturally be drawn to Stephen Douglas, who, as Holman Hamilton showed in 1954, did more than the Great Compromiser himself, Henry Clay, to save the nation as early as the Compromise of 1850.

Certainly much of Johannsen’s interpretive framework stems from that “needless war” school of historians who wrote during the 1930’s. “His interests were national,” says Johannsen of Douglas in the Preface, “and this fact shaped everything he said and did.” Douglas died, he adds, “as his beloved country stood on the threshold of bloody civil war, a casualty of the conflict just as surely as if he had been struck down on the battlefield.” Throughout the book, Johannsen pictures Douglas as a “pragmatist” bent on compromise (Milton used the term “realist” to mean the same thing). Douglas’s political enemies, at least on the slavery question, espouse “abstract” issues or reveal interest in merely “theoretical rights” (Milton’s villains indulged their interest

in "slogans" or "constitutional interpretations," "mystic claims of innate rights, looking on Liberty as a spontaneous creation and asserting rights unconnected with responsibilities," and "metaphysic contemplation of the Federal Constitution"). Johannsen's language is more restrained than Milton's, and he certainly never broaches the concept of a "needless" Civil War, but Milton is still his intellectual ancestor.

The broad interpretive scheme of the book, then, is at least forty years old, and even the general outlines of the biographical scheme are not new. Douglas is pictured as an ambitious politician. Adept at the arts of compromise, even he cannot keep the ardent sectionalists together over the issue of slavery expansion. When push comes to shove, Douglas does not confuse compromise with truckling, and there is an especial grandeur to his career after 1857 and his break with the Buchanan administration (even Nevins admired Douglas's career from this point on). This is the way Johannsen describes Douglas's break with the Buchanan administration on the Kansas issue:

He had been forced as never before to confront the full meaning of the principles on which he stood. His leadership in the party had been placed in jeopardy, but he now appeared before the people as a champion of principle, a role to which he was not altogether accustomed. Douglas found the altered image appealing, and in this sense the Lecompton crisis was a turning point in his career. He became more openly and unabashedly a defender of principle, struggling for popular sovereignty and the Union against increasingly vicious attacks from all sides. Less inclined to compromise than before, he was a man under fire, and the struggle brought out his best qualities.

Douglas grew in the new role, campaigning as much against break up of the Union as for his own candidacy in the 1860 Presidential election and giving the Republicans so much support after secession that he endangered his distinguishability as a Democrat.

Johannsen did not set out to change the landscape of American middle-period historiography or even to alter the basic outlines of Douglas biography. But within his rather old-fashioned scheme Johannsen provides a lucid, subtle, and careful detailing of Douglas's career (I say "career" rather than "life" because the man was so secretive about his inner feelings that he defies biography). Johannsen's choice not to tell the reader what he is doing, but simply to do it, not only creates the air of magisterial objectivity about the book but often makes it difficult for the reader not fresh from an immersion in the previous literature of factional disputes in the Pierce administration or the various controversies surrounding the origins of the Kansas-Nebraska Act to plow through the details without stifling a yawn or two. But to prove that it is all well worth it, I got out the best single treatment of the Kansas-Nebraska Act to date (Roy F. Nichols's article "The Kansas-Nebraska Act: A Century of Historiography" in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* for 1954) and did some comparing. The results were worth the effort.

To remove some of the historical blame placed on Douglas for authoring the Kansas-Nebraska Act, revoking the Missouri Compromise, and exacerbating sectional animosities, Nichols simply removed Douglas from center-stage and pictured the Kansas-Nebraska Act as the victim of powerful forces rather than Douglas's own unfortunate brain child. Earlier attempts to exonerate Douglas had left him in the most important role in the formulation of the bill but had attempted to clarify and justify his personal motives. To refute the obvious charge that Douglas had sold out to the slave-power in exchange for Southern support for the Democratic nomination for President in 1856, Milton (for one) noted that Douglas's failure to get the nomination in 1852 had stemmed from lack of support from his own Northwest, not from lack of Southern delegates' votes. Others had tried to say his motives had nothing to do with sectional issues but a great deal to do with his personal interests in railroad development in the West.

Nichols argued that Douglas was the victim of powerful political forces he could not control. The failure of a bill to organize Nebraska in the 1853 session of Congress showed that Douglas needed four Southern votes in the Senate to get the measure through. He faced a compli-

cated situation in his own party. President Franklin Pierce felt that the Democrats had regained the Presidency in 1852 because the Democrats who bolted the party over the slavery expansion issue in 1848 (principally, a New York faction called the Barnburners) had come back to the Democratic fold in 1852. Pierce felt obliged to let them share the federal patronage. To other Democrats, especially those from the South, it looked as though Pierce was rewarding disloyal Democrats who had sabotaged the party in 1848. Loyal New York Democrats (called Hard-shells, because they were not "soft" on the issue of admitting previously disloyal Democrats to the patronage) were so upset over the policy that the party split in New York and gave the governorship to a Whig in 1853. The powerful Southern senators who controlled the votes Douglas needed to pass the bill and who lived together in a Washington boarding house on F Street needed an issue to test the loyalty of the 1848 bolters who had rejoined the party. Reasoning that the principles of the Compromise of 1850 would be good for Nebraska if they were good for Utah and New Mexico and finding that Missouri's Senator Atchison had promised in his campaign for reelection to organize the Nebraska territory with slavery as a live option, the F Street group decided to make repeal of the Missouri Compromise, which would have excluded slavery from Nebraska, the test of the Barnburners' loyalty. The whole group met with President Pierce and Douglas on the Sunday before the bill would come to vote (unusual because Pierce never transacted business on Sundays) and altered the bill to organize Nebraska so that it specifically repealed the Missouri Compromise and so that it included a provision to organize *two* territories, Kansas and Nebraska, the one beside a slave state (Missouri) and the other by a free state, to give it a greater air of sectional compromise. Douglas was powerless to resist, and his bill was the work of many hands besides his own. Such were the origins of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill as Nichols explained them.

Johannsen's very careful analysis significantly alters that picture which has stood for nearly twenty years. Johannsen restores Douglas to the preeminent role in the genesis of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill. In part his case rests on a slender foundation, a statement in a letter Douglas wrote in 1852 expressing his intention to "repeal altogether that compromise." Nichols claimed the letter was not genuine, and here Johannsen fails for once to be "magisterial" in his treatment, noting in a footnote only that the content of the letter is controversial without any discussion of the merits of the case one way or another. However, his case rests on several other pieces of evidence. For one thing, Douglas had for several years thought that popular sovereignty—allowing the people in the territories themselves rather than Congress to decide the slavery question—was the proper principle for the organization of new territories. Nevertheless, the original Nebraska bill of the 1853 session had assumed that the Missouri Compromise would apply; it was the law of the land and need not be reiterated just because the principle had not been extended to some new territories acquired since the Louisiana Purchase (the Missouri Compromise forbade slavery above the line of 36°30' latitude in the territory acquired from France). As early as December 17, 1853, Douglas expressed his hope in a letter that "all will be willing to sanction and affirm the principle established by the Compromise measures of 1850" in the new territory, showing that he expected the bill in the new session of Congress to go by the principles of 1850 and not of 1820. This statement came but three days after the Nebraska bill was under consideration in Douglas's territorial committee in the Senate.

The report Douglas submitted with the bill that came out of committee on January 4, 1854, drew a careful analogy to the Compromise of 1850. That Compromise had not been a convenience or necessity, but an establishment of "great principles" to settle the territorial question without agitation in Congress about slavery. The new Nebraska bill would allow the state to come in slave or free as its constitution prescribed. The territorial legislature before that date was granted the power to legislate on all save certain enumerated subjects, and slavery was *not* enumerated. Previous to the action of the territorial legislature on slavery, the Missouri Compromise would be in effect in the territory, just as

Mexican law (which outlawed slavery) had been in effect in the lands acquired from Mexico after the Mexican War. Congress had declined to state explicitly that Mexican law would be in effect in 1850, and "so your committee," Douglas's report said in 1854, "are not prepared now to recommend a departure from the course pursued on that memorable occasion, either by affirming or repealing the 8th section of the Missouri act" [the section prohibiting slavery above the line 36°30']. William Seward knew immediately what this meant, writing in a letter on January 4 that Douglas had gone "as far as the Democrats dare, toward abolishing that provision of the Missouri Compromise which devoted all the new regions purchased from France, north of the line of 36°30', to freedom." Douglas said later: "It was written by myself, at my own house, with no man present." If Johannsen is right, then the early 1853 version was the "aberration," as he puts it, and not the 1854 version. Douglas meant to replace the principles of the Missouri Compromise all along.

Johannsen adds many other subtle embellishments to the argument. Fully aware that Douglas's political troubles were in his own backyard and not in the South, Johannsen further exonerates Douglas from the charge of truckling to the slave interests by arguing that Douglas assumed—even stated explicitly on rare occasions—that westward expansion was *ipso facto* expansion of freedom. Douglas had come very close to saying this (and to saying it was a good thing) in a speech he made in 1850. Douglas said flatly that there could be no slavery in the West because of soil and climate conditions and the will of the settlers there. More important, he expressed a hope that the border states and states of the upper South would soon free their slaves through a program of gradual emancipation. At a later date Douglas would avoid even such an indirect public endorsement of freedom as this, but Johannsen does not rest his contention on this evidence alone.

Johannsen also suggests that Douglas advanced guarantees of his own, in addition to nature's guarantees of soil and climate, that slavery would never take root in the American West. As he puts it, "to Douglas, Nebraska Territory was not an isolated question, but was rather a part of a larger program for western development which he had been urging for many years." In the first place, the Pacific railroads that Douglas had been advocating to unite California and the rest of the United States would, of course, bring commerce in their wake and cities too—economic and social conditions that were not conducive to slave labor (incidentally, these would also bring prosperity to Douglas's home constituency, Illinois). Second, Douglas's advocacy of free homesteads for settlers in the West would "attract settlement by small independent farmers," a social class hostile to a system of slave labor. These two factors are especially convincing when taken into account along with Douglas's apparent belief that the Missouri Compromise would remain in effect until the territorial legislature decided what should be done about slavery. In other words, slavery would be excluded up to the point in time when the territorial legislature made its decision. Obviously, there would be no slaveholders in that legislature to advocate the legalization of the peculiar institution.

If anything, Johannsen's point here is more important than his careful selection of quotations from Seward and Douglas and his careful attention to the chronology of these remarks in the development of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, for it is this point that *completely* reverses Nichols's contention. Johannsen sees Douglas not as the compromising victim of the aggressions of the "F Street Mess," as the group was called, and of the factional feuds in the Democratic party which he did not create, but rather as the effective proponent of a grand plan for the American West. The Kansas-Nebraska Bill is seen not as the patchwork quilt of compromise to satisfy the many hands that shaped it, but as the slightly modified practical instrumentation of a plan—the application of Douglas's ideals to the West. The Bill is the embodiment of an ideology and not the crazy quilt of pluralistic compromise.

Johannsen adds other careful embellishments to the story of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. For example, he points out that although William Seward claimed having a role in suggesting the Dixon amendment which finally specifically repealed the Missouri Compromise (as a

machiavellian measure to split Northern from Southern Democrats), Mrs. Dixon could not recall Seward's role. Johannsen also points out that the decision to split the territory into two areas, Kansas and Nebraska, had nothing to do with sectional issues. The representatives of the settlers already in Nebraska Territory petitioned for two territories. Moreover, Iowa's senators pressed for the division because they feared that the capital and the avenues of commerce from the new territory would otherwise fall south of Iowa's latitude.

Johannsen's alterations and embellishments of the traditional picture of the Kansas-Nebraska Act will provoke new scholarship, I am sure, and I am sure also that this could be said of many of Johannsen's treatments of episodes in Douglas's important career. It is in these respects rather than in the broad interpretive scheme that Johannsen's book will prove most stimulating, indeed, absolutely indispensable.

But the weaknesses of the overall scheme are nagging. If Douglas is to be seen as implementing an overall plan in the Kansas-Nebraska Act, then Douglas's ideology deserves a more searching treatment than Johannsen gives it. Yet Johannsen is prevented by his acceptance of the general compromiser-vs.-ideologue scheme from seeking the answer to the question of Douglas's sincere beliefs. To be sure, even a writer setting out to answer that question alone would be severely hampered by Douglas's lack of "introspection." But Johannsen leaves two avenues of approach still to be explored: (1) the relationship between Douglas's early "Jacksonian convictions" and his more familiar efforts at compromise and Unionism in the 1850's and (2) the images and patterns of belief to be gleaned from a close rhetorical study of Douglas's political speeches.

Johannsen does make some effort in the latter area, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that in the course of his very thorough narrative of Douglas's political career, Johannsen gives enough glimpses of Douglas's language to allow a reader to piece together at least the rough outlines of a Douglas ideology. Indeed, Johannsen himself makes a major connection between Douglas's vision of foreign policy and his view of domestic policy. The two boiled down to one word, expansion—expansion as fast as possible and with the least amount of introspective attention to festering problems in the society already established in the eastern part of the United States. The model of republican liberty for the world, the United States could best serve the cause of freedom by growing outwardly. It was a simple quantitative argument: the more United States there was, the more freedom there was in the world. Douglas recognized no historical debt to the past in his vision of a country unique for the degree of liberty it granted its citizens. "I cannot recognize England as our mother," Johannsen quotes Douglas as saying about 1850. "If so, she is and ever has been a cruel and unnatural mother." This fit Douglas's foreign policy, which was always anti-English (and which in turn met his personal needs as a Democrat who always gained support from the anti-English Irishmen who worked on the railroads and canals in Illinois). It fit his position on sectional issues (he blamed abolitionism on English inspiration). And it fit his traditional allegiance to the Democratic party on domestic economic issues (Jacksonians traditionally contrasted, as Douglas put it, the "youthful, uprising aspirations of the American heart" with the "old, antiquated notions which belong to the stationary and retrograde movements of the Old World" in a symbolic clash between aristocracy and "the people" which began with the American Revolution and continued in the party battles of Whigs and Democrats). The Kansas-Nebraska Bill was a microcosm of Douglas's whole policy: American expansion meant expansion of freedom.

That is, it meant expansion of freedom for white people: Douglas said repeatedly that he cared more for the Union than for all the members of the African race put together. Johannsen does not hide or even soft-pedal this well-known aspect of Douglas's Democratic ideology, but it fails to provide Johannsen with even a minor theme in the book. Nonetheless, racism is as clearly a common denominator for Douglas's ideology as expansion of freedom.

To say so bluntly is to tie Douglas's grand plan up into an even neater bundle than Johannsen's rubric of "advancing the area of freedom." It also alerts the reader

to another strikingly old-fashioned aspect of Johannsen's interpretive scheme. Stephen Douglas, as chairman of the Senate's Committee on Territories and as author and chief sponsor of many of the territorial bills, certainly must have had considerable occasion to deal with the Indian question. Yet Indians are mentioned only in asides. In one brief episode, we are given Douglas's ideas on Indians, and they did not stray far from the old dictum that the only good one was a dead one. In 1859, Douglas urged that Congress recognize a government set up by miners who had encroached on Indian territory. After all, Douglas said, the Indians "are fading away before the advance of civilization like snow before the vernal sun." Nor was this policy based on matters of fact (analogous to his argument that the territories would not support slavery no matter what Northerners or Southerners desired); Douglas said the Indians constituted nothing but "barriers of barbarism, of savage ferocity" and must be removed from blocking white progress.

Even if Douglas's Western expansionism constituted a policy of *de facto* expansion of freedom, his advocacy of expansion in the southern latitudes was a different matter. Expansion to Cuba and other areas of Latin America was avidly sought by the pro-slavery interests because it would provide areas (unlike the American West) which could and did support the institution of slavery. Douglas never argued that slavery would ultimately be extinct in America, and it would not be stretching things to say that his support of expansion to Cuba and Nicaragua was a policy of expansion of the area of slavery. In addition, Douglas's foreign policy was imperialism, plain and simple—in other words, it meant reduction of freedom for the occupants of Latin American countries, as expansion in the North did for Indians and in the South for Negroes. Douglas usually cloaked his imperialism in language of peaceful expansion and promises of eventual assimilation under the American Constitution. Nonetheless, when opportunity knocked, Douglas endorsed any methods. Thus he supported Robert Walker's filibustering takeover of Nicaragua in 1856, saying that he offered the "firmest and most stable" government the country had ever had. Once the Nicaraguans were "thoroughly Americanized," then the country would be annexed. The interim system would have to be imperialistic rule. Later, in 1858, Douglas suggested that the only way to acquire Cuba was not to try to buy it from Spain but to await some incident justifying forcible seizure of the island. All in all, Douglas's ideology—his grand plan—was one of imperialistic expansion at the expense of Negro, Indian, and Latin American freedom.

The above constitutes only a different emphasis on materials that are all present in Johannsen's comprehensive treatment of Douglas's life. Considerations of Douglas's debt to the Jacksonian beliefs of his early career, however, are largely wanting in the book. It is unclear how thorough-going a Jacksonian Douglas was in his economic beliefs. At one point, Johannsen pictures Douglas as a "whole-hog" Jacksonian critic of "milk-and-cider" Jacksonians. Yet Douglas's hard-money views were loose enough to allow him to advocate state banks of issue to supply credit for the Illinois land boom in the 1830's. Douglas's course of beliefs on internal improvements was likewise twisty. To speak simply of his "Jacksonian convictions" begs the question all the readers want to know: what kind of a Jacksonian was he? Were his beliefs closest to John C. Calhoun's, Martin Van Buren's, Andrew Jackson's, or Lewis Cass's? Did he go in for extreme appeals to economic discontent in his speeches? These and many other questions about Douglas's early political beliefs—including that of the source of his very early opposition to abolition despite his early years in upper New York State's "burned-over district"—remain largely unanswered by Johannsen's disappointing treatment of Douglas's first thirty-five years. The area clearly deserves more exploration, especially in light of the known power of Whig ideology over Abraham Lincoln's beliefs.

By slighting Douglas's ideology, Johannsen allows confusion about important matters. For example, Johannsen feels that Douglas was an "antislavery" man. There are two principal reasons: (1) Douglas's policy was one of the expansion of the area of freedom, and (2) Douglas consistently battled Southern extremists on issues that arose in Congress. The latter is an element of the story

we too often forget; about the former I have expressed some doubts already. And I question Johannsen's references to Douglas's "general antislavery stance" (page 299) or to Douglas as a man "opposed to the institution of slavery" (page 583).

The only solid piece of evidence in regard to Douglas's personal and private views of slavery stems from a reminiscence (after Douglas's death and after the Civil War) by a personal friend, Major George Murray McConnell. McConnell recalled a conversation he had with Douglas when the Illinois senator was upset over the opposition of Northern Democrats to the repeal of the Missouri Compromise in 1854. "I am not pro-slavery," said Douglas. "I think it is a curse beyond computation, to both white and black." Johannsen says there is no reason to suspect that Major McConnell's recall was faulty.

Yet there is much in Douglas's public record to make us wonder about Major McConnell's memory. Douglas did not, it is true, serve the interests of slavery expansion in the Kansas-Nebraska episode. He did not believe that slavery was the natural condition of the black race; he said repeatedly, as Johannsen shows, that the role of the Negro was to be determined by the whites locally, and that role could be any that was consistent with the safety and welfare of the local area. He was not pro-slavery, then, in the sense that he thought it was so good a system that it should be spread wherever possible.

On the other hand, whether he can be termed "antislavery" is another matter. His beliefs seem to have tended to the position that slavery was best where large numbers of blacks resided and freedom best where the society was racially homogeneous. Douglas said as much at least once (in 1860): "If I were a citizen of Louisiana I would vote for retaining and maintaining slavery, because I believe the good of that people would require it. As a citizen of Illinois I am utterly opposed to it, because our interests would not be promoted by it." If it be objected that this was a public stance of a man who desired the Presidency, then one could point to at least as good an index of Douglas's private opinions as McConnell's reminiscence: Douglas's personal dealings with Negroes.

In 1848, Douglas's father-in-law died, leaving a Mississippi plantation and over 100 slaves to his daughter, Douglas's wife. By Mississippi law, the property of a married woman was her own and could not be controlled by her husband. The will made Douglas "manager" of the estate in exchange for 20 per cent of its annual income. Douglas hired an overseer and corresponded with him regularly about the plantation, though Douglas did not "manage" it directly. Despite some advice to the contrary, Douglas never divested himself of the direct connection to the slave property. When faced with a practical choice, Douglas acted consistently with his apparent belief that slavery was best where blacks were numerous. Once again, all this information (and much more) is in Johannsen's comprehensive book, allowing the reader on occasion to arrive at conclusions different from Johannsen's own.

There are many answers in Johannsen's book to questions about Douglas's later years, and these are the more important years of his life—years when he became probably the most important and charismatic personality in the Democratic party. To discuss only the Kansas-Nebraska issue in detail, as I have done here, and to ignore the multitude of other similarly judicious and detailed treatments of complicated political issues, while criticizing certain features of the book, considerably underestimates its virtues. It is an indispensable book for students of the middle period of American history, for students interested in Lincoln (for there is no understanding the one man without understanding the other), and for those interested in Stephen A. Douglas. The reader should be cautious, however, in accepting Johannsen's belief that Douglas was "a representative man," "a man of his times," and a man who "had a feel for the nation that few others could boast." Douglas represented *some* Americans. But no man of such nebulous religious convictions and such oblivious resistance to social reform despite a personal background of life in a part of the country burned over by repeated religious revivals and crusades for moral reform represented *all* of America before the Civil War.