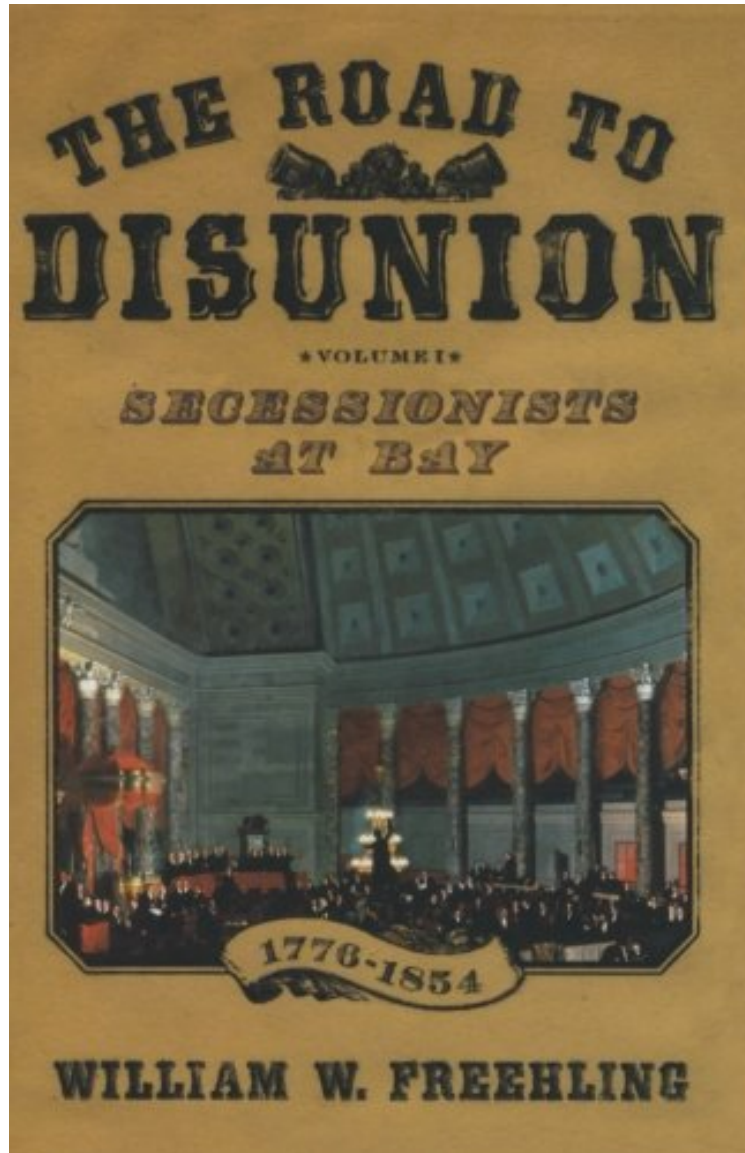


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The Road to Disunion, Vol. 1: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854

William W. Freehling

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William W. Freehling : The Road to Disunion, Vol. 1: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854 before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Road to Disunion, Vol. 1: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A significant contribution, but not the end-all versionBy John S. ReidThis review covers both Vols. I II, since I believe that a proper review (based on my personal motivations for reading these books) requires a comprehensive review. To that end, my personal motivations for reading these books

was to hopefully discover the reasons why the South felt compelled to withdraw from the Union - i.e., the *casus belli* of the American Civil War. Were my expectations met? To a large extent, yes. However, it is possible that the author places too much emphasis on slavery as the primary driving factor compelling the South to secede, without sufficient discussion of alternative (non-slavery) motivations (such as tariffs, etc.). The author is perhaps correct that slavery was the big issue, but I just felt that other potential motivations (or at least the possibility of other potential motivations) were sold short and not given sufficient discussion. Which is a bit ironic since the author spends a great deal of Vol. I (and to a lesser extent, Vol. II) developing his theory that there was no one single monolithic antebellum "South", but then goes on to argue that the antebellum South was solidly (monolithically?) united behind slavery as a justification for secession. (More on this later.) Personally, I found the author's style of writing to make for a difficult read at times. More specifically, his reporting of actual historical events was relatively straight forward (e.g., regarding the Dred Scott decision in Vol. II), but when he went on about more theoretical subjects (such as the difference between Northern Whigs and Southern Whigs), I oftentimes had to reread a sentence (or paragraph) two or three times in order to get what he was on about, and sometimes I couldn't even figure it out after that. I am a slow and deliberate reader, so I usually don't have comprehension issues, but I did here. (E.g., Vol. II, page 295: "To defeat the state's pragmatists, lowcountry reactionaries would have to suffer politicians' haunts." Even in the context of the chapter, I find this sentence difficult to parse.) I commend the author on three points: (i) given the large cast of characters involved in this comprehensive history, he makes a reasonably valiant (but imperfect) effort to remind the reader of who these characters are when references to the characters are separated by pages and chapters (but less-so in Vol. II); (ii) the inclusion (particularly in Vol. I) of many excellent maps, all very easy to read (at least in the hard bound copies I read); and (iii) well documented research in the endnotes. On the last point, this is not to say that the author's research was exhaustive, but merely that he did perform a considerable amount of research, and documented his research. Personally, I find references very useful in conducting my own further research on a topic, so the fact that an author is willing to submit his resources for further review goes a long way towards establishing the author's credibility with respect to the conclusions he has drawn (or at least his willingness to let others read the same materials and perhaps draw different conclusions). As indicated above, the author places primary emphasis on slavery as the cause of the war, and is essentially dismissive as to the possible impact of financial motivations (specifically, Federally imposed tariffs and duties). (While he alludes to the possibility in the last half of Vol. II, he is generally dismissive of the topic). I find this odd since the author emphasizes that there was no one single monolithic Southern motivation for secession, so it just seems to me that perhaps some Southerners were in fact motivated by financial considerations. Given the large volume of alternative research which supports the financial motivation for secession, the author should perhaps have devoted at least one chapter to address this issue. I have always contended that any student of history needs to read at least two, and preferably more, accounts of any historical event in order to arrive at a personal opinion as to how events probably occurred. To this end I believe that "The Road to Disunion" is an essential reading for any armchair historian (such as myself) looking for an answer to the question, "why did the South feel compelled to secede from the Union in 1860-1861, thus provoking the American Civil War?" In "The Road to Disunion" Freehling does an excellent job of describing Southern events that ostensibly lead to disunion, and also does an excellent job of trying to explain the Southern mentality that eventually lead to disunion. However, his Southern-focused approach falls a bit short at the end of Vol. II in addressing Northern responses to Southern secession during the "Crisis Period" (i.e., between Lincoln's election and the attack on Fort Sumter). In my opinion the actions of North and South during the "Crisis Period" are exceedingly important in explaining the last few miles in the "road to disunion". But then, this topic has been covered extensively by Kenneth Stampp in his book "And the War Came", which I highly recommend. On "further reading", Freehling cites to three "pamphlets" written by instrumental South Carolina secessionists in late 1860 (see Vol. II, page 394). Copies of these pamphlets can be found (for free) on the Internet. They make for wonderful supplemental reading as they are original source documents, and not a historian's distillation. Also beneficial is "Secession Debated" (edited by Freehling), which are copies of the actual legislative debates in Georgia in 1860 on secession. Granted, these documents are essentially propaganda issued by Southerners in order to justify secession - i.e., these documents are not abstract contemporaneous considerations intended for historical documentation. However, as they did provide (in large part) a motivation for secession, they are important reading. We must consider that non-slave-owner Southerners were motivated to go to war for some ostensible reason, and these documents provide possibly the best evidence. (And, these documents do address financial considerations, which, as addressed above, is lacking in Freehling's ostensibly comprehensive coverage of the motivations for secession.)

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Excellent analysis of the years 1776-1854 and the issue of slavery in American History

By gloine36

The first of a two volume set, Road to Disunion is characteristic of William Freehling's research into the events leading up to the American Civil War. His writing on the research is meticulous and focuses on the political history surrounding the issues that led to the Civil War. Freehling's idea was that he would study the cause of the southern secession crisis of 1860-61 and he didn't think it would be a very deeply involved task. The work turned into a major effort and he found the search for causation taking him all the way back to 1776 as the political history turned out to far more extensive than he originally thought. Freehling, a professor emeritus at the University of

Kentucky is renowned for his research into the various secession conventions of 1860-61 and that research made this book possible. Freehling's writing has been noted for being a bit odd and one has to wonder if that is the result of his deep studying of the antebellum period of US History. He has studied thousands of handwritten documents from the time period, and judging by some of the various speeches he has given, I really think he has picked up speech patterns from that era as a result. The book is still an enjoyable read and one does not have to labor in reading through the pages. It is just at times the wording of some sentences does tend to be strange. He makes good use of quotes from those primary sources as well which does establish a good sense for how various important figures from the past viewed their world. One thing historians stress is that the past is different than the present. The people of the past acted in accordance with their interests, needs, wants, and desires, not those of the future. I think Freehling does a very good job in showing that throughout the book because there is no doubt that he is bringing up the ideas of those past persons. Since no one living in the US today has owned slaves, conveying the way slave owners thought in such a way as to make it clear to present day readers the slave owners' thoughts is quite an accomplishment. This is a very difficult thing to accomplish as most college instructors of history will testify to. Students constantly stamp their own beliefs onto those of the past and that often results in some very odd interpretations and comments in their own analytical writing. The other thing that Freehling shows us in this first volume is that the lead up to secession was not something that just developed overnight. This was a very long process that began in the American Revolution. Slavery was deeply embedded in the US and slowly eroded away over time. He takes great pains to make that clear while also showing how slave owners viewed this gradual national decline of the institution. He also shows how they began to use the federal government's powers in protecting slavery when if it had been left to its own devices might have faltered before the Civil War. This is one of the central issues in the causation of the sectional conflict that gets overlooked. Freehling shows us a South that was not united by much of anything for a long time other than its geographic location and common bond of slavery. It was that issue that gave the South a regional identity and that issue which dominated its political world over time. Key points in US politics are the Missouri Compromise, the Nullification Crisis, the Compromise of 1850, and the lead to the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Actions taken by various slave owners during those years showed the lack of solidarity within the geographic South on the issue as well. In this regard, I think Freehling does an outstanding job of contrasting the elements of the national political parties and how they broke down by votes on major issues regarding these decisions. All in all, this is a very good book on the years leading up to the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Many books that deal with the secession crisis ignore or lightly touch upon what came before 1848, but *Disunion* does wonders to show how Americans got to that point and why slavery was a major issue nationally. I also really enjoyed going through the endnotes because several of the passages there are rather illuminating. In fact, I've referenced the notes section twice in research papers, they are that good. I do wish they were footnotes instead of endnotes, but that was a publishing choice, not the author's as far as I understand it. A major shortcoming of this work is the lack of pictures of the historical figures. There are a lot of names in this book and the lack of pictures results in a blur of people instead of connecting a fact to a name or line of thought in the book. I do recommend the book for use in courses studying the causation of the Civil War. The notes contain the primary sources used in the research which can be quite helpful if using a pedagogical teaching model like the Interactive Learning Model. I do not think this is a book useful for the American History survey courses due to the length, but parts can be used in establishing context for specific events. Other than that, I enjoyed reading it and am looking forward to reading the second volume of the pair. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Magisterial AND Engaging By W. S. Jones This work is by far the most complete, engaging, wonderful history book I have read in quite some time! The author has copious footnotes as well. Being a person with a curious nature, I often found myself getting lost in reading the footnotes as much as the text! The author's love of his subject was apparent, and that made reading the book much more enjoyable. I only had a cursory knowledge of this time period before reading it, but did not find the details too daunting. For me they opened my eyes to the complexity and heterogeneous environment of the antebellum south. If you want a great reference for this period of history look no further! If you want to find out more on the antebellum south and the reasons for the Civil War, look no further! If you like history and are searching for that next book to read - you guessed it - look no further! I'm anxiously awaiting the arrival of the second volume, which I am sure will round out my knowledge quite nicely!

Far from a monolithic block of diehard slave states, the South in the eight decades before the Civil War was, in William Freehling's words, "a world so lushly various as to be a storyteller's dream." It was a world where Deep South cotton planters clashed with South Carolina rice growers, where the egalitarian spirit sweeping the North seeped down through border states already uncertain about slavery, where even sections of the same state (for instance, coastal and mountain Virginia) divided bitterly on key issues. It was the world of Jefferson Davis, John C. Calhoun, Andrew Jackson, and Thomas Jefferson, and also of Gullah Jack, Nat Turner, and Frederick Douglass. Now, in the first volume of his long awaited, monumental study of the South's road to disunion, historian William Freehling offers a sweeping political and social history of the antebellum South from 1776 to 1854. All the dramatic events leading to secession are here: the Missouri Compromise, the Nullification Controversy, the Gag Rule ("the Pearl Harbor of the slavery

controversy"), the Annexation of Texas, the Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Freehling vividly recounts each crisis, illuminating complex issues and sketching colorful portraits of major figures. Along the way, he reveals the surprising extent to which slavery influenced national politics before 1850, and he provides important reinterpretations of American republicanism, Jeffersonian states' rights, Jacksonian democracy, and the causes of the American Civil War. But for all Freehling's brilliant insight into American antebellum politics, *Secessionists at Bay* is at bottom the saga of the rich social tapestry of the pre-war South. He takes us to old Charleston, Natchez, and Nashville, to the big house of a typical plantation, and we feel anew the tensions between the slaveowner and his family, the poor whites and the planters, the established South and the newer South, and especially between the slave and his master, "Cuffee" and "Massa." Freehling brings the Old South back to life in all its color, cruelty, and diversity. It is a memorable portrait, certain to be a key analysis of this crucial era in American history.

From Publishers Weekly This major work of scholarship by the author of *Prelude to the Civil War* offers an intimate look at the Old South and describes how the slavery issue led to successive collisions between "private despotism and public democracy." The book also provides a detailed account of how slavery functioned. Freehling's sweeping narrative traces national crises that led to secession: the Missouri Compromise, the annexation of Texas, the Compromise Act of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Such figures as Andrew Jackson, John C. Calhoun, Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln stride vigorously through these pages. The study, which contributes importantly to our understanding of the causes of the Civil War, will interest readers with its brilliant evocation of the antebellum South. Illustrations. Copyright 1990 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Library Journal Broadening the search that led to his prize-winning *Prelude to Civil War* (1966), Freehling seeks to track Southern disunion from independence to secession. He reaches the Kansas-Nebraska Act in this first of a promised two-part epic that focuses on the South through the filter of national mainstream politics. Freehling brings alive Southern traditions, heroes, villains, and diversity. He depicts various souths caught in an ineluctable tendency to freedom while the antithetical systems of democracy and despotism divided southerners. Akin to James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* (LJ 3/1/88) and Eric Foner's *Reconstruction* (LJ 4/1/88; both LJ "Best Books of 1988"), Freehling's masterful synthesis brims with wisdom and wit. It is essential for any collection on the nation, the South, or antebellum politics. Highest recommendation. --Thomas J. Davis, Univ. at Buffalo, N.Y. Copyright 1990 Reed Business Information, Inc. "This is an excellent book; the best that we have for the early period of the sectional conflict. I will put it on my reading list for my Civil War and Reconstruction course. Students in U.S. introductory courses could benefit from this book."--William C. Harris, North Carolina State Univ. "Many of the details, to be sure, are fresh, and so are some of the shifts in emphases."--Carl N. Degler, *The Journal of American History* "Freehling has struck as powerful blow for history as narrative art in this remarkable recounting of the southern secession movement up to 1854."--George M. Fredrickson, Stanford University. "The major work of scholarship by the author of *Prelude to the Civil War*... Will interest readers with its brilliant evocation of the antebellum South."--Publisher's Weekly