

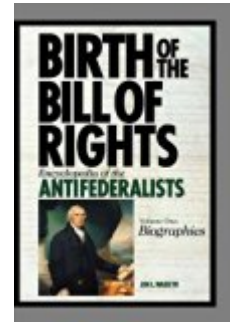
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jon L. Wakelyn. *Birth of the Bill of Rights: Encyclopedia of the Antifederalists; Volume 1—Biographies*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2004. xxiii + 262 pp. \$199.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-33194-7.

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Ladies and Gentlemen, Meet Your Antifederalists

Antifederalist writings and scholarly commentary on the opponents of the Constitution have both become readily available in the last quarter-century. What has not been readily available, until now, are concise biographical sketches of the Antifederalists. Jon L. Wakelyn has compiled biographical entries on 140 leading Antifederalists in his *Birth of the Bill of Rights: Encyclopedia of the Antifederalists*. The entries run from a paragraph to about four pages in length, averaging just under two pages. In them Wakelyn describes the personal, professional, and political achievements of the leading critics of the Constitution and cites sources where readers can uncover more information about each figure. The volume contains a brief profile of the Antifederalist movement as a whole based on the biographical data compiled and an essay on “essential sources.”

The utility of each biographical sketch depends largely on the individual entry. The most prominent Antifederalists such as Patrick Henry, Elbridge Gerry, and George Clinton each have their own biographers. Entries on these figures serve as a shorthand reference and a source guide for more serious study. For the most obscure Antifederalists treated here the entries contain close to everything we know about these individuals. Between these two categories readers will find interesting information about the middle-level politicians who aimed to defeat or improve the Constitution. Of particular interest are the biographical sketches of the few printers who aided the Antifederalist cause.

Such a work requires that editorial decisions be made about who merits inclusion. For the most part Wakelyn’s choices are sound. He includes the “ratifying Antifederalists” from New York, who voted in favor of the Constitution after it became clear that ten states had ratified and that the state would be left behind by the new government if they did not accede to it. Several who equivocated about the Constitution, like Samuel Adams, are included as well. In a few cases, I thought individuals who warranted inclusion were left out, like Arthur Fenner, who served as Rhode Island’s governor during part of that state’s contest over ratification.

The information contained in the entries accurately reflects what we know about these individuals from secondary sources. Wakelyn has included information not only from the better known scholarly works on the Antifederalists, he also has found many biographical tidbits in local histories and family chronicles. Those learning about the Antifederalists for the first time will profit from the thumbnail sketches of what animated each individual’s opposition to the Constitution. Even diligent students of the Antifederalists, however, can learn biographical details from the encyclopedia. I had no idea that New Jersey’s Abraham Clark died of complications from sunstroke (p. 48), or that Maryland’s Luther Martin represented Aaron Burr at the latter’s treason trial (p. 131), or that North Carolina’s Duncan McFarland was convicted of rape (p. 139, presumably after and not before he was elected to Congress [?]).

Unfortunately, our knowledge of many Antifederalists is still pretty sketchy. This means that even though the book accurately reflects our knowledge, there are significant gaps in the record and some reliance on speculation. For example, most of the Antifederalists' writings were published under pseudonyms, so there is a good deal of confusion as to who authored even their most profound works. Wakelyn echoes the state of current scholarship on the subject, which in some cases is pretty clearly mistaken. Additionally, there are occasional factual errors. Samuel Bryan, eighteen years old in 1777, is deemed "too young to participate in the American Revolution" (p. 28) while William Cabell "turned revolutionary" in 1769 (p. 38)—before anyone seriously contemplated armed separation from Great Britain. These errors are relatively few and do not significantly detract from the work as a whole.

More confusing is the choice of title. While the Antifederalists frequently complained that the federal Constitution did not secure popular rights, the origin of the actual Bill of Rights involves both Federalists and Antifederalists. Many Federalists came to support passage of the Bill of Rights. Indeed, its provisions were written by that champion of the Constitution James Madison and sanctioned by the Federalist-dominated First Congress. While most Antifederalists were heartened by its proposal and ratification, some thought the Bill of Rights was a distraction designed to obscure the real issue: that self-government had been taken away from the people as they exercised it in the states. The title is also suspect because the Antifederalist legacy encompasses more than the Bill of Rights. The robustness of the division of powers between the national government and the state governments, for instance, is part of the Antifederal legacy.

Nevertheless, set onto the shelves of a good refer-

ence collection, this work will interest new audiences in the lives and the legacy of the Antifederalists. This biographical dictionary will help to humanize those who fought over the Constitution, and will point interested readers to many valuable sources for further consideration. The "Essay on Essential Sources" at the end of the volume is an up-to-date and fair characterization of primary source material and secondary scholarship. Anyone looking to do research on the Antifederalists would do well to consult this list. I can think of only a few major arguments about the Antifederalists that are excluded, most notably Cecelia M. Kenyon's venerable article from the *William & Mary Quarterly* describing the Antifederalists as "Men of Little Faith" in democracy and Kenneth R. Bowling's description of Antifederalist opposition to the Bill of Rights.[1]

Those who study these pages will probably want a more adequate summary of the nature of Antifederalism than is presented in the author's introduction, but there are books readily available which contain such summaries. The second volume in this series—not reviewed here—reprints Antifederalist writings and speeches. That work has significant competition from other authors, including the one writing this review, but for concise biographical sketches of those who opposed ratification of the Constitution, volume 1 of Wakelyn's *Birth of the Bill of Rights* sets the standard.

Note

[1]. Cecelia M. Kenyon, "Men of Little Faith: The Anti-Federalists on the Nature of Representative Government," *William & Mary Quarterly*, 3d series, 12 (1955): pp. 3-43; Kenneth R. Bowling, "'A Tub to the Whale': The Founding Fathers and the Adoption of the Bill of Rights," *Journal of the Early American Republic*, 8 (1988): pp. 223-251.

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