



Kevin J. Hayes. *The Mind of a Patriot: Patrick Henry and the World of Ideas*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008. 184 pp. \$22.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2758-9.

Reviewed by R. B. Bernstein (Distinguished Adjunct Professor of Law, New York Law School)

Published on H-Law (February, 2010)

Commissioned by Christopher R. Waldrep

## Reconsidering Patrick Henry

Kevin J. Hayes, a professor of English at the University of Central Oklahoma, has written several books that place him squarely in the forefront of the new scholarly field known as “the history of the book.” Two of his most recent books use the research and interpretative methodologies associated with the history of the book to cast new light on two key Virginian founding fathers—*The Road to Monticello: The Life and Mind of Thomas Jefferson* (2008) in which, against the odds, Hayes has newly illuminated Jefferson as reader and thinker; and the book now under review.<sup>[1]</sup> In *The Mind of a Patriot*, Hayes has set himself no less daunting a task—and, despite the volume’s modest bulk, he has succeeded once again.

Even biographers favorably disposed to Patrick Henry (1736-99) have tended to minimize his intellectual attainments, scanting his education, his interest in books and ideas, and his capacity for sustained intellectual work. In this, Hayes argues, they have been influenced, whether they know it or not, by the efforts of Thomas Jefferson to denigrate Henry. In letters written for Henry’s first major biographer, William Wirt, Jefferson praised Henry’s eloquence but criticized Henry as lazy, unconcerned with reading, and decidedly disinclined to the intellectual labors that Jefferson thought were required of a lawyer or a politician. Hayes is silent about the possibility that Jefferson’s criticism was actuated by personal animus,<sup>[2]</sup> but he does make the interesting and plausible suggestion that Jefferson’s perceptions of Henry were the result of Jefferson’s embrace of the stage-theory of human cultural development, exemplified by a letter he wrote late in life: “Let a philosophic observer commence a journey from the savages of the Rocky Mountains, eastwardly towards our sea-coast. These he would observe in the earliest stage of association living under no law but that of nature, subscribing and covering themselves with the flesh and skins of wild beasts. He would next find those on our frontiers in the

pastoral state, raising domestic animals to supply the defects of hunting. Then succeed our own semi-barbarous citizens, the pioneers of the advance of civilization, and so in his progress he would meet the gradual shades of improving man until he would reach his, as yet, most improved state in our seaport towns. This, in fact, is equivalent to a survey, in time, of the progress of man from the infancy of creation to the present day” (p. 14)<sup>[3]</sup> For Jefferson, Henry was a textbook example of the “semi-barbarous citizens” whose cultural development approximated that of the ancient bard Homer; thus, it was no surprise that Jefferson found Henry’s eloquence remarkable, praising Henry for speaking the way that Homer wrote. Whatever Jefferson’s motives, he persuaded Wirt to present Henry as a child of nature, though Wirt extolled Henry’s “native genius” as enthusiastically as Jefferson limited and denigrated it.

Hayes argues that ample evidence requires us to jettison this caricature of Henry. He grounds his reinterpretation of Henry on the posthumous inventory of the library that Henry had at his last home, Red Hill, where he died in 1799. *The Mind of a Patriot* reproduces the inventory, carefully and thoughtfully interpreted and expanded, as an appendix, with a prefatory note explaining Hayes’s methods; it is no accident that the resulting catalogue resembles in miniature the great, five-volume magnum opus of E. Millicent Sowerby, *The Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson*.<sup>[4]</sup>

After a first chapter anatomizing and questioning Jefferson’s efforts to denigrate Henry, Hayes presents his main argument in a series of six chapters. His method is to move back and forth between the catalogue of Henry’s library and his extensive research about Henry’s life and career, using each to illuminate the other. While acknowledging that it is sometimes difficult to determine when and why Henry acquired or read a given book (or even to identify some of the cryptic and garbled ti-

tles recorded in the catalogue), Hayes persuasively establishes the credibility of his method and thereby charts Henry's course through life by the bibliographic landmarks he consulted along the way. (This method resembles that used by Jeffrey H. Morrison in his 2008 monograph *The Political Philosophy of George Washington*.)[5]

Chapter 2 seeks to establish "What the Catalogue Says about Henry's Education," tracing the influences of Henry's parents, his uncle Patrick, and other early teachers on his intellectual development, as well as the self-guided course of reading, emphasizing history and classical literature, that the young Henry pursued after his formal education closed. Chapter 3, "The Law," examines Henry's reading and self-training for the bar within the context of legal education in colonial Virginia; noting the parallels between Henry's and Jefferson's reading, the chapter also contrasts Henry's utilitarian preparation for the Virginia bar with the self-consciously intellectual course of training that Jefferson and John Adams pursued. This chapter may be of greatest use to readers of H-Law, but law and legal issues persist as focal points in Henry's life, and in later chapters of *The Mind of a Patriot*.

Chapter 4, "The Sound of Liberty," and chapter 5, "The Discourse of Freedom," juxtapose Henry's reading with his early activities in the Patriot cause, whether as litigator in "the Parsons' Cause" or in his great orations in the House of Burgesses. In considering Henry as orator, which for many is the basis of Henry's enduring fame, Hayes parses the texts of Henry's most famous orations to trace roots or parallels in Henry's reading of such plays as William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and Joseph Addison's *Cato* (a play that also had a powerful influence on George Washington). Chapter 5 also explores Henry's letters about the immorality and baleful influence of slavery, noting his rueful acknowledgment of the contrast between his hatred of slavery and his being a slaveholder. This section further notes how Frederick Douglass and other nineteenth-century abolitionists invoked Henry's rhetoric in support of their cause. Chapter 6, "Swords into Ploughshares," probes Henry's use of books to prepare himself for military command in the first months of the Revolutionary War and later to educate himself about managing a plantation once the war was over. Chapter 7, "Odd Volumes, But Good Books," turns to Henry's reading of travel literature, both for amusement and to illuminate contemporary political issues. For example, Henry steeped himself in books about Spain while following the controversy over John Jay's abortive negotiations in 1785-86 with the Spanish

envoy Don Diego de Gardoqui, which would have sacrificed American navigation rights along the Mississippi River in exchange for a commercial treaty benefiting the New England and mid-Atlantic states. This chapter also notes Henry's growing absorption in religious literature, bolstering his Protestant Christian faith and his determination to combat what he saw as the dangerous forces of deism and atheism. (To this reviewer's surprise, Hayes does not make the obvious connection between Henry's religious reading and what most scholars view as his most famous post-Revolutionary political effort—his 1785 promotion of a bill providing state subsidy for Protestant Christian ministers, which provoked the final, titanic clash between himself and James Madison in the Virginia disestablishment controversy.)

Throughout this concise, well-written, and well-researched monograph, Hayes juxtaposes Henry and Jefferson as readers. For Hayes, Jefferson embodies the extensive reader, who pursues a constant, wide-ranging course of reading and study; by contrast, for Hayes, Henry epitomizes the intensive reader, who reads and rereads a select body of literature over and over again, digging ever deeper into those few books that he deems enlightening and informative. Further, it was not Henry's way to amass a large and impressive library, unlike Jefferson, Madison, Adams, or the colonial aristocrat William Byrd of Westover. Rather, Henry was likely to give a book to a friend, a relative, or a colleague once he had mastered its contents and extracted all that he could from its pages.

At his book's close, Hayes maintains that "books were more integral to the mind of Patrick Henry than to other contemporary intellectuals who amassed great personal libraries" (p. 106). For men such as Jefferson, Adams, or Benjamin Franklin, libraries were storehouses where one could find whatever ideas or information one needed at a given time; the existence of such a storehouse meant that the man who possessed it need not subject his books to close, repeated, attentive study and thereby to assimilate their contents into his mind. By contrast, Hayes insists, Henry "sought to internalize what he read"—a difference of approach that meant that he "was able to make his books a part of his mind" (*ibid.*). Although Hayes valuably illuminates the difference in reading habits between Henry and his bookish contemporaries, he does not persuade this reader, at least, that books were "more integral" to Henry's mind than to the minds of such men as Jefferson, Adams, or Franklin.

*The Mind of a Patriot* is not a complete, comprehensive life of Henry, nor does it pretend to be. Rather, it

is a valuable study in the ways that a leading American politician not usually seen as an intellectual nonetheless explored the world of ideas and how those explorations nourished his political action. Further, it exemplifies how “the history of the book” is not just a new but also a valuable way to enter what Douglass Adair called “the closed circle of meaning” of the late eighteenth-century Atlantic world.[6]

## Notes

[1]. See R. B. Bernstein, review of *The Road to Monticello*, by Kevin J. Hayes, *Journal of American History* 96, no.1 (June 2009): 192-193.

[2]. For an excellent new study of Jefferson as Virginian revolutionary and beleaguered war governor that suggests that the animus between Jefferson and Henry arose after Henry helped to foment the Virginia legislature’s abortive investigation of Jefferson’s conduct as governor, see Michael Kranish, *Flight from Monticello: Thomas Jefferson at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[3]. Thomas Jefferson to William Ludlow, September 16, 1824, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Pe-

terson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1496-1497.

[4]. E. Millicent Sowerby, *Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson: Compiled with Annotations by E. Millicent Sowerby*, 5 vols. (Washington DC: Library of Congress, 1952-59; Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1983), <http://www.loc.gov/rr/rarebook/coll/130.html> (accessed February 11, 2010).

[5]. See also R. B. Bernstein, review of *The Political Philosophy of George Washington*, by Jeffrey H. Morrison, H-Law, H-Net Reviews (January 2010), <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=26363>.

[6]. See generally Trevor Colbourn, ed., *Fame and the Founding Fathers: Essays of Douglass Adair* (New York: W. W. Norton for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1974; Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), xiv-xv. See also Mary Sarah Bilder, Maeva Marcus, and R. Kent Newmyer, eds., *Blackstone in America: Essays of Kathryn Preyer*, pt. 3 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), and the forthcoming H-Law review by R. B. Bernstein.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

**Citation:** R. B. Bernstein. Review of Hayes, Kevin J., *The Mind of a Patriot: Patrick Henry and the World of Ideas*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. February, 2010.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29619>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.