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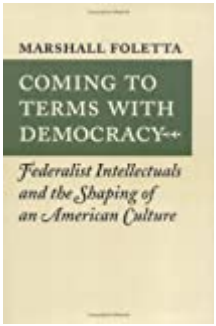

Marshall Foletta. *Coming to Terms with Democracy: Federalist Intellectuals and the Shaping of an American Culture.* Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001. 303 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2059-7.

Reviewed by Mel Yazawa (Department of History, University of New Mexico)

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Persistent Federalism, Post-1815 Federalists

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Federalists coming of age after Jefferson's election in 1800 faced an unpromising future in America. Their fathers had once dominated national politics, but the party that had carried them to power began to wither away in the first decade of the new century, and after the War of 1812 and the debacle of the Hartford Convention had simply disappeared. Compounding this loss of political influence was the decline of deference in an increasingly democratic culture. Men of superior talent and merit were no longer guaranteed a return of recognition and respect from their more common brethren. Thus denied the "security of status and clarity of direction that had guided their fathers" (p. 44), second-generation Federalists might have succumbed to despair or withdrawn altogether from the larger public world. But they did not, according to Marshall Foletta. Instead, principally through the agency of the *North American Review*, which began publication in 1815, these young Federalists voiced an "optimistic agenda" (p. 7), were confident of their power to effect that agenda, and maintained a "clear sense of purpose" (p. 102) in a seemingly hostile civic environment. Ironically, the demise of the Federalist party turned out to be a blessing, for it liberated the minds of these "sons" and allowed them to think more creatively about their place in society, to greet their "more wide-open futures with enthusiasm," and ultimately to craft a legacy of "enduring significance" (p. 44) in American letters.

In advancing this portrait of youthful exuberance amid political defeat, *Coming to Terms with Democracy* takes on two interrelated historiographical arguments. First, Foletta contends that previous studies of Federalism have focused too narrowly on politics and political ideology, and therefore have failed to appreciate the continuing vitality of Federalist culture well beyond the end of the War of 1812. Second, precisely because historians have not sufficiently acknowledged the contributions of the young Federalist intellectuals of the early republic–at thirty-six, William Tudor, the founding editor of the *Review*, was among the oldest contributors to the journal and the oldest of its first six editors–they have generally accepted an unflattering assessment of the "intellectual sterility" (p. 9) of the nineteenth-century New

England mind before the arrival of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Transcendentalism. Foletta has important things to say on both counts, and his explication of the second-generation's intellectual mission is unsurpassed in the existing literature.

Foletta is especially adept in analyzing the prospects and problems inherent in the young Federalists' quest for a national literature. Convinced that they, as members of a natural aristocracy, were obligated to assume leadership roles in society, but finding closed the traditional avenues of meeting those obligations through political dominion, these young Federalists fashioned extrapolitical roles for themselves. Most importantly, they became engaged in nothing less than a literary "crusade" (p. 102). They hoped that by shaping a national literature that was at once more patriotic, more "native," more attuned to the cultivation of virtue, and less Anglophilic, they might effectively pull together an otherwise diffuse nation. Here was a role befitting the "wise and the good" (p. 4) of the republic, a role that linked them to the heroic generation of the founders. In this sense, the cultivation of American letters was neither narrowly intellectual nor wholly personal. And success in this endeavor would be doubly satisfying to the contributors of the *Review*, for it would mean that their generation would secure the cultural independence that Americans had been striving toward since the 1780s, and it would demonstrate that the place of intellectuals in American life was central rather than peripheral, their writings socially useful rather than merely ornamental.

But the campaign for a national literature was soon beset with problems. The young Federalists discovered that the interests of patriotism and the demands of what one of their own, William Prescott, labeled the "science of literary criticism" (p. 114) were sometimes incompatible. There was no necessary connection between literature as the "glue of nationalism" (p. 96) and literature as a work of true genius; indeed these could entail conflicting obligations. The literary critic might have to choose between championing the social utility of art or celebrating the brilliance of the artist. And the more often the contributors to the *Review* chose to do the latter by adhering to a set of literary standards independent of national or moral considerations, the more likely it became that they would suffer the fate of their fathers. By renouncing provincial prejudices they risked being reduced to alienated elites railing against the baseness of the democratic majority. Caught on the horns of a dilemma, these young intellectuals not surprisingly compiled a mixed record of achievements. While setting the stage for the renaissance of American letters in the 1840s, they undermined their own literary mission; while promoting the cause of literary nationalism, they hastened the abandonment of the neoclassical principles upon which their authority rested. "The more they succeeded, the more they failed" (p. 133).

When Foletta turns his attention to Federalist activities outside the realm of literature, his analysis loses some of its explanatory power. Two examples involving institutional reform, the first educational and the second judicial, will suffice. In both cases, it appears, Foletta's focus on the *Review* may have caused him to lose sight of the larger context of antebellum reform. George Ticknor complained about the state of education in Massachusetts, but he was neither alone nor the first to do so. In fact the leading educational reformer in Massachusetts in the 1820s may well have been James G. Carter. Michael B. Katz identifies Carter as the "first great advocate of school reform" in Massachusetts.[1] Carter was, according to Rush Welter, "one of the earliest writers" to enunciate a vision of public education that was "democratic."[2] Lawrence A. Cremin draws a "direct line from Carter's efforts of the 1820s to the establishment of the Massachusetts board of education in 1837."[3] Carter and Horace Mann were the best-known champions of public education in Massachusetts, and together with activists in other states, were instrumental in the establishment of national educational associations and the articulation of the ideals of public schooling in America. To place the contributors to the *Review* in the forefront of the reformers, therefore, let alone to argue that the "people of Massachusetts joined Ticknor in evaluating their school system" (p. 149), is a bit misleading.

Furthermore, if these young Federalists were most attentive to the needs of higher education, as Foletta argues, then their achievements in educational reform were perhaps even less notable and almost certainly less innovative. George Henry Bode's call for the establishment of a national university to counteract the influence of local prejudices on young men entering public office was hardly original. The same may be said of Ticknor's reform efforts at Harvard. "The spirit of reform [in higher education] was ubiquitous," Cremin has observed, and the decade of the 1820s marked the "watershed of the movement."[4] Not just Harvard, but Union College, the University of Virginia, the University of Vermont, Brown, and Amherst (apparently with the blessing of that old Federalist Noah Webster) undertook curricular or organizational changes around this time.

Foletta's discussion of judicial reform similarly sin-

gles out his "young Federalist innovators" (p. 172) for too much. After all, the impulse to reform the judicial system became urgent only after Jefferson's election to the presidency made the judiciary the "best refuge" (p. 168) of Federalism. The "leading figure" (p. 168) among the reformers was Theodore Sedgwick, an "old school" Federalist who, according to his daughter, was mightily offended whenever a "free-and-easy mechanic came to the front door."[5] The bulk of the reforms were enacted, as Foletta points out, before 1810, that is to say, five years before the first issue of the *Review*. And the principal achievement of the reformers–their defense of the common law, which favored precedent and tradition over legislative codification, thus increasing the power of judges relative to juries–was managed by the "fathers." In the end, the most that may be said for the "sons" is that they "furthered a process begun by their fathers" (p. 168) or that they "engaged aggressively" (p. 169) in an ongoing debate. Do either of these qualify as innovative?

Finally, contrary to the main thrust of Foletta's argument, there is much to suggest that his young Federalists had not come to terms with democracy. The use of "confident," "enthusiasm," and "optimistic" in relation to their pursuit of influence in an increasingly egalitarian America seems misplaced. Foletta himself is too good a scholar to ignore the frustrations that threatened to overwhelm these second-generation intellectuals. The *Review*, upon which they rested their hopes of shaping a national literary culture, had a circulation of 500 in 1820 and a peak circulation of 3,200 before the Civil War (p. 267 n. 3). Thus its influence may not have exceeded that of the *Port Folio*, which under the editorship of Joseph Dennie was the voice of first-generation Federalism. Realizing that the *Review* reached a "very limited audience" (p. 211), many young Federalists found its literary crusade too inconsequential and their role as literary critics too insignificant to satisfy the need to be useful. William Prescott, perhaps the most highly regarded contributor to the *Review*, sadly concluded in the 1830s that, as Foletta has it, "literary criticism was an essentially worthless form of literary activity" (p. 214). Others, most importantly William Tudor and Edward Everett, abandoned the *Review* and turned to politics, the traditional means by which their "fathers" had met their social obligations. Foletta's own examination of the implementation of the second-generation's agenda is seemingly at odds with his earlier assertion that these young Federalist intellectuals successfully "worked out a new definition of public service" and creatively adapted to the demands of "democratic society and their role within it" (p. 44).

Having said all of this, I should hasten to add that some of the difficulties to which I allude constitute the best evidence of the subtlety of Foletta's overall argument and his readiness to ask big questions. *Coming to Terms with Democracy* is a significant addition to the standard works of David Hackett Fischer, Linda K. Kerber, and James M. Banner, Jr.[6] Alone it is a splendid effort at reconstructing an important part of the intellectual life of the early republic. Coupled with William C. Dowling's study of the *Port Folio*, it situates the first two generations of Federalist intellectuals in their proper places in the evolution of American letters.[7]

Notes

[1]. Michael B. Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 35.

[2]. Rush Welter, *Popular Education and Democratic Thought in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), p. 35.

[3]. Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience, 1783-1876* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 154.

[4]. Ibid., p. 272.

[5]. Catherine Maria Sedgwick quoted in David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965; 1969), p. 14.

[6]. Fischer, *Revolution of American Conservatism*; Linda K. Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970); James M. Banner, Jr., *To the Hartford Convention: The Federalists and the Origins of Party Politics in Massachusetts, 1789-1815* (New York: Knopf, 1970).

[7]. William C. Dowling, *Literary Federalism in the Age of Jefferson: Joseph Dennie and "The Port Folio", 1801-1811* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999).

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