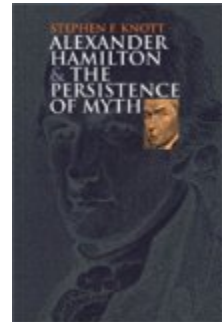


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Stephen F. Knott. *Alexander Hamilton and the Persistence of Myth*. American Political Thought. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002. x + 336 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1157-7.

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“Taming the Great Beast”: The Historical Resurrection of Alexander Hamilton

Founding father biographies are a more complicated genre than most. Along with the bound collections of their papers, there are single volume monographs, collective biographies (e.g., Joseph Ellis’s *Founding Brothers*) and multi-volume collections (Dumas Malone and Irving Brant’s respective studies on Jefferson and Madison). Finally, there are the biographies that are not really biographies at all. These books deal with the enduring influence of the founding generation on the nation’s political debates, its collective memory and its myth-making. While the legacies of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson are firmly established in the nation’s consciousness, Stephen F. Knott’s highly readable work makes a persuasive case that Alexander Hamilton deserves to be included as well.

Knott’s book is organized around a survey of American politics and history from the founding period to the present, and he provides ample evidence of the influence and popularity of Hamiltonian ideas. Not surprisingly, Hamilton’s ideas carried the day during periods of rapid economic expansion and increased executive authority. The Civil War offered Hamilton his greatest vindication, particularly in the North, because of his commitment to the Union and the expansion of the federal government. Hamilton also enjoyed enormous popularity among business leaders during the Gilded Age because his prescient economic policies were credited with laying the groundwork for the nation’s prosperity.

While Knott does an admirable job in establishing Hamilton’s influence, Knott can never fully separate Hamilton from his chief rival, Thomas Jefferson. Over

the past two centuries, their reputations and popularity have risen and fallen in opposition to one another. Yet, Jefferson has always overshadowed Hamilton, remaining the more popular and celebrated figure. Herbert Croly’s observation that the progressive era represented the triumph of Hamiltonian government through Jeffersonian means defines Hamilton’s dilemma. Although Hamilton’s ideas prevailed, Jefferson won the nation’s heart.

Hamilton’s seeming hostility towards democracy and the people is one of the chief reasons for his unpopularity and one of the greatest challenges Knott faces in resurrecting Hamilton’s enduring legacy. Knott confronts Hamilton’s unpopularity from several angles. First, he describes the public’s reverence for Hamilton, as measured by the enormous crowds that gathered on the streets of New York City to witness his funeral procession. He also blames Jefferson’s longevity (and careful cultivation of his reputation) for Hamilton’s unpopularity. Knott cites the twenty-two year gap between Hamilton’s death in 1804 and Jefferson’s in 1826 in which the latter could “portray their differences in a most favorable light without fear of rebuttal” (p. 9).

The greatest damage to Hamilton’s popular reputation was allegedly inflicted by Hamilton himself and then widely repeated by his enemies. According to Henry Adams in his *History of the United States of America During the First Administration of Thomas Jefferson* (1889), Hamilton, while attending a dinner in New York with John Adams, slammed his hand on the table and declared: “Your people, sir—your people is a great beast” (p. 74)! The original source for this statement was the 1859 memoirs of Theophilus Parsons, a Massachusetts Federalist. Because Parsons did not attend the dinner and received

this information fourth hand, Knott questions its veracity. As additional proof, Knott mentions that Parsons was an Adams supporter and Henry Adams, of course, was the great-grandson of Hamilton's rival, John Adams.

Was Hamilton really an enemy of the people? Aside from debunking this statement, Knott never tells us, other than to concede that Hamilton was no great fan of democracy. One of the weaknesses of this form of biography is that the individual gets lost amidst the mythology. If Knott hopes to resolve this issue definitively, he needs to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of Hamilton's statements and writings.

Myth-making also benefits politicians, while making a less certain biographical contribution. Knott cites numerous examples of the use of Hamilton (as well as Jefferson) by contemporary politicians over the past twenty years. While it is reassuring that our current leaders revere the founding fathers, do their invocations do justice to their ideas? Would Thomas Jefferson be appalled that many Americans do not have affordable health care, as Bill Clinton has claimed (p. 204)? I wish Knott had devoted more attention to analyzing the myths rather than just documenting their existence. In the later chapters, his strong historical analysis collapses amidst a tedious

compendium of contemporary references to Hamilton. Knott falls victim to this approach as he conjures a politically useful Hamilton. He concludes his otherwise strong book with the unexplored claim that a "return to Hamiltonianism could help fix what ails modern American politics by restoring the possibility for statesmanship and deliberation" (p. 232).

Combining historiography, political history and biography, Knott largely succeeds in taming Hamilton's excesses and Jefferson's shadow in order to establish Hamilton's enduring influence on American politics. Remarkably, the debate between Jefferson and Hamilton over the appropriate size and role of the federal government continues to define the nation's politics. Thanks to Stephen Knott, Hamilton has gained his place alongside Washington and Jefferson in the national pantheon.

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