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Richard N. Rosenfeld. *American Aurora: A Democratic-Republican Returns. The Suppressed History of Our Nation's Beginnings and the Heroic Newspaper that Tried to Report It.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. xi + 988 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-15052-5; $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-19437-6.

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Recapturing the Sense of Crisis

American Aurora is a difficult book to categorize. Over 900 pages in length, it offers a day-by-day (or rather, issue-by-issue) account of the trials and tribulations of Benjamin Franklin Bache's Philadelphia *Aurora*, a Republican newspaper renowned for its fiery opposition to high Federalism of the late 1790s. Proceeding through several years, the book offers excerpts from each issue, accompanied by related passages from the personal writings of public figures, and from Federalist newspapers such as the *Gazette of the United States* and *Porcupine's Gazette*. Grounded on a close reading of early national newspapers and attention to the narrative of high politics, the book is *almost* entirely constructed of a pastiche of primary materials. Almost. For rather than having the newspaper tell its own story, Rosenfeld provides a narrator, assuming the persona of William Duane, Bache's successor as editor of the *Aurora*. Rosenfeld uses Duane as a commentator and historian, interjecting his comments into the flow of newspaper commentary to be sure that readers interpret it properly, according to Rosenfeld/Duane's point of view.

American Aurora is thus not a simple history of a Republican newspaper. Narrated by Duane and filled with his personal asides and observations, it reads like a work of fiction. Yet, grounded as it is in primary materials, it is not entirely fictional. In essence, Rosenfeld has created an extremely effective mode of historical storytelling, full of seemingly accurate detail, carefully selected and arranged to present Duane's world-view as the objective truth. Duane's truth, as portrayed by Rosenfeld, is populated by democratic heroes and aristocratic Federalist villains engaged in a violent struggle for control of the new republic's soul. Full of supposedly shocking revelations about George Washington, John Adams, and their Federalist friends, it is intended to be a "suppressed history" that reveals the truth in a way that historians have not yet dared to attempt.

The book's structure is crucial to this historical agenda. Presented as a radically new look at the 1790s, the work relies for its credibility on our willingness to believe that there is, indeed, a suppressed history that reveals the truth about Founders that we have long known and loved. Thus, after an initial section that concludes with Bache's death, the book's second section retreats to the era of the American Revolution, demonstrating that George Washington was not the "Father of Our Country," but rather, an incompetent general who won the war due only to Benjamin Franklin's assistance in France; that John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay were monarchists with an evil agenda; and and that Adams, in particular, had a vengeful jealousy of Franklin intense enough to affect his better judgment and reason. With this historical "reality" under our belts, we then return to the 1790s in the book's third section, where we see the fruit born of such corruption, jealousy, and incompetence. Editors are jailed and die, and the future looks grim, until Republicans take control in 1800 and save the day. Benjamin Franklin is the hero of this morality tale, the real "Father of Our Country" who wanted a true democracy and a one-house national legislature, rather than the monarchical Senate that we have today. (One of the goals of Rosenfeld's book is to remind us that "it is not by chance that America's Presidents and senators are, on average, wealthier than members of the House of Representatives; it is by design ..." [p. 907]). As a proponent of a tripartite government, John Adams is the ultimate

villain, foiling Franklin's hopes and decrying his reputation, and enforcing monarchical rule with the Sedition Act, which Rosenfeld seems to attribute to Adams alone.

Duane's presence in this narrative is crucial, for this is a book with a mission. Assuming his persona gives Rosenfeld leeway to present an emotional expose of high Federalists as the objective truth. Yet, although he readily admits that his history depicts "a radical 1790s Democratic-Republican point of view," he also states that "those who object to the anachronicity and other deficiencies of this choice may interpret the narrator's first-person/present-tense statements to be the author's third-person/past-tense statements about W[illiam] D[uane] and his time" (p. 920, n19). In other words, Duane's point of view is Rosenfeld's point of view. Rosenfeld clearly considers such personal involvement far superior to "the narrative voice of the traditional historian (presumably impartial, implicitly omniscient, nearly anonymous, emotionally opaque)" (p. 920, n19). Some might argue that it is possible to capture the immediacy and emotion of a historical moment without such emotional excess. The historian's palette has far more subtle shadings than cold and detached "tranquility" or blind emotional involvement (p. xi).

Blurring Rosenfeld's precise relationship with his narrative, Duane's presence as a narrator is an effective rhetorical stance–though Rosenfeld's mask occasionally slips, as when Duane cites "historians" to prove his point–usually, to demonstrate that George Washington and John Adams were not the noble Founders that "historians" would have us believe – a piece of circular logic that reveals one of the underlying goals of Rosenfeld's narrative. As Rosenfeld (not Duane) explains in a final note: "As Poor Richard sagaciously, perhaps tautologically, and much too quietly observed, *Historians relate not so much what is done, as what they would have believed.* The historian's testimony is, at best, only hearsay" (p. 907). There is some sort of historian's conspiracy to protect the Founders' reputations, Rosenfeld suggests, positioning his work to reveal "the" truth, or as he phrases it, "the story of America," a "suppressed history of our nation's beginnings and the heroic newspaper that tried to report it."

"Suppressed history," "heroic newspaper"–such epithets suggest that Rosenfeld has created a history as biased as any other. He admits as much in an introductory author's note, where he confesses that after reading the *Aurora*, he "saw the America these editors saw. It was then that I shared their fears" (p. xi). Indeed, in its way, the narrative offers a fine depiction of the sensational, emotional, screamingly partisan diatribes that characterized political print culture of the early republic. Evidence is chosen selectively; personal correspondence is ransacked for suggestive passages; and a complex political dialogue is condensed into a life-and-death struggle between evil monarchical Federalists and noble democratic Republicans. John Adams "puffed at 'seegars' and believed in monarchy," Duane/Rosenfeld tells us conspiratorially at his narrative's start (p. 3). What does this mean? That Adams admired monarchical values and organization? That he assumed that a monarchy was best for the United States? That he was attempting to implement an American monarchy himself? There is a world of difference between these possibilities. An early national Republican like Duane might not have seen a difference; the period's prevailing fears, passions, and instabilities virtually would have prevented it. A syllable uttered in praise of monarchy would seem to threaten the infant republic, point of fact. Yet what is a modern reader to make of such a statement? (And did Adams smoke cigars?) John Jay, too, had "monarchical leanings," Rosenfeld tells us. Fair enough. But to substantiate his claim he includes the following quote from a letter to George Washington: "Shall we have a king? Not in my opinion while other experiments remain untried. Might we not have a governor-general limited in his prerogatives and duration? Might not Congress be divided into an upper and lower house–the former appointed for life, the latter annually–and let the governor-general … have a negative on their acts? " (p. 465). Here, Jay is dismissing the idea of a king, as long as "other experiments" remain feasible. Why is he a monarchist? For desiring a strong executive and a Senate for life? By simplifying early national politics into a battle between forces for good and evil, Rosenfeld converts subtle distinctions into accusations, and modern-day suspicions into historical truth.

Which is not to say that Washington, Adams, Jay, Hamilton, and their Federalist pals deserve untarnished reputations (though the curmudgeonly John Adams would be amazed to hear that he had one to begin with). As Rosenfeld/Duane asserts, the founding Federalists were ambitious, self-interested, and hyper-sensitive to criticism. Some were avid land speculators; others had political appetites that far exceeded their capabilities. Washington was not a stellar military commander and could not have won the war without France's aid, and John Adams was, indeed, vain and self-absorbed. These men zealously protected their reputations, even to the

point of silencing their foes. Certainly, when contemplating the annals of history, they attempted to doctor the historical record, re-writing or destroying problematic correspondence. Yet, all of these things were true of their Republican opponents as well. In his eagerness to create a suppressed "truth" about the Federalists, Rosenfeld sometimes suggests differently. For example, writing of Washington's death, Rosenfeld/Duane informs readers that Martha Washington "immediately" burned some of his papers, his nephew Bushrod discarded some, and then licensed their publication to Jared Sparks, who "will control, withhold, and even reword them (for the sake of Washington's reputation) and will be their only publisher for the next hundred years" (p. 726). Apart from overlooking John Marshall's five-volume 1805 biography of Washington, written with original papers under the inspection of Bushrod Washington, this statement suggests the onset of a historical conspiracy to protect Washington's image, rather than the haphazard documentary practices of the early nineteenth century, inflicted on the papers of many, if not most of the Founders.

Minor though they might seem, such half-truths and creative adaptations have some force when taken collectively. One wonders what an average member of the reading public would conclude. For such is Rosenfeld's audience. As he informs us in his final note, he hopes that *American Aurora* will show "First, that historians and publishers need not fear exposing the public to large quantities of history's source materials which comprise, after all, our safest vehicle for time travel," and "Second, that the public need not eschew footnotes or resort to historical fiction to find the past exciting. History's first-person/present-tense materials, properly presented, can be thrilling"–praiseworthy goals that I endorse heartily. Yet would the reading public know that it was not John Adams alone who "ended America's freedoms of speech and of the press"–that the Alien and Sedition Acts were acts of Congress born of real fears, rather than further evidence of Adams's evil monarchical plot (p. 523)? Would they know that future Republican James Madison contributed to the *Federalist* essays (1787-1788), depicted by Rosenfeld/Duane as a highly suspect centralizing tome, largely the work of "Alexander Hamilton, the New York lawyer and Federalist leader who prefers a hereditary monarch and senators for life" (p. 480)? Would they know that Thomas Paine's chilling condemnation of George Washington, quoted throughout Rosenfeld/Duane's account of the Revolution, was not an objective appraisal penned in the 1770s, but rather, a 1796 outburst of rage at Washington's supposed refusal to gain Paine's release from a French prison (p. 276)? Given the book's format, readers would logically conclude that Paine's words, appearing under a heading such as "Sunday, March 17, 1776" are contemporaneous with the events described. Indeed, although Rosenfeld informs us that his newspaper excerpts are supplemented by "same-day reactions" from *Aurora* readers and "same-day writings" of government officials, some of his evidence was written decades later (p. xi).

Such creative use of documentary evidence, joined with Rosenfeld's tone and adopted persona, suggests that his work is more fictional than "historical"–a judgment that is not intended to be condemnatory. As a work of fiction, *American Aurora* accomplishes much, recreating a sense of the fierce partisan combat of the 1790s, enabling modern readers to gain something of the experience of reading battling newspapers in conversation with one another. Proceeding issue by issue, Rosenfeld creates a slow drumbeat of conflict, the threat of suppression under the Sedition Act ever lurking on the horizon. Clearly, he has done a tremendous amount of research, reading widely in a number of newspapers and sampling a broad range of personal correspondence and diaries. The Federalist mindset remains unexplored, but with Rosenfeld/Duane's commentary, readers get a sense of the Republican mindset of resistance. I found Duane's frequent references to "Benny" Bache and "Jimmy" Callendar grating, but other readers might be invited into this alien world through such modern-day familiarized nicknames. The frequent use of exclamation points ("The *Aurora's* advertisements tell much about Republican newsprinting in 1799!"), if intended to achieve a like purpose, is less successful (p. 643).

American Aurora thus achieves some of its goals. It makes creative and evocative use of primary materials, bolstered by footnotes. It breathes life into the political narrative of the 1790s in a manner that will appeal to a wide readership. It reminds readers that the Founders (or at least, Federalist Founders) were not icons, but rather, people who were capable of as many human failings and foibles as the rest of us. It encourages readers to question what they accept as "history." And it focuses attention on the importance of a free press in the founding of the republic. All in all, an admirable accomplishment.

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