



David A. Bell. *Men on Horseback: The Power of Charisma in the Age of Revolution.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020. 352 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-374-20792-2.

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David Bell's *Men on Horseback* is a study of charisma in the age of revolutions, between 1750 and 1820. It focuses on five major figures: Pasquale Paoli, George Washington, Napoleon Bonaparte, Toussaint Louverture, and Simon Bolivar. Each possessed the charisma to effect major change in their respective regions, and each provided a model for those who followed.[1]

Bell begins his study with Pasquale Paoli, erstwhile leader of the Republic of Corsica. He traces Paoli's career from insurgent leader to his defeat by the French, first in the pacification campaign of 1768-69 and then by the Revolutionary government in the 1790s. Paoli serves as Bell's archetype, binding the Corsican rebels to his leadership through his charisma. This was a more intimate form of charisma that allowed his followers and admirers to see him as both man and leader, further endearing him to them and enabling him to better leverage the resources of the rebellion. For Bell, this lays the foundation of his argument for the use of political charisma.

From Paoli, Bell journeys to America, where he details the career of George Washington. Washington used a different kind of charisma, less intimate and more formal, to become the paragon of virtue for the new American state, receiving his apotheosis when he played Cincinnatus in laying down his power, first as army commander and then as pres-

ident. Bell finds that Washington inspired his next three subjects, whether directly or indirectly, to more quixotic ends. Napoleon leveraged the same elements of charisma as Washington but refused to lay down his power, instead more directly controlling the levers of both charisma and power, to his ultimate ruin. In Haiti, Toussaint Louverture experienced much the same career path, rising to power via charisma that won him the admiration of black Haitians and white Europeans alike before succumbing to the lure of power and French occupation. Finally, Bell concludes with Simon Bolivar, the liberator of South America who eschewed the autocracy of Napoleon and Louverture until forced to take it up in an attempt to prevent the fracturing of Gran Colombia, in Bell's analysis.

Bell's narrative is as much a study of memory as it is of the men themselves. The Western world learned of Paoli not through dispassionate reports or even from the man himself but rather from James Boswell's fawning account that helped to personalize him, including details of his intimate moments. Bell argues that this intimacy and, by extension, the creating of the image of Paoli by Boswell, rather than the reality, was vital in the charisma of his memory. This model applied to each of the four subjects, in both respects. Napoleon carefully crafted his image to conform first to the model of Paoli, then of Washington, and

Louverture to that of Washington; Bolivar had the benefit of drawing on all four of the examples that preceded him.

To this end, Bell notes that media played a critical role in the spread of political charisma. He argues that the charisma of prior periods was an impersonal one, the monarch as distant *pater familias* disposing of his children according to his view of their best interests. The rise of mass literacy and the press changed this relationship, opening up avenues of political charisma that were more intimate, more revealing, and crucially, more direct. Leaders like Napoleon did not need to rely on tradition to cement their rule when they could reach the people directly. Bell argues that this created a new kind of populist charisma that persists to the present, including its strengthening by social media and as manifested in the Trump era.

As a result of this line of analysis, the individuals largely disappear into Bell's narrative. This is especially apparent with Washington: despite Bell's highlighting of the importance of intimate knowledge of the study's subjects, Washington appears only from a distance, as filtered through the myths of his life and the writings of those who eulogized him, especially Mason Weems. Louverture's relationship with his former slaves also disappears into the images of him formed by Americans, Europeans, and Bolivar. As mentioned, the image of Paoli is not the strictly historical one but rather Boswell's. In addition, as is the case with almost all works in the field of individual history, individuals who do not make the narrative, such as James Madison, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and José de San Martín, loom large in their absence.

The casual reader will enjoy Bell's fluid narration and storytelling as he weaves together elements of social science, traditional historiography, history of memory, and metahistory throughout the era. For the historian, the value of the book is less in the narrative history and much more in Bell's purpose. He seeks to rehabilitate a very old line of historiography, that of the "great man," re-

dubbing it "individual history" or "the history of charisma."

This indicates the issue with the direction Bell adopts, one of which he is quite well aware: the fraught nature of great man history. Bell directly engages this issue in the most useful portion of the book, the "excursus," entitled "Writing Charisma into History." In it, Bell traces the origins of great man history via Thomas Carlyle and the notion of political charisma through Max Weber. He notes the exchange of great man history for history from below in the late nineteenth century, largely at the hands of Marxists and the *Annales* school. This pushed analyses of individuals to popular historians and social scientists, hence the Weberian connection. Bell seeks to rescue this line of historiography from the two fields, rehabilitating it as a valid academic pursuit while still acknowledging its dangers. He argues that individuals must be studied in order to understand their outsized effects on history (and historiography), although historians must be careful not to ignore subalterns and individuals who do not rise to the heights of power, which are the two most significant failings of great man historiography.

In the larger sense, Bell makes a persuasive case for the resurrection of the academic historiographical survey. He notes the penchant in modern historiography for the "microhistory," intensely focused monographs that provide excellent and useful detail of aspects of daily life or average people in a given time period but often fail to connect to larger trends and movements. These have largely replaced broader, survey-type works, particularly as written by academic historians, leaving surveys to be written by popular historians and social scientists, just as great man history once was, and is. Bell finds that this results in incomplete histories and theories that often remain abstract rather than applicable or reflective of the reality of the times. However, rather than throwing over microhistories for surveys, Bell proposes a happy medium—the one connected to the other, both illumi-

nating the past in a useful way. While Bell never explicitly argues for this, it is evident in his prose and in his approach.

Bell's work is an interesting book from a prolific author. It will be particularly useful for graduate students in history and readers looking to move from popular into more academic historiography. Professional historians will doubtless question its approach, arguments, and conclusions, many along the paths worn by critiques of great man history. Bell's final chapter addresses these concerns and convincingly argues for the resurrection of individual history, expanding it beyond great men. Chiefly, the book presents an important historiographical debate. Regardless of purpose, the reader will do well to read the "excursus" as an introduction rather than conclusion.

Note

[1]. The views of the author do not reflect any official position of the US Army, the Command and General Staff College, the Department of Defense, or any other government official or agency.

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