



Bosom Friends: The Intimate World of James Buchanan and William Rufus King

by Thomas J. Balcerski, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, Pp. 352, \$34.95 (hbk), ISBN 9780190914592

Nikita Shepard

To cite this article: Nikita Shepard (2021) Bosom Friends: The Intimate World of James Buchanan and William Rufus King, *American Nineteenth Century History*, 22:1, 101-103, DOI: [10.1080/14664658.2021.1911409](https://doi.org/10.1080/14664658.2021.1911409)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14664658.2021.1911409>



Published online: 17 May 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

At the same time, Woods does not minimize intrasectional variation. Lincoln and Douglas were *not* the same. Woods' reminder here is helpful, especially as some scholars yearn for an antislavery convergence between Republicans and northern Democrats. Woods' careful reconsideration of Douglas relative to both Davis and Lincoln demonstrates that many white northerners were white supremacists and antiabolitionist without being either proslavery or antislavery. Democrats like Douglas who fought for the Union defy simplistic, morally charged portrayals of the Civil War. Woods' reassessment of Douglas Democrats thereby potentially complicates the debate over Union war aims. Davis, like Douglas, also faced opponents back home among both more moderate and more extreme Mississippians. Sectionalism ultimately trumps partisanship for Woods, not because disagreements within each section did not matter, but because sectionalism mattered so much.

Not even white supremacy, a subject of much recent scholarship, united Democrats. Woods seems to be of two minds regarding the racism of the Democratic Party. He appears dismissive of white supremacy as a calculated and shallow means of riling up white men. Elites manipulated the "sham populism" of race to secure slavery (p. 63). Yet, in a very perceptive argument, Woods concludes that racism could not overcome sectionalism, not because white supremacy was superficial, but because Democrats had "rival racist worldviews" (p. 153). This latter interpretation rings truer, as it acknowledges white supremacy as a substantive and complex facet of Democratic identity. Even in their racism, Woods illustrates, Democrats were more diverse than usually assumed. Woods widens the antebellum political spectrum and enriches our understanding of it. We need to enlarge it even further if we hope to find democracy untainted by the consequential ideas of Douglas and Davis.

Joshua A. Lynn
Eastern Kentucky University

© 2021 Joshua A. Lynn
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14664658.2021.1911408>



Bosom Friends: The Intimate World of James Buchanan and William Rufus King, by Thomas J. Balcerski, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, Pp. 352, \$34.95 (hbk), ISBN 9780190914592

While same-sex love in the American past attracts increasing popular and scholarly interest, the intimate bond between James Buchanan and William Rufus King has sparked perennial speculation. Was Buchanan, as James Loewen and other historians have claimed, the first gay president and his longtime bachelor companion King in fact his lover? *Bosom Friends* presents the first comprehensive scholarly assessment of the relationship between the fifteenth president and the Alabama senator, who lived together for years in a bachelor's mess (or Washington boardinghouse) shared with multiple unmarried politicians. Thomas Balcerski moves beyond a narrow focus on possible erotic dynamics to explore how the deeply intertwined spheres of political and intimate personal relationships between men shaped the nation in the decades leading up to the Civil War. Building off the work of E. Anthony Rotundo and Richard Godbeer, the book examines two prominent "bosom friends" who attempted to bridge the nation's sectional divide to reflect on the significance of friendship, marital status, and gender in nineteenth-century American politics.

The innovative dual biography format of *Bosom Friends* weaves together the separate strands of the men's lives as the warp set against the woof of the shifting landscape of national partisan politics. Balcerski organizes his study into seven briskly moving chapters, arranged chronologically and each labelled with a gerund encapsulating the men's roles as they climbed into national prominence. The chapters titled "Leavening" and "Hardening" trace their early lives and political careers, as King grew from an aristocratic North Carolina youth to a successful young Alabama plantation owner and slaveholder, while Buchanan rose from a Pennsylvania frontier shopkeeper's family into a prominent law career. Balcerski's account places particular emphasis on the men's failed early romantic engagements – Buchanan's local sweetheart who died tragically, King's (possibly fictitious) dalliance with a Russian czarina – and how they later deployed these incidents to justify remaining unmarried for the rest of their lives. "Messing," a subsequent chapter, describes how Buchanan and King, upon joining the Senate in the 1830s, constructed shared domestic arrangements and built networks of intimate friendships and political connections with the men with whom they lived, hosted lively dinners, and debated ideas and legislation. While many historians have narrated how the issues of the day – the national bank, Texas annexation, war with Mexico – played out on the floor of Congress, few have paid such careful attention to the critical roles that domestic spaces, socializing, and affective bonds played in shaping these political developments. The book compares patterns of voting behaviour to show how these domestic relationships translated into concrete alliances, impacting the course of national policy.

Even as Buchanan and King built out their networks and grew in power and influence, their bachelorhood, unconventional personal traits, and strong connection to one another left them vulnerable to the venomous tongues of their political opponents. Balcerski plumbs the significance of sexualized and gendered gossip within political discourse, while tracing the deft strategies by which the men sidestepped efforts to impugn their masculinity. When King's 1844 diplomatic appointment to France separated the men, they began a heartfelt – if not always reciprocal, to King's ongoing chagrin – correspondence that would continue for the rest of their lives. The "Wooing" chapter contains a nuanced analysis of the famous letters, often quoted as evidence of the pair's putative homosexuality, in which Buchanan recounts how he has "gone a wooing to several other gentleman," to no avail, to which King remonstrates that he hopes Buchanan will not "procure an associate, who will cause you to feel no regret at our separation" (pp. 110–11). Rather than interpreting the lines as suggestive of an explicitly sexual partnership, Balcerski reads them in the context of the passionate and sentimental language of romantic friendship common among public men during the period, noting the usage of quotations from contemporary sources, stock phrases, and common threads from correspondence with others. Drawing on thorough knowledge of each man's life and correspondence as well as epistolary and gender norms of the time, the chapter provides a convincing reading of the letters as evidence of a heartfelt, but not necessarily erotically charged, friendship and political partnership.

By 1848, the men had risen to such prominence that some commentators foresaw a "bachelor ticket" in which Buchanan would rise from secretary of state to presidential candidate while King would join as his running mate. In the shifting winds of Washington, however, both failed to secure nominations, leaving King to return to the Senate and Buchanan to retreat to his Pennsylvania estate. Balcerski recounts how although the men maintained their correspondence and shared visits, the ardour of their prior bosom friendship as messmates in the capital cooled, and their relationship centred more on sharing political assessments and advice. As sectional tensions reached a boiling point, the two conservatives represented an effort to transcend the North-South divide

through moderation, compromise, and mutual trust exemplified by their decades-long friendship and collaboration. In 1852, Buchanan narrowly missed the nomination, but King secured the vice-presidency, only to die from tuberculosis barely a month after the election. Buchanan's eventual successful White House bid in 1856 would result in the ultimate breakdown of cross-sectional compromise and the disintegration of the Union, followed by his eclipse from public life, summarized in the final "Presiding" chapter. An epilogue details the role of the men's nieces in sustaining their historical legacy and reflects on the evolving meaning of intimate male political friendship since the Civil War, while additional appendices tabulate the Washington homes where the two men resided over their decades in the capital, analyse the convergence in Senate voting records among Buchanan and other members of the bachelor's mess, and list the extant correspondence between the two men and their nieces.

The book's narration of the core political events of the era, while lively, treads familiar ground; its unique contribution consists in the sensitive attention to friendship, gender, marriage, gossip, and the domestic sphere in shaping antebellum American politics at the highest levels. Balcerski's careful interpretation of evidence demonstrates familiarity with literatures of LGBTQ and gender studies as well as antebellum political and diplomatic history. Despite this measured approach, at moments he slips into imputing more explicitly sexual meanings onto remarks about the men, particularly King, than the evidence perhaps merits. The book's passing treatments of slavery and Indigenous dispossession, which form the mostly unspoken background to King's life and career, might be improved by a deeper engagement with critical literatures in African American and Native American histories. Nevertheless, *Bosom Friends* successfully blends political history and creatively formatted biography with an insightful analysis of the meaning of domestic intimacy, gender discourse, and political friendship to deepen our understanding of antebellum national politics.

Nikita Shepard
Columbia University

© 2021 Nikita Shepard
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14664658.2021.1911409>



Unfaithful: Love, Adultery, and Marriage Reform in Nineteenth-Century America, by Carol Faulkner, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019, Pp. 224, \$49.95 (hbk), ISBN 9780812251555

Carol Faulkner's *Unfaithful* details the evolution of nineteenth-century Americans' understanding of marriage through an analysis of reformers' debates and activism. Using novels, letters, speeches, sermons, religious and moral tracts, newspapers, magazines, and court records, Faulkner argues that activists critiqued the legal and social structure of marriage as "an obstacle to a more equitable society" (p. 2). These activists – largely white, upper- and middle-class northeasterners – were united on their desire for marriage reform, yet they differed in their tactics, rhetoric, and goals. Moderate reformers pushed for more liberal divorce laws, for example, while more radical activists advocated for the dissolution of the legal institution of marriage. Faulkner contends that these activists were responsible for provoking an ideological shift in the hearts and minds of contemporary Americans, who, by the