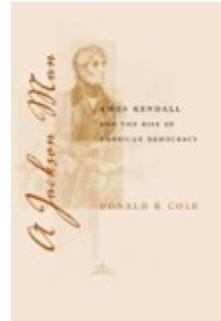


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Donald B. Cole. *A Jackson Man: Amos Kendall and the Rise of American Democracy*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004. xii + 332 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2930-2.

Reviewed by Robert Tinkler (Department of History, California State University, Chico)
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Amos Kendall: Symbol for a Democratic Age?

Sickly, slight of build, and shy, the New England farmer's son seemed unlikely to become a thundering Kentucky newspaper editor, a powerful presidential advisor and Cabinet member, and a wealthy entrepreneur. Yet, as Donald B. Cole tells us in this first modern biography of Amos Kendall, that is precisely what happened. And we need to be told because, I would wager, most students of the Jackson era know relatively little of Kendall's background or his post-Cabinet career; his autobiography, finished after Kendall's death by his son-in-law, contains numerous errors and much misleading information. Historians, then, will be grateful for this excellent biography by Cole. Professor emeritus at Phillips Exeter and author of numerous works on Jacksonian America—including *The Presidency of Andrew Jackson* and *Martin Van Buren and the American Political System*—Cole displays his thorough knowledge of the people and issues of the period.[1] *A Jackson Man* combines Cole's expertise as a political historian with his skills as a sensitive biographer. He renders Kendall as a full, complex person, while providing insights into the early republic that ordinary political history often does not.

Born in the rural north-central Massachusetts village of Dunstable in 1789, Kendall disliked farm work as a boy and hoped for a different future. After working his way through Dartmouth as a teacher in local academies, he briefly studied law in Groton, Massachusetts. Then, in 1814, ambitious and growing in self-confidence, he opted to leave New England for good. After a brief stay in the nation's capital (just months before the British burned

the city), he headed West—to Kentucky—to pursue new opportunities.

Two examples from this period of Kendall's life demonstrate the amazing smallness of the antebellum American world. As Kendall made his way to Kentucky for the first time, he hitched a ride down the Ohio from Pittsburgh on a flatboat with William Barry—who Kendall later replaced as Jackson's Postmaster General. Not long after, when Kendall found himself unemployed because a promised teaching job in Lexington failed to materialize, Henry Clay's wife, Lucretia, rescued the nearly penniless young man by hiring him to tutor the Clay children at Ashland. So, in short order, Kendall met two influential men (and one woman) who would open doors for him politically.

Although Kendall had been interested in politics back home in New England—even leading a group of young Republicans at Federalist-dominated Dartmouth—his real political education began in Kentucky. Capitalizing on excellent debating and writing skills sharpened in college, Kendall joined the ranks of the politically important newspaper editors in the state. First, he ran papers in relatively small Georgetown (the *Minerva* and then the *Patriot*) before moving in the autumn of 1816 to the capital, Frankfort, to edit (and eventually own in full) the *Argus of Western America*. Supporting allies, including Clay and Congressman Richard Johnson, Kendall gained a reputation for cutting invective and persuasiveness. He also discovered that the republicanism of his

youth played less well in the rough-hewn West than did a more democratic sort of rhetoric. Early in his career, he defended Johnson's support of the Compensation Act of 1816, which replaced the low per diem received by each member of Congress with an annual salary of \$1,500. When this proved unpopular in Kentucky (as indeed it was elsewhere), Kendall began self-consciously adopting and advocating positions that the majority backed. This represented, according to Cole, an important step for Kendall "down the road toward democracy" (p. 57). Later, this one-time supporter of the Second Bank of the United States turned on the institution during the Blue Grass State's "Relief War," a political struggle occasioned by the economic difficulties of the Panic of 1819. He honed his democratic language during this episode and in the related fight between New Court and Old Court parties that followed.

In the Kentucky section of the book (and, indeed, later on), Cole does not always make clear precisely how committed Kendall might have been to the policies his editorials backed or to the ideals of "democracy." Cole's Kendall seems at times contemptuous of the masses, powerfully influenced by his desire for personal financial advancement, and willing to trim his sails to the prevailing political winds to maintain his editorships. What Kendall most keenly understood, as Cole does show well, was the effectiveness in Kentucky (and later more widely in Jacksonian America) of populist rhetoric given the political reality of universal white manhood suffrage and majority rule.

That hard-won understanding—and his split with Clay over matters both political and financial—led Kendall into his most important political relationship, with Andrew Jackson. Leading up to the 1828 election, Kendall's columns blasted Adams for his "corrupt bargain" with Kendall's old ally, Clay, in the previous presidential contest. His editorial and political efforts helped Jackson carry Kentucky, and he moved to Washington—permanently, as it turned out—just after the election to claim his reward.

During the Jackson administration, Kendall became one of the president's closest advisors. First as fourth auditor of the Treasury and then as Postmaster General, he proved a competent and thrifty administrator. But he obtained most of his power not from these official positions, but from his role as Jackson's favorite writer. Putting explanations of the president's policies in language to which he knew ordinary folks back in Kentucky and throughout the nation would respond well, Kendall

helped shape the image of Jackson as a man of the people. Cole notes that Kendall wrote more of Jackson's important public papers than any other advisor. Especially significant is the author's case that, contrary to the claims of Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and others that Roger Taney penned the Bank Veto message, Kendall deserves to be known as its major author.

After leaving the Cabinet (where he served through the first three years of the Van Buren administration) and especially following the Whigs' 1840 victory, Kendall experienced personal hard times. Feuds, politics, and debts all contributed to his problems. For instance, he had a blow up with his old editor-ally (and creditor) Francis Blair in 1842 that resulted in their permanent estrangement from each other. Even after the Democrats retook the presidency in 1844, James K. Polk forsook Kendall as an advisor. His financial reverses included an adverse civil judgment that left him in significant debt; the court also ordered that he not leave the District of Columbia until he paid the plaintiffs, something that took at least a year.

Then Kendall hit pay dirt. In 1845, he became an agent of Samuel F. B. Morse to promote his telegraph; this arrangement led to great wealth for the once penurious editor. Cole's fascinating story of Kendall's subsequent business activities reminds us that the subject of this biography was more than just the brilliant political writer most historians know. Kendall worked assiduously to build a New York-based system of telegraph lines, and, despite some challenges, largely succeeded. His connections with Morse gave him both the means and the motivation to become a philanthropist. Enriched by Morse's telegraph, he also took an interest in the hearing impairment suffered by the inventor's wife, Sarah. In the late 1850s, he began organizing and financing what became Gallaudet University, the nation's first college for deaf students. Despite years of religious skepticism, he also lavished funds on a Washington Baptist church in the years before his death in 1869.

In the end, what made Kendall tick? As the subtitle indicates, Cole emphasizes the importance of democracy as a unifying theme. But there is an occasional ambiguity in how Cole uses the term "democracy." He acknowledges, of course, that Kendall's commitment to democracy—in the sense of majority rule—was flawed for his exclusion of non-whites and women from political power. But, as suggested earlier, Kendall seems not to have believed deeply in the wisdom of the majority of white men; rather, one could argue that his Kentucky ex-

perience taught him to figure out the popular position and then take it. Once he became adept at doing so, he was able to shape popular will through his rhetoric. The notion of democracy Cole employs goes beyond majority rule to include a socio-economic component. At the beginning of the book, Cole defines democracy as being rooted in “an egalitarian society in which the mass of the people enjoy what Gordon Wood has called a ‘rough equality of condition’” (p. 5). If so, is that not contrary to the nineteenth-century liberal notion that Cole rightly sees at the heart of the Bank Veto message, one that seeks equality of opportunity but accepts economic inequality (pp. 169-170)? Part of the difficulty in pinning down “democracy” relates to the fact that, as Cole states, the very concept “was evolving” in Kendall’s time (p. 5). And, surely, Cole is correct to point out that many of the techniques Kendall pushed—patronage and partisan organizing chief among them—helped democracy evolve towards greater inclusiveness by inspiring greater numbers of white men to get involved in politics.

Meanings of “democracy” shifted in Kendall’s lifetime in part because of the rapid economic changes going on about him, changes whose impact on Kendall Cole demonstrates well. But, as Cole seeks in the conclusion to tie together the various strands of Kendall’s life (the ambition that took him from a Massachusetts farm out West and then to Washington, his business pursuits, his political activities, his interest in improving communications), the author misses an opportunity to put those changes in a broader framework. Cole does cogently argue that an economy characterized by technological innovations in transportation and communications allowed opportunities for the bright and ambitious—like Kendall—to “get ahead.” Curiously, however, he shies away from placing the changes in transportation, communications, and economics under the rubric of the “market revolution,” a concept he employed to frame his 1993 study of Jackson’s presidency. In that earlier book, he suggested that the underlying issue for Jackson involved whether he would embrace the economic changes sought by commercial-minded Americans or seek to conserve values associ-

ated with the agrarian-minded. Ultimately, he argued, Jackson “was powerless to hold back the market revolution.”[2] Since that book’s publication, and influenced by the 1994 appearance of William Gienapp’s trenchant critique of Charles Sellers’s *The Market Revolution*, Cole has apparently abandoned the concept with which Sellers is so identified.[3] But even if one objects to some of Sellers’s particular arguments, there is no need to throw the baby out with the bathwater. The “market revolution” remains a useful historical paradigm for understanding the grasping ambition of Amos Kendall and many of his contemporaries. Indeed, one might argue that a good reason to call Kendall “a Jackson man” is that he, like so many others in his time, was decidedly a “man on the make,” a person who advanced from humble origins to power and wealth by taking advantage of expanding political and business opportunities in the period after the War of 1812.

A full-scale biography of Amos Kendall is long overdue. Fortunately, we now have *A Jackson Man*—diligently researched, clearly organized, well written, and full of insights. In short, specialists in the early nineteenth century once again owe a debt of gratitude to Donald Cole.

Notes

[1]. Donald B. Cole, *The Presidency of Andrew Jackson* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993); and Cole, *Martin Van Buren and the American Political System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984)

[2]. Cole, *The Presidency of Andrew Jackson*, pp. 14-15, 272 (quotation).

[3]. Cole cites Gienapp on p. 170, n. 38, specifically to counter Sellers’s characterization of the Bank Veto as anti-capitalist, but his rejection of Sellers and of the market revolution concept appears all-encompassing. See William E. Gienapp, “The Myth of Class in Jacksonian America,” *Journal of Policy History* 6 (1994): pp. 232-259; and Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

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