

Flashback

TO KNOW NOTHING OF WHAT HAPPENED

BEFORE YOU WERE BORN IS TO REMAIN EVER A CHILD—*Cicero*

The Strange Populism of the Anti-Masonic Party

“T was a night as dark and drear, as e'er o'er-spread the Earth”—or at least that's how partisans imagined the evening in September 1826 when William Morgan was drowned in the Niagara River and up bobbed the oddest political party of our history.

Morgan, a 52-year-old itinerant toper, had fought under Andy Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans and he kept battling for the rest of his tumultuous life. He settled in Western New York, where he joined the Masons, the centuries-old secretive fraternal order. The voluble boozier was bounced from chapter to chapter, until, resentful, he exacted revenge by revealing Masonic oaths and pledges and other arcana in his book *Illustrations of Freemasonry*. For his perfidy Morgan was “plunged into the dark and angry torrent of the Niagara...at the black hour of midnight.” (His body never washed ashore, and to this day a few loyal Masons insist that Morgan was spirited north to Canada, where he swore—and kept—another oath, this one of silence.)

Rumor and speculation ran rampant. A cover-up was alleged: Morgan's disappearance was desultorily investigated by a legal-political structure rife with Masons, from Governor DeWitt Clinton on down. The region was already on the cusp of a great and fiery religious revival: Morgan's murder lit the match, and the tinderbox blew.

Anti-Masons held raucous caucuses that resembled revival meetings. Claiming to be ani-

mated by “the blessed spirit,” they sang not of William Morgan, drunkard, but of Captain Morgan, the people's hero:

A Martyr has yielded his life to the cause

Of freedom and truth, and respect for the laws;

'Tis *Morgan* whose blood still proclaims from the ground

That life is in peril, where masonry's found

How absolutely baffling it must've been for a typical Mason—a well-to-do merchant, prosperous and respected—to wake one morning and find himself vituperated as a homicidal cabalist!

In 1873, two generations after the backlash, one elderly New York Mason recalled the sting: “Masons were excluded from a participation in the Holy Communion; their names were thrown out of the jury box; and at the social gatherings of the grave matrons of the neighborhood resolutions were...passed forbidding their daughters from keeping company with a Mason.”

The fury concretized into the Anti-Masonic Party, which in its newborn purity rested on a single plank: to bar Masons from political office, juries, indeed all of public life.

In 1827 Anti-Masons won 15 seats in the New York Assembly; over the next quadrennium the party became preeminent in much of New York and Vermont and parts of Pennsylvania, electing congressmen, legislative blocs, and even capturing Ver-

mont's governorship. In 1830 the Anti-Masons barely lost the gubernatorial race in New York, 128,000–120,000.

Damning secret societies became the rage: John Quincy Adams, trawling for Anti-Masonic votes in 1828, offered to expose the treacheries of Phi Beta Kappa.

Then came the locusts. A host of cunning men who would later found the Republican and Whig parties—William Seward, Thurlow Weed, Millard Fillmore, Horace Greeley—cut their eyeteeth on Anti-Masonry. They'd found a regular lode of votes, but still, they winced at a rabble given to such overheated utterances as “Let the friends of good order and civil law rise in their strength, and drive back to the dark regions from which it sprang this Beast with Seven Heads and Ten Horns.” (“Anti-Masons tended not to believe in venial sins,” historian Lee Benson noted with understatement.)

The coup was bloodless. Master strategist Weed ousted the leader of the red-hots, publisher Solomon Southwick (poor Solomon's habit of basing major decisions on a coin flip proved lethal to his reputation), and the party fell to a cadre of well-groomed young lawyers on the make. The new Anti-Masons committed the party to Henry Clay's program of high tariffs, a national bank, internal improvements, and other matters unrelated to the Beast with Seven Heads.



The deposed Southwick saw “the cloven foot of Clay...in the movements of some folks who pretend to be Anti-Masons,” but the hijacking was successful. Lost in the shuffle was the party's reason for being: the Anti-Masons were now indifferent on the subject of Masonry! In 1832 Weed engineered the nomination of an unrepentant ex-Mason, William Wirt, for the presidency; Wirt carried only Vermont. The party was finished; the smooth alchemists Weed and Seward admixed its tailings with Henry Clay's National Republicans to create the Whigs, while the firebrands were left in the lurch, betrayed and sputtering.

And what of Masonry? The order was decimated in the Northeast. In 1825 the Masons counted 480 lodges and 20,000 members in New York; a decade later they numbered fewer than 50 lodges with 3,000 adherents. Today the Masons are no more clandestine than the Rotary Club; lodges are likelier to sponsor Little League teams than governors.

Oh, and by the way, 14 presidents have been Masons. Which raises the question: what if the conspiracy theorists were right?

—Bill Kauffman

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BookTalk

MONSTER MAO

By John S. Aird

The Private Life of Chairman Mao

By Dr. Li Zhisui

(New York: Random House), 682 pages, \$30

As Andrew Nathan notes in his foreword to this volume, "No other leader in history has held as much power over so many people for so long as Mao Zedong, and none has inflicted such a catastrophe on his nation." For that reason understanding the character of Mao is essential if one is to understand what happened in China during the first 30 years of the People's Republic. This period was marked by disastrously misguided policies that damaged the Chinese economy, wasted both human and natural resources, and wrought havoc, suffering, and death on the Chinese people. The major responsibility for these tragic mistakes, as Li Zhisui makes clear, rests with one man—Mao himself.

Li knew him well. He served as Mao's personal physician from 1954 until Mao's death in September 1976, but Mao also relied on him as a confidant, informant, and sounding board for some of his ideas. Mao basically distrusted other party leaders and kept them at a distance. He was more open and intimate with his guards, secretaries, and Li, people without political power from whom, therefore, he had nothing to fear.

The Mao who comes to life in the pages of this book is venal, vengeful, hypocritical, vainglorious, and devoid of human feeling. The serious flaws in Mao's character are reflected in his policies, every one of which, from the "land reform" to the Cultural Revolution, exacted a toll in human lives and anguish. Mao admitted that he did not

understand economics, yet he insisted on implementing economic policies based on ideology that often lacked common sense and were out of touch with reality. When they miscarried, he blamed others, rejected criticism, and would not listen to bad news. Mao thought himself infallible and became addicted to flattery. He demanded absolute loyalty from his followers but felt no enduring loyalty to anyone, not his wives, his children, his personal staff, or his comrades. Zhou Enlai, who was slavishly loyal, Mao held in contempt.

Among Li's most striking revelations is the evidence of Mao's callous disregard for human life. When Mao's Great Leap Forward policy led to a national famine in 1959–61 and tens of millions were dying, Mao simply did not care. Li quotes him as saying, "We have so many people we can afford to lose a few." At the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, Mao said, "A thousand people will die this time, I think. Everything is turning upside down. I love great upheavals." But Mao had never concealed his attitude. In a speech in Moscow in 1957 he appalled the Russians by insisting that even if half China's population of 600 million were killed, "the country would suffer no great loss. We could produce more people."

Many readers of Li's book will be even more surprised to learn that Mao was an inveterate womanizer, though there had been some evidence of that even in the late 1930s, when the party leaders were living in the Yanan caves after the Long March. Mao was fond of ballroom dancing and used the dances to select his sexual partners, as did many of his associates. After 1949, whole dancing troupes were part of Mao's entourage, and innocent young women were selected from peasant families

to gratify Mao's insatiable sexual appetite. When he tired of them they were replaced by fresh recruits.

Mao showed how little he cared for their welfare when he became a carrier of a sexually transmitted infection, trichomonas vaginalis, which he passed on to all his women. The infection is virtually asymptomatic in men but often causes acute distress to women, yet Mao would not let Li treat it. "If it's not hurting me," he said, "then it doesn't matter." Despite his public espousal of women's rights, Mao regarded women mainly as a source of gratification.

Although he hoped to find a place in history as one of the oracles of Marxism, his interest in history focused on China's imperial past. He admired most those emperors who had been most brutal in pursuing their goals. Like them, Mao was obsessed with power and would use or destroy anyone to attain his goals.

In view of Mao's obvious deficiencies as a person and as a leader, the wonder is that foreign observers were so slow to take his measure. One explanation is that, especially in the United States, where support for Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists determined policy toward China for many years, some journalists and scholars attempted to offset what they saw as the prevailing bias by becoming apologists for Mao and the Communists. The result was a political polarization on matters relating to China that generated great heat but did little to enlighten the public.

