

H-Net Reviews

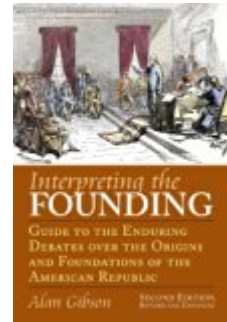
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alan Ray Gibson. *Interpreting the Founding: Guide to the Enduring Debates over the Origins and Foundations of the American Republic*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009. xix + 224 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1705-0; \$16.95 ([paper), ISBN 978-0-7006-1706-7.

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Good Things Come in Small Packages

Alan Gibson's *Interpreting the Founding: Guide to the Enduring Debates over the Origins and Foundations of the American Republic* proves the truth of the adage that good things come in small packages. The book (a second revised and expanded edition of an earlier work) is a deceptive 224 pages long. The book's eight chapters, however, consist of a scant 140 pages, while the extensive notes take up another 47 pages and his inclusive bibliography takes up another 33 pages. In this short compass, Gibson accomplishes his goal "to characterize the major interpretative traditions or approaches that have informed the study of the American Founding" in the modern post-Beardian era. Gibson goes about his work by "comparing and contrasting these traditions of interpretation, examining the different methodological assumptions underlying them, considering their contributions and weaknesses, and providing an account of the trajectory of scholarship on the American Founding" (p. vii).

Gibson's first chapter summarizes the entire book. Each of the next seven chapters then analyzes a different school of interpretation of America's founding. Contemporary accounts from the Revolutionary era are not examined—that includes letters and autobiographies as well as full-blown histories written by the likes of Mercy Otis Warren, David Ramsay, and William Gordon as well as biographies such as John Marshall's multivolume life of George Washington. Also absent are any examinations of the many "life and correspondence" histories written in the first half of the eighteenth century and the imperial and Whig historical traditions of the nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries epitomized by George Bancroft and John Back McMaster.

Gibson's analysis begins with the Progressive historians, particularly Charles Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913) which dominated American historiography for fifty years. He then proceeds to examine the liberal tradition with its focus on John Locke and the consensus school; classical republicanism as revived in the writings of the English Commonwealth men of the seventeenth century; the Scottish Enlightenment's "moral" and common sense" philosophies; the mixture of these different schools; new analyses of the downtrodden (women, slaves, and Native Americans); and the latest Unionist paradigm or Federal interpretation. It would be superfluous to summarize in this review what Gibson summarizes so deftly. He never intends to be all-inclusive in his bibliographic summarizations. Rather, he takes some of the best examples in each school and explains their methodology as well as their interpretation. He is superb in presenting not only the core foundational aspects of each school but also some of their key subtleties.

In summarizing his effort, Gibson states that no one school now holds a dominate position in the historiography of the founding era. Although there was a sequential appearance of one school after another, in actuality there has been an accretion of contested perspectives, each of which has added a new dimension to the overall picture. Gibson's *Guide* should now be regarded as the best single work of its kind.

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