

1-1-2019

Book Review - Tariff Wars and the Politics of Jacksonian America

Michael Camp

University of West Georgia, mcamp@westga.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq>

 Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Camp, M. (2019). Book Review - Tariff Wars and the Politics of Jacksonian America. *Georgia Library Quarterly*, 56(1). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq/vol56/iss1/17>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Georgia Library Quarterly by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

Off the SHELF

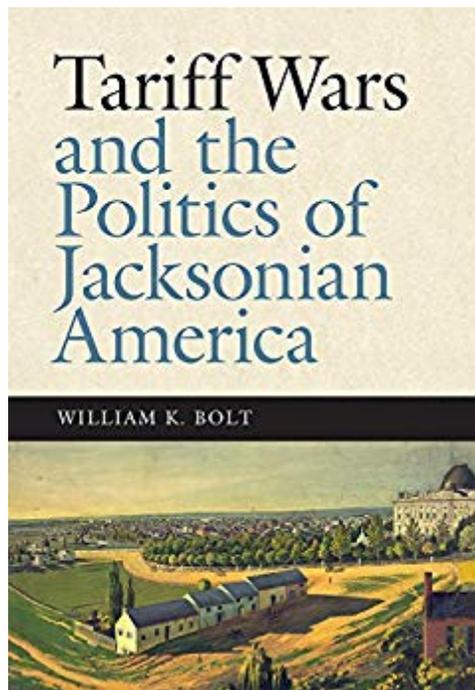
Tariff Wars and the Politics of Jacksonian America by William K. Bolt (Vanderbilt University Press, 2017: ISBN: 9780826521378, \$34.95)

The tariff battles of the Jacksonian period have received major attention in historical works ranging from Irvin Bartlett's 1993 biography of John C. Calhoun to Daniel Walker Howe's magisterial 2007 *What Hath God Wrought*. However, William K. Bolt's *Tariff Wars and the Politics of Jacksonian America* offers the most comprehensive history to date of the politics of tariffs in the United States from the 1810s to the 1860s. As Bolt noted, his work "attempts to show why the tariff was an important part of the national narrative in the antebellum period." He explains how tariffs provided the revenue to fund infrastructure projects, veterans' pensions, and the removal of Native Americans westward, but also inspired fierce discussions about national character.

As Stephanie McCurry shows in *Masters of Small Worlds*, antebellum white Southern culture revolved around the perceived superiority of independent, self-sufficient farming. Therefore, a tariff that increased the price Southerners had to pay for imported manufactured goods, and at the same time encouraged the growth of wage labor and urban squalor in the United States, was detestable. Although South Carolina was the epicenter of anti-tariff agitation, Georgians

"voiced their displeasure," too. By placing tariffs into a variety of different broader contexts and connecting them to other developments of national significance, Bolt succeeds in arguing for their importance.

Bolt is less effective in making the case that debates over the tariff "helped to spread democracy throughout America throughout the antebellum period." This quote could lead the reader to believe that Bolt might be adopting an approach similar to that of T.H. Breen's *The Marketplace of Revolution*, which shows how linked grassroots boycotts of British manufactured goods helped create networks that allowed disparate communities to provide coordinated resistance against the British Empire upon the outbreak of revolution. However, Bolt concentrates mainly on elite figures in the US Congress and in the White House, not on the views and actions of more "ordinary" Americans. He gestures from time to time to the shifts in public opinion that helped to direct congressional action, but this is a relatively minor part of the narrative. Perhaps the biggest reason for this confusion is that Bolt never defines what, exactly, it means to "spread democracy." He seems to suggest that he means something about increased energy and ferocity surrounding policy debates in the US Congress, but given that Sean Wilentz's *Chants Democratic* sees democratic expansion in the rise of street protests and marches by urban workers in New York City demanding better working conditions, some more explanation on



definitions and concepts would have been helpful in orienting the reader.

These critiques do not substantively detract from the impressive detail that Bolt offers. Given the density with which he documents the policy debates under consideration, his book

will be most useful for specialists in economic history and the Jacksonian period.

*W. Michael Camp is Assistant Professor
and Political Papers Archivist at
University of West Georgia.*