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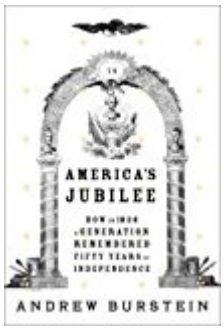
Andrew Burstein. *America's Jubilee: How in 1826 a Generation Remembered Fifty Years of Independence.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001. xiv + 361 pp. $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-375-41033-8.



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Remembering Glory Days

Whether they will admit it or not, most ambitious scholars dream of writing a breakout book. If they're fortunate, that means a commercial publisher, notice in the *New York Times* Book Review, and sales, if not quite on the scale of a Doris Kearns Goodwin, Michael Beschloss, or David McCullough, perhaps enough for a down payment on a house in the country. Reading *America's Jubilee*, I kept thinking that Andrew Burstein just might make it. His topic, "How in 1826 a Generation Remembered Fifty Years of Independence," invites an exploration of what it meant in the 1820s to be an American. The cast includes iconic figures like Jefferson and Adams (whose uncanny timing in leaving this earth astounded their countrymen and made possible books like this one), and numerous well known characters from the early republic. And let it be said, Burstein can write. *America's Jubilee* is beautifully and at points brilliantly crafted, beribboned with acute and often amusing character sketches, epigrammatic prose, and sensible judgments about men and events.

Burstein says he is examining Americans in their year of "national jubilee," 1826, though he ranges much farther afield, at points taking us back to the American Revolution and notable developments subsequent to it. He also asserts that the book will knock down "old myths" (p. 5) and reject "convenient categories" (p. 6).

Burstein's narrative opens with Lafayette's triumphant return to America in 1824-25--a natural prelude to the jubilee celebrations of July 4, 1826. "For Americans who wished to revisit the season of their national birth," he notes, "no experience could be richer than to catch a glimpse of the last surviving general from the War for Independence" (p. 8). What follows is an often poignant account of Lafayette's journeys across the country, which provided Americans who met him with a "moment of self conscious thanksgiving." Here and throughout the book Burstein contrasts Americans' virtuous self-abnegation in the 1770s with the go-ahead mentality of the 1820s. Americans (as Marvin Meyers and Fred Somkin have reminded us) were quite cognizant of this shift in their values.[1] It certainly accentuated

the emotion in the homage they paid to Revolutionary era heroes.

Burstein follows the Lafayette chapter with a series of biographical sketches of early republic characters well known to the general public, others known well to scholars, and still others little known. By including chapters on the likes of a Massachusetts-based novelist named Eliza Foster, the marriage of Ruth and Ezekiel Bascom (the latter a Massachusetts clergyman and the former a silhouette artist), and the political career and entrepreneurship of popular Ohio politician Ethan Allen Brown, Burstein extends his analysis beyond the "great men" of the era. We learn, along the way, many interesting facts about America during the 1820s--for example, about cheeses made and sent to the president; demographic information about dynamic young cities like Cincinnati; the basics of making and wearing of boots; and the terms of employment of a minister in a typical New England town.

Still, it is famous or semi-famous characters who dominate the tale Burstein weaves. While his account of the political struggles of the era is deftly drawn, it is hard to find anything new in it. I enjoyed Burstein's chapter on William Wirt's world, and particularly the famed lawyer's hagiography, masquerading as biography, of Patrick Henry--which as Thomas Jefferson acutely noted, told readers more about Wirt than Henry. Wirt's goal in life, we learn in a pithy phrase, was "to be wealthy and to be well liked" (p. 35). He did better on the latter score than the former. Despite spending enormous amounts of time away from his family on business (including even one Christmas), Wirt never did keep his accounts in balance, much less bankroll that country estate he dreamed of owning. Hemorrhoids and all, Wirt comes alive in Burstein's account.

Burstein's chapter on Eliza Foster describes in somewhat numbing (for this reader) detail the plot of her romantic novel *Yorktown*, aiming to show how "the successor generation was daily contributing new emotion to the national creation story" (p. 75). Foster's heroines are strong women, who helped make the Revolution, but they were trapped, then and later, in a culture that emphasized men's agency and women's supporting role.

The discussion of the Bascoms affords Burstein an opportunity to contrast the "stoic" ethos of the Revolutionary generation with a much more emotion-driven younger generation, whose response to the deaths of Adams and Jefferson highlighted this cultural change. Ruth Henshaw Bascom's journal, kept for an amazing fifty-seven years, provides plenty of material for Burstein on her life--mostly dreary, it appears--as a gloomy clergyman's spouse.

The texture of daily life in the West in the 1820s is discussed in the chapter on Ethan Allen Brown. Readers learn about dairy farming in Ohio, the prevalence of corn liquor, and the fact that fact that diets were, well, even greasier than today. The West was a dynamic place in the 1820s, with canal construction seemingly pervasive and cities growing fast. The great canal champion DeWitt Clinton of New York cheered on the western entrepreneurs. For his part, Burstein soon heads back east.

Leaning on John Quincy Adams's diaries and the work of James Sterling Young[2], Burstein draws a word portrait of Washington in 1826 that accentuates its "deserted feel" and "unfinished" look (p. 131). Readers get a sprightly, if potted account of John Quincy Adams's life and career up to the fateful election of 1824. There's nothing new here that I could tell; indeed, Burstein's discussion of Adams's famous annual message of 1825 and the political fallout reads essentially as a gloss on George Dangerfield's ***The Era of Good Feelings***.[3] Adams is depicted as the intellectually precocious but politically maladroit character we have met so many times in the scholarship of the era. His ambitious program of internal improvement set off alarm bells in the South, further energizing the Jacksonian politicians (including the

Old Hero himself) still smarting from Adams's presidential grab in 1824. Among those energized was Congressman George McDuffie of South Carolina, whose fixed idea was changing the system of elections to prevent further miscarriages of the people's will. An earnest recitation of constitutional options about electing presidents is enlivened (Burstein probably imagined his general interest readers' eyelids drooping) by stories about the inimitable John Randolph of Roanoke. Indeed, Randolph appears periodically through outthe book as comic relief. Yet there is pathos in Randolph's comment quoted towards the end of the book, in which he responded to his physician's observation that "there are idiosyncracies in many constitutions." Randolph dryly replied that "I have been an idiosyncracy all my life" (p. 298).

Randolph is the source for one of the better set-pieces in the book, the famous duel he fought with Henry Clay after likening Clay and President Adams to Blifil and Black George, characters in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*. Burstein nicely conveys the uncertainty and anxiety of the scene and even in completing the story of this famous duel leaves the reader not quite sure what Randolph was up to. Perhaps Randolph himself was not sure whether he would fire at Clay, whatever he told himself before standing at the mark. At all events, the two men emerged unscathed and forged a friendly bond as a result of their interview.

Burstein provides similarly well drawn accounts of Thomas Hart Benton's youthful brawling (including a settu with future president Andrew Jackson) and Andrew Jackson's memorable 1806 duel with Charles Dickinson. Old Hickory took a bullet to the chest, then calmly "shot straight through the lawyer's midsecton and waited while his adversary bled to death" (p. 207). Not included here is Jackson's immortal observation that "I should have hit him if he had shot me through the brain."[4]

Burstein's usual sure hand in narrative falters somewhat with his unenlightening account of John Quincy Adams's dealings with the Creek Indians and his one-dimensional interpretation of Jackson as a political leader. The Indian matter merited a clearer exposition. Some attention to Robert Remini's emphasis on Jackson as avatar of democratic politics would have been worth including, even if Burstein wanted mainly to critique it. As Burstein explains it, Jackson the presidential candidate was primarily the beneficiary of anger against Adams and Clay for the corrupt bargain. The reality was more complicated than that.

The book heads, ineluctably, to the deaths of Jefferson and Adams. This story has been told many times before, and Burstein's account is at best a pithy summary. That said, I found his unpacking of Adams's purported last words, "Jefferson still survives," a model of historical detective work and exposition. Suffice it to say here that scholars from now on should be careful about attributing this phrase to Adams.

America's Jubilee concludes with a recapitulation on the dramatis personae from the body of the text, in some cases, carrying their careers forward and describing their deaths. The best elements of the finale are Burstein's comments on Americans' glorification of the founders' generation. Memory tends to have a good editor, and this was certainly applicable to Americans in 1826. The deaths of Jefferson and Adams on July 4, 1826 (and James Monroe on July 4, 1831) were to millions of citizens a heaven-sent reminder about the legacy they bestowed on the current generation. Americans in the 1820s knew they were living in times of great opportunity and material advancement. But they were not so convinced that they controlled their destinies. That lack of self-confidence was part of the "humbling effect" of the jubilee. "Insufficiently appreciating that the founders themselves had lamented a loss of control over the future, and despite the unprecedented level of energy that directed them, the successors were unsure of their ability to steer ahead" (p. 305). Steer ahead they would, doubtless ener-

gized by an idealized vision of their fathers' achievement.

America's Jubilee is informative, insightful and often charming. But I do have to wonder whether it will earn Burstein that house in the country. Joseph Ellis and David McCullough are secure in their hold on the popular market for books about the founders and their legacy. Scholars will find Burstein's book convenient to exploit for quotes and anecdotes, and general readers will enjoy the robust prose about interesting characters. But it is difficult for this reader to call the book essential reading, even when themes like memory and the Revolution are on the table. Burstein's work does not supercede Fred Somkin's *Unquiet Eagle* for insight into the anxieties of the 1820s generation or Merrill Peterson's *Adams and Jefferson*[5] for an explication of the Revolutionary legacy. It does nicely complement Joyce Appleby's recent meditation on the first generation after the Revolution, and what it did with the freedom won by the founders.[6] Like Burstein, Appleby explores Americans' new national identity, which she finds (more so than Burstein) enveloped in sectional divergences and conflict.

As for the "old myths" and "convenient categories" that Burstein said he would revise, they don't seem any worse for the wear of his prose. The exception would be his account of John Adams's last day, as noted above. As I read it, this is not fundamentally a revisionist work. Rather, it constitutes a handsome and revealing quilt, depicting aspects of American character and culture in the 1820s--a cross stitching that leaves ample room for others to say their piece about a restless and ingenious people on the make. I hope that *America's Jubilee* will be followed by more of Burstein's work crossing the porous boundaries between popular and scholarly history. It will be interesting to see where Burstein goes next. We continually need more good history, written with verve, and my suspicion is we'll be getting more in this vein from Andrew Burstein.

Notes

[1]. Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957); Fred Somkin, *Unquiet Eagle: Memory and Desire in the Idea of American Fredom, 1815-1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967).

[2]. James Sterling Young, *The Washington Community, 1800-1828* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966); for a useful corrective, see Michael Nelson, "The Washington Community Revisited," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 61 (1985): 189-210.

[3]. George Dangerfield, *The Era of Good Feeings* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1952), esp. part five.

[4]. Quoted in Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire, 1767-1821* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 142.

[5]. Merrill D. Peterson, *Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

[6]. Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

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