Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War

David Donald
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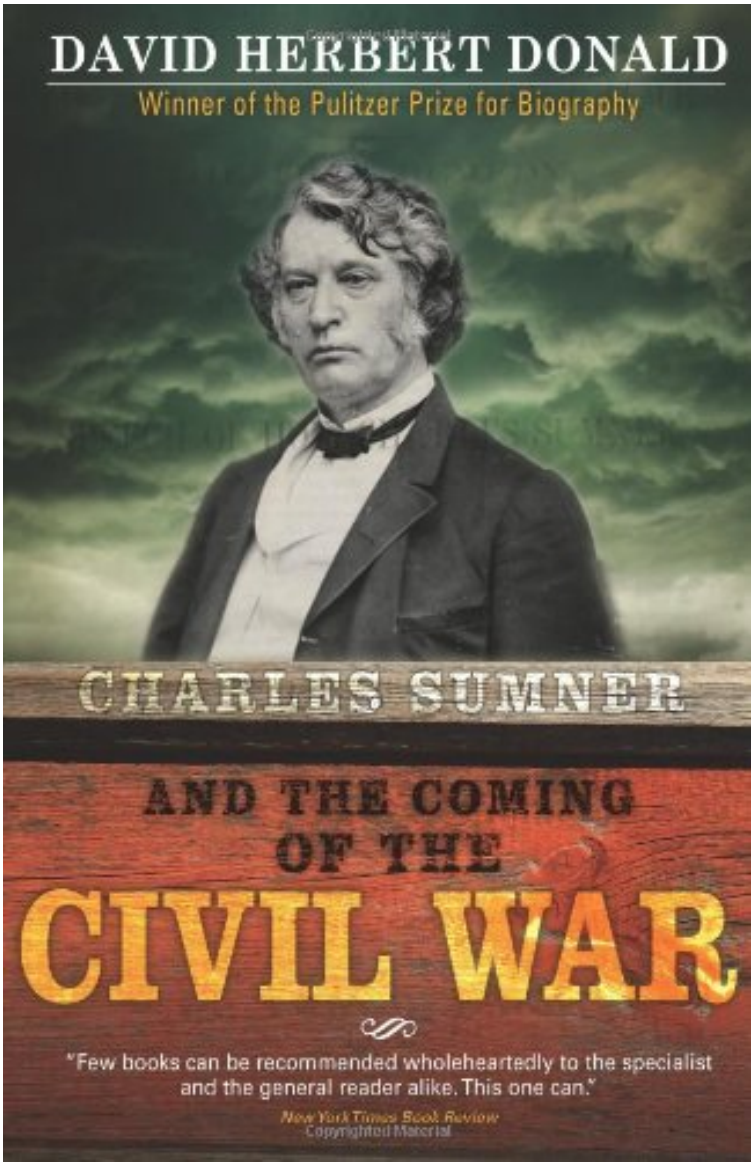

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David Donald : Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War:

42 of 43 people found the following review helpful. Superb AmericanaBy Wayne CollierThe author focuses his attention on Sumner's pre-Civil War years when his influence on behalf of the Union and the antislavery cause reached its zenith.David Donald is renowned for his meticulous research and well written books. He used diaries, manuscripts, scrapbooks, family histories, letters, newspaper files, and valued secondary sources to flesh out his subject. Donald

spent ten years on this book and during that time had to absorb the arcane knowledge of the 19th century in such subjects as medicine, law, politics, etc. His scholarship is impeccable. Though forty years have elapsed since the original publication of this book it still satisfies both the casual and serious reader.If a theme can be assigned to this very good book, it would be, "Sumner was a man who wouldn't compromise his principles no matter the cost." Sumner believed, "...to sanction the enslaving of a single human being was an act which cannot be called small, unless the whole moral law which it overturns or ignores is small." He was convinced that the appeasement of slave holders was impossible; that the various compromises enacted by the Senate were abdications of Northern principle in order to placate the South and to forestall an inevitable constitutional crisis. Sumner pointed out that supporters of the Compromise of 1850 were in fact extreme sectionalists, while antislavery agitators were the true nationalists.The author points out that slavery was the one great issue beginning in the late 1840s and continuing through the Civil War. Sumner battled the "peculiar institution" for years and made the abolition of slavery paramount. He became the chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, a post which he made more important than that of any Ambassador and more influential than that of the Secretary of State of the United States. By 1851, Sumner was one of the most powerful men on the North American continent and was known throughout Europe.When first viewing slaves Sumner said, "They appear to be nothing more than moving masses of flesh, unendowed with anything of intelligence above the brutes." This book clearly illustrates why his opinion changed and why this complex man fought the lonely fight to remove all legal barriers that sustained racial discrimination. Sumner believed such discrimination fostered racial inferiority and was psychologically harmful to Blacks. He believed the pledge in the Declaration of Independence for universal equality was as much a part of the public law of the land as the Constitution.In this regard, Sumner continually excoriated the public to reform slavery and eventually influenced hundreds of thousands of Northern voters. When read today, his fiery speeches seem ponderous and stilted. Further, Sumner often used illogical reasoning and had a tendency to extend a principle to its utmost limits - he could be irritating and obtuse at time. Regardless, he was a powerful spokesman for the antislavery movement and his speeches solidified Northern opinion in the "great crusade."In reading this book, its clear Sumner was insensitive to the power of his words. He really didn't care as he had a remarkable power of rationalization and convinced himself that expediency and justice coincided where the abolition of slavery was concerned. The author hasn't overlooked the part that fortuitous circumstances played in the selection of Sumner as one of the most powerful and enduring forces in the pre-Civil War government. (He led the Radical Republicans during the Civil War) While the borderline between myth and history is often blurred, the author proves that the myth in Sumner's life more often than not matched the real Charles Sumner.Sumner's involvement in the slavery issue seems compulsive to 21st century readers but it was an outgrowth of his life and times. The humanity of a society can be measured by the quality of its compassion and its ability to feel the anguish of others. In contrast, the inability to feel the lash that strikes another's back is the most destructive trait a society can possess.Sumner's moral compassion wouldn't allow him to act otherwise when it came to slavery. Sumner believed the issue was simple: Slavery was evil, stamp it out!This is superb Americana.7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Donald's biography of Sumner is well worth reading for those interested in the Civil WarBy Gary HoggattNot long ago I read David Herbert Donald's 1996 biography Lincoln and was completely impressed by Donald's work, and his ability to bring Abraham Lincoln to life with his writing. One of the major recurring personalities in Lincoln is Charles Sumner, the abolitionist Senator from Massachusetts. Given all that, and that Donald won the Pulitzer Prize for biography for it, I decided I had to read Donald's 1960 biography, Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War. This is the first volume of a two volume biography, and covers Sumner's life up until Confederate shots are fired at Fort Sumpter.One major difference between this volume and Donald's Lincoln is, frankly, that the subject is much less likeable. Sumner could be passionate and uncompromising in his beliefs, but he could also be vain, touchy, and self-righteous. To Donald's credit, he does not shy away from behavior or incidents that leave Sumner looking the worse, and he tries to explain just why Sumner developed these traits. I came away feeling that I had an accurate picture of the man, good and bad.Much like Donald's biography of Lincoln is an interesting insight into the then-frontier of Illinois and the birth of the Republican Party in the West, the Sumner biography is also a window into 19th century New England (and Europe, thanks to Sumner's extensive travels) and the birth of the Republican Party in New England. It was a time of great tension and change, even in the oldest parts of the country.Sumner was one of the most powerful politicians of his day, and at the forefront of the conflict between North and South. Anti-slavery Northerners looked to him as their most outspoken and powerful advocate, and Southerners despised him for his assault on what they viewed as their traditional way of life. After Sumner's "Crime Against Kansas" speech in 1856, South Carolina congressman Preston Brooks actually assaulted Sumner with a cane in the Senate chamber, resulting in Sumner being unable to perform his duties as a Senator for three years.I can't recommend Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War as highly as I do Donald's Lincoln, but that's is not really Donald's fault. As interesting as Sumner is, he's just no comparison to Lincoln. However, after reading these two books and finding him as the opposition in each, I find myself wishing Donald would write a biography of Illinois Democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas, who contested with Lincoln in Illinois for the Illinois Senate seat and and the 1860 presidential campaign, and who butted heads with Sumner over slavery in the Senate in the 1850's.Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War is a good

book that sheds a lot of light on the tensions that lead to the Civil War. I wouldn't recommend it to the general reader who isn't familiar with the era, and I'd recommend you read Donald's Lincoln first, but this volume is well done, and worth your time if you're a Civil War history aficionado.2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. This book was the BEGINNING of my LOVE FOR HISTORYBy Gene McGuireI had an absolute HATRED for the High School I went to in a small town in Washington State. I couldn't WAIT to get OUT of that place and, to THIS DAY, I have NEVER REGRETTED IT (I later finished High School in Seattle when I was 30 with STRAIGHT "A's"). This book was the BEGINNING of my LOVE FOR HISTORY. I was SO EXCITED to see that it was STILL OUT there. I now have it again and will never let it go. Thanks to books like this one, I can honestly say that I learned way, WAY more on my OWN than I EVER did in that most MISERABLE EXCUSE for a SCHOOL that I was CURSED to ATTEND!!! Many thanks to David Donald, as well as Mathew Brady, for making history and learning EXCITING again.

The Puliter-Prize winning classic and national bestseller returns! In this brilliant biography—a Pulitzer Prize—winning national bestseller—David Herbert Donald, Harvard professor emeritus, traces Sumner's life as the nation careens toward civil war. In a period when senators often exercised more influence than presidents, Senator Charles Sumner was one of the most powerful forces in the American government and remains one of the most controversial figures in American history. His uncompromising moral standards made him a lightning rod in an era fraught with conflict. Sumner's fight to end slavery made him a hero in the North and stirred outrage in the South. In what has been called the first blow of the Civil War, he was physically attacked by a colleague on the Senate floor. Unwavering and arrogant, Sumner refused to abandon the moral high ground, even if doing so meant the onslaught of the nation's most destructive war. He used his office and influence to transform the United States during the most contentious and violent period in the nation's history. Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War presents a remarkably different view of our bloodiest war through an insightful reevaluation of the man who stood at its center. "A truly perceptive study." American Heritage "Few books can be recommended wholeheartedly to the specialist and the general reader alike. This one can." New York Times Book Review "[Full of] Donald's unparalleled knowledge and provocative interpretations." James M. McPherson, New York Times Book Review

About the AuthorDavid Herbert Donald, who has twice been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Biography, is Charles Warren Professor of American History and Professor of American Civilization Emeritus at Harvard University. His many books include Lincoln's Herndon, Lincoln Reconsidered, The Politics of Reconstruction, Charles Sumner and the Rights of Man, and Look Homeward: A Life of Thomas Wolfe. Excerpt. Excerpt from Chapter One THESE JOTTINGS ARE MADE FOR FRIENDLY EYES," THE NEWLY ELECTED senator from Massachusetts wrote as a postscript to his autobiography, "to be used more or less, or not at all, as shall be thought best." The senatorial contest of 1851 had been the most embittered and prolonged in Massachusetts history, and Charles Sumner wished to repel charges that he was a political nonentity, a mere rhetorician elected through an unholy and corrupt coalition. As his autobiographical notes had this practical purpose, they naturally were not modest, and Sumner's old friend and former Harvard professor, John Gorham Palfrey, to whom he entrusted them, was able to work them into a laudatory newspaper sketch of the new antislavery senator as a statesman whose name would illuminate "the historical page of the triumphs of Freedom in the nineteenth century." Touched by Palfrey's words, which, in fact, merely echoed his own, Sumner was delighted by "that beautiful sketch" of his career. "I felt a throb of gratitude to you," he wrote Palfrey, "but a deep feeling also of my own unworthiness…As a composition your article is all that could be desired. As a token of friendship more than I deserve." 1 Sumner's autobiographical jottings, like Palfrey's published tribute to him, were revealingly reticent. The new Massachusetts senator stated that he had been born in Boston on January 6, 1811, but he had nothing else to say about his boyhood. Neither here nor at any other time did he look back to the good old days when Boston was a compact town of only 40,000 inhabitants, most of whom knew each other by sight. He never told anecdotes of playing in the mud flats of Back Bay, where now some of the proudest houses in Boston rise. He had no tales of wandering on the wharves, thronged with sailing ships manned by rough-voiced sailors shouting in unknown tongues. He never remembered roaming through the markets, sniffing the exotic aroma of tea from the Orient, tasting figs from Smyrna, and sampling barrels of West Indies molasses through straws adeptly inserted through the bungholes. He had no recollections of snowball fights on the Common or of sledding down Beacon Hill across the main thoroughfare of Washington Street in defiance of all traffic. Sumner never had the feeling of his contemporary, Edward Everett Hale, that Boston "was a good place in which to be born, and a good place in which to grow to manhood." Sumner's autobiography was equally silent on his genealogy. Though he knew that New Englanders had an almost Oriental reverence for their ancestors and delighted in tracing family lineages through assorted Patiences, Ashabels, and Eliphalets back to the founders of Massachusetts Bay Colony, the newly elected senator made no effort to exploit the fact that on both sides of his family he could claim industrious and God-fearing forebears who had settled in New England in the early 1630s. He did not mention that his mother's grandfather had been an extensive landholder, the

surveyor of Hanover, in Plymouth County, a town selectman, a member of the Revolutionary Committee on Public Safety, and later a state representative, or that his maternal grandmother was a descendant of Governor William Bradford, of Plymouth. Nor did he refer to the career of his paternal grandfather, Major Job Sumner, who quit his Harvard classes to fight under General Washington and after the Revolution served as United States commissioner to settle the accounts between the Confederation and Georgia. Any temptation Sumner may have had to proclaim himself the heir of the Puritans in politics was curbed by his knowledge that his father had been born out of wedlock. Inbred, provincial Boston, where such scandals were never forgotten, would be all too likely to rake up the gossip about the dashing Major Sumner's failure to marry Esther Holmes, by whom he begat his one son. Remembering the grandson's fondness for oppressed races, Boston maiden aunts speculated—without any evidence whatever—that the mysterious Esther had been "partly of negro or Indian blood." Prudently the new senator preferred to draw the veil over the whole subject of his genealogy: "It seems to me better to leave it all unsaid." More surprising was Sumner's silence about his parents. Of his father, Charles Pinckney Sumner, the son merely remarked that he "was a lawyer by profession…a person of literary taste and knowledge, of remarkable independence and sterling integrity."10 The son's coolness reflected the fact that the father was a singularly unlovable man. Presumably he had not always been so formal, so obdurately fixed in his ways. As a student at Harvard he had become a warm friend of young Joseph Story, of Salem, who inspired him to attempt verses in the stately tradition of Alexander Pope's rhymed couplets. The friendship did not expire with college days, and in florid fashion Sumner claimed that he treasured Story's frequent letters as "truly the balsam of friendship,…infinitely more sacred than that which bedewed the hand of laughter-loving Venus, when wounded by the sacrilegious shaft of Diomed." Under Story's influence he became an ardent Jeffersonian, at a time when only Federalism was respectable in Massachusetts, and he even talked of editing a party newspaper in Boston.But, by the time Charles Sumner was born, his father's feeble fires of rebellion had burned low. "I have now passed more than half the age of man," he wrote in 1811, at the age of thirty-five, "and the ambition of youth is in me now checked by the…cautious, and sober thoughts of age." The insecurity of his clouded birth and impoverished childhood, his comparative failure in his law practice, and his financial worries over his growing family he concealed behind an outward front of stiff and stilted formality. Long after the style had changed, he, like Major Thomas Melville, continued to wear a tricornered hat, and he retained to his death the punctilious eighteenth-century etiquette of saluting acquaintances upon the streets by "bowing low, touching his mouth with his hand, and waving it back to his side." His family rarely, if ever, saw him smile. His wife brought little more warmth to the Sumner household. Tall and stately, with a smooth olive complexion and lustrous brown eyes, Relief Jacob had been a twenty-five-year-old seamstress when she married, and she carried some of her spinster ways into her married life. She did not know how to express affection; not until after her death did Charles learn that she had always cherished a lock of his baby hair. Even her friends remarked that she was "distant" or that she had "the old-school dignity of manner," and she impressed on them her "evident superiority of mind." Doubtless it was the memory of his own cheerless home that made young Sumner, when a student at Harvard, describe "The present character of the Inhabitants of New England" as one of sobriety, industry, moral purity—and "a natural coldness." The very house in which he was born, on Bartolph (now Irving) Street, was "respectable, and yet only above being humble." Like the two later homes the Sumners occupied on Hancock Street, it lay north of that imaginary line that, as true Bostonians used to say, divided the "bob" from the "nabob" side of Beacon Hill. When Charles was a boy, his father's income was only about $1,000 a year, and only Mrs. Sumner's frugality kept the family from actual want. She could afford only iron knives and forks for tableware, and she sent Charles to school wearing coarse, chunky shoes and cheap sky-blue satinet clothes, "never a nice fitting or handsomely appearing suit."