

Congressman Henry Emerson Etheridge: Aspects of His Life and Times. By Lonnie E. Maness. Jackson, TN.: Main Street Publishing, Inc., 2008.

Dr. Lonnie E. Maness, University of Tennessee Professor Emeritus of History, dug hard to research the life of Henry Emerson Etheridge of Dresden, Tennessee, 1819-1902, a somewhat notable Northwest Tennessee politician of the mid-19th century. Maness produced a partial account due to the fact that no body of Etheridge's writings exists. The professor gives a quick sketch of his subject's life in the introduction and an outline in the Appendix. By age 21 Etheridge had become a lawyer, a profession he practiced throughout the 19th century. Not surprisingly he entered politics, first as a one term Tennessee representative before serving three terms in the U.S. House during the 1850s as the nation moved toward disunion and military conflict as tensions accelerated. Albeit a minor national figure, Etheridge worked vainly to dissipate North-South tensions. Though a slave owner himself, he opposed divisive repeal of the Missouri compromise in 1854 and the misguided attempt to re-open the prohibited African slave trade. In 1860 his faith was firmly in national unity as

seen in his support of fellow Tennessean John Bell of the Constitutional Union Party for President.

Despite the sectional conflict of early 1861, Etheridge remained a Unionist, while serving as the U.S. House Clerk. At the end of 1863, he lost that office due to his opposition to the Emancipation Proclamation. Like Lincoln, he stood for the Union but he diverged about the freeing of the slaves. Back in Tennessee, he was a Conservative Unionist, disagreeing with the policies of Military Governor Andrew Johnson (1862-65) and in turn William G. Brownlow by which they unconstitutionally created civil government in the Volunteer State. Nor was Etheridge pleased with the state's alleged ratification of the 14th Amendment. He strove for reconciliation, not oppression of former Confederates, the majority of Tennesseans. Accordingly he unsuccessfully ran for Governor in 1867 to unseat Governor Brownlow who made the rules and controlled the process, according to Maness. Nevertheless, Etheridge steadfastly maintained that ex-Confederates should have been able to vote. Their re-enfranchisement in 1869 ended the state's Radical Republican government. That year he was elected to the Tennessee Senate for a

term and thereafter basically devoted himself to his local law practice.

In fewer than 200 pages Professor Maness developed a partial biography of a “fiery Unionist” of West Tennessee who straightforwardly expressed his opinions throughout his life. Consequently this figure of “honor and principle and high moral character” that sometimes acted contrary to his constituents’ views, helped to both enhance and limit his overall impacts. Even Maness concedes that on occasion in Etheridge’s campaigning against Radical Republican reconstruction in Tennessee resorted to practical expediency. In general, the professor has made it possible for history-minded Tennesseans to learn about one of their staunchest local mid-19th century proponents. In addition, to enhance understanding and appeal, the author included 26 photographs of prominent 19th century politicians and a basic chronology about Etheridge’s activities in the book’s Appendix. Readers can also find a wealth of information in Maness’ small print endnotes.

Review by Dr. Marvin Downing, University of Tennessee at Martin.