H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Daniel Feller. *The Jacksonian Promise: America, 1815-1840.* Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. xiv + 227 pp. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-5168-1; $38.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5167-4.

Reviewed by Benjamin McArthur (Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists)
Published on H-PCAACA (April, 1996)

The Age of Jackson and the American Dream

The Jacksonian Promise is, quite simply, the finest short period survey that I have read. Daniel Feller has seen and digested the recent secondary literature, has interesting things to say, and says them with an unassuming eloquence. He retells familiar events but wraps them in a bright and compelling new package. This work deserves a wide readership among Americanists; it also promises to be an engaging text for undergraduate courses.

It is arguable that the Age of Jackson has been subject to more historiographic debate than any other peacetime era of our history. To this forum Feller brings a persuasive argument: that Americans generally agreed that their nation was providentially destined for greatness; optimism, not gloom, set the national tone. Yet the exact nature of national purpose and the means of achieving it evoked increasing contention. Stated thus, Feller's argument may appear truistic or even trite. But as he surveys how this tension informed debates on internal improvements, a national bank, and other components of the American system, the evolution of law and interpretation of the Constitution, nationalism versus sectionalism, communitarian and benevolent social reforms, revivalism, the nascent workingmen's movement, the Jacksonian presidency, and finally the evolution of a new two-party system–Feller ably shows that a similar starting point led to very different conclusions for leaders of political and social thought. (His argument resembles Alan Trachtenberg's in *The Incorporation of America* regarding the cultural struggle over definitions of "America" in the later nineteenth century.) A few examples must suffice.

Americans of the 1810s and 1820s were enraptured by the "spirit of improvement" symbolized by the steamboat, the American system of manufacturing, and especially the magnificent network of canals. Lafayette's visit and the fifty-year jubilee celebration of independence occasioned paeans to a boundless national future. But should this victory parade be led by the national government or left to state or individual direction? Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, John Quincy Adams, and other nationalists envisioned a federally coordinated system of transportation, tariffs, and banks as a kind of entrepreneurial infrastructure. However, nationalists discovered that the Virginia tradition of localism now thrived beyond the boundaries of the Old Dominion. Sectionalist fears of federal direction became predominant across the South following the Panic of 1819, suspicions nurtured by the growth of the colonization movement for slaves.

Our national dialectic also evidenced itself in the double-mindedness about banks. Americans were hungry for easy credit with which to pursue their dreams. Yet financial panics evoked vicious attacks on the credit structure and its symbolic heart–the National Bank. Unlike Marvin Myers, Feller does not see Democratic idealogues as yearning for a past age of simplicity; rather, they wished to pursue (vigorously) their American dream on individual terms, wary that centralized planning inevitably descends into pork barrel politics or favoritism to the well-connected.

The unbounded confidence in fashioning the future had even more striking exemplification in the age's utopian communitarian impulse and benevolent efforts. Of course, nowhere else did such keen differences over the proper path to social or personal salvation arise. Feller sees the communitarians' failure as a consequence of our culture's resistence to "overarching systems," and proclivity for "diffusion rather than discipline, toward self-determination and away from supervision, however benign" (p. 83). Likewise, though evangelists such as Charles Finney, abolitionists, and various benevolent reformers had greater long-term influence, they, too, ran up against resistance to their "holistic prescription for progress." Where Evangelicals saw self-evident need for personal regeneration, many Americans saw their preachings as a "threat to moral autonomy and democratic self-determination" (p. 117).

Feller asserts that by the mid-1830s, with the Democrat-Whig party lines clearly drawn, the contending visions of America's future had diverged dangerously. Moreover, Americans' self-image became more jaundiced as they regretfully acknowledged the "speculative excesses, the chicanery and sharp dealing" of their headlong rush to wealth. And the increasingly strident division over slavery hovered ominously above the social landscape.

I fear my sketch of *The Jacksonian Promise* fails to convey the intelligence of the work. The book requires first-hand inspection. I feel confident, though, that Feller's study will take its place beside the existing classics by Schlesinger, Tyler, Pessen, and Sellers as an important interpretation of the age.

This review is copyrighted (c) 1996 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Associations reserve print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu)

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: Benjamin McArthur. Review of Feller, Daniel, *The Jacksonian Promise: America, 1815-1840.* H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. April, 1996.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=408

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact P.C. Rollins at Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.