

Unforgettables

Winners, Losers, Strong Women,
and Eccentric Men of the Civil War Era

John C. Waugh



Savas Beatie
California

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For the Unforgettables in the Tucson, Arizona, Senior High
School class of 1947, with affection.

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ABBREVIATIONS

B&L	Battles & Leaders of the Civil War
CW	Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln
JAH	Journal of American History
JSH	Journal of Southern History
LOC	Library of Congress
MVHR	Mississippi Valley Historical Review
NA	National Archives
SHSP	Southern Historical Society Papers

In Appreciation

In this space, generally at the very end of first thanking everybody else who helped birth their book, authors generally think to thank their spouses. Husbands and wives generally deserve it, for their constant and loving support—moral and otherwise—during the research and writing process. This nod of gratitude is quite necessary. I nod, too. But wives and husbands are too often the last to be thanked, here at the very bottom of the appreciation page.

For this book I have moved my spouse, Kathleen D. Lively, up from last to first, because she performed acts quite above the call of spousal duty. What she did required a keen eye, grit, fortitude, a lot of love, immunity from frustration, and earplugs for the occasional outbursts of agony from her writer-husband. And after the big Source Search she was able to successfully intervene between me and my nemesis, 21st century technology. Tough work considering I am a 19th century person.

All the trouble began when I did not cite sources for most of these profiles at the time I was writing them. I didn't think they would ever appear in print this way. So Kathleen had to be drafted, out of matrimonial necessity, for the odious job of helping find what we thought might be long lost and forgotten sources and match them to their place in the text.

After they were all found and miraculously matched we made proper footnotes and then did it over and over and over again, again, and again. It was a needle in the haystack operation. To find and position these sources where they belonged took several months. Dirty work, but finally and magnificently done, with a heavy dose of thanks to Kathleen. I now footnote everything, instantly, including the weekly grocery list.

There are yet others who have won my gratitude as well, for thoughtful service in putting this book between covers.

Chris Mackowski, Professor of Communication at St. Bonaventure University, who is deeply acquainted with the Civil War and with the contents of this work,

offered to introduce me to a publisher who might be interested in publishing it. You would not be holding the book in your hands but for Mackowski's intervention. He can't be thanked enough.

Another gentleman difficult to adequately thank is the publisher to whom Mackowski graciously introduced me—Ted Savas of Savas Beatie, a publishing house that specializes in books about campaigns in military history. This book is not about that. It is a book that profiles forty fascinating men and women of the Civil War era, some of whom might have fought in some of those campaigns. Savas might have thought this book a mite out of the Savas Beatie wheelhouse. But he took it and put it in his waiting line of books to be published.

When my book reached the head of the line, Savas assigned to it two seasoned freelance editors—Rebecca Hill to do the initial edit; and a copy editor, David J. Snyder, to do a final detailed edit before the manuscript headed for covers. These two editors helped make this a better book. For that they have my sincerest thanks.

Ted Savas is not the only one from Savas Beatie who needs to be thanked. He has a staff down in the trenches that transforms manuscripts into books. Among that group I had a typhoon of email exchanges with Veronica Kane, who coordinated the production of the book, and did excellent work, as did Elise Hess, who compiled the complete index. And I became acquainted with Sarah Keeney, the marketing director, and Sarah Closson, the media specialist, representing two forms of staff help closest to the heart of any author.

Finally, here at the end where spouses like Kathleen are usually thanked, I salute librarians. Those creatures, like elves to Santa Claus, are nearly as valuable to historians as wives and husbands are. From the Library of Congress in Washington to local and university libraries in Texas and elsewhere, librarians have helped guide my passage through the dozen other books I have written. They are never less than delighted to help any author doing serious research.

Prologue

All My Sources Are Dead

For everyone who has left a helpful imprint on this book, my sincerest thanks, again.

Historians are lucky. We get tickets in front row seats to the drama of history. We get to know as intimately as plausible the characters of the past.

I got hooked on history, and the unforgettable characters who made it, when I was just a kid. I discovered the past is a mother lode of drama with outstanding actors—century after century of terrific human stories. People who learn about the captivating history and human stories become hooked on the past for life. Just as I have been. Characters of the past are what this book is about. I have brought back a few friends from the Civil War era whom I have met in my three decades of researching and writing. They have all touched me in some way.

I have written word portraits of each of these individuals. Some sketches are long. Others are short. Some characters are famous and familiar, household names both then and now. Others are “little noted, nor long remembered”¹ in the pages of time. I could have picked a different cast entirely, and yet another and another, so rich is history’s mother lode.

Great minds have attempted to define history through the ages. Automaker Henry Ford reportedly said, “History is bunk.” He later claimed they misquoted him (a common dodge in all ages). Technically, Ford *was* misquoted. What he said was, “History is more or less bunk.” Clearly, he thought it was bunk; who needs it?²

Carl Sandburg, the poet, folksinger, and Lincoln biographer, told us, “the past is a bucket of ashes.”³ Voltaire, the eighteenth century French Enlightenment writer and philosopher, believed history to be “nothing but a pack of tricks, which

1 A paraphrase of a phrase from Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, in Abraham Lincoln, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Roy P. Basler, ed., 8 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ, 1953), 7:17-23. Henceforth this will be cited as *CW*.

2 *Chicago Tribune*, May 25, 1916.

3 Carl Sandburg, “Prairie” in *Cornhuskers* (New York, 1918), 11.

we play upon the dead.”⁴ The satire-tongued English playwright and novelist, Oscar Wilde, believed history is “merely gossip.”⁵ Ambrose Bierce, the American iconoclast writer and Union veteran, agreed indirectly with Wilde. A historian, Bierce grumbled, is but a “broad-gauge gossip.”⁶

Winston Churchill, who was, among other things, a Civil War historian, said, “History stumbles along the trail of the past, trying to reconstruct its scenes, to revive its echoes, and kindle with pale gleams the passion of former days.”⁷

I buy what Churchill said. I’ve written thirteen books about the Civil War era, hoping to help history reconstruct its scenes, revive its echoes, and rekindle its passion.

Writing history, at least narrative history, which I allegedly do, is strikingly similar to writing fiction. Neither differs from writing a feature story for a newspaper, which is what I did in much of my past professional life. I wrote stories for a newspaper, about twentieth century events and people. However, I discovered, nearly too late, that I was a nineteenth century person. So, I began writing news stories that broke a hundred and fifty years ago. For a time, I called myself a “history reporter.” I’m nearly two centuries past my deadline.

When I started researching the Civil War, I discovered that writing about that era and its countless compelling characters was no different from writing about today’s. I discovered history, when presented as it so often is, can be mind-numbing, dull, and sleep-inducing. Bad history is full of boring dates, facts, places, names, battles, wars, treaties, acts of Congress, with hardly a story line, drama, or humanity in it at all, and usually marching along with facts in lockstep, which must be memorized.

There is only one reason everybody doesn’t love history in school and continues to love it throughout their lifetimes. That is because it isn’t taught or written correctly. When done properly, as a great dramatic story driven by bewitching characters, it is everybody’s favorite subject.

You can beam yourself down anywhere in the past, anywhere at all, and something dramatic, interesting, indeed riveting, is going on. Somebody amazing is doing something spectacular, and probably doing it to somebody else amazing. It ought to be written and taught that way. Good, readable, narrative history has

4 Quoted in Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (New York, 1926), 168.

5 Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. Wilde says this about history in this play, in a line spoken by the character Cecil Graham, in Act Three.

6 Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil’s Dictionary* (1911; repr., New York, 1979), 49.

7 Churchill said this in a tribute to the late prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, in a speech in the House of Commons on Nov. 12, 1940.

unforgettable characters and vivid description. There is tension and conflict. It has a plot. And we cannot forget the drama. The only difference between it and a page-turning novel is that history must be true, factual, immovably based on real people and actual events.

Historians can't make up anything. We quote only what was said or reported, and we ensure it is quoted exactly. Everything that is happening and who it is happening to in this book's collection of portraits is true, or as close as I can get to the truth from the available sources. Nothing is made up, not the weather, or a fact or a description or a word of conversation, as it is in fiction. We don't have to make anything up. Letters, newspapers, journals, memoirs, and diaries from the Civil War are humming with colorful characters, compelling dialogue, and vivid description.

In fiction, the story is pieced together from the writer's own experience, knowledge, research, skill, and imagination, his or her own internal store of source material. It gives slack for straying from truth or mixing truth with fiction. In writing history, this does not happen. Poetic writing, however, is allowed. The only difference between narrative history and fiction is the source material. The writing shouldn't be any different, nor should the reader's enjoyment. I have yet to read a novel about the Civil War that is better than the story as it really happened.

Writing fiction or history is telling a story about the people in a certain period and their circumstances. The leg up that history has over fiction is that the people are real—people who lived and died, loved, and hated, just like all of us today.

Real people, plots, places, and facts—they are the raw material of the historian. All those ingredients, together with the perspective, are in the research material. The historian's job is to find those ingredients and blend them together into a gripping, poetic work that reads like fiction. In my mind, that is what narrative history writing amounts to.

The poet Muriel Rukeyser wrote, "The universe is made of stories, not of atoms."⁸ Stories, driven by its characters, are what history is all about, and what this book is all about.

This book is not a history of the Civil War. It is but a rummaging around, stumbling about in that nation-changing era by a writer-historian who has found tragedy, passion, irony, and comedy in the past. My intention with these sketches and word portraits is to rekindle that passion and hook a few non-believers onto the undeniable drama of history.

8 Muriel Rukeyser, *The Speed of Darkness* (New York, 1968). The words cited are from poem number 9 with the same title as the book.

Chapter 1

Three for the Ages

A trio of unforgettable men, Henry Clay (Kentucky), John C. Calhoun (South Carolina), and Daniel Webster (Massachusetts) came together to form a unique political trinity in the Antebellum years of American history. Together they formed a political trio, the like of which has not been seen since.

This trinity dominated American politics in the first half of the 1800s, just as the Founding Fathers dominated in the late 1700s. These three charismatic young men burst onto the stage together, burning with ambition and talent. Slavery was the central issue that consumed their political lives.

They had become known as the “Great Trio,” or “The Great Triumvirate.” All three were iconic political powerhouses. Each yearned to be president, but that would never happen. They were sometimes friends and allies. Sometimes they were political enemies on opposite sides of nation-warping issues. Together on the Senate floor, where they often were, they seemed larger than life: dynamic, dramatic, dominant, and magnetic.

The great theater of the nineteenth century, in their heyday, was political theater. The preeminent political stage of the time, largely because of them, was the hallowed old Senate Chamber in the capitol building in Washington. In that chamber, they were the star actors. Their voices vibrated Union-wide. Whenever one of them spoke on an explosive national issue, it was to standing room only.

The chamber and galleries teemed with witnesses to their greatness in what Henry Clay called “this noble theater.”¹

By 1850, old, tired, and dying, they came together one last time on the Senate floor to try to save the Union from the demon of slavery, to keep the Union from breaking into civil war and disunion. They tried, through a steaming Washington summer, but failed. By 1860, before the dreaded war came, all three had died.

So, who were these distinguished men? What were their likes and dislikes, their deepest thoughts and desires, their strengths, and weaknesses?

The Eloquent Gambler

Tall and slender, the tobacco-snuffing Henry Clay was arguably the greatest of the three. He was a leader, always seeking the middle ground, and reaching for compromises to save the Union. Earlier, he had successfully found a middle ground during the Missouri Compromise of 1820, and the South Carolina nullification battle in the early 1830s. But in a mighty effort, he tried, and failed, to find a similar foothold in the slavery debates on the Senate floor in the sweltering Washington summer of 1850.

There was no more beloved man in the country than Henry Clay, a Kentucky Whig, the acknowledged leader of his party. Young Abraham Lincoln looked up to him, calling him his “beau ideal of a statesman.”² This beau ideal was so lionized that he couldn’t travel normally, but as one contemporary observed, he could “only make progresses. When he left his home, the public seized him and bore him along over the land, the committee of one State passing him on to the committee of another, and the hurrahs of one town dying away as those of the next caught his ear.”³

Clay attempted to become president five times, but he was rejected every time. One said that he “can get more men to run after him to hear him speak and fewer to vote for him than any man in America.”⁴

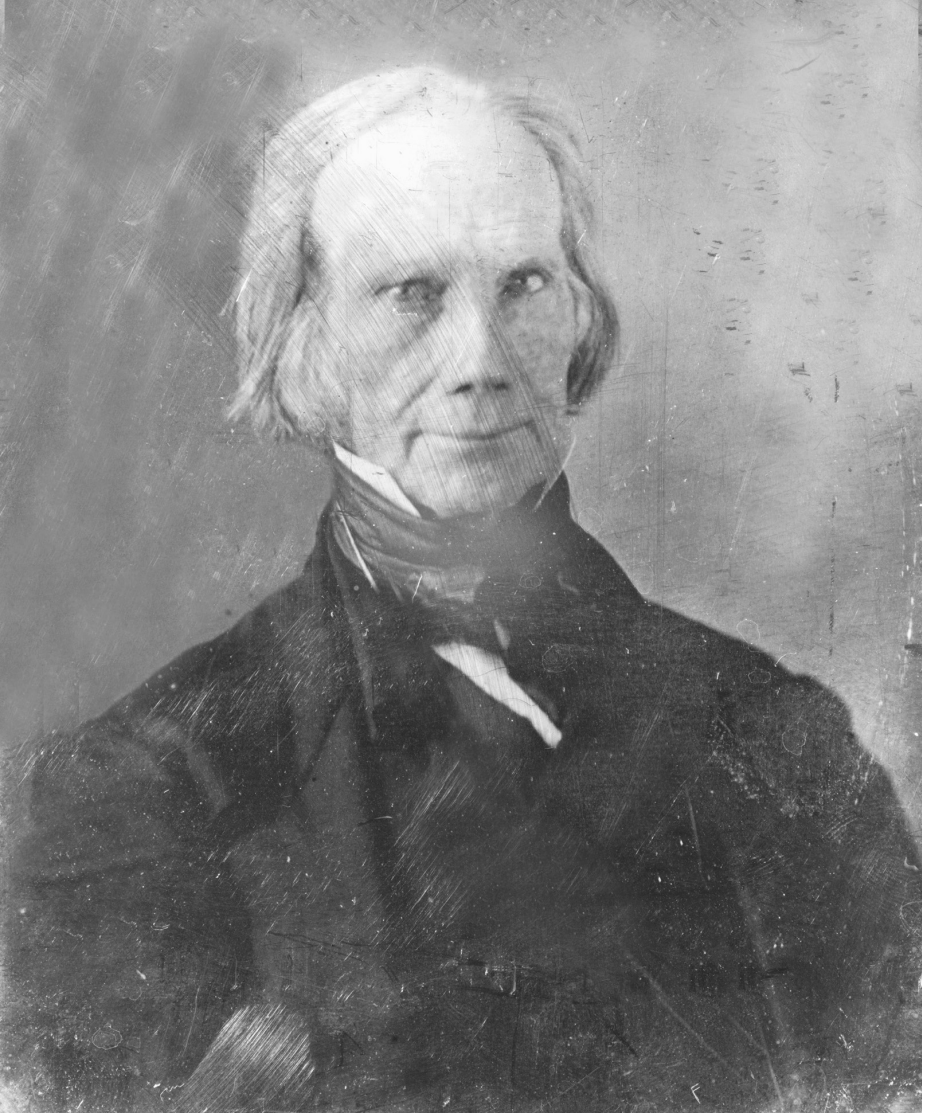
Dressed in black with a high-standing collar reaching his ears, Clay eclipsed other stars in the political galaxy simply by showing up. When entering the House of Representatives for the first time in 1811, he was elected Speaker.

1 Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years’ View: or a History of the Workings of the American Government for Thirty Years, from 1820 to 1850*, 2 vols. (New York, 1968), 2:401.

2 Lincoln, *CW*, 3:39.

3 James Parton, *Famous Americans of Recent Times* (Boston, 1867), 4.

4 Holmes Alexander, *The Famous Five* (New York, 1958), 11.



Henry Clay
Library of Congress

Clay stood over six feet, “slender and loose jointed.”⁵ He oozed charm from every pore. He could take snuff, to which he was addicted, “more elegantly than

5 Merrill D. Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate* (New York, 1987), 10.

any man of his time.”⁶ He was a gambling man, dominating the gaming table much as he dominated the Senate. In 1850, age seventy-three, he could no longer gamble all night and debate all day. But he could gamble well enough still. In the heyday of his gaming years, a friend of his wife Lucretia asked her, “Don’t it distress you to have Mr. Clay gamble?” “No, my dear,” Lucretia said, “he almost always wins.”⁷

Clay brought a compelling talent, not only to the gaming table, but to his affinity for national healing, for finding a compromise in chaos, standing on the middle ground, and pulling the country up with him. He was endowed with parliamentary finesse powered by a hypnotic personality matched by a mesmeric voice.

An admirer wrote:

No orator’s voice superior to his in quality, in compass and in management, has ever, we venture to say, been raised upon this continent. It touched every note in the whole gamut of human susceptibilities; it was sweet, and soft, and lulling as a mother’s to her babe. It could be made to float into the chambers of the air, as gently as descending snow-flakes on the sea; and again it shook the Senate, stormy, brain-shaking, filling the air with its absolute thunders.⁸

A reporter from the *National Intelligencer* noted that when speaking, Clay’s “whole body would become eloquent.”⁹ He gesticulated all over, another reporter recalled: “The nodding of his head, hung on a long neck, his arms, hands, fingers, feet, and even his spectacles, his snuff-box, and his pocket-handkerchief, aided him in debate. He stepped forward and backward, and from the right to the left, with effect. Every thought spoke; the whole body had its story to tell.”¹⁰

His voice, one admirer said, “filled the room as the organ fills a great cathedral.”¹¹ With this voice, “musical yet mighty,” another admirer believed, he could put “an amazing weight of expression on to the backbone of a single word” and he seemed always ready to limber up and fire away, like “a sort of flying

6 Neil MacNeil, “The House Shall Chuse Their Speaker...” in *American Heritage* (Feb. 1977), 29.

7 Theodore N. Parmelee, “Recollections of an Old Stager,” in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* (Jan. 1873), 96.

8 Edward G. Parker, *The Golden Age of American Oratory* (Boston, 1857), 38.

9 Oliver Dyer, *Great Senators of the United States Forty Years Ago* (New York, 1889), 229.

10 Benjamin Perley Poore, *Perley’s Reminiscences of Sixty Years in the National Metropolis*, 2 vols., (Philadelphia, 1886), 1:143.

11 Parton, *Famous Americans*, 11.

artillery.”¹² Another more reluctant admirer said, “I’m damned if I can listen to Mr. Clay speak and believe him to be wrong.”¹³ It is difficult to believe that this brilliant orator stammered in his youth.

Clay’s mixed medley of rhetoric—lullaby-soft to tempest-tossed—cascaded from a mouth “of generous width, straight when he was silent, and curving upward at the corners as he spoke or smiled.” It was “a singularly graceful mouth . . . indicating more than any other feature the elastic play of his mind.”¹⁴ Clay’s mouth, was in truth, cave-like. It was enormously broad-beamed as if split open “with a broad axe.”¹⁵ Someone said it “looked like the stone mouth of the great Sphinx.”¹⁶

It was a mouth, which, when speaking, could paralyze a hooded cobra. Calhoun remarked, “I don’t like Clay. He is an impostor, a creature of wicked schemes. I won’t speak to him—but by God, I love him.”¹⁷ One wary newcomer to a congressional seat in 1821 was asked by a mutual friend, “May I introduce you to Henry Clay?” The newcomer said, “No, sir! I am his adversary, and choose not to subject myself to his fascination.”¹⁸

That was the magic of Henry Clay.

Paladin of the South

John C. Calhoun is hardly less fascinating. He was South Carolina’s prophet of Southern anger. His dying on the last day of March 1850, during the debates on the slavery issue in the Senate, was itself unreal. Harriet Martineau, the celebrated English writer who had visited America, seeing him in his prime, called him “the cast-iron man, who looks as if he had never been born and never could be extinguished.”¹⁹

In 1850, during his last living months, he was haggard, frail, riddled with tuberculosis, and wracked by coughing. His long magisterial hair hung limply along the sides of his sunken face, around deep-pocketed eyes. He seemed more a

12 Parker, *The Golden Age*, 38, 43, 46.

13 Alexander, *The Famous Five*, 2.

14 Poore, *Perley’s Reminiscences*, 1:34.

15 Parker, *The Golden Age*, 36.

16 Edgar Dewitt Jones, *Lords of Speech: Portraits of Fifteen American Orators* (Chicago, 1937), 20.

17 Alexander, *The Famous Five*, 2.

18 Horace Greeley, *The Autobiography of Horace Greeley, or Recollections of a Busy Life* (New York, 1872), 250.

19 Harriet Martineau, *Retrospect of Western Travel*, 3 vols. (New York, 1969), 1:243.



John Calhoun

Library of Congress

specter than a man. But this belied “the young Hercules”²⁰ of his younger years, six feet, two inches tall, who had served a dynamic lifetime at the altar of public service. Calhoun had been a congressman, senator, secretary of war, and vice president—a career lacking only a presidency, like the other two, desperately longed for but never realized.

Varina Davis, wife of Jefferson Davis, who saw Calhoun often in the antebellum years, described his forehead as “low, steep, and beetled squarely over the most glorious pair of yellow brown shining eyes that seemed to have a light inherent in themselves.” Those brilliant eyes, Varina said, “looked steadily out from under bushy eyebrows that made the deep sockets look still more sunken.” They were eyes that Varina supposed got lowered less than any eyes she ever saw, bending steadily, laser-like, on whomever he was looking. On some people, Varina believed, that stare had “an almost mesmeric power.”²¹

Calhoun’s impressive mane of hair could mesmerize. Long and coarse, it made a majestic statement by itself. His hair had whitened over the years, and he wore it as he always did, cascading down either side of his stern face in masses from his forehead. It was his physical beacon on the world despite himself. He said of it, “I have always endeavored to dress with a simplicity that would not attract notice, and I have succeeded, with the exception of my hair.”²²

A reporter staring at the whole Calhoun and that mane of hair saw a body “without an ounce of superfluous flesh, with a serious expression of countenance rarely brightened by a smile, and with his long . . . hair thrown back from his forehead, he looked like an arch-conspirator waiting for the time to come when he could strike the first blow.”²³

The voice that spun from this apparition was not musical, like Clay’s. Varina described it rather as “the voice of a professor of mathematics,” that “suited his didactic discourse admirably. He made few gestures, but those nervous gentlemanly hands seemed to point the way to empire. He always appeared to me rather as a moral and mental abstraction than a politician.”²⁴

Calhoun had been delivering didactic discourses on behalf of his beloved South and its “peculiar institution,” slavery, for decades. As the crisis intensified and the danger to his section deepened, he changed from an ardent Unionist to “the stern

20 Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate*, 18.

21 Varina Howell Davis, *Jefferson Davis, Ex-President of the Confederate States of America: A Memoir by His Wife*, 2 vols. (1890; repr., Freeport, NY, 1971), 1:209-10.

22 “Reminiscences of Washington,” in *Atlantic Monthly* (Dec. 1880), 800.

23 Poore, *Perley’s Reminiscences*, 1:64.

24 Davis (Varina), *Jefferson Davis*, 1:210.

zealot,”²⁵ “the arch defender of the slave system,” its “terse, vigorous relentless champion,”²⁶ its paladin, hammering for its extension into the territories, for free trade, for state sovereignty, and for political parity, without stint and without a scintilla of compromise.

Calhoun, a cotton farmer’s son, never considered a wider occupation for himself, until he was eighteen years old. It was then he discovered that he possessed a mind that everyone saw as extraordinary. That landed him at Yale, where he took everything seriously, never joked, and impressed all with his bulldozing intelligence. He took his Yale education and rock-like confidence in himself directly into politics. A fellow South Carolinian remarked that Calhoun, “sprang into the arena like Minerva from the head of Jove, fully grown and clothed in armor: a man every inch himself and able to contend with any other man.”²⁷ He entered Congress in 1811 at the age of 28, in that same extraordinary freshman class with Clay.

Over the years, they would become friends and political allies, then enemies. When he and Clay later clashed in the Senate, it was said to be “a conflict of giants.” Clay was a hip-shooter, “intolerant and aggressive, delighting in gladiatorial combats.” Calhoun, on the other hand, was a sniper, unequaled for careful, incisive analysis.²⁸

Calhoun, one colleague recalled, was “like a college professor demonstrating to his class,” a well-oiled reasoning machine with “a perceptive, comprehensive, and analytic mind.”²⁹ Harriet Martineau believed his theories of government were “almost the only subject on which his thoughts are employed” and were “the squarest and compactest theories that ever were made.”³⁰

Despite their deep differences, there was love and appreciation of Clay and Calhoun for one another. When Clay retired for the first time from the Senate in 1842, they had been on the outs for half a decade. As Clay made his farewell

25 Ibid., 1:20.

26 Chaplain W. Morrison, *Democratic Politics and Sectionalism: The Wilmot Proviso Controversy* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1963), 5.

27 Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York, 1974), 93.

28 Parmelee, “Recollections of an Old Stager” (Oct. 1863), 758-59.

29 John Wentworth, *Congressional Reminiscences: Adams, Benton, Clay, Calhoun, and Webster* (Chicago, 1882), 20-22.

30 Martineau, *Retrospect*, 1:243.

speech, Calhoun, a man who hid the trace of a gentle heart within that stern exterior, “gave way to his feelings and shed tears like a woman.”³¹

That was the enigma that was John Calhoun.

America’s Political Vesuvius

Daniel Webster, the third significant figure in this political trinity, was, unlike the other two, a Yankee.

He was born in New Hampshire in the late eighteenth century, two months before Calhoun was born, and five years after Clay was born. He arrived in Congress two years after Clay and Calhoun. At thirty years old, he rocketed into politics from the launch pad of a brilliant law career. He had never served in or run for any office when elected to the Thirteenth Congress from Massachusetts, bypassing all the usual lower stops. When he arrived on the House floor in 1813, the great trio came together for the first time.

Like Clay and Calhoun, Webster was one of a kind. The Washington reporter Ben Perley Poore saw him as “one of the few to whom Divinity had accorded a royal share of the Promethean fire of genius.”³² Another observer recalled, “when I first put eye upon him . . . I was as much awe-stricken as if I had been gazing upon Bunker Hill Monument.”³³

Rising on March 7, 1850, to deliver his powerful speech backing Clay for compromise and Union, his once raven black hair atop his large head had changed to a rich iron gray. It was a head that was often called leonine.

The look of him overwhelmed strangers. Jenny Lind, the renowned Swedish Nightingale who took concert halls by storm with her rich soprano of “placid sweetness,” was as celebrated as any figure in her day, and not often impressed with mere mortals. Meeting Webster, she exclaimed, “I have seen a man!”³⁴

Another who saw him thought him “a whole species in himself.”³⁵ He was not tall like Clay or Calhoun. Powerfully built, with an enormous head housing that oversized brain, he appeared a giant. One writer wrote, “he must be an impostor, for

31 Parmelee, “Recollections of an Old Stager” (Oc. 1863), 759.

32 Poore, *Perley’s Reminiscences*, 1:79.

33 Parton, *Famous Americans*, 57, 98.

34 Henry W. Hilliard, *Politics and Pen Pictures at Home and Abroad* (New York, 1892), 241.

35 Parton, *Famous Americans*, 98.



Daniel Webster

Library of Congress

no man can be so great as he looked”³⁶—“a small cathedral,” exclaimed another.³⁷ Thomas Hart Benton, the senator from Missouri, served with the trinity for part of the first half of the nineteenth century. He saw Webster as “the colossal figure, bearing the constitutional ark of his country safely upon his Atlantean shoulders.”³⁸

Webster was the ultimate patriot, America’s senator. He had delivered a career of brilliant speeches on and off the Senate floor, each brimming with love of country. “The hold Clay had upon the heart of his countrymen,” a friend said, “Webster had upon the American mind.”³⁹ The great literary beacon from New England, Ralph Waldo Emerson, believed people saw Webster “as the representative of the American Continent . . . he alone of all men did not disappoint the eye and the ear, but was a fit figure in the landscape.”⁴⁰

Webster’s eyes, rather like Clay’s mouth, were big, deep, bottomless pools, cavernous and hypnotic, black as pitch, “living coals.” Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish writer-philosopher, described them as, “sleeping furnaces . . . needing only to be blown.”⁴¹ Webster’s eyes were likened by another as “great burning lamps set deep in the mouths of caves.”⁴²

Matching those otherworldly eyes was an otherworldly voice, deep, melodious, theatrical, and mesmeric. New York’s Horatio Seymour called it “a voice of great power and depth—a voice full of magnetism, a voice such as is heard only once in a lifetime.”⁴³ When roused, one writer wrote, his speech was akin to heavy cannonading, “Vesuvius . . . in full blast. No Gothic language has ever been pounded into more compact cannon-ball sentences.”⁴⁴

The sight of Daniel Webster taking the floor, as he did on March 7, 1850, to speak for compromise on the slavery issue, was one of the most riveting in American politics. One observer wrote: “the getting up of Daniel Webster was not a mere act; it was a process. The beholder saw the most wonderful head that his vision ever rested on reaching slowly upward; he saw a lionlike countenance, with great, deep set, luminous eyes, gazing at him with solemn majesty; in short, he saw

36 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” in *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Brooks Atkinson, ed. (New York, 1940), 863.

37 Parker, *The Golden Age*, 49-50; Alexander, *The Famous Five*, 53.

38 Dyer, *Great Senators*, 297-98.

39 Parker, *The Golden Age*, 84.

40 Emerson, “The Fugitive Slave Law,” 863.

41 Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate*, 223.

42 Dyer, *Great Senators*, 252.

43 Howard Carroll, *Twelve Americans: Their Lives and Times* (1883; repr., Freeport, NY, 1971), 7.

44 Parker, *The Golden Age*, 93, 113.

the godlike Daniel getting on his feet, and his heart thrilled at the thought of what might be coming.”⁴⁵

That was the mesmerism of Daniel Webster.

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On the last day of March 1850, as the debate raged over compromise, Calhoun died. Within two years, Clay and Webster would follow. They had only seemed immortal.

These three prominent senators were stars in American politics for almost fifty years. Their passing closed an epic passage of American politics. They were an unrivaled trio in politics, with unmatched presence, power, and personality.

However, even with their combined political magnetism and talents, they could not stop what was coming—a house-dividing civil war. It is just as well they didn’t live to see it.

⁴⁵ Dyer, *Great Senators*, 288-89.