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## Book Review - Andrew Jackson Donelson: Jacksonian and Unionist

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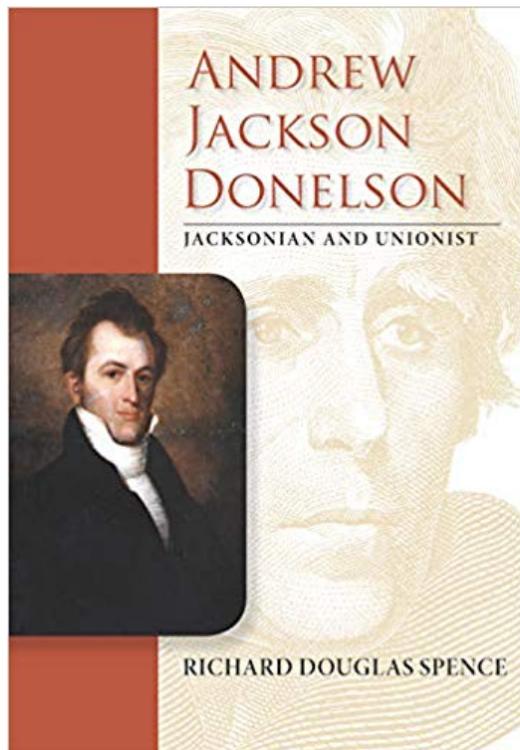
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## Off the SHELF

**Andrew Jackson Donelson: Jacksonian and Unionist** by Richard Douglas Spence (Vanderbilt University Press, 2017: ISBN 9780826521637, \$39.95)

A plant physiologist by profession, Richard Douglas Spence presents a deeply researched biography of Andrew Jackson Donelson, a nephew of President Andrew Jackson and a very interesting figure in his own right. Spence's narrative covers the main periods of Donelson's life from birth to death. The first few chapters examine his early years, including his years at West Point; the middle chapters examine Donelson's assignment to negotiate the annexation of Texas; and later chapters discuss his appointment as envoy to the Kingdom of Prussia. While in Europe, Donelson witnessed the dramatic revolutions of 1848 that shook the continent. The closing chapters of the book cover Donelson's candidacy for the US vice presidency with the Know-Nothing Party in 1856, which dismayed former allies in the Democratic Party. Throughout the book, Spence highlights Donelson's persistent unionism in the face of sectional tension: at the 1850 Nashville Convention, convened to present a united Southern front against Northern antagonism, Donelson criticized secession and emphasized staying in the Union in order to change the system from within. Years later, in the midst of the Civil War, Donelson announced that he



would take a loyalty oath to the Union “to set an example” for other Southerners.

Spence documents Donelson's life in meticulous detail, which is both a strength and a weakness. The narrative often slips into describing proceedings in a literal day-to-day fashion, which, while useful for understanding the sequence of events in question, threatens to leave the reader bogged down in detail without an ability to grasp the broader implications at play. To take just one example, Spence at one point notes a payment to a cousin in the amount of \$1,702.50 for farming tools and furniture. Details like this abound throughout the book and render the narrative choppy at times. This would present a minimal problem if these details were integrated into an analysis of the broader context in which the events of Donelson's life took place. However, a review of

the footnotes reveals that the book is based almost exclusively on primary source materials, with secondary literature almost nowhere to be found. Readers will have trouble comprehending the larger implications of Donelson's actions without this context as a guide. Given the vast array of secondary sources available on Jacksonian politics, the annexation of Texas, and US engagement with Europe in the antebellum period, this feels like a missed opportunity.

Given Spence's overwhelming focus on the

details of Donelson's day-to-day life, this volume will be most useful for enthusiasts of the antebellum period, especially those interested in minute biographical detail. Other readers should consider Mark R. Cheatham's *Old Hickory's Nephew: The Political and Private Struggles of Andrew Jackson Donelson* (2007)—

a more conventional political history.

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