

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Edward Countryman, ed. *What Did the Constitution Mean to Early Americans?* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. xii + 169 pp. \$11.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-18262-5.

Joseph J. Ellis, ed. *What Did the Declaration Declare?* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. xii + 110 pp. \$11.33 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-19063-7.

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Studying Historians at Work

The two books under review are among the first in "Historians at Work," a new series launched by Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press. The goal of this series is to demystify for students what historians do; the method adopted is to provide an array of historians' close-focus examinations of key historical issues and problems. Each volume begins with an introduction setting the background and context of the volume's historical question. The body of the text presents (in the books under review) the key primary document in question, followed by unabridged articles or book chapters by five historians. The editor of each volume chose these readings to illuminate differing aspects of the problems presented by the document, or differing methodological concerns and approaches, or both. Each selection appears with all its original documentation intact, presented as endnotes; in addition, the editor has provided occasional helpful footnotes to define key terms or identify key persons or events. Each book also provides a brief but cogent introduction, questions preceding each reading, a section called "Making Connections" posing questions to tie the readings together, and a brief bibliography. These books are handsomely presented and well-designed, and should appeal to undergraduates or to high-school students in advanced-placement American History courses. With these two volumes, it appears that "Historians at Work" will provide valuable resources for the teaching of American history.

The balance of this review assesses the approach of each volume under review to its chosen problem. The narrow compass of these books of course forces each editor to make what are probably painful decisions to exclude or overlook some issues in favor of others. That point recognized, some decisions of selectivity and omission are more justifiable than others.

Joseph J. Ellis of Mount Holyoke College, author most recently of the award-winning *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Knopf, 1997; Vintage paperback), has focused *What Did the Declaration Declare?* on Thomas Jefferson as the author of the Declaration of Independence. Thus, he has chosen four of his five excerpts from books that focus in whole or in part on Thomas Jefferson: Dumas Malone's *Jefferson the Virginian* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1948); from Carl L. Becker's *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (1922; New York: Vintage, 1958); from Garry Wills's *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (New York: Doubleday, 1978); and from his own *American Sphinx*. (His fifth excerpt, from Pauline Maier's *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* [New York: Knopf, 1997], conveys the same focus though such was not the author's intent.) This focus has the merit of being consistent with the conventional wisdom about both the Declaration and Thomas Jefferson, and it also recognizes that, for most of American history, Jefferson has drawn much of his

centrality in the American story from his status as the Declaration's author. Unfortunately, however, it leaves *What Did the Declaration Declare?* seriously flawed in two avoidable ways.

First, as Pauline Maier has shown in *American Scripture*, Jefferson was less the author of the Declaration than the draftsman assigned the task by a committee of the Second Continental Congress. Jefferson, Maier demonstrates further, drew on a range of rhetorical and historical models for a declaration going back over a century in English and Anglo-American constitutional history. In addition, both Jefferson and the Second Continental Congress were aware of a growing discourse of independence throughout the colonies in late 1775 and early 1776 and drew on it as well in a reciprocal dialogue about the desirability, feasibility, and timing of declaring independence. None of this material appears in Ellis's compilation, however, and his selection from Maier's *American Scripture* directs students' attention to the comparatively uninteresting question about whether the Second Continental Congress butchered or improved Jefferson's draft.

Moreover, Ellis's compilation slights what the Declaration declared in its immediate context as the Americans' final statement in the ongoing constitutional controversy with Great Britain. Rather, Ellis showcases the hoary controversy whether Jefferson's Declaration was a Lockean statement (invoking the scholarship of Carl L. Becker) or an invocation of communitarian Scottish common-sense philosophy (invoking the scholarship of Garry Wills). Maier's *American Scripture*, which in turn was anticipated by the 1981 review essay by John Phillip Reid, "The Irrelevance of the Declaration"[1] (an essay neither reprinted by nor mentioned in Ellis's compilation, though students find it highly illuminating and effective), points out that the passages so closely scrutinized for their Lockean or common-sense roots were actually there to lay the foundation for the invocation of the right of revolution claimed by the Second Continental Congress on behalf of the American people—a right firmly grounded in Anglo-American constitutional history and argument.

In sum, Ellis's book would have been strengthened by his frank acknowledgment that he was more interested in the Declaration as it has evolved in American historical memory rather than in his implied focus on what the Declaration was supposed to declare.

Edward J. Countryman of Southern Methodist University, the general editor of the "Historians at Work" series, has provided a far more useful and effective vol-

ume with *What Did the Constitution Mean to Early Americans?* His five selections superbly lay out historical context for students' discussions of that central question. For example, the famous essay by Isaac Kramnick, "The 'Great National Discussion': The Discourse of Politics in 1787," provides an excellent overview of the controversy over framing and then accepting or rejecting the Constitution. Stephen Patterson's article, "The Federalist Reaction to Shays's Rebellion," similarly gives a first-rate jumping-off point for discussion of the perennial but still-vital question whether the framers of the Constitution were counterrevolutionaries intent on frustrating the democratic American Revolution or moderates seeking to preserve the fruits of the Revolution in the face of domestic and foreign crisis. Countryman also has chosen a useful extract from Gordon S. Wood's still-influential *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969) to examine the achievement of the Federalists in 1787-1788. Balancing these essays, all of which might be read by captious critics as celebrating the achievements of dead white male power-wielders, Countryman has also reprinted Jan Lewis's fine and thought-provoking essay, "'Of Every Age Sex & Condition': The Representation of Women in the Constitution." (He also could have included an essay by, say, William W. Freehling or Paul Finkelman or the late Justice Thurgood Marshall on the relationship of African-Americans to the origins of the Constitution, but that would have strained the size of this book beyond the compact length prescribed by the series.) The concluding essay, the opening chapter of Jack Rakove's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution*, is a valuable and highly accessible historian's perspective on the undying controversy over "original intent."

As a general matter, this new series is a welcome addition to the armory of high-school teachers, undergraduate instructors, and perhaps even professors in law or graduate schools. The publisher boasts that the "Historians at Work" series makes secondary sources the primary focus. That goal may seem questionable in the abstract; we want students at whatever level to retain respect for the primacy of primary sources. And yet these volumes perform a valuable service by bringing the historians' debate, a cliché of overview lectures, to life for the student-reader.

Note

[1.] John Phillip Reid, "The Irrelevance of the Declaration," in Hendrik Hartog, ed., *Law in the American Rev-*

olution and the Revolution in the Law (New York: New York University Press, 1981), 46-89. This essay deserves to be better known.

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