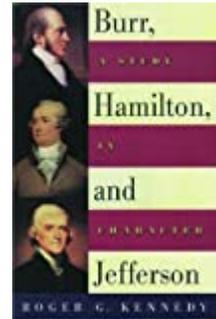


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Roger G. Kennedy. *Burr, Hamilton, and Jefferson: A Study in Character.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. xix + 476 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-513055-3.



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This is a difficult book to review. Reviewers no less than casual readers will be by turns stimulated, challenged, puzzled, frustrated, occasionally angered, and finally exasperated. One suspects that the author, Roger G. Kennedy, who in these pages seems to cultivate a cranky, contrarian persona, would be pleased by this, but perhaps he should not be. For it is not the argument, thesis, or novel contribution of this book that will move readers as Kennedy hopes. Few minds will be changed by the substance of anything he writes. Rather, it is the extremely idiosyncratic and at times fantastical nature of this work itself that will leave readers uncertain as to what to make of it and reviewers stymied as they try to critique a book that defeats all efforts at analysis.

Kennedy believes that Aaron Burr has been unfairly denigrated by scholars over the years. He argues that scholars have ignored his achievements and have instead highlighted shortcomings and foibles they have excused in others, specifically Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. Burr is the central focus of this book because, Kennedy asserts, "his character was better than his reputation. Though unquestionably a failure, his role in our history was larger than the credit he has received" (p. xvii). It is not, on its face, an untenable assertion and is certainly worth pursuing. In the course of the discussion Kennedy rightly reminds us of Burr's unwavering com-

mitment to abolishing slavery and of his proto-feminism, in which he took both women themselves and their ideas seriously.

But Kennedy has a larger task in mind. He seeks not merely to reexamine but to rehabilitate Burr's reputation at all costs. He does so in such a peculiar, heavy-handed manner that readers will be left with the feeling upon completing the book that it is Hamilton's and Jefferson's characters that will have to be rehabilitated, so obviously motivated by a strange malice and venom are Kennedy's assertions. He rarely lets pass a chance to make a critical comment about Hamilton or to interpret any Hamiltonian action or statement in the worst possible light. Jefferson receives similar treatment while Burr's every shortcoming or character defect is too felicitously explained away. This tendency undermines any effort at fairness or evenhandedness which might earn the book a fairer hearing.

The scattershot nature of this book and its non-linear, anachronistic structure render it difficult to summarize since Kennedy rarely pauses long enough to develop any of his points. Here is what Kennedy is apparently trying to get across. Hamilton hated Burr not for any justifiable reasons but because Burr was too much like him, a "fatal twin" in whom Hamilton saw "everything he feared most in himself. When he fired [his pistol in the 1804

duel], he was consumed by his loathing of a projected person – as much himself as Burr...in the end he arranged to have Burr kill him” (p. 42). Hamilton was furthermore, Kennedy claims, primarily driven not by a quest for fame and glory, as most specialists argue from the evidence, but was instead consumed by envy and resentment. Envy was, Kennedy says, Hamilton’s “primary passion...It is difficult to recall any other American statesman so incapacitated by resentment.” (This from an author who worked in the Richard Nixon administration!).

Jefferson’s hatred of Burr stemmed from many sources, jealousy and rivalry among them. But one which Kennedy thinks it “passing strange” that historians have paid so little attention to is the fact that it was Burr who introduced James Madison to Dolley Todd in 1794. Why is this significant? To Kennedy it is because the entry of Dolley into Madison’s life interrupted “a bachelor partnership without parallel in American public life” between Jefferson and Madison. “Then, because of Burr, Jefferson received the third great shock of his life, after the deaths of his mother and his wife –Dolley entered that partnership, and forever altered its terms...Fourteen years is a long time for two brilliant and lonely men to work together. When interveners enter such mutual dependencies, they do so at their peril. Burr intruded. That alone could explain Jefferson’s “distrust“ of him. As time went on, that distrust settled into something like hatred. After Hamilton was removed from the scene, Jefferson became a sort of alternative host to Hamilton’s malignancy” (p. 368).

That is quite a lot to digest, and it will come as news to scholars who have spent their entire careers in careful, thorough investigation of these topics, apparently unaware of (or unwilling to admit) what to Kennedy at least seems so clear. There is a huge, insurmountable problem. Kennedy does not, of course, prove any of his points – because they are themselves unprovable. It is not possible to know the inner minds of historical figures who lived two hundred years ago or to know with certainty why they did what they did (and he admits as much himself on page 369 – “While acknowledging the difficulties of direct assault upon the secrets of the motivation of historical characters, courtroom practice suggests that we may do better if we seek the opinions of their contemporaries” – but proceeds anyway).

Yet Kennedy’s interpretation rests solely on such psychological theorizing, a game in which he seems to think his cursory study of this field of scholarship enables him to decode what others have found indecipherable. Thus

Kennedy’s “argument” is no argument at all; it is a set of careless assertions based on fanciful, uncritical, and sometimes wishful thinking. It is not that it is demonstrably untrue, it is that it is not demonstrable at all. It is unsubstantiated and it cannot be substantiated. Such is the work of novelists, not historians who are bound by the rules of their discipline which require at least a modicum of evidence before arguments can be heard and evaluated.

Stylistically, the text is marred by innumerable interjections and conversational asides such as “Let us now turn,” “We now approach,” “Let us reconsider,” and “Before we go further, I’d like us to have a talk.” Even a few of these interruptions can be grating – and there are more than a few. But the major problem is the formlessness of the argument. His chapters consist of numerous, digressive narratives with virtually no analysis, interpretation, or search for larger meaning or context. Short (three or four page) subheadings in the chapters jump randomly from point to point without advancing, developing, or supporting a thesis. His disjointed narrative also skips from, say 1794 back to the 1780s then forward to 1800, back to the 1790s again and then to 1804. Random quotations, taken out of context or drawn from very different years (and thus completely different contexts) are spliced together and taken at face value. The book is unchronological and ahistorical.

The various digressions, piled on top of one another, joined by some of his aforementioned interjections, in the end reveal little. It is a pity because Kennedy himself has had a varied and interesting career. He has been, in no particular order, a lawyer in the Eisenhower Justice Department, a journalist for NBC, a banker, an assistant in the Labor Department, an administrator with the student loan program, the University of Minnesota, and the Ford Foundation, Director of both the National Park Service and the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History, and the author of nine books. Such a career might have produced a fascinating memoir or a study of the inner-workings of governmental and institutional bureaucracy of some real merit. However, it is not immediately clear exactly how any of Kennedy’s resume gives him special insight into the early republic.

Kennedy does have one thing absolutely right. The three protagonists of his story are endlessly fascinating. He is also surely correct that questions about character are always interesting and relevant and can prove a useful framework for analysis. But to plumb the depths of the characters of Hamilton, Jefferson, and Burr requires

that they be understood in the historical context of the time they lived in. They must be grasped and understood fully as politicians, thinkers, and historical figures who lived at a particular point in time. Such an analysis, furthermore, must have a depth and consistency befitting to complex thought. And to understand those times – or have any hope of comprehending these elusive figures – requires disciplined and systematic research. It cannot be achieved by a superficial dabbling or whimsical speculation.

Regardless of how entertaining one may find Kennedy's book, it ultimately is not history. In fact, by willfully disregarding both context and chronology, this

book obscures and blurs the very subjects it hopes to clarify. Readers who desire an accessible, entertaining book about the period would be far better served by turning to William Safire's novel, *Scandalmonger*, a well-researched and fascinating story which actually conveys a good feel for the period and the people of the early republic. One is likely to pick up a much better sense of the times and the individuals in Safire's work of fiction than in Kennedy's work of fantasy.

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