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Gilded Age Cato: The Life of Walter Q. Gresham

Charles W. Calhoun

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Union general, federal judge, presidential contender, and cabinet officer?Walter Q. Gresham of Indiana stands as an enigmatic character in the politics of the Gilded Age, one who never seemed comfortable in the offices he sought. This first scholarly biography not only follows the turns of his career but seeks also to find the roots of his disaffection.

Entering politics as a Whig, Gresham shortly turned to help organize the new Republican Party and was a contender for its presidential nomination in the 1880s. But he became popular with labor and with the Populists and closed his political career by serving as secretary of state under Grover Cleveland.

In reviewing Gresham's conduct of foreign affairs, Charles W. Calhoun disputes the widely held view that he was an economic expansionist who paved the way for imperialism. Gresham, instead, is seen here as a traditionalist who tried to steer the country away from entanglements abroad. It is this traditionalism that Calhoun finds to be the clue to Gresham's career. Troubled with self-doubt, Gresham, like the Cato of old, sought strength in a return to the republican virtues of the Revolutionary generation.

Based on a thorough use of the available resources, this will stand as the definitive biography of an important figure in American political and diplomatic history, and in its portrayal of a man out of step with his times it sheds a different light on the politics of the Gilded Age.

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