

Book Review

FRANKLIN PIERCE: YOUNG HICKORY OF THE GRANITE HILLS. By Roy Franklin Nichols. (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1931. xvi + 615 pp. \$5.)

A LIFE of Franklin Pierce (President 1853-'57) is an event of major importance in the literature of Kansas history, because hitherto no scholarly biography of the fourteenth President has been available. In Kansas tradition Pierce has received harsh treatment as the result of hostile partisanship based on the single issue of slavery in the territories. The balanced picture has been lacking. The present biography is written by a man who is thoroughly conversant with the period and has written *The Democratic Machine, 1850-'54* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1923) and "Jeremiah Sullivan Black" in *The American Secretaries of State and Their Diplomacy, Vol. VI.* (New York, A. A. Knopf, 1928.) Doctor Nichols is now professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania.

Franklin Pierce was born in the town of Hillsborough, New Hampshire, in 1804. He graduated from Bowdoin College and then took up the study of law and along with it the practice of politics as a Jacksonian Democrat. His father enjoyed some prominence in New Hampshire and was elected governor about the time Franklin was entering politics, so the rise of the younger Pierce was relatively easy. From 1838 to 1842 he was in congress, first the house and then the senate. During this period he married, and while this brought him much needed aristocratic social connections, it was in many respects unfortunate as his wife was afflicted with illness and a morbid Puritan conscience. Pierce retired from the senate before the expiration of his term and set himself again to the practice of law and local politics. The Mexican War gave him an important military appointment, but he found that glory was elusive. The next three years (1849-'51), Professor Nichols concludes, were his years of greatest effectiveness. He was again in his familiar New Hampshire environment and virtually dictator in his party.

In 1852 Pierce was nominated for President as a dark horse and elected on the platform of the finality of the compromise of 1850. The preparation for his administration was embarrassed by insurmountable problems of peaceful conciliation of factionalism, and the fact that Pierce was not recognized as the real party head. Of

course, the party had no head, but he was not the leader even of an important faction. That was why he was available as a compromise candidate in 1852. Just before the inauguration the Pierces were overwhelmed by the tragic death of their small son in a railroad accident. This was no small factor in the inauspicious opening of the new administration. Professor Nichols tells the story of the next four years from the national point of view, making the story revolve around the White House as the pivot, and narrating the events as they unfolded to Pierce. The President had to balance factional quarrels over patronage, insistent business interests, land questions, the slavery issue, and foreign affairs and out of the conflict hope to insure the success of his administration and the well-being of the nation. Scandals and controversies in the western territories were an old, old story. Minnesota land graft appeared more important than the early stages of the Kansas land quarrels. Even after making allowances for Pierce's weaknesses, he appears primarily as a victim of circumstances; the break-up of the Democratic party, the realignment of political forces which proved to be creating a new political party, and the unscrupulous tactics of some of the antislavery-Republican politicians who were more interested in advancing their political fortunes than in contributing to a peaceful settlement of the Kansas question. This last point Nichols hints at, but does not develop as he might have done from Kansas sources. Pierce tried sincerely to maintain an impartial national administration. After retirement from office, he traveled awhile and then settled down in New Hampshire. The abuse that was heaped upon him during the Civil War period is one of the things which the American people may well wish to forget. He died in 1869.

A biographer has a choice of two general courses in treating his subject. He may write what is essentially a history of the period with the subject as the chief character, or he may confine himself to personal narrative, recording the interaction between the man and his environment, but assuming that the latter is already known to the reader. Professor Nichols has chosen the second course, which has the advantage of permitting a more intimate personal portrayal of the individual, but which is somewhat disappointing in its larger contributions to the solution of historical problems. Professor Nichols has saturated himself in the atmosphere of New Hampshire and Washington and has been able to fill in the personal record so completely that at times Pierce can be followed in detail in his daily routine. Of course, at other times there are unfortunate gaps in the

materials at critical points, which are no fault of the author. Nichols has based his book primarily on manuscript collections and newspaper files, many of which have never been used before for a major historical study. On the personal side of Pierce's career, therefore, a large part of the detail of this biography is new.

The student of Kansas history cannot but be a little disappointed in the book. The balanced picture of the man Pierce and his administration are important contributions, but scarcely any major political problem is solved. It scarcely need be said that Nichols would have had a surer grasp on the Kansas question if he had used the files of Kansas newspapers and the manuscript collections of the Kansas State Historical Society. Governor Reeder's land deals would have been clearer in the light of his own records of holdings in Indian lands and townsite companies. The governor showed no partisanship in accumulating shares in both proslavery and anti-slavery towns.

Pierce's sincere devotion to the Union is one of his outstanding characteristics. He felt that its preservation could be accomplished only by mutual concessions, by moderation and compromise. His public adherence to the principle underlying popular sovereignty dates from 1846 when he assisted in framing the following resolution in the New Hampshire state Democratic convention:

"That the policy to be pursued in reference to slavery rests with the states and territories within which it exists—that whatever parties may profess, it is only as citizens of such states and territories that the members of those parties can influence that policy—and that angry external agitation, by exciting the prejudices of the slaveholding communities, while it may endanger the Union tends rather to fasten than to destroy the bonds of the enslaved."

This is one of the earliest known statements of the idea as applied to the territories and in the light of this resolution Pierce's consistency is clear on the compromise of 1850, the platform of 1852 and the Kansas question.—JAMES C. MALIN.