

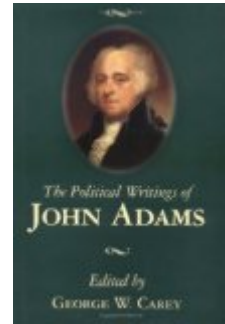
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

George W. Carey, ed. *The Political Writings of John Adams*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishers, 2000. xxxvi + 712 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89526-292-9.

James P. Lucier, ed. *The Political Writings of James Monroe*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishers, 2002. xliii + 863 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89526-229-5.

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Getting Right with the Founders?

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In recent years, we have seen a curious phenomenon that some major magazines have called Founders' Chic. Such books as Joseph J. Ellis's *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*[1] and David McCullough's *John Adams*[2] present readers with warm, cozy portraits of Founding Fathers designed to evoke comfortable feelings of uncritical veneration and reflexive pride from their readers. Books that fall within the category of Founders' Chic are notable for their indifference to the challenge of grappling with the ideas of their subjects, or with the political realities with which these First Politicians had to contend. No wonder that some historians reflexively fire back, charging that any books dealing with members of the political elite of the Revolution, the Confederation, or the early Republic must be exemplars of Founders' Chic.[3] And yet these books win major prizes and lodge themselves firmly on the nation's best-seller lists. The inescapable conclusion is that general readers want these bed-time stories, whether to read or simply to cherish as handsome book-shaped objects testifying, like saint's reliquaries, to the reverence the possessor feels for the person honored by the possession.

In a related development, the leading examples of Founders' Chic are making way on bookstore shelves for another array of handsome, well-designed volumes, the "Conservative Leadership Series" edited by Christopher

B. Briggs for Regnery Publishing. These books, however, are far more intellectually demanding than the cozy, bland products of Founders' Chic. They present the writings of Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, the Anti-Federalists, the authors of *The Federalist*, John Adams, John Taylor of Caroline, and James Fenimore Cooper. In some cases, especially that of James Monroe, these volumes literally have no counterparts or competition. The question is, how useful are they to historians and students of the origins of American constitutionalism? Based on the two potentially most valuable titles to have appeared in this series, the answer is mixed.

In *The Political Writings of John Adams*, George W. Carey, professor of government at Georgetown University and author of many books on American constitutionalism, presents a selection of Adams's major political writings spanning the whole of his career, unlike the recent volume focusing on Adams's writings before and during the Revolution edited by C. Bradley Thompson.[4] In particular, he presents lengthy extracts from Adams's greatest effort to explore constitutional government, *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States...* (1787-1788), a three-volume work that Adams wrote at breakneck speed while he was American Minister to Great Britain, and its sequel, *Discourses on Davila* (1790), which he wrote while he was Vice President. The great virtue of this volume is that Carey emphasizes Adams's more formal ventures into writing on

“the divine science of politics” (as he dubbed it). One drawback of this approach is that Adams’s best writing, which appears in his private letters, is nearly absent from this book, but Carey makes the valid point that much of this material is readily available.[5] Carey’s major source is the venerable, and still valuable, *Works of John Adams* edited by Adams’s grandson, Charles Francis Adams and published in the 1850s,[6] and provides careful source notes to indicate from where he has drawn his extracts. Carey’s thoughtful introduction does a far better job of grappling with Adams’s political thought than does the mellifluous David McCullough, and in addition does a creditable job of making a case for Adams’s perspicacity and insight.

Carey’s selection of Adams’s writings has two problems, however. First, there are difficulties with relying on the Charles Francis Adams edition. The younger Adams was an exacting textual scholar, but he also could not resist tidying up his grandfather’s prose, making it seem more smooth and formal and less peppered with the eccentric capitalization and punctuation that the manuscripts and original published versions disclose. Another problem with this volume is that it lacks an index—an inexcusable omission in a book more than seven hundred pages long. Even so, until such time as the Adams Papers project provides the raw material for a textually rigorous edition of John Adams’s “greatest hits,” Carey’s collection is a valuable resource for the scholar and the student.

In some ways, the strengths of Carey’s volume devoted to Adams are the defects of James Lucier’s volume devoted to James Monroe, and vice versa. Lucier, a longtime congressional aide and senior fellow of the James Monroe Memorial Foundation, has tackled a more difficult task—and, in some ways, an even more necessary one. He rightly points out that there has been no collection, either comprehensive or abridged, of James Monroe’s writings in over a century (though he fails to mention the 1987 James River Press edition of Monroe’s unfinished book, *The People The Sovereigns*, [7] and Stuart Gerry Brown’s 1959 edition of Monroe’s unfinished *Autobiography* [8]). Lucier’s major source for his one-volume compilation is the seven-volume edition of Monroe’s writings prepared in the late 1890s by Stanislaus Murray Hamilton, one of a series of editions of Founding Fathers’ papers published by G. P. Putnam’s Sons. [9] (Others included Paul Leicester Ford’s edition of Jefferson, Gaillard Hunt’s edition of Madison, Henry Cabot Lodge’s edition of Hamilton, Albert Smyth’s edition of Franklin, and Worthington C. Ford’s edition of Washing-

ton.) Unlike Carey, however, Lucier does not give citations in his volume to indicate the sources of his texts, diminishing its usefulness for scholars.

Lucier’s introduction, also, suffers by comparison with Carey’s. Lucier warmly admires James Monroe, and is not shy about displaying that admiration on the page. Unfortunately, however, his introduction is not only uncritical but speckled with minor errors [10] and some notable omissions. For example, readers of the introduction will search in vain for Monroe’s role as a leading Virginia Anti-Federalist—though Monroe’s arguments against the Constitution are well-represented in the collection (see, e.g., Lucier, pp. 46-95). Also, Lucier occasionally lets his modern political views get in the way of his scholarship, as when he praises President Monroe’s 1822 veto message accompanying his veto of the Cumberland Roads bill (pp. 549-602) as an authoritative rejection—then and now—of the idea that the Constitution gives the Federal government the power to build highways (pp. 547-548). [11]

Even with these problems, Lucier’s volume is valuable in that it makes available once again an extensive collection of primary sources long consigned to reference shelves and rare-book collections. In particular, it is enlightening to study the writings of the man often denoted (probably unfairly) the last and least of the Virginia Dynasty. Monroe has suffered by comparison with his friends Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, not least because he was not an intellectual, as they were. Unlike them, he was concerned with ideas solely as they related to practical political and diplomatic problems; his one major venture into the genre of philosophical history, *The People, The Sovereigns*, is a flat and derivative performance, despite the efforts of Lucier (and, before him, the noted conservative philosopher and polemicist Russell Kirk) to resurrect it as a major work of political thought. However, as Lucier’s generous selections from Monroe’s writings show, these documents—including Monroe’s firsthand accounts of key events in the French Revolution (pp. 105-262), the letters and notes from his pen concerning the negotiation of the Louisiana Purchase (pp. 345-413), and the documentation concerning the origins of what we now know as the Monroe Doctrine (pp. 611-658)—deserve republication. This volume, with all its faults, deserves to stand alongside Harry Ammon’s still valuable 1970 biography of Monroe. [12]

In conclusion, it is hard to understand the thinking that juxtaposes in the same series collections of writings by two men who so disliked and disagreed with one another.

other as did James Monroe and John Adams. One abominated the French Revolution as a catastrophe for humanity, whereas the other welcomed it. One favored a vigorous general government with such powers as the power to undertake internal improvements, whereas the other rejected such sweeping understandings of federal constitutional power. One regarded the proposed Constitution (albeit flawed) as a vindication of his political theories, whereas the other was its vigorous and effective opponent. How do both these men evoke “conservative leadership”? Perhaps the answer lies in the selective invocation of Adams’s and Monroe’s arguments for elements of the modern conservative agenda. Adams’s insistence on the dark side of human nature, his doubts about modern projects of reform based on reason alone, and his insistence that Americans were no different from other nations of the human race strike a recognizably conservative tone, as do Monroe’s agrarianism, his skepticism about federal constitutional power, and his embrace of American leadership of the Western hemisphere. In essence, then, we see in this odd but useful series of volumes a “useable past” with a decided conservative flavor—an exercise in “getting right with the Founders” as comforting to its modern adherents, though more attuned (in some ways) to ideas and arguments, than the pablum of Founders’ Chic.

Notes

[1.] Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000). See also Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

[2.] David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

[3.] See the discussions on H-SHEAR for March, 2002.

[4.] C. Bradley Thompson, ed., *The Revolutionary Writings of John Adams* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2000).

[5.] See, e.g., L. H. Butterfield, et al., eds., *The Book of Abigail and John* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976); John A. Schutz and Douglass G. Adair, eds., *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1965; reprint, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2000); and above all Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters...*, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959; one-volume reprint ed., 1988).

[6.] Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John*

Adams..., 10 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1850-1856).

[7.] James Monroe (Stuart Gerry Brown, ed.), *The Autobiography of James Monroe* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1959).

[8.] James Monroe (Samuel L. Gouverneur, ed.), *The People, the Sovereigns: being a comparison of the government of the United States with those of the republics which have existed before, with the causes of their decadence and fall* (Cumberland, Va.: James River Press, 1987).

[9.] Stanislaus Murray Hamilton, ed., *The Writings of James Monroe, including a collection of his public and private papers and correspondence now for the first time printed*, 7 vols. (New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1898-1903; reprinted, New York: AMS Press, 1969).

[10.] On p. xxiv, Lucier claims that Monroe studied law under Jefferson, who was a professor at William and Mary while serving as governor of Virginia; actually, Monroe studied law as an apprentice to Jefferson, as was customary in this period. See Bernard Schwartz, Barbara Wilcie Kern, and R. B. Bernstein, eds., *Thomas Jefferson and Bolling v. Bolling: Law and the Legal Profession in Pre-revolutionary America* (San Marino, CA, and New York: Huntington Library and NYU School of Law, 1997). On p. xxvii, Lucier unaccountably dates Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* to 1790 when it actually was published in 1787.

[11.] He also indicates in his table of contents that this chapter actually contains two documents, an 1817 memorandum on his views of internal improvements and the veto message, but readers will search in vain for any indication as to whether one ends and the other begins, or whether the veto message is indeed the only document in the chapter. Elsewhere, Lucier does a better job of indicating where one document begins and the other document ends, but the use of the same typeface for Monroe’s documents and Lucier’s headnotes sometimes causes confusion. Occasionally, Lucier provides S. M. Hamilton’s headnotes on various subjects, but in such cases he denotes that material with italics.

[12.] Harry Ammon, *James Monroe: The Quest for National Identity* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971; reprint ed., Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990). See also Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., *The Presidency of James Monroe* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

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