

# H-Net Reviews

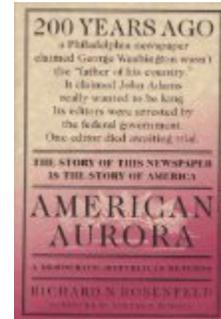
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Richard N. Rosenfeld. *American Aurora: A Democratic-Republican Returns*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. xi + 988 pp.

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.

Reviewed by Michael Durey (Murdoch University)  
Published on H-SHEAR (November, 1998)



In many ways Richard Rosenfeld has written, and compiled, a remarkable, if extremely long, book on American political history at the end of the eighteenth century. It is divided into three parts: the first part, 235 pages, covers the period March to October 1798; the second part, 272 pages, covers the period 1774 to 1793, with a short prologue on the Seven Years' War; and the third part, 380 pages, covers the period October 1798 to 4 March 1801, with a short epilogue, the final quotation in which is dated 1927. Broadly, Part One focuses on Benjamin Franklin Bache's editorship of the (Philadelphia) *Aurora General Advertiser*; Part Two on Bache's grandfather Benjamin Franklin as Founding Father; and Part Three on William Duane's first months as editor of the *Aurora*.

Much of Parts One and Three of the book consists of paragraphs from three Philadelphia newspapers: the *Aurora* itself; and the two main conservative newspapers, John Fenno's and John Ward Fenno's *Gazette of the United States* and William Cobbett's *Porcupine's Gazette*. The authorial voice throughout is William Duane's, with the occasional intervention by Rosenfeld. The book can perhaps best be described as a combination of Duane's scrapbook of his times, his diary, and his manuscript—either for a history of the American War of Independence and the Federal Constitution or for a biography of Franklin. Parts One and Three comprise Duane's scrapbook of press cuttings, and his comments thereon (his “diary”); Part Two comprises his manuscript history, again using press cuttings and his “research note-

book.” If all the copious primary material in the book could have been incorporated into these categories, one might have been able to say that this was an ingenious attempt to write the history of his times through the eyes of the Democratic-Republican printer, William Duane, but the equally copious use of private correspondence—from Jefferson, Washington, Abigail Adams, etc.—which Duane could not have seen, unfortunately thwarts my rather desperate attempt to find symmetry in Rosenfeld's methodology.

What appears to be abundantly clear is the partisan nature of this book. It is written “from Duane's radical Democratic-Republican point of view” (author's, i.e. Rosenfeld's, note, p. xi). Thus its point of view is that of an extremist, who during the administration of John Adams was convinced that American democracy, as expressed by the Federal Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and as interpreted by Thomas Jefferson, was not only under threat from the anti-French policies and repressive legislation of the Federalists, but was about to be replaced by a monarchy. Franklin, Bache, and Duane himself are the heroes of this story (Jefferson's lack of political courage, as commented on by Duane himself, disqualifies him from this pantheon [p. 171]). Washington and Adams are, predictably, Duane's *bêtes noires*. Duane greatly admired Franklin, who despised Adams, yet if anyone can be said to have prevented the United States' collapse into monarchy in 1798-99—assuming such a threat had validity—it was John Adams. Declaring war on France was Adams' best

chance of a second term; instead, he ignored his extreme (and noisy) supporters and made a final, and successful, attempt to reach agreement with France, thus splitting his party and puncturing the ultra-Federalists' pretensions. That, Mr. Jefferson, was political courage; it was not the action of a closet monarchist. Of course, Adams' policy did not halt Duane's attacks on the president's kingly pretensions (see, e.g., p. 600).

Rosenfeld's method is most successful in its attempts, through placing newspaper excerpts, congressional reports and private correspondence together on the day they were written or spoken, to bring the immediacy and uncertainty of events to life. The thrust and counter-thrust of the newspaper war, as the threats posed by the black cockade gangs and McPherson's Blues in 1798 imposed themselves on the Republicans; as the sense of the Republicans' becoming a beleaguered minority grew; and as the great change in public opinion in 1799 occurred, are made all the more vivid by Rosenfeld's day-by-day approach. There is a real sense in which we live through the crises with the protagonists, as Rosenfeld intended.

Yet there are irritations as a result of Rosenfeld's approach. Being Duane enables Rosenfeld to use the (supposed) familiar names of many of the protagonists. Bache is thus nearly always "Benny Bache," except when he is "Young Lightning Rod" (I wonder if Rosenfeld is aware of the *double entendre* encompassing Cobbett's witticism?). James Thomson Callender is usually "Jimmy Callender," although in reality his friends always called him Tom. More irritating is the bibliography, arranged alphabetically under acronyms, the logic of which escapes me. Checking endnotes becomes a real chore.

The \$64,000 question is: is *American Aurora* history, propaganda or a clever postmodernist text? At this point I will, for a moment, become Rosenfeld and quote part of his introductory note [p. xi]:

To provide background, where needed, for this first-

hand testimony [i.e. the press extracts etc.] [and to provide *leitmotif* reminders that *American Aurora* embodies Duane's point of view], *American Aurora* imagines William Duane to be its narrator and its historian [chooser of fact], granting him the advantage of these intervening years but grounding his narrative assertions (which can be read as the author's) in endnoted sources. At the midpoint of this work, William Duane becomes the editor of and speaks through the *Philadelphia Aurora* and thus becomes [as much as possible] the actual narrator of and speaks through this work. From that point, readers can compare Duane's actual voice with the posited one, traveling the path of free inquiry from the imagined to the real, from the given to the tested, which lies at the heart of our First Amendment and which survived its most formidable test at the time of the *American Aurora*.

If I have understood this correctly, Duane thus becomes both participant and late twentieth-century historian, although he is not an objective historian, for his comments as narrator follow the same line as his (real) comments as participant. Whether this is a post-modernist conceit is for the author (authors?) to say. What can be said is that *American Aurora* cannot be dismissed as mere propaganda, for Rosenfeld's method allows us to see into the minds of both sides as each situation developed, and allows us to read the two Fenos' and Cobbett's writings in conjunction with Bache's and Duane's. A selection process has, of course, taken place (by Rosenfeld/Duane); nevertheless, the conservative counter-argument is present here, even if we are not meant to choose it. In one sense, that makes us the historians, making up our minds on the basis of the evidence presented. By a very strange route, perhaps Rosenfeld has achieved with this work what history books are meant to do.

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**Citation:** Michael Durey. Review of Richard N. Rosenfeld, *American Aurora: A Democratic-Republican Returns* and Rosenfeld, Richard N., *American Aurora: A Democratic-Republican Returns. The Suppressed History of Our Nation's Beginnings and the Heroic Newspaper that Tried to Report It*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. November, 1998.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2458>

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