

Millard Fillmore: A Review

Ben Liberto
CHARMS
Milford High School
9/22/11

Paul Finkelman's *Millard Fillmore* is an engaging work about one of America's least-remembered Presidents. Short and to the point, the book's appeal appears to be targeted towards casual readers of history interested in a brief biography of America's 13th President. However, it seems curious that a book about one of America's most forgettable Presidents would be written for the general public to consume, as one would wonder who in the general public would be interested in such an obscure figure. Yet, the book does not seem to be written for the more serious student of history, as a more devoted student of the field will be quick to point out questions regarding Finkelman's conclusions about Fillmore, as well as note Finkelman's strong anti-Fillmore bias throughout the work. Though not completely damaging, Finkelman's lack of exposition in regards to some of his conclusions about Fillmore's personality leaves much to be desired.

First, the strengths of Finkelman's work. Finkelman does an excellent job in giving a broad overview of Fillmore's life, from his humble origins in rural New York state, to his days as an attorney in Buffalo, to his involvement in Whig politics at both the state and national level, through his tenure as Vice-President and eventually President, as well as his subsequent fade into obscurity. Finkelman's prose is readily accessible and straightforward – a pleasant departure from some authors in the field who attempt to make their works highly complex on a level approaching that of Foucault in terms of both sentence structure and word choice. Finkelman's book remains very easy to read, and, unlike other biographies, is short and to the point (by and large). Finkelman's down-to-earth writing style, coupled with his brevity, make this book an appealing choice for a casual history buff. Indeed, *Millard Fillmore* can serve as an excellent starting point for a person just learning about this figure in American history.

Finkelman's tone and word choice are at times humorous, making the book far easier to read than a typical biography.

Yet, it is precisely here that the more serious historian can take issue with Finkelman's work. While the book itself is quite short (clocking in at 137 pages), Finkelman from time to time goes on tangents that take him off-track from Fillmore. In chapter 2, Finkelman spends a good many pages describing the origin and early effects of the Mexican-American War. Fillmore is hardly mentioned at all in this section, and indeed, this section hardly seems necessary. If one is willing to read a book about a figure as obscure as Fillmore, it is almost expected that one will have at least a working knowledge of an event as important as the war with Mexico. To spend nearly ten pages in a book as short as this describing one of the most important antebellum events in American history is unnecessary, as the overwhelming majority of people reading a book on Fillmore would be well acquainted with the details of America's war with Mexico.

Finkelman does this again in describing the Missouri Compromise as a prelude to the debate over the existence of slavery in the western territories. While important in framing the problems Fillmore faces as President, the intended audience of a book such as this should be well aware of both the Missouri Compromise and the Mexican-American War without Finkelman giving an in-depth review of both events. Finkelman's sections here only serve to slow down the narrative on Fillmore where a quick summation of both events would be sufficient. Again, the assumption can be made here that if one is willing to read about someone as obscure as Fillmore,

then that person will already have at least a basic understanding of this period of American history.

In *Millard Fillmore*, Finkelman does not come off as a believer in American exceptionalism. Yet he unfavorably compares Fillmore to Lincoln, one of the most exceptional individuals in all of human history. Finkelman does not seem to be a believer in American heroes or icons, yet in the early pages of his book he lambasts Fillmore precisely because Fillmore is not as exceptional as Lincoln. It is difficult enough to compare a great President to Lincoln, but to compare someone of Fillmore's stature to Lincoln's (as Finkelman does on pages 7 and 9) is patently unfair. Almost everyone compares poorly in relation to Lincoln, but Finkelman attacks Fillmore for growing up in poverty – like Lincoln – and struggling to make ends meet in his first years – also like Lincoln – and ultimately for not being as great a statesman as Lincoln. It seems that Finkelman is disappointed that Fillmore cannot begin to match the greatness of Lincoln. Again, Finkelman does not appear to be a believer in American exceptionalism, so it is curious why Finkelman rakes Fillmore over the coals for being nothing else than a mediocre politician and for failing to stand up against the evils of slavery, which many Americans saw as evil, but did not necessarily seek to end it (the abolitionist movement remained on the fringe of American politics and social life almost until the eve of the Civil War).

Finkelman's greatest strength in *Fillmore* is also his greatest weakness. Historians are often reminded to “watch their bias(es)” in an attempt to provide a modicum of objectivity. Finkelman makes it plain from the beginning that he is not a fan of Fillmore. He is not ashamed to let his biases show. While this can make for a more engaging reading experience with the insults tossed in Fillmore's direction, it is also unnecessary. Finkelman seems intent on

hammering home the idea that Fillmore was one of the worst Presidents in American history.

This is unnecessary. Fillmore's terrible record can stand on its own lack of merit. No reader of this book will come to the conclusion that Fillmore was a good President, but readers do not need Finkelman insulting Fillmore at nearly every turn. By trying to continually belittle Fillmore, Finkelman only succeeds in beating a dead horse.

While Finkelman's lack of appreciation for Fillmore is evident, so is Finkelman's bias towards other sections of U.S. history. On pages 55-56, Finkelman attacks the Compromise of 1850 for not really being a compromise, but rather a series of powerful concessions to the South. On page 81, he suggests that the reader call it "The Appeasement of 1850." While there may be an academic argument here, calling it an appeasement is a clear reveal of Finkelman's bias about the way the Compromise of 1850 is discussed in high schools and universities across the U.S.

Ultimately, the biggest questions that arise about Finkelman's book are the conclusions he draws about why Fillmore was so horribly ineffective as President. Finkelman asserts that Fillmore's birth into a low social class permanently crippled him emotionally, and left him "unsophisticated and insecure" (13) in his dealings with his perceived social betters. Again and again, Finkelman attempts to tie Fillmore's political beliefs as well as his political failings to the fact that Fillmore was an insecure man because he was "a poor boy from the sticks" (6). Throughout the book, Finkelman tries to pin Fillmore's failures on the fact that he was an insecure man, and these insecurities led him to be a weak leader who appeased the South at every opportunity.

While this is certainly a compelling thesis, Finkelman does not really back up these assertions. He wrote that Fillmore "was always impeccably dressed – perhaps the sign of a

pretender trying to convince those around him that he actually belonged in polite society...He was a parvenu who seemed always worried that someone might discover he did not belong in proper society” (6-7). These claims are not sourced by Finkelman, which is tragic, as this represents a whole new angle from which to approach Fillmore. This author certainly found Finkelman’s claims fascinating and within the realm of possibility, but without sourcing, it just appears to be nothing more than Finkelman’s opinion. While these claims are interesting, to historians, without some form of primary source to base these claims on, they just remain unproven assertions.

In the end, Paul Finkelman’s *Millard Fillmore* is a nice and easy introduction to a President largely forgotten in the annals of American history, but it should not be the be-all and end-all of Fillmore biographies. Finkelman provides an excellent starting point for those who are curious about Fillmore, but for devoted students of history, Finkelman’s claims that Fillmore’s weakness as President can be traced to his insecurities as a man have to be taken with the proverbial grain of salt without further documentary evidence. Finkelman’s strengths are his ability to explain the material in a fun, easy to read manner, but questions about his unapologetic bias and lack of justification for some of his claims about Fillmore’s reasons for failing as President means serious students of history will need to examine other Fillmore biographies to paint a fuller picture of America’s 13th President.