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EDITED BY SEAN PATRICK ADAMS

A COMPANION TO
THE ERA OF
ANDREW JACKSON



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Introduction

THE PRESIDENT AND HIS ERA

Sean Patrick Adams

Whether they adored or loathed him - and most commenters break down into these extreme camps - Americans found it difficult to avoid Andrew Jackson. From his humble roots in the Carolinas, through his political career in Tennessee, his military victory in New Orleans, and all the way to his arrival in Washington D.C. to be inaugurated as the seventh president of the United States in 1829, Andrew Jackson rode the turbulent currents of public adulation and outrage. His story mirrored that of his nation; its great successes as well as its deepest flaws. For this reason, it is difficult to untangle Andrew Jackson, the individual, and the era of Andrew Jackson. This volume will emphasize the latter over the former. This is a difficult task, as Jackson stands alone among the many distinguished Americans to reside in the White House. There is no "era of Roosevelt" or "Eisenhowerian era." Regardless of the amount of criticism or revision aimed at this nomenclature, the idea of a "Jacksonian era" persists. It is an impressive longevity. And yet, Andrew Jackson himself does not need to be the focal point of every essay that seeks to understand the era. The President bursts through in several chapters here, perhaps predictably for such a strong personality, but it is a testament to his status during these decades that he does not need to dominate each one.

Jackson is probably the only president who stirred one of the nineteenth-century's greatest novelists, Herman

Melville, to include him in a literary masterpiece as well as inspire an early twenty-first century Broadway musical. In *Moby Dick*, Melville invokes Jackson as the great commoner-turned-king anointed by God: “Thou who didst pick up Andrew Jackson from the pebbles; who didst hurl him upon a war-horse; who didst thunder him higher than a throne!” (Melville, 1851 [1964]: 161). In the more recent play entitled *Bloody, Bloody Andrew Jackson*, which premiered on Broadway in 2010, the eponymous character, recast as a modern rock star turned president, appears as a symbol of the flawed power of populism in an era dominated by vapid celebrity. In both cases, simply invoking the name of Andrew Jackson dredges up a number of images – the representative of the “common man,” destroyer of Indian nations, temperamental statesman, wealthy planter and slave owner, and hero of New Orleans. Jackson was all of these things. But whether he is recast as the patron saint of democracy or a dim-witted rock star vaulted into the presidency, Jackson also serves as an unavoidable presence for Americans seeking to understand the Early American Republic. Like no other individual president, his name is attached to the era through terms such as “Jacksonian Democracy,” “The Age of Jackson,” and “Jacksonian America.” Perhaps this is attributing too much influence to a sitting president—after all the Early American Republic witnessed massive changes during Jackson’s life that had little or nothing to do with his career—yet his presence seems dogged in both academic and popular histories of this era.

The chapters that follow in this volume use this iconic image as a similar starting point, even as they often push off in different directions. Like the contemporary and historical views of Andrew Jackson, they tackle difficult and sometimes contradictory themes. In this sense, *The Companion to Andrew Jackson* is not a blow-by-blow account

of the administration of a president named Andrew Jackson, but a more wide-ranging examination of how “his” era reshaped American history. It brings together a dynamic set of chapters that blend both historiography and historical narrative from a wide range of emerging and established scholars. Although loosely organized around Jackson’s life, the volume that follows is very ambitious in its scope; in fact it might surprise readers with its range. Andrew Jackson, the collective authors in this volume suggest, continues to serve as a touchstone for much broader meditations on race, gender, economy, culture, and, of course, politics.

Because of his symbolic status, the lines between biographical works on Andrew Jackson and narrative treatments of his era often become blurred. This was not always the case, as biographies at first separated Jackson very distinctly from his times. In fact, early biographies of Jackson tend to reinforce his larger than life personality, even as they revised his net worth to the nation. Nineteenth-century authors purposely dented Jackson’s image as one of the nation’s great presidents. In his sprawling, three-volume biography, for example, James Parton gave Andrew Jackson’s life a thorough scouring. When it was all over, he concluded that Jackson’s personality dominated his judgment, his policies, and his legacy: “Andrew Jackson, in fact, was a fighting man, and little more than a fighting man.” “He was a thorough-going human fighting cock – very kind to the hens of his own farm-yard, giving them many a nice kernel of corn, but bristling up at the faintest crow of chanticleer on the other side of the road” (Parton, 1861, vol. 3: 695). William Graham Sumner offered a more explicit criticism of the president by highlighting the “tyranny of Jackson’s popularity,” which he argued “crushed out reason and common sense.” A shallow people deserved a shallow leader, in his opinion. “To the

gravest arguments and remonstrances,” Sumner maintained, “the answer was literally, ‘Hurrah for Jackson!’ ” (Sumner, 1882: 279). Mark Cheatham’s historiographical assessment of this first wave of Jackson biographers highlights their elite backgrounds and the fact that “their segment of society had found itself on the losing end of the Jacksonian political revolution” (Cheatham, 2011: 2). The resentment toward Jackson had deep roots; if they could not defeat him in the public sphere during his lifetime, at least they could rough up the General on the more familiar terrain of scholarship.

Twentieth-century historians, perhaps quite predictably, focused less on Jackson’s personal qualities and more on his political, social, and cultural context. Sometimes this did little to dull the sharp criticism offered of Jackson’s time in office. In 1929 Carl Russell Fish found that Jackson expressed the “lower aspect” of his generation’s belief in equality. Even as the “common man” rose to prominence on the political and cultural stage, Andrew Jackson was neither an articulate nor a particularly effective symbol for that movement. “The ultimate tendency of Jackson’s view,” he argued, “would have been to dull effort by a satisfied sameness” (Fish, 1929: 9, 10). So for historians like Carl Russell Fish, Jackson was an important part of the American narrative of this period, even as he appealed to its lowest desires.

Perhaps the most influential pairing of Andrew Jackson and his times is found in the aptly named *The Age of Jackson*, written by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in 1945. This lengthy political and cultural account of the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s begins with a vignette describing Jackson’s inauguration in 1829. “The young republic faced its critical test,” Schlesinger argued. “Could it survive the rule of the people?” (Schlesinger, 1945: 7). The *Age of Jackson* takes its time in answering this simple question, yet when it arrives

at its conclusion, Schlesinger was far more sanguine about Jackson's legacy than earlier scholars had been. In terms suggestive of the New Deal and World War II era society in which he was writing, Schlesinger found that "the Jacksonians, under the banner of antistatism, could carry on a vigorous program of government intervention, and Jackson, ruling in the name of weak government, ended up by leaving the presidency stronger than it had ever been before" (Schlesinger, 1945: 513). The parallels between the 1830s and 1930s were quite apparent to Schlesinger, as his Andrew Jackson hammered together a political coalition of urban workingmen and aspiring farmers to change the American polity in much the same way that Franklin Roosevelt built the New Deal Coalition out of the twentieth-century inheritors of the "common man" rhetoric.

The Age of Jackson certainly set the tone of the argument for the next three decades, even as it failed to convince many historians that Jackson's political status owed as much to the interests of working-class voters in the East as it did to those in the emerging West. Schlesinger's work had succeeded somewhat in looking at the long-term significance of Jackson's various wars against banks, Indians, nullifiers, rival politicians, and cabinet members; but the General's notoriously difficult personality was never quite expunged from the history. Marvin Meyers saw the Jacksonian era as one that struggled over an essential paradox that matched "simple yeoman values" with an attempt to come to grips with an emerging capitalist economy stressing "acquisition, emulative consumption, promotion, and speculation." In this drama, Jackson served as one of the important figures in bridging that gap. "The movement we have come to call Jacksonian Democracy," Meyers argued in 1957, "borrowed more than a powerful name; it projected into politics a fighting image of the man who would save the republic from its enemies" (Meyers,

1957: 2, 10). A decade later, Edward Pessen noted that Jackson viewed enemies not as “men warring on his or his party’s program so much as men who thwarted him or who would impair his reputation, challenge his veracity, or frustrate a scheme of his – a scheme typically devoid of ideological content” (Pessen, 1969: 310). Jackson’s personality, even as it showed signs of instability, affected the wider impact of the notion of “Jacksonian Democracy” in unmistakable fashion.

Biographies of Andrew Jackson continued to flourish in the post-World War II era, although with considerably different portraits of the brash and uncultured Jackson who thundered across the desks of earlier biographers. The president’s strong personality that so riled his contemporaries and inspired his followers served as the subject of psychological analysis rather than moral judgment. The most influential of these psychological studies appeared in 1975 with the publication of Michael Paul Rogin’s *Fathers & Children*, which focused on the Indian question as a way to understand Jackson’s personality as well as his wider connection to American society. “Jackson’s own family life – father dead at birth, mother in adolescence, traumatic early speech difficulty – prefigured in exaggerated form the problems of Jacksonian society,” Rogin wrote. “Returning to childhood, in Indian war, Indian treaties, and Indian removal, Jackson mastered its regressive appeal” (Rogin, 1975: 15). Following in Rogin’s footsteps, although not as grounded in explicit psychoanalytic terms, historians continued to explore Jackson’s personality and his emotions. James Curtis, for example, made the case that Jackson’s life and political career was a long search for vindication. The psychological approach yielded, for Curtis, a political career affected more by Jackson’s anxiety and a self-defensive approach than any strong ideological urges. “Jackson’s emotions, not his

principles, commanded their allegiance and determined the structure of the party," he wrote of the Democrats (Curtis, 1976: 179-180). More recently, Andrew Burstein explored Jackson's "passions" and found that a kind of righteous defiance characterized his political persona. "Jackson did not invent either viciousness or violence," Burstein maintains, "though there was no one more addicted to its political manifestation" (Burstein, 2003: 231).

No discussion of the biographical approach to Andrew Jackson would be complete without recognizing the herculean efforts made by Robert Remini. His signature piece is the three-volume biography (1977-1984) that recounts nearly every detail of Jackson's life in vivid and effective prose. Although often charged with being too sympathetic to his subject, no one can accuse Remini of not thoroughly engaging it. At last count, he has written at least fourteen books related to Jackson himself, as well as biographies of Old Hickory's main political rivals, John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay. Remini's overall assessment of Jackson as an individual or a symbol for the "common man" is difficult to characterize succinctly; his three-volume biography required over one thousand, six hundred pages to reconstruct Jackson's life. In a brief adaptation of that series, however, Remini describes the great successes and failures of his career as president and concludes that, on the whole, "Andrew Jackson served the American people extremely well. He preserved the Union, strengthened the presidency, and advanced democracy." "The people prospered," Remini writes, "and they enjoyed peace and respect of the entire world" (Remini, 1988: 332). Although recent works by the historian H. W. Brands (2005) and political editor Jon Meacham (2008) have revitalized the popular - and sympathetic - biographical treatment of Jackson for readers, it is unlikely that any scholar will ever

surpass Remini in the length of engagement and analysis of Andrew Jackson's life.

By 1990, Daniel Feller argued that no narrative synthesis of the Jacksonian period - with or without the General as its fulcrum - had appeared for three decades. Feller himself offered a corrective here five years later, with his slim, but effective volume entitled *The Jacksonian Promise* (1995). In addition to Feller's work, the 1990s produced two important treatments of the era; both of these focused less on Jackson himself and more upon times. Harry Watson's excellent summary of the Jacksonian political system, entitled, *Liberty and Power*, presented Andrew Jackson as a successful updater of old republican values from past generations. "The period of his leadership is justly known as the Age of Jackson," Watson argues, "not only because he dominated its politics, but also because he dominated the thinking of both his friend and enemies" from 1815 to 1848 (Watson, 1990: 10). Another influential survey from the 1990s sees the rise of capitalism - most forcefully put by Charles Sellers as the "Market Revolution" - as the central development of this era and the prime mover of all political, economic, social, and cultural forces during Jackson's time. By 1833 Sellers argues, "Jackson mustered democracy to defend patriarchal independence, equality, and therefore honor, against an activist capitalist state" (Sellers, 1991: 331). In all of these modern accounts, then, Jackson's personal qualities lent themselves to the translation of a wider ideology and were not a force in and of themselves.

In the next decade, the two most influential syntheses of the Jacksonian era since Schlesinger's *Age of Jackson* sought to update the overall meaning of this era of the "common man." Both tend to abandon the notion that Jackson personally imposed his will on the American people. Sean Wilentz argues in his epic work entitled *The Rise of American Democracy* (2005) that the era represented a

wider struggle to reconcile democratic impulses with the republican framework of government crafted during the American Revolution. Continuity between Thomas Jefferson's generation of politicians pushing for equality among the American citizenry and the "common man" of the 1830s and 1840s outweighs any notion that Andrew Jackson and his immediate followers ushered in a unique era of democratic principles. Not only did Andrew Jackson himself espouse a brand of "good old Jeffersonian Democratic republican principles," but even as he came to "symbolize a fulfillment of Jeffersonian desires, his path had been cleared long before he took office." "For more than half a century, Americans of all persuasions had been preparing the way for Jackson, or some democratic leader like him" (Wilentz, 2005: 4).

Daniel Walker Howe offers a more skeptical view, even a rejection of the idea of "Jacksonian Democracy" in his rival synthesis, written in 2007 and entitled *What Hath God Wrought*. In fact, Howe refuses to even use the term "Jacksonian America" as "it suggests that Jacksonianism describes Americans as a whole, whereas in fact Andrew Jackson was a controversial figure and his political movement bitterly divided the American people." Howe focuses upon the various notions of economic and cultural "improvement" that characterize this period, from canals to social reform, and examines how the relative conquest of time and space reshaped American society. It was a critical moment in the history of the United States, he argues, but not necessarily one that saw the rise of the "common man" as a positive or progressive development, particularly from the perspectives of Native Americans, African-American slaves, or women of all races living during the period. "The consequences of white male democracy," he argues, "rather than its achievement, shaped the political life of this period" (Howe, 2007: 4-5). Historians championing the great

promise of democratic politics during this era and those citing its immense shortcomings in execution are likely to go hammer and tongs at one another for decades - it is a testament to the work of Wilentz and Howe that they make their arguments for their respective causes so persuasively.

The chapters in this volume follow the career path of Andrew Jackson and provide a deeply textured look at the era that carries his name, even as they recognize that a focus on a single individual fails to capture the enormity of change during that time. Jackson's early life in the western fringe of white settlement, for example, provides much insight into his later career as well as providing a good start to any examination of the Early American Republic. Even Old Hickory's most vociferous critics noted the need to understand his early upbringing in order to understand his personality. "There are features of American democracy which are inexplicable unless one understands this frontier society," William Graham Sumner wrote. "Some of our greatest political abuses have come from transferring to our now large and crowded cities maxims and usages which were convenient and harmless in backwoods country towns" (Sumner, 1882: 7). The chapter provided by Kevin Barksdale provides an important context for Jackson's early life, and demonstrates the innovative work done on these "American Borderlands" by past and current historians. Jackson's career, of course, moved far beyond his Carolina and Tennessee roots. As the "Hero of New Orleans," Andrew Jackson moved from a regional into a national figure, and Matthew Warshauer's chapter examines closely his role in that pivotal battle.

Of course, no portrait of Jacksonian America would be complete without examining the role of dispossessed Native Americans and enslaved African Americans to the growth of the young nation. Although Jackson earned both fame and money from his role as a noteworthy Indian fighter and