war as a triumph of freedom and principle, Escott instead offers a sobering and unromantic account of the litany of squandered opportunities, lapses in judgment, and equivocations by Lincoln and his fellow white Americans. We are left to wonder what might have been accomplished if higher principle rather than expediency had prevailed during the nation’s most traumatic and vicious conflict.

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When Nathaniel Hawthorne died in 1864 at the height of the Civil War, he was both the most critically respected and the most politically discredited author in America. Oliver Wendell Holmes, speaking of the deceased man’s tales and romances, extolled “their atmospheric effects, . . . the blue of his distances, . . . the softening of every hard outline he touches, . . . the silvery mist in which he veils deformity and clothes what is common so that it changes to awe-inspiring mystery, by the clouds of gold and purple which are the drapery of his dreams.” But as the abolitionist Moncure Daniel Conway recalled about the war years, Hawthorne “had no party,—then the equivalent to having no country.”

Little has changed since then, argues Larry J. Reynolds in Devils and Rebels, his important and sensitive new examination of Hawthorne’s politics during a period of political dissension and civil war. Hawthorne may retain a chief position in the canon of antebellum American writers, but his politics—initially condemned by abolitionist Concord as well as by his wife Sophia’s family, the Peabodys—have faced unrelenting opprobrium from subsequent generations of biographers, historians, and literary scholars. It is Reynolds’s task to restore “the depth, complexity, and even progressiveness of Hawthorne’s political views” without defending either his stubborn conservatism or “repugnant racism” (p. xiv). He does so by recounting in meticulous detail the process by which Hawthorne arrived at a “system of values and beliefs as they affected his political perspectives, especially on abolitionism and slavery” (p. xiii).
Despite his lifelong devotion to the Democratic Party, Hawthorne shared many values and beliefs with the newfound Republicans and their platform of emancipation. “If we are fighting for the annihilation of slavery,” he wrote his friend Horatio Bridge when the war was a month old, “. . . it may be a wise object.” One year later, when he traveled to Washington to get a closer glimpse of the conflict, he encountered a group of “contraband” (former slaves who had escaped and fled past Union lines) and aided them with food, money, and passage on a train heading north. What Hawthorne found so confoundingly wrongheaded about the Republican Party in general and its radical abolitionist wing in particular was their certainty, self-righteousness, fanaticism, and scarcely concealed bloodlust. “For Hawthorne,” Reynolds observes, “a persistent danger of New England righteousness was its tendency to lead followers into confusing darkness rather than clear light” (p. 73).

Reynolds is especially good at tracing Hawthorne’s constitutional mistrust of moral certitude, which stemmed from the novelist’s early study of the Puritan past, particularly the Salem witch trials. “Just as John Hathorne and Cotton Mather sought to drive Satan from New England,” Hawthorne came to believe that “the abolitionists and Conscience Whigs sought to drive him from the Union” (p. 80). The historical precedent of New Jerusalem’s inhabitants persecuting and hanging Quakers and accused witches convinced Hawthorne that “the impassioned attempts to rid the world of evil could produce results just the opposite of those desired” (p. 62). As the Concord abolitionists became increasingly willing “to condone violence to effect political change” (p. 112), he distanced himself from them—precipitating the “fall” which has become a critical meme in American literary history.

Well-written, scrupulously researched, and simultaneously sympathetic and critical toward its subject, Reynolds’s book is important not only for its historically responsive account of Hawthorne’s widely misunderstood politics but also its invigorating portrait of a perceptive author who struggled to resist the political extremism that swept the Northern states before and after the bombardment of Fort Sumter. As such, Devils and Rebels may stand as a kind of model for avoiding the binary thinking so typical of wartime psychology. A formidable Hawthorne scholar, Reynolds bolsters his discussion with unexpected and at times brilliant readings of his subject’s more obscure works, including The Elixir of Life (1872), published posthumously by Hawthorne’s daughter Una, and Horatio Bridge’s Journal of an African Cruiser (1848), which Hawthorne edited.
If there is a weakness to the book, it is the short shrift Reynolds pays to Hawthorne’s “official” role in politics, both as a repeated beneficiary of the political spoils system and as the close friend and campaign biographer of Franklin Pierce, the Democratic president whose complacency in confronting the South’s growing demands was seen by many as having helped precipitate the war. Reynolds’s point is that Hawthorne’s views, instead of having been aligned with the more conservative elements of the Democratic Party, were in fact far more nuanced than the standard account portrays. Yet the author’s intimate involvement with that party unquestionably influenced the perspectives Reynolds otherwise so wisely and intelligently illuminates.


MIT’s founder, William Barton Rogers (1804–82), has long needed a scholarly biography. Now, thanks to A. J. Angulo, we have a very good one.

Rogers came of age in the midst of the early industrial revolution in the United States, a time of transformation that marked the advent of the modern age in American history. He was raised in an academic family, studied the natural sciences (he eventually specialized in geology), and attended William and Mary College. Like his father, Patrick Rogers, he decided to pursue an academic career, first as a schoolteacher in Baltimore (1825–28), then as his father’s successor at William and Mary (1828–35), and eventually as a professor at the University of Virginia (1835–53). An important turning point occurred between 1835 and 1842, when Rogers directed the state-sponsored Geological Survey of Virginia.

Although fraught with political infighting, organizational difficulties, physical challenges, and ultimate disappointment, the survey taught Rogers several important lessons. One was the significance of combining theory and practice in the education of young people embarking on careers in the “useful arts” (surveying, engineering, manufacturing, industrial science, etc.). Another was the need to