H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Arnold A. Rogow. *A Fatal Friendship: Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr.* New York: Hill & Wang, 1998. 351 pp. $27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-4753-6.

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Published on H-Pol (May, 2000)

In Search of Hamilton's

Historians and novelists have long sought to understand what drove Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton to their interview at Weehawken with such fatal consequences. According to Arnold Rogow, "...the deeper causes of the duel are to be found in the dark recesses of their relationship and in the personal histories that shaped both their characters and that relationship" (pp. xi-xii). Tracing their inter-connections from the 1770s, through their rivalries in the army, with women, before the bar, and in politics, Rogow argues that Hamilton became obsessed with his hatred of Burr, and that this obsession ultimately led him to force the situation that resulted in the duel. Hamilton, more than Burr, was responsible for his own death. Therein lies the story.

Coming from very different backgrounds, but living parallel lives, Hamilton and Burr became professional and political rivals in New York City. Both men may have met while living in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, prior to the Revolution; each earned distinction in the war, as they would in the pursuit of law in New York, and both emerged as political leaders in state and national affairs. For Burr, who descended from a distinguished lineage of Puritan divines and enjoyed the benefits of family affluence, this journey was easier, although he was not always able to realize the opportunities that opened to him. For example, his service on General Washington's staff was short lived with the result that he never enjoyed Washington's confidence thereafter. When President Adams sought to appoint Burr as a brigadier general during the Quasi-War with France, Washington and Hamilton blocked the nomination. For Hamilton, whose inauspicious pedigree and modest circumstances are too well known to recount, the journey was more challenging. Even if he was not born a gentleman, his gifts and associations, not to mention a propitious marriage into an affluent and influential Hudson valley family, made him one. Despite their obvious accomplishments, both men were flawed. Each lived beyond his means, and both were womanizers, but of the two, Burr was the most self-indulgent and prone to excess. Indeed, Rogow observes that Burr "...achieved little and contributed nothing of lasting value to his country, [and that he] suffers by comparison..." (p. xiii).

Dispatching with the duel in the first chapter, the narrative scheme of the book roughly follows Hamilton's public life. This strategy sometimes obscures the author's major themes. For instance, it is not necessary to develop Hamilton's actions as a nationalist in the 1780s, his role in the ratification of the Constitution, his authorship of part of the Federalist Papers, or his activities as Secretary of the Treasury, to explain his rivalry with Burr. It would have been far more revealing if Rogow had developed two of the major themes he discusses. On the political side, Rogow argues that Burr's defeat of Hamilton's father-in-law for the Senate in 1791 poisoned their relationship, but he does not delve very deeply into the nature of state politics thereafter to explore this rivalry. Others have argued that it was this type of political prominence which resulted in the duel.[1] He also demonstrates that both men, despite their political differences, were linked in various commercial ventures.

Surprisingly Burr sought Hamilton's support in establishing the Manhattan Water Company in 1799 and would place John B. Church, Hamilton's British brother-in-law, on the board of the Holland Land Company. Rogow does a nice job of exploring the intricacies of alien land-holding in New York and how it affected both protagonists. Still, one suspects that this commercial rivalry, especially since Hamilton was so closely associated with the activities of his brother-in-law, may be even more complex and revealing.

The heart of this interpretation is Rogow's assertion that Hamilton was a manic depressive who committed virtual suicide by agreeing to fight a duel with Burr. According to Rogow, Hamilton's recurring physical maladies, in addition to President Washington's unexpected

death in 1799, contributed to the deterioration of his underlying mental condition after 1800, when Hamilton's self-destructive tendencies were most evident. This depression is evident, for example, in a series of letters to Rufus King. Hamilton's decision not to fire, and his serenity in the days preceding the duel, lead Rogow to the conclusion that Hamilton decided to use the duel to commit suicide.

Although much of this interpretation is predicated on some level of psychoanalysis, which Rogow acknowledges is difficult when dealing with people long dead, he spends too little time discussing the psycho-historical models used in his interpretation. Hamilton may have been prone to mood swings, but it would be more convincing if the judgement that he was a manic depressive were predicated upon a more systematic and objective analysis. Similarly, Rogow uses the concept of projective identification to suggest that Hamilton's obsession with Burr may have had a homoerotic component, due to his "…compelling need to defend against an attraction that is experienced as unacceptable in terms of prevailing social and introjected models of masculinity" (p. 266). The scientific basis for "projective identification," as he explains in a footnote quoting a leading authority, "remains one of the most loosely defined and incompletely understood of psychoanalytic conceptualizations" (n. 29, p. 327). One must ask, if it is that inadequate, why use it?

The key to understanding why the duel was inevitable may be found in the subtle negotiations following Burr's challenge. Burr had twice before challenged Hamilton because of offensive remarks and both times Hamilton had avoided a duel by recanting sufficiently to satisfy his wounded honor. At issue the third time was what Hamilton had said in a private political meeting in Albany during the 1804 campaign. In a published personal letter, Dr. Charles D. Cooper wrote that Hamilton "…has come out decidedly against Burr; indeed when he was here he spoke of him as a dangerous man, and who ought not to be trusted" (pp. 231-2). Responding to a published reply from Hamilton's father-in-law, Cooper later elaborated that he "…could detail to you a still more despicable opinion which General Hamilton has expressed of Mr. Burr" (p. 233). Upon the appearance of Cooper's second letter, Burr wrote Hamilton asking for clarification as to what he had said.

The substance of Hamilton's "despicable opinion" has proven elusive. The letters between Hamilton and Burr, or those between their seconds, offer no real insight.[2] Rogow argues that Burr could not have considered Hamilton's previously expressed opinions on his political career, or his well known efforts to thwart Burr's political ambitions in 1800 and 1804, as being that offensive. Instead, he adopts Gore Vidal's conjecture that the "despicable opinion" was an allegation that Burr had an incestuous relationship with his daughter.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Rogow examines that relationship in great detail, as well as Hamilton's awareness of it. Earlier in the book, Rogow concludes that "…Burr in his long life probably never loved any woman, with the possible exception of his wife, as much as he loved his daughter, and probably she never loved any man, not excluding her husband, as much as she loved her father" (p. 94). He later observes: "The relationship between Burr and Theo has been thought by a few observers not merely to have been close but to have possessed some of the affective qualities commonly associated with marital love" (p. 192).

Having established that such a relationship existed, the next step would be to ascertain if Hamilton learned of it. According to Rogow, Hamilton may have learned of Burr's alleged intimacy with his daughter because she may have confided this secret to Hamilton's daughter, who was "rumored" to have known Burr (pp. 192-93). This would mean that Hamilton was aware of their incestuous relationship long before the Albany meeting. Even allowing a broad latitude in writing narrative history, especially where there is ample evidence that family members destroyed intimate correspondence in an effort to protect the family reputation, Rogow sometimes speculates too freely. If the daughters were only "rumored" to have known each other, why should we assume that they were confidants, or that Hamilton's daughter shared any intimate information with her father?

While the circumstantial evidence may support Rogow's contention that Hamilton had an affair with his sister-in-law, Angelica Church, the inference that both Burr and Hamilton had carnal knowledge of Mrs. Reynolds is more difficult to accept on the evidence proffered. Consider Rogow's assertion: "If Hamilton knew or suspected that Burr had had an affair with Maria [Reynolds] at any time, he left no written record of this belief, and although the possibility cannot be wholly ruled out, taking into account Burr's proclivities, there is no evidence that he and Maria had such a relationship, or that he engaged in any conspiracy with her and her husband" (p.154). Does this establish that Hamilton had another reason to resent Burr; or is it a flight of fancy on the part of an author who would like to introduce another dimension to the rivalry? These and other assertions by Rogow reflect more the standards of tabloid journalism

than history. For instance, his observation that "[o]ne of [Burr's] conquests not long after he took his seat in the Senate may have been Dolley Payne Todd, more familiar to us as Dolley Madison (1768-1849)" (p. 167) elevates the undocumented speculation from a poor biography into historical truth.

Rogow's conclusion that the fatal duel was due to Hamilton discounts evidence that Burr was quick to take offense and to challenge anyone who questioned his honor. Burr, as Rogow points out, had issued challenges to Hamilton twice before which were settled with an apology. He also alludes to, but does not elaborate upon, a duel which Burr fought with Hamilton's brother-in-law in 1799. The newspaper account of this event reveals a remarkable similarity with the Burr-Hamilton duel: "[i]n consequence of some unguarded language used by John B. Church, esq., of this city, at a private table in town, reported to col. Burr, the latter sent Mr. Church a challenge, which being accepted, the gentlemen met on Monday evening about sun-set on the Jersey shore...."[3] This undercuts Rogow's assertion that Burr was not "easily offended" (p. 237), especially since the offensive remarks were made "at a private table." A more detailed examination of this incident might offer greater insight into the controversies between Burr and Hamilton's extended family at a time when Rogow feels that Hamilton was becoming obsessive about Burr.

Rogow's interpretation suggests some important avenues for additional research. For instance, a comprehensive examination of the dueling culture in the early national period would be especially insightful. As Rogow points out, Hamilton lost his son to a duel, and he himself had almost fought a duel with James Monroe over the Reynolds affair. While other studies concentrate on dueling as an expression of a southern code of honor in the nineteenth century, it may have been more prevalent in other areas of the country in the early national period than is commonly thought. As the Quasi-War with France ended and the new Army was being disbanded, for example, there were numerous newspaper accounts of duels between officers whose honor had been impugned in one way or another.

It may well also be that in order to understand affairs of honor historians may have to explore the meaning of masculinity in the early national period. Rogow introduces the topic in several ways. Citing Hamilton's correspondence with Henry Laurens during the Revolutionary War, as well as his admiration for Major Andre, he concludes that Hamilton was comfortable expressing affection for other men, while observing that Burr was "...more secure and self-confident..." (pp. 78-79).

Questions of honor also had to be settled between gentlemen and those who were not. As Rogow reports, James Cheetham maligned Burr in the public press in the so-called Pamphlet War in 1802. He shows in passing that Burr sued Cheetham, one of Michael Durey's "painite" expatriate editors who was far from being a gentleman, twice for libel in the state courts.[4] While this is not developed as a major theme, Norman L. Rosenberg has shown that libel actions and monetary damages were becoming increasingly popular with gentlemen seeking to defend their honor in the early republic.[5] One such action drove Peter Porcupine from Philadelphia. Furthermore, as William Duane discovered after his reports on the Northampton Insurrection published in the Philadelphia *Aurora* offended militia officers, gentlemen punished social inferiors with the whip.[6]

In the final analysis, the tragedy of the duel was that Hamilton's very productive life was cut short and Burr's great gifts were never realized. I suspect that other historians of this duel will distance themselves from the Vidal-Rogow conclusion of Hamilton's "more despicable opinion" of Burr, and focus instead on their political rivalry. Even if Hamilton had been a manic depressive personality, he was far from washed-up as a political leader in New York, as his influence in the 1804 gubernatorial defeat of Burr suggests. Nonetheless, by focusing on the question of dueling in the early republic and attempting to probe the motivations of Hamilton and Burr, this book offers new insight into a complex series of historical events.

Notes

[1]. See, for instance, Joanne B. Freeman, "Dueling as Politics: Reinterpreting the Burr-Hamilton Duel," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Series, 53/2 (April 1996), 289-318.

[2]. While Rogow does a nice job of explaining the letters, for those interested, the originals may be found in Harold C. Syrett and Jean G. Cooke, eds., *Interview in Weehawken: The Burr-Hamilton Duel* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1960).

[3]. *Gazette* of the United States (Philadelphia), 6 September 1799, reprinted from the New York *Daily Advertiser*.

[4]. A number of immigrant republican newspaper editors were involved in controversies with gentlemen. For their common backgrounds as radicals, see Michael Durey, "Thomas Paine's Apostles: Radical Emigres and the Triumph of Jeffersonian Republicanism," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Series, 44/4 (October 1987), 661-88.

[5]. Norman L. Rosenberg, *Protecting the Best Men: An Interpretive History of the Law of Libel* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

[6]. William Duane, "Minutes of Examination. Taken in Short Notes – On the Trial of the Rioters, for a Riot and Assault on William Duane, on 15 May 1799 – Trial," 28 April 1801 (Philadelphia, 1801).

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Citation: Whitman H. Ridgway. Review of Rogow, Arnold A., *A Fatal Friendship: Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. May, 2000.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4104

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