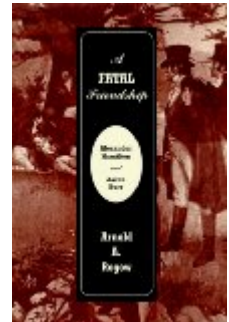


Arnold A. Rogow. *A Fatal Friendship: Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1998. 351 pp. \$27.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8090-4753-6.



Reviewed by Joanne B. Freeman

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In *A Fatal Friendship*, Arnold Rogow offers a readable account of the conflicted and ultimately fatal relationship between Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr, a dramatic story with a bang-up ending. The book circles in on that final deadly encounter, discussing the two men's youth, Revolutionary War service, and families and friends, then progressing through the 1780s and 1790s, taking us ever nearer to July 11, 1804. Final chapters detail the duel and its aftereffects, and an epilogue glances at the two men's treatment at the hands of history. As this rapid stride through two lifetimes might suggest, the book is more a character study than a chronological history, focused on the development and emotional evolution of its two protagonists in relation to their final encounter. As Rogow himself explains it, his book suggests that "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" (p. xi). In the final outcome, Hamilton garners much of the responsibility for his duel with Burr. In Rogow's words, Hamilton's "character structure was more impaired than Burr's, and that as a consequence

he was more at fault in bringing their relationship to a violent end" (p. xiv).

As this last statement suggests, *A Fatal Friendship* is a psycho-history, addressing the deep psychological drives that drove both men to the field of honor. Given the conflicted and complex psyches of both Burr and Hamilton, such a character study could yield some interesting insights, if grounded on reliable research --and Rogow does indeed suggest that he has sifted through historical evidence in search of the truth. In fact, this is his literary persona in *A Fatal Friendship* -- the clear-eyed outsider who will use documentary evidence to question "mythologies that sanctify Jefferson, ennoble Hamilton, and demonize Burr" (page xiii). Rogow assumes this stance from the outset, explaining in his preface that "even the most conscientious biographers are not always able to avoid bias in favor of their subjects," or to prevent modern political culture from coloring their depictions of the past. Rogow, however, will neither take sides nor drag the present into the past, he tells us; he will simply "explore ...interactions of personality and politics," suc-

ceeding in objectivity where historians and biographers have failed. A worthy objective that, unfortunately, is not met.

A Fatal Friendship's main problem is its tone-deafness to the subtleties and realities of early national politics and life. Psychological theorizing requires a light touch when dealing with personalities from the distant past who saw their world through a cultural lens quite different from our own. As eighteenth-century gentlemen and politicians, Hamilton and Burr acted according to a distinctive logic that must be acknowledged before their actions and character can be understood. It is impossible to understand what drove these rivals to their final, fatal encounter without a clear grasp of the precise combination of political events and cultural conventions that guided their decisions. Rogow, however, places character structures front and center, depicting the duel as a clash of personalities. In essence, he has written about America's most famous political duel without seriously considering politics or culture.

Not surprisingly, such political and cultural tone-deafness results in some questionable conclusions. Focused on the individual psychology of his two protagonists, Rogow limits his historical field of vision, warping or overlooking evidence that would have revealed much. In Rogow's eyes, little guides his two protagonists other than their fatally predetermined character structures. For example, discussing Hamilton's ill-advised pamphlet attacking John Adams in the fall of 1800, Rogow states that "character defects and thwarted ambitions" might explain Hamilton's animosity, but they can't explain the pamphlet, leading to one logical conclusion: Hamilton must have been mentally ill (p. 206). Where character and personality alone cannot explain events, Rogow blames personality malfunctioned -- mental illness -- with nary a thought about political motives or conventions of print culture. Hamilton's pamphlet was recklessly self-serving -- even foolish -- but it had a definite logic that deserves to be explored, per-

haps revealing more about Hamilton than Rogow's unsubstantiated suppositions. This is the book's fatal flaw, writ small.

Again and again, Rogow draws dubious conclusions based on twentieth-century assumptions -- conclusions that become particularly problematic when discussing as alien a custom as dueling. He claims that apologies were possible when they were not, and that compromises could have been made long past the point that they could. Nor does he understand the insults inherent in his protagonists' actions and language during their duel negotiations -- the very insults that made it impossible for the two men to turn back, spurring their conflict to its fatal conclusion. Rogow's fixation on Hamilton's insult is likewise wrong-headed. To redeem their reputations, failing politicians often provoked opponents into uttering something worthy of a challenge. In this context, the precise insult that prompted Burr's challenge is beside the point. Burr lost an election, seized on a suggestive comment, and initiated an affair of honor. There was a reason for Hamilton's repeated requests for his offending words. Burr cited none. Rogow's focus on Hamilton's flawed "character structure" blinds him to such facts, occasionally leading him to make bizarre claims. For example, how precisely did Hamilton "allow himself to be fatally shot"? (p. 267).

Rogow's predetermined argument leads to poor choices about primary and secondary sources as well. For example, in his first chapter's first paragraph, Rogow quotes Thomas Jefferson saying the following about Alexander Hamilton: "It's monstrous that this country should be ruled by a foreign bastard!" (p. 4) -- an exclamation that sent me scurrying to the footnotes. Rogow's source? *Alexander Hamilton: First American Business Man* by Robert Warshow (Garden City, NJ: Garden City Publishing, 1931), written in the era of many a creative "Founder" biography, few of them footnoted. Rogow makes ample use of such questionable early (and late) twentieth-cen-

tury works, a logical choice given that they were often more interested in the personalities of the "Founders" than in historical fact.

These same problematic works become convenient targets at other points in *A Fatal Friendship*, enabling Rogow to seem unbiased in comparison. Sometimes, the historians under attack remain unidentified, without a footnote of explanation. Other times, footnotes reveal that Rogow has leveled his weapons at long-outdated works that are hardly significant enough to engage in battle. For example, protesting against Hamilton's inflated reputation in the historical record, Rogow refutes the claim that "Hamilton may also be called the author of the Constitution" (p. 114). Who is his target? James Parton, whose *Life and Times of Aaron Burr* first appeared in 1857. In another instance, hoping to redeem Burr, he refutes the "view of some historians and biographers" regarding Burr's intentions for the Manhattan Company, a water company created to facilitate the founding of a bank. Biased historians have charged that Burr never intended to supply water, Rogow charges (p. 187). Rogow's target? "Geology Professor Julian Kane, in a letter to *The New York Times*" (p. 318 n28). Framed as an objective historical study, complete with footnotes and commendatory blurbs from historians on the back cover, *A Fatal Friendship* appears to be part of a scholarly conversation with which it does not engage.

Rogow's single-minded vision also leads to some creative manipulation of evidence. For example, he often makes unsubstantiated claims about his protagonists' feelings, followed by a phrase such as "We can only wonder" (p. 20). On the one hand, he claims not to assert such guesses as fact. On the other hand, he then incorporates them into his argument as if they were just that. For example, discussing Hamilton's relationship with his sister-in-law Angelica Schuyler Church, Rogow reveals that Hamilton misdated a letter to her "January 7, 1789" instead of "1790." As Rogow

explains it, "One does not have to be a Freudian to suspect that the slip may have owed something to Hamilton's wish that the year 1789 with its lengthy visit from Angelica could be relived" (p. 73). One does not have to be a historian to find a more logical reason for Hamilton's error: with the new year only a week old, Hamilton misdated his letter by habit, a common mistake then as now. Within a paragraph, Rogow presumes the existence of an illicit relationship between Hamilton and Angelica based on little else but such guesses. Similarly questionable logic distorts Rogow's discussion of Burr's famous farewell to the Senate. Burr's mention of morality "may have" been intended to "evoke in his listeners a memory of Hamilton. . . . But if that was his intention, he failed" (p. 226). He certainly did fail. Which suggests that Burr may not have been thinking about Hamilton -- something that the book's oddly focused universe makes it difficult to fathom. In *A Fatal Friendship*, Burr and Hamilton think of little else but each other; not even politics gets in the way of their (or rather, Hamilton's) obsession.

Let me be clear: I am not refuting Rogow's charges, nor am I denigrating the effort to gain psychological insights into character and action. Hamilton had a curious relationship with his sister-in-law (how curious, we do not know); his troubled mental state deserves ample study; and who knows what was in the mind of Aaron Burr? Musing on such matters makes perfect sense. My criticism is of Rogow's method of musing; he is more interested in his argument than in wrestling with historical evidence, leading him to make assertions that will propagate the very myths that he affects to overturn.

The book's failing is dramatically apparent at its most interesting moment: Rogow's exchange with Gore Vidal. Vidal, whose *Burr* (New York: Random House, 1973; Ballantine paperback; Modern Library hardcover with new introduction, 1998) is still widely read and enjoyed, attributed the duel to a shocking statement that has since re-

ceived wide circulation: according to Vidal, Hamilton accused Burr of incest -- of sleeping with his daughter Theodosia. Questioned by Rogow, Vidal explained that "'The incest motif is my invention. I couldn't think of anything of a 'despicable' nature that would drive AB to so drastic an action'" (p. 240).

Vidal's statement is enormously revealing. Not because he admits to inventing the "incest motif"; he has admitted this before. Rather, he confesses that he could not imagine a charge serious enough to merit Burr's challenge. Nor could Rogow; in fact, he agrees with Vidal, hook, line, and sinker (p. 240). By twentieth-century standards, only an unimaginably severe insult would drive Burr to such drastic measures, and incest is as severe a slur as any. However, by eighteenth-century standards, any number of charges could demand a challenge. Insults had different meanings two hundred years ago; "puppy" and "rascal" were unpardonable slurs that virtually invited a duel. Nor was initiating a duel so unimaginably drastic. Most of Burr's friends engaged in at least one affair of honor; several dueled. The thin-skinned Hamilton negotiated his way out of a duel at least *nine* times. Burr himself fought two duels and considered others -- a fact that Rogow conveniently glosses over. Rather than a drastic measure requiring the severest of insults, dueling was a method of self defense --extreme, but possessing a logic that must be recognized before we can hope to understand the Burr-Hamilton duel.

Although Rogow's factual errors are less serious, they raise further questions about the reliability of his claims. Hamilton did not write "a manual for lawyers" -- his preparatory notes for the New York Bar examination were later converted into a manual by someone else (p. 86); Burr's second was William Peter Van Ness, not Peter Van Ness (p. 253, 255-57), and William Van Ness (author of "Aristedes") was the same person (p. 225); it was John Eustace (not Eustache) who tried to provoke (not challenge) Hamilton to a

fight a duel (p. 45); the name is Tench Coxe -- not Cox -- or "Trench Cox," as it appears in the index (p. 135).

In the end, we are left with a flawed character study, more focused on discussing character and personality than on grappling with political history, cultural context, and documentary evidence. Rather than questioning "mythologies," *A Fatal Friendship* perpetuates them, yet another in a series of sensationalized studies of Burr, Hamilton, and their fatal encounter.

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