

## Lang Prize Reflection Letter

I've been using the labyrinthine book reserves in Shields Library since freshman year, but never before had my exploring led to a concrete work of my own. I'd check out a variety of books in Oxford University's "Very Short Introduction" series—about the Great Depression (written by Davis' very own Eric Rauchway), English Literature, Philosophy, etc. I went through a Thomas Pynchon phase and soon realized that the library had not only all of his books but about 30 books *about* those books. It was always so exciting to scroll through the Worldcat search engine (sometimes called Melvyl) in my quest for introductions, Pynchon books, historiographies of various stripes. Now, in my third and final year at Davis, I could use that natural curiosity and familiarity with the system for something certainly more focused and, in my view, more productive than random searching.

When my advising professor gave our class the option to pursue a research project as a final, I knew I should get started right away. My experience with smaller, more contained facsimiles of research projects in other classes showed me that you can almost never do enough research—there is always more to find and more to read. I went into my advisor's office hours and told him I was interested in researching the Whig party. A big topic, absolutely, but a start. The party always struck me as a historical anomaly: its active period from the early 1830's to the early 1850's directly preceded the two-party system that remains with us today. As an ideological vehicle, historians have long criticized American Whiggery as a loose set of interests united principally by their opposition to Andrew Jackson's transformative populism. And the party fell apart around 1853 at one of the most fraught periods in American history, just after the incomplete compromises of 1850 and moving into the hysterical climate that would portend secession and war. I soon found that there was no real room for any kind of comprehensive interpretation of the Whig party. Distinguished scholars had already spent decades digging through the archives, interpreting long-winded political diatribes, counting election returns, and tracing broad historical arcs far beyond the scope of my time or abilities. So, as is always required with these kinds of projects, I had to narrow my topic.

My advisor first pointed me to broad historiographical surveys of the period like Michael Holt's *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party* and Daniel Howe's *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848*. Holt dives deep into the complex electoral landscape of the Whig party, from presidential elections and their wild nominating conventions to local and state elections. Howe documents the major political, social, cultural, and military events of the stated period with an emphasis on the effects of the transportation and communication "revolutions" with the emergence of the railroad and telegraph. Together, these works served as both indices for other specific investigations into Whig politics and as bases for existing historical thought. First I tried to find gaps—however small—in their research. Obviously, surveys like this privilege certain events and trends over others in the interest of space, but even major events receive broad coverage. The annexation of Texas struck me as a particularly divisive and important event surrounded by complex political forces. Of course, major figures like Henry Clay, James Polk, and John Tyler played huge roles and their personal movements significantly shaped debates and contingencies that ultimately permitted annexation

when it did finally happen. But less attention had been paid specifically to the dynamics of the Whig party's southern contingent, which found itself in a bit of bind: because the Whig party officially opposed annexation, southern Whigs suddenly had to support either their party's platform or the longstanding southern fight for more slave states, thus adding pro-slavery representation to Congress. Initially I was most interested in the ways that politicians of the period straddled partisan and sectional interests. The annexation of Texas provided an illustrative flashpoint for these kinds of competing political forces.

But what made Texas more interesting was its ability to unearth previously taboo topics like slavery and its expansion. The 1830's were defined by partisan fights over tariffs and banks, but economic issues like this seemed to fade as the scary realities of the slavery question emerged, probably against the will of most politicians. By the 1840's, gag rules in Congress still banned legislators from even mentioning the south's peculiar institution. Bipartisan consensus at the time concluded that the Missouri Compromise, created over 20 years earlier, would forever define the national politics of slavery. This all ended with Texas, when a massive territory practically begging for annexation and statehood beckoned just when Mexico, its former patron, seemed too unstable to fight back. Under these tumultuous conditions, southern Whigs had to either assent to certain victory for anti-slavery forces for the sake of their party or consent to the basic political will of their constituents.

All these questions of partisan and sectional tension led me to research the Whig party's ideology. Daniel Howe's other seminal work, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs*, provides the best sociopolitical analysis of the party throughout its history. Thomas Brown's *Politics and Statesmanship: Essays on the American Whig Party* offers varied contexts and angles on the party. Eventually I found that in addition to more abstract treatments of the entire Whig party, I needed a command of the precise political dynamics that led to annexation. David Pletcher's *The Diplomacy of Annexation* extensively delineates correspondence between the major actors and diplomats that, after lots of wrangling and intrigue, created the conditions for annexation and produced treaties and bills officially executing it. Biographies about the major political actors like Henry Clay, John Tyler, John Calhoun, James Polk, Alexander Stephens, and several prominent Congressmen all gave key insight into personal motivations. I found all of these works either through the indices of the broader surveys or by using the Worldcat search engine available through the library website. The search engine was extremely useful especially because it indexes keywords so well, and even broad searches like "texas annexation" and "whig party" produced extensive lists of books, often with thorough descriptions, chapter titles, and even related titles. Once I searched for a few books and went to the actual stacks in Shields Library, the thematic distribution helped me find similar titles right next to those I'd already looked at. I even had to request loans from other University of California campuses through the ILL (Interlibrary Loan system). Delivery to Shields library, even from campuses in southern California, was always swift and prompt. Works in this vein included Matthew Karp's *This Vast Southern Empire* and Joel Silbey's *Storm Over Texas*. Both were loans and both essential for context and particular interpretations of important historical conditions.

But not all of my research included books plucked from the library. The UC Davis library website also offers a vast index of scholarly journal and publications, most of which publish almost exclusively online nowadays. Using search engines like ProQuest and JSTOR, I was able to find articles written in prestigious journals like the *Journal of the Early Republic* and *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*. These articles were much narrower in scope than many of the books and offered detailed context for and deep analysis of annexation, usually from a very specific historical lens. Michael Morrison's article in the *Early Republic* and John Schroeder's essay in the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* served me best throughout the project. Fortunately for me the entire UC system gives even undergraduates access to these journals, most of which require steep fees for researchers not affiliated with research institutions like a university.

The final resource I needed were the speeches and debates of the 28<sup>th</sup> Congress, which deliberated over annexation and revealed at least the public arguments for and against annexation. These I accessed through the Library of Congress' website on "American Memory," which houses all the debates, journals, bills, statutes, and letters of Congress since the original Continental Congress. The *Congressional Globe* in particular reprinted all debates and speeches from Congresses of the period. These congressional papers were the basis for my analysis of the southern Whigs specifically. Parsing the language and rhetoric of politicians at the time was invaluable to my project. For the project, these speeches and debates were essentially my key primary source.

With all of these resources—search engines, online scholarly journals, good old-fashioned books—I developed several techniques that led me to research that otherwise I might not have found. First, I relied on my advisor for his direction. He pointed me to essential works to start with and continued to recommend relevant research even as my topic narrowed. Second, I always kept an eye on what these authors were citing. Reading meticulous footnotes will lead a researcher down endless roads they might never normally perceive. Third, I kept a detailed annotated bibliography. It's easy to delve into articles and book chapters and take mental notes but immediately forget both the content of the material and your reaction to it if it's not documented. The annotated bibliography served as a useful index for my own thoughts, where I could categorize the works according to their thematic focus and compartmentalize my argument. Finally, I grew to pay the most attention to historical *arguments*, rather than simply the detailed sequence of events that historians rely on for research. Other than archeological discoveries of documents and artifacts, historical research is really about interpretation. Remaining cognizant of arguments informs authorial biases and is the basis for my own reactions to said interpretations. I would imagine that all of these methods are essential to historical research, especially that which far exceeds the scope of this project.

This project represents by far the most research I've done for a single paper. I found the work, though rigorous, immensely rewarding and a simulation of historical research that might be otherwise unavailable to me. I relied entirely on library resources—books and scholarly journals in particular. And the ease with which I could acquire such materials speaks to the level of access for even undergraduates at the university.