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Martin H. Quitt

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## Stephen A. Douglas and Antebellum Democracy

This thematic biography demonstrates how Stephen A. Douglas's path from a conflicted youth in Vermont to dim prospects in New York to overnight stardom in Illinois led to his identification with the Democratic Party and his belief that the federal government should respect the diversity of states and territories. His relationships with his mother, sister, teachers, brothers-in-law, other men, and two wives are explored in depth. When he conducted the first cross-country campaign by a presidential candidate in American history, few among the hundreds of thousands who saw him in 1860 knew that his wife and he had just lost their infant daughter or that Douglas controlled a large Mississippi slave plantation. His story illuminates the gap between democracy then and today. The book draws on a variety of previously unexamined sources.

Martin H. Quitt is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, where he has served as Dean of Graduate Studies and Vice Provost for Research. He has published books on the history of the family and the colonial Virginia legislature, as well as essays in social and political history. His article on English-Indian relations at Jamestown received the Lester J. Cappon Award in the *William and Mary Quarterly*.

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MARTIN H. QUITT  
*University of Massachusetts, Boston*



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## Acknowledgments

This project began as an article that was never completed, not even as a book chapter. While reading, in 2005, Robert Johannsen's great 1971 biography of Douglas, I had a flash – Douglas was the “towering genius” that Lincoln had in mind during his well-known 1838 speech at the Young Men's Lyceum in Springfield. This speech, given two weeks before Lincoln's twenty-ninth birthday, warned of an ominous figure who would some day tear down the great national edifice created by the founding fathers. Scholars with a psychological bent had turned an analysis of the speech into a mini-academic industry regarding Lincoln's motives. Most believed that Lincoln was really speaking about himself. I was certain that he was warning about Douglas. I reviewed the literature *that I knew* about the topic and was satisfied that no one had identified Douglas as Lincoln's *bête noir*. I then did my own research in published sources concerning the circumstances of the speech. In September 2005 I drove from my home in Massachusetts to Illinois to do firsthand research at the University of Illinois Library in Urbana and to examine the Lincoln and Douglas papers at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library (ALPL) in Springfield.

I had arranged to meet Tom Schwartz, Illinois State Historian, at the end of my visit to the ALPL. After three days of work at the library, I met Tom and told him generally of my interest in the relationship between Douglas and Lincoln and my particular interest in the Lyceum speech, without sharing my insight. Almost in passing, Tom said that I might want to look at the appendix of Michael Burlingame's psychological study of Lincoln, in which he makes the case that Douglas was the “towering genius.” I was stunned. I was familiar with the 1994 book, but not the appendix. When I drove back to Massachusetts, I could not find my own copy. I raced to a library and read the four-page appendix. Alas, not only did Burlingame identify Douglas as a “Target” of Lincoln's address, he relied on the same sources and circumstantial evidence that I had drawn on independently. What to do? After financing the trip to Illinois myself, I would be embarrassed to abandon my Douglas project.

Fortunately I had taken extensive notes on a manuscript that I had found at the ALPL – Douglas’s copybook from his year at the Brandon Academy, when he was sixteen and seventeen. (Tom Schwartz had arranged for its accession in 1989.) I am most grateful to Cheryl Schnirring, Manuscripts Curator at the ALPL, for her assistance while I was there and in response to a later request. I decided to build on the copybook by driving to Brandon, Vermont. Fortuitously, on my first day at the Town Office I met Blaine Cliver, a retired architectural historian who lived nearby and was doing research on Douglas’s birthplace and his Vermont family. A modest man, Blaine did not mention that his interest and expertise were more than a hobby. At the time he was president of UNESCO’s International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property. During the next few years, as I researched and wrote the first three chapters of this book, Blaine’s own research and photos, usually emailed, provided indispensable help to me. His guided tour of the birthplace before it was renovated demonstrated what a gifted interpreter of material culture could reveal. He also arranged for me to visit the Brandon home where Douglas grew up, as well as the site of the district school he attended. Blaine and Mary Cliver were also generous hosts with whom I could discuss our common interests in Douglas, the Boston area, and the Red Sox.

On that first research trip to Vermont in October 2005, I stopped at the Middlebury College Library. I am grateful to Andy Wentinck, Director of Special Collections, and his staff for making available records of the origins and early history of the college. Like others, I wanted to ascertain whether Douglas’s father attended, as the family claimed. At the Vermont Historical Society in Barre, Paul Carnahan, curator, was extremely helpful in locating relevant newspapers and manuscripts. The record book of the district school Douglas attended adds to our understanding of Douglas’s early education and of New England common schools at the time. At this point I was confident that I had enough new materials to undertake a reassessment of Douglas’s childhood and development.

I made three trips to Illinois. On the first I met John Hoffman, Illinois History and Lincoln Collections Librarian and Manuscript Curator at the University of Illinois at Urbana. He found and copied sources, then and more recently. He also arranged for Greg Olson, a reporter with the *Journal-Courier* in Jacksonville, to show me around the town where Douglas opened his law office at the age of twenty.

On the second trip I spent a week with the Douglas Papers at the Special Collections Research Center of the University of Chicago Library, which made my stay in 2007 invaluable; in addition, the center has provided follow-up support by photocopying or scanning documents I have requested. I am especially beholden to Associate Archivist Daniel Meyer for obtaining permission from Douglas descendants for me to access newly discovered letters to Adele Cutts Douglas before their donation was formalized. I am grateful to Eileen Ielmini, Director of Archive Processing and Digital Access, and Christine Colburn, Reader Services Manager, for scanning and transmitting the documents and



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for identifying one of the letter writers. David Pavelich arranged for the copying and transmission of documents earlier. I learned about the new cache of Douglas papers in the March 2011 issue of the newsletter of the Stephen A. Douglas Association.

The purpose of my third trip was to air my early ideas on Douglas's constitutionalism before the annual meeting of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic in Springfield in July 2009. The meeting was held there for Lincoln's bicentennial birthday. At the opening session, after listening to four distinguished panelists discuss Lincoln and wholly ignore Douglas, I exclaimed, "No Douglas, no Lincoln." While the point was acknowledged, I do not imagine that Douglas will ever come out from under Lincoln's giant shadow. Nevertheless, he deserves more attention than he usually receives. I am grateful to Graham Peck, who commented on my paper at the meeting and sent me a copy of his astute criticism. My colleague Jonathan Chu, a legal scholar, heard my paper and shared his thoughts on our return trip to Boston.

I am grateful to the executive director, Ed Varno, and staff of the Ontario County Historical Society in Canandaigua, New York, for searching for marriage records after I visited and providing illustrations. Wilma Townshend, the curator, was delightful and helpful in a long phone conversation. Staffs at public offices in Vermont – the Rutland County Probate Court in Rutland, the Brandon Town Office, and the Public Records Division in Middlesex – were unfailingly courteous and helpful when I researched there.

I am grateful to William R. Ellis, Jr., Archivist, Federal Judicial Records, at the National Archives, who found, copied, and transmitted the agreement that Douglas redrafted in 1859 for his partnership in a Mississippi plantation.

The American Antiquarian Society in Worcester occupies a lush urban setting to which one can drive and park for free. The staff is tireless and gracious in bringing oversized volumes of nineteenth-century newspapers to visitors. The complete run of the *Rutland Herald*, which had not yet been digitized when I researched it, is an extraordinary resource. Vincent Golden, Curator of Newspapers and Periodicals, has reason to be pleased with its acquisition. Philip Lampi, head of the AAS First Democracy Project, shared his unique knowledge of early American election practices with me in person and by email.

Even in the day of digital access from a home computer, living near the libraries and archives in the Boston area is a researcher's good fortune. Peter Drummy, Massachusetts Historical Society Librarian, provided his normally cheerful assistance as I used the Edward Everett Papers. The holdings of the Harvard libraries are incomparable, although admission for unaffiliated scholars is not without limits. At Langdell Hall the young law library staff could not have been more gracious or helpful to me in my work with the microfiche collection of state laws. No other law library in the area possessed the complete set. Visiting scholars may easily use the O'Neill and Law Libraries of Boston College. I made extensive use of an alumnus's borrowing privileges at Brandeis University's Goldfarb Library, for which I am especially grateful. Whittemore

Library at Framingham State University provided a microfilm reader and paper for me to print countless pages from newspaper reels.

My Boston Public Library card provides online access to its U.S. Serial Set, which contains reports of congressional committees on which Douglas served. Membership in the New England Historic Genealogical Society enabled me to connect from home to two newspaper databases, *19th Century U.S. Newspapers* and *Early American Newspapers*, Series I, 1690–1876. Few antebellum Southern newspapers, however, have been digitized. In order to trace Douglas's 1860 campaign in the South, I required borrowed microfilm from several states. Most helpful was Patricia Wilson, Senior Archivist, Alabama Department of Archives and History, who located and sent microfilm of six newspapers from 1860. I also needed to read some Northern newspapers that had not been digitized. In one case, a local librarian went beyond the normal call of duty. Michael May, Adult Services Librarian, Carnegie-Stout Public Library, Dubuque, Iowa, searched for, scanned, and sent me electronically several issues of the *Dubuque Herald*. Martha Reid, Vermont State Librarian, and Paul Donovan at the Vermont State Library tracked down and copied for me a rare issue of the *Northern Visitor*.

My greatest institutional debt is to the University of Massachusetts, Boston, my home for the past three decades. Its Healey Library has become an indispensable resource for serious scholarship. Its expanding databases, remarkably good book holdings, and terrific interlibrary loan operation under the supervision of Janet Stewart have enabled me to complete this project. Provost Winston Langley has made certain that the scholarly activities of retired faculty members are supported and recognized.

For more than a decade Peggy Tippit has been the Apple specialist at the UMass Boston Information Technology Help Desk. She has been my lifesaver numerous times. Her responsiveness, patience, and expertise always surprise me, and she invariably solves my problems.

I am most thankful to busy scholars who fulfilled promises to critique what I sent them. Gerald Leonard agreed to read early versions of my two chapters on constitutionalism, and his comments were extremely helpful. His essay on the literature of the *Dred Scott* decision, moreover, pointed me to a body of work I needed to assimilate. Rosemarie Zaggarri read an early version of Chapter 4 and offered her encouragement and suggestions in a long telephone conversation. John Wallis responded to a comment regarding the Constitution and internal improvements and shared two papers bearing on the topic. Roxanne Marcus spurred me with a postmodernist perspective on portions of Chapter 4. Burt Kaufman read and commented on a previously published portion of Chapter 5. The anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press were thorough and made invaluable suggestions. I am grateful to the University of Pennsylvania Press and the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic for permission to reprint a few pages from my article "Congressional (Partisan) Constitutionalism: The Apportionment Act Debates of 1842 and 1844," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 28:4 (Winter 2008), 627–651.

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The idea for doing something on Douglas came while I was giving a lecture on Lincoln at an assisted-living facility in 2005, part of a series on American presidents I presented at the prodding of Nancy Baer. The series originated in a short course I had taught the preceding year at the request of Wichian Rojanawon, Director of the Osher Institute for Lifelong Learning (OLLI) at UMass Boston. Vivian Fox, with whom I collaborated on a family history book more than thirty years ago, and I reexamined our study on the basis of recent work in a course we taught for OLLI in 2006, an experience that stood me in good stead when I wrote Chapters 1 and 3. I also tested my approach to Douglas's constitutionalism and 1860 campaign in different courses and talks at OLLI. UMass Boston has always been hospitable to older learners. OLLI members, now more than one thousand, are knowledgeable, engaged, and demanding.

The Boston Biographers Group (BBG) has been a continuing source of intellectual exchange, information, warmth, and encouragement as publishing changes from day to day. We interact as a group and individually. Ray Shepard and I have met at lunch to discuss Douglas, slavery, and his book-to-be on the Emancipation Proclamation. All BBG members owe debts to Nigel Hamilton, a truly generous scholar; to Elizabeth Harris, whose minutes are a boon to the occasional absentee; and to Phyllis Steele, who arranges our meetings and updates our roster. The group prodded me to include illustrations, but after considerable thought I decided to be true to my faith in language and am glad that Lewis Bateman and Anne Lovering Rounds at Cambridge University Press agreed to restrict artwork to the cover. I introduced myself in a long email to Lew because I drew much on two books he had recently edited. He invited me to submit my manuscript for consideration. I will always be grateful to him. He, Anne, Mark Fox, and the Newgen staff have been close partners in converting the manuscript into a book.

When I was at college, history professors usually downgraded "speculative" or "hypothetical" paragraphs. Then came John Murrin, my mentor in graduate school, who demonstrated the value of counterfactual propositions. My brief rumination in Chapter 8 on how Douglas, had he lived, would have reacted to Lincoln's policies during the Civil War is offered only because of the respectability that John has given to such exercises. I am indebted, indeed, to the rich scholarship of American history from the Revolution to the Civil War, reflected only partially in quoted authors, who are indexed. The full range of my use of this literature is made clear in my notes.

Friends and family have listened with a lot of forbearance, a bit of amusement, and, most important, encouragement as I have compulsively spoken about Douglas over the past several years. Jack Jagher, who trained as a biologist but preferred history, lent an ear whenever I deviated from our discussion of the Red Sox. His wife, Sandy, devours novel after novel but assured me she would read this biography. Richard Forman, with whom I spoke about history and politics on the beach and at dinner summer after summer before his untimely death, would have loved to have read the book. I have shared each

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part of the odyssey with my longtime colleague and friend Ron Polito, a historian of photography. He advised me on searching for images and securing permissions before I decided to rely exclusively on my prose. Ken Berk, a gifted photographer, gave me his panoramic view of Fenway Park for respites from my writing. Vivian Fox was a friend, collaborator, and booster for forty years. Sadly she died while the manuscript was in press. Sandy Shapiro listened and pressed questions as we drove to the opera, and so too did Jane Schneider whenever we spoke, at dinner, in the car, or on the phone. Andy Davis, who unboxed, set up, and taught me how to use my first Mac twenty-five years ago, and Gayle Davis invariably drew me out while only occasionally rolling their eyes. Mark and Arlene Lowenstein worked in Rutland, still love Brandon, and have embraced this project since they learned about it. Jordan and Jean Krasnow listened, smiled, and listened again. Lou Esposito and I discussed the project during our dinners at restaurants in Lexington. Musician Bill Slocum had me update my progress and thinking every summer at Bank Street beach. I met musicologist Ralph Locke on Cape Cod after my manuscript was being read by Cambridge. Coincidentally Ralph was working on his second book for the Press. His emails provided helpful advice regarding the publishing scene. Charlie McMillan, a history major once upon a time, urged me to put my manuscript online in order to share it freely with the world. He refuses to believe that Northerners went to war in 1861 for a purpose other than ending slavery. I hope to change his mind regarding both propositions.

Two friendships go back longer than Douglas lived. Both date from our days at Brandeis when the three of us majored in history. Burt Kaufman and I were roommates. He became a prolific historian, who wrote his book on the retirements of American presidents while I did this one. We have shared perspectives on American history for a long time. Howard Marcus earned his doctorate in Latin American history but became a criminal lawyer in Toronto. He provided an ear and wonderful wit whenever I became too serious about my project. A third friendship dates from graduate school at Washington University, where Harry Fritz was a roommate. A resident and historian of Montana, he embodies the popular imagination of a Western man. Six feet five inches tall, with a natural ease and fluid mind, he has impersonated Abraham Lincoln in talks on Mississippi riverboats and other venues. We could stand in physically for Lincoln and Douglas respectively, but I'd be no match for him in a debate.

One always wonders about friends who are accomplished scientists, engineers, or social scientists when they hear how engaged a humanist is with his subject. But Dick Fey, Steve Finn, and Charles Schulman respect serious research in all fields, Stan Klein has a son who is a philosopher, and Russ Harter's wife, Marilyn, is an English professor. Murray Frank does public policy and remains a social activist but values research that is not applied. Michael Schneider loved to read biographies of great men, to which he invariably brought fresh perspectives. He died before this project began, yet I still ponder what his critical mind would have thought about various issues.

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Mark Watson, a gifted handyman, astute conservative (and therefore exasperating) thinker, and descendant of Massachusetts men who fought in the Civil War, continues by emails to make me sharpen my argumentative skills. Terry Mortimer and Fuad Safwat, colleagues at UMass Boston and lunch companions for many years, and Ruth Bennett have listened to and encouraged me. So too has Paul Wright, who knows the history of the book in America and academic publishing today. To Baheej Khleif, sociologist, poet, playwright, and novelist, writing is like breathing and he does it in English, Hebrew, and Arabic. Returning to writing full time, I feel more connected to my old friend than I had been as an administrator.

My mother, Ida, valued the life of the mind. I spoke to her of Douglas's sister and mother, comparing their relationship to the one between her, my sister Elaine, and me. Sadly she died before the manuscript was finished, but at ninety-seven she would have read the book.

My emphasis on the unpredictability of the past in no small way has been influenced greatly by my own children. Our son, Adam, a scholar-athlete in college, became a U.S. Marine, firefighter, competitive boxer, mixed martial arts fighter, wrestler, coach, and personal trainer. Adam and Tara produced our three grandchildren, Nora, Andrew, and Raina, all while I worked on this book, providing us much joy. Our daughter, Alisha, a sociology major with a concentration in race relations, has surprised us by finding satisfaction in the business world. No one has boosted my spirits more than she. She has been with Parag since I began this project, and their relationship has been a source of pleasure to Deborah and me.

Debbie, who taught social studies at The High School (a.k.a. Brookline High School), for thirty-eight years, vetted every page of every version of this manuscript. She reads novels while I read academic stuff, but she has an extraordinary grasp of American history that always astonishes me. A friend says she likes our company because the continuous laughter gives her an endorphin rush. In fact my state of well-being since I met Debbie in 1970 has been due in no small part to her humor, which, among her other qualities, keeps me grounded whenever my prose becomes too fanciful or florid.

My greatest intellectual debt is to the subject of this book. I tried to understand Douglas while I was in awe of him. At the same time I tried not to be so admiring as to be unaware of his inconsistencies and self-delusions. The awe derived from his precocious rise to prominence, his remarkable energy and staying power, his exceptional intelligence, his emotional connection to the people, and his genuine faith in local majorities. Personal comparison fueled my reaction: he became a political star before the age at which I graduated from college, and he was all done at forty-eight, an age at which much of my career was still ahead of me. The criticism of him derives in part from the sensibility of our times. Racism and slavery are so condemnable it is hard to approach Douglas without an edge, particularly after stitching together his steady involvement with the institution during the last quarter of his life.

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## Abbreviations

CG	<i>Congressional Globe</i>
CG, APP	<i>Congressional Globe</i> , Appendix
CWAL	Roy P. Basler et al., eds., <i>The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln</i> , 9 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ, 1953)
EAN	<i>Early American Newspapers</i> , Series I, 1690–1876
Johannsen, SAD	Robert W. Johannsen, <i>Stephen A. Douglas</i> (New York, 1973)
L-DD	Rodney O. Davis and Douglas L. Wilson, eds., <i>The Lincoln–Douglas Debates</i> (Urbana, IL, 2008)
<i>Letters of SAD</i>	<i>The Letters of Stephen A. Douglas</i> , ed. Robert W. Johannsen (Urbana, IL, 1961)
SAD Papers	Stephen A. Douglas Papers, Special Collections, University of Chicago Library
USN	<i>19th Century U.S. Newspapers</i>