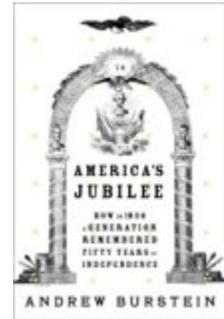


Andrew Burstein. *America's Jubilee: How in 1826 a Generation Remembered Fifty Years of Independence.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001. xiv + 361 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-375-70918-0; \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-375-41033-8.

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Feeling Good about History: Burstein Looks at America's Fiftieth Birthday

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The history written in any age tends to reflect the values, concerns, and ideas of the time in which it is written. Recognizing this fact, many post-modernist historians have eschewed any pretense of doing objective history, opting instead to use history merely as a tool for contextualizing current political issues. Andrew Burstein, the Mary Frances Barnard Professor of 19th-Century American History at the University of Tulsa, recognizes the difficulty of removing oneself from the process of writing history, but still aspires to an academic ideal of objectivity. At the end of *America's Jubilee* he writes: "Romance and ideology are unavoidable, and today's historians are engaged in an uphill battle—perhaps a fruitless battle—to encounter an objective reality" (p. 307). As Burstein informs us, this battle is not new. During the Romantic era in America—roughly 1824-1860—Americans reconsidered the events of the Revolution and the drafting of constitutions from the more spiritual, tender, and emotional perspectives of one generation's remove from the harsh rationality of America's Enlightenment.

America's Jubilee describes the national celebration of fifty years of nationhood since the Declaration of Independence. Burstein notes the great variance in public celebrations, but devotes little space to them. He is more concerned with how Americans in 1826 used literature, politics, and imagery to remember the people and events

of 1776.

Burstein presents the first generation of the American Romantic era as people looking to find meaning in their lives, their concerns prompted by a perceived need to be worthy of their past. In vindication of their own values and concerns they accepted new myths which "restore[d] the Revolution to living memory for ... [that] generation" (*id.*). Some characters were more suitable for mythical reformulation than others. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson avoided such assaults to their eminently reasonable personages until their deaths in 1826; in fact, up until their deaths, they railed at the perceived weaknesses of latter-day Americans. Despite their worthy contributions to national glory, they remained surprisingly aloof from Americans' loving embrace. Meanwhile, men like Patrick Henry, bombastic, emotional, and having died with the comparative advantage of having left few texts, were prime fodder for the Romantic era historians who wrote to help Americans "feel good about the past" (p. 46).

The Second Great Awakening produced renewed spirituality among Americans, not all of it expressed in traditional Christianity. The third, fourth, and fifth decades of the nineteenth century evidenced a moralistic emphasis in American religiosity. Americans struggled to reconcile their desire for moral behavior with growing perceptions of various social trends—a societal emphasis on economic growth; a softening and spoliation

of young men that threatened the perpetuation of the masculine ideal; an increase in political gamesmanship and corruption at all levels of governance; the incompatibility of slavery in a nation committed to freedom; the increased factionalism, economically and politically, between east and west, north and south; and fears over unrestrained immigration and ethnic mixing. Despite more liberal voting rules, election turnouts in the 1820s were embarrassingly low. Americans truly wondered whether they were worthy of the nation their parents had bequeathed to them.

Burstein's descriptions of the events pertaining to the Jubilee celebration must be understood in this context—and he does a fine job of presenting them to the reader. In addition, he provides anecdotes illustrating the degree to which the 1820s constituted a transitional period, intellectually, generationally, and socially. One excellent example is his description of John Quincy Adams's inauguration in 1825. The new president was the first to wear long pants instead of knee breeches and hose, and the first to refer to the nation as a democracy. Another is Burstein's attention to Americans' attitude toward the Constitution of the United States. During 1825 and 1826 several proposed constitutional amendments sought to redefine American democracy by imposing term limits and eliminating the electoral college. The failure of these measures strongly suggests the inability of the new generation to change what its predecessors had built. Confusion and self-doubt seem to lead inexorably to impotence.

In this context, Americans' re-fashionings of the symbols, leaders, and meaning of the earlier age make sense. In his 1817 biography of Patrick Henry, William Wirt described his subject as God's servant, and the Revolution as pre-destined or ordained. He ignored the opinions of Henry's contemporaries to present his subject as a kind, sensitive prophet of God's providence. Wirt chose to describe Henry's oratory as divinely inspired and lauded a man of action, Henry, for his intensity of feelings, appealing to the people of the age who had come to see emotions as being at least as important as ideas. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both discredited Wirt's biography, but the American people embraced it. In an age of self-doubt and spiritual emphasis, a myth that repositioned the creation of the nation as from the hands of God and not those of mere mortals resonated with the public.

Similarly, Burstein examines a work of fiction, *Yorktown: An Historical Romance*, written by Eliza Foster and published in 1826, that is set in the context of the Amer-

ican Revolution but ascribes Romantic era values to the historical actors. The novel's lesson is that the pursuit of happiness must be moral. *Yorktown* presents a new conception of womanhood, describing the heroine's dissipation from a life of wantonness. The "Golden Era" of women, associated with the Revolution and its immediate aftermath by many historians,[1] can certainly be seen as having ended by 1826 in a book that lauds as female virtues self-suppression, generosity, sympathy, and emotional charity. Burstein puts the point in a well-turned line: "female delicacy was publicly matched by female assertiveness only in areas of moral improvement—temperance societies, religious life, and early childhood education" (p. 82). Foster's novel also subjects male virtue to Romantic revision, depicting soldiers as ardent and chivalrous. Burstein wisely draws parallels between Foster's book and more well-known works by James Fenimore Cooper and Lord Byron both to clarify the conclusions he is drawing and to confirm their legitimacy. As Burstein demonstrates, Romantic America wanted men of action and men and women of high morals.

The romanticization of the Revolution eventually caught up with even Adams and Jefferson. To the generation of Americans alive in 1826, it was not sufficiently ironic or meaningful that these two great men died within hours of each other on July 4, 1826. Within days, the stories of each man on his deathbed had been enhanced by myths regarding Adams's last words ("Jefferson still lives") and the timing of Jefferson's death at the exact time when the Declaration had been first read fifty years earlier. Once again, the hand of God was guiding events in America. Almost immediately after their deaths, these two devotees of reason and proponents of man's quest for truth fell under the power of Romantic myth.

One contemporary political figure chose to embrace myth-making rather than to fight it. Burstein adroitly depicts Andrew Jackson as the man for the times—a man whose legend exceeded his talents and character. Jackson looked every part the gentleman, was known for his bravery, and was presented by his admiring promoters as a self-sacrificing man of the people. His election to the Presidency in 1828 was all but sealed after his close defeat by John Quincy Adams in the election of 1824, notorious for the alleged "corrupt bargain" that decided it. The irony that Burstein illuminates for us is that, at the same time that Americans were able to transform the heroes of the past into more moral, sympathetic, and divinely inspired actors, they were unable to perceive so many of their current political leaders as acting virtuously. Henry

Clay's sincere disdain for Jackson and trust in Adams almost certainly prompted his delivery of the necessary electoral votes to secure Adams the presidency. Yet, perceptions of corrupt political dealing cost Clay his chance for higher elected office and clouded Adams's single term with scandal. Historical actors could remain unsoiled by the human failings that Americans were all too ready to see in themselves in 1826. However, contemporary politicians, no matter how noble in actuality, could not escape the taint that their fellow countrymen read into all of their lives. Burstein refers to Americans in 1826 as "romantically muddled," and in this discrepancy it is easy to see why.

Burstein's book succeeds both as an informative, interesting account of America's celebration of its fiftieth birthday and as an effective exploration of the role of memory in writing and understanding history. As he demonstrates, when people create heroes to meet their self-conscious needs, they also create images of the past derived from presentist concerns. Cultural memories thus infuse national histories with heroic myths. These significant accomplishments are enhanced by Burstein's artistry in using his findings and his text to address methodological issues of concern to all historians working today.

America's Jubilee is a very valuable book for the academic scholar and lay historian alike. Yet, it is not without weakness. Burstein is subject to a common tendency among today's historians to rely on psychology to explain behaviors of historical actors. Always a question-

able practice, this method becomes especially dangerous when used without adequate foundation—serving as the basis for merely conjectural judgments imposed on those no longer able to explain themselves, rather than leading to further understanding. For instance, in discussing John Randolph, Burstein writes: "He overcompensated for his distinctive appearance, tending to initiate verbal attacks rather than wait to be challenged" (p. 172). Similarly, Burstein asserts: "The duel also persisted at this time [the 1820s], because there was no war to function as an outlet for men who needed to exhibit their chivalrous attributes" (p. 200). Perhaps at no point in the book is this tendency more troubling than in Burstein's description of Henry's biographer, William Wirt, and his family. The digression into Wirt's family relations offers a fair insight into 1820s American society but does little to develop Wirt's text on Henry or the public's fascination with it.

Nonetheless, this weakness does not significantly detract from a very strong text. *American Jubilee* provides thought-provoking insights into American culture, both in 1826 and today. As Burstein writes: "recasting history to serve the present, while something less than truth, continues to animate the American political culture" (p. 307).

Notes

[1]. See, Mary Beth Norton, "The Evolution of White Women's Experience in Early America," *American Historical Review* 89 (June 1984): 563-619.

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