



SR's Books of the Week:

## Two New Studies of Alexander Hamilton

Authors: Louis M. Hacker and Richard B. Morris

By J. H. POWELL, *author of several studies of the age of Alexander Hamilton.*

**T**HIS year of Our Lord 1957 has been chosen for the celebration of the 200th anniversary of Alexander Hamilton's birth. We are to have big doings; a Bicentennial Commission with a distinguished historian (Dr. Frank Monaghan) is already at work, a multi-volume edition of Hamilton's Papers is in progress which will take its place alongside Jefferson's, Adams's, and Franklin's; books and articles will appear, and probably we shall not be spared TV dramas which will somehow contrive to make a heroine out of Mrs. Reynolds and a villain out of Aaron Burr.

We are, curiously, two years off. Hamilton seems actually to have been born on January 11, 1755. Our error is just another of those oddities that have plagued General Hamilton's reputation throughout American history.

He himself made a bit of a mystery about his age. Probably he didn't know the exact year: his birth was illegitimate, good records were not kept in the West Indies, when he was seven he was taken by his irregular family—man, woman, two "obscene" sons as the probate court called them—from one island to another, he began working at a counting house when he was eleven, before he was twelve his father had decamped, his unhappy mother died when he was thirteen, at sixteen he left the West Indies never to return.

In this pitiful, muddled origin much was lost. Louis M. Hacker observes in his new book, "*Alexander Hamilton in the American Tradition*" (McGraw-Hill, \$4.75) that it required "a powerful character to emerge from such a background"; but this of course was something Hamilton did not have. A powerful character would never have risked his home and career for a blackmailing mistress like Mrs. Reynolds, nor in a tantrum stormed out of Washington's favor; a powerful character would not have involved himself in financial difficulties almost insoluble, nor been defeated nearly to impotence by his son's tragic death, nor rushed to his own destruction in a foolish, fantastic duel. A powerful

character is a poised, well-adjusted person. Hamilton was neither. His brilliance, his eruptive instability, his grim determination, his sudden bursts of conventionality in a life generally disordered, his deep patriotism so surprising in a rootless waif, his wit, his eternal youthfulness, his reflective powers and his restless activity, his uniquely incisive gift for policy, his skill at managing things and his inability to manage people are not to be accounted for by the ordinary ways of biography. The genius and personality of Hamilton are literary problems, ethical and moral ones. But because he bent his poetic imaginings toward statecraft and budgets he is usually written of not by literary characters, but by political scientists, economists, or statesmen. The colorful man himself is little known from such works. It would be hard to imagine any Americans less suited to write his biography than Henry Cabot Lodge or John Morse, Jr., yet those wooden biographies they committed

were for many years the standard ones. What had Senator Lodge to do with the introspective, sensitive advocate who in desperate defeat and failure could pour out a plea:

Mine is an odd destiny. Perhaps no man in the United States has sacrificed or done more for the present Constitution than myself; and contrary to all my anticipations of its fate, as you know from the very beginning, I am still laboring to prop the frail and worthless fabric. Yet I have the murmurs of its friends no less than the curses of its foes for my reward. What can I do better than withdraw from the scene? Every day proves to me more and more, that this American world was not made for me.

Of course, no world was ever made for Hamilton. He was a dreamer, not a realist; he lived in plans and hopes. A brilliant essay some years ago by Gerald Johnson put the contrast succinctly: Jefferson and Hamilton are

**WHEN WAS HAMILTON BORN?:** By Congressional act and Presidential proclamation this year is being celebrated as the two-hundredth anniversary of Alexander Hamilton's birth, but Hamilton scholars believe that 1957 is actually the 202nd anniversary. During his lifetime Hamilton appears to have been puzzled and troubled by the circumstances surrounding his nativity. Henry Cabot Lodge, like most early biographers, romanticized the ancestry of the founding father and gave his birth year as 1757. Early in this century the novelist Gertrude Atherton traveled to Nevis, St. Kitts, and St. Croix, the West Indian islands where he and his mother had lived, and by research on the scene nailed down some of the facts for the first time. Then a dozen years ago Harold Larson of Washington, D. C., combed the records of the islands that had found a final resting place in the National Archives. He supplemented his findings with data supplied him by Maj. Gen. H. U. Ramsing of Copenhagen, who had gone through the islands' records now in the Danish State Archives. The result is a clearcut statement of Hamilton's birth and ancestry: born in Nevis, B. W. I. (probably Jan. 11), 1755, the illegitimate offspring of James Hamilton, a Scottish merchant, and Rachel Faucitt, a young woman of British stock who had separated from her husband, a planter of Dutch stock—but, contrary to legend, not Jewish. However, as a boy, Hamilton did attend a Jewish school and learned the Ten Commandments in Hebrew. The birth of 1757 always made Hamilton seem incredibly precocious; the date 1755 leaves him precocious but human.



**ANOTHER NEW BOOK** about Hamilton due soon is "*Alexander Hamilton: From Youth to Maturity, 1755-1788*," the first instalment of a two-volume biography by Broadus Mitchell which Macmillan will issue in April. It will carry Hamilton's story from his birth through the Revolutionary War to the adoption of the Federal Constitution that he helped to write.

the two polar opposites of our American philosophy, but which is the materialist, which the idealist? Which described America as it was, which as it might be? Mr. Johnson would have it that Jefferson was the man essentially prosaic, Hamilton the visionary. So I would too, and it is only a confusion that we today in an America principally urban and industrial prefer to prize Jefferson's philosophy, as though we were still an agrarian seaboard commonwealth of independent planters and farmers.

The landed proprietor of Jefferson is not much different, after all, as a social being, from Hamilton's artisan-proprietor of a city craft. It was an arbitrary choice. Both Hamilton's artisan and Jefferson's farmer are anachronisms in today's world; so are both their economic philosophies, based as they both are on economic realities which have ceased to exist.

Our modern Hamiltonians, who have built into the fabric of the nation Hamilton's concept of the central government—"majestic, efficient, operative of big things"—think themselves Jeffersonians. Indeed, America's prejudices seem frequently to be Jeffersonian in subtle, inexplicable ways. Russell Kirk has said that Hamilton was "eminently a city-man, and veneration withers upon the pavements." Now why should a twentieth-century American think veneration withers on a pavement? It was an American who wrote, "Oft have I seen at some cathedral door / A laborer, pausing in the dust and heat. . . ." Veneration was no more a stranger to Hamilton's urban mechanic than to Jefferson's agrarian proprietor, or indeed than to Turner's frontiersman in his dismal hut. Veneration for liberty and principle does not require the inconveniences of farm proprietorship to be genuine. "Am I, then, more of an American than those who drew their first breath on American ground?" Hamilton asked. One might as well say veneration withers on the frontier. . . .

Dean Hacker has written much on American capitalism. His approach to Hamilton is that of a learned, able defender of Hamiltonian principles, both as Hamilton first enunciated them in the conflicts of his day and as they have subsequently operated in American life. Without neglecting the controversial nature of Hamilton's policies or minimizing the conflicts that raged around him, he is still a defender, determined that we shall believe in the skill, wisdom, and greatness of the man and his contribution to "the American tradition." In this respect he has written a conventional book, a somewhat old-

**PRESIDENT MADISON:** To divest James Madison of the aura of vacillation and ineffectuality with which Henry Adams and other historians endowed him and to restore him to a place among the American great, Washington newspaperman Irving Brant has devoted nearly twenty years, five volumes, and more than a million words.

In his first four volumes Mr. Brant easily established his case with his detailed account of Madison as Virginia revolutionist, chief architect of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and Jefferson's Secretary of State. In his latest volume, "**James Madison: The President**" (Bobbs-Merrill, \$6.50), he is less successful. For the massive evidence he presents, drawn largely from newspapers and archival materials, makes it painfully clear that, great as Madison was as a scholar and thinker, he made a bungling Chief Executive, unable to lead his own party or the Congress or to maintain harmony in his own Cabinet at a time when the nation was teetering on the brink of war with both Great Britain and France. Mr. Brant lets the voluminous record speak for itself. A handful of specialists will relish the detail, but lay readers and even most historians would be grateful for more summaries, evaluations, and background material. The new volume covers only thirty-nine months, ending with the declaration of war against Great Britain in June 1812. Mr. Brant optimistically estimates that he can cover the remaining twenty-four years of Madison's life in one more volume. On the basis of his performance to date, the odds are against it.

—RAYMOND WALTERS, JR.



fashioned one, for the sources he uses lead him back to Fiske's interpretation of the Confederation period as the critical period of failure from which only the Constitution ("that frail and worthless fabric," Hamilton called it) rescued the nation. I had thought Merrill Jensen had successfully punctured this theory; Dean Hacker thinks otherwise. So, of course, did Hamilton.

**I** SEE no reason to object to the position that Hamilton's financial policies were responsible for the nation's prosperity and success beyond saying that it is a position which can neither be proved nor disproved. It can be attacked: Dean Hacker certainly maintains it with earnestness. He also argues that Hamilton has been rejected, or at least neglected, by conservatives and liberals both in recent writing. This is certainly true, and I think the reason for it is that people write of Hamiltonianism rather than of Hamilton. Dean Hacker's book is not a biography; it is an essay, an exhortatory analysis of the results of a public career. The private man is not present, the Secretary of the Treasury with "a very boyish, giddy manner," full of joys and darkneses, of turmoil, doubt, and passion, "very trifling in his conversation with ladies."

It will be a very rare book indeed which will have him present. Hamilton's days were full of people, but he was not good with them, or much revealed by them. His genius lay in what he wrote, for he had a wonderful gift of words. That gift is abundantly displayed in "**Alexander Hamilton**

and the Founding of the Nation" (Dial, \$7.50), Professor Richard B. Morris's book of selections from his writings. [Much—but not all—of the same material is available in another newly published volume edited by Professor Morris, "**The Basic Ideas of Alexander Hamilton**" (Pocket Books, paperback, 35¢.)] In these pages, some of them filled with material never before published, Hamilton breathes freshly and vividly. The editor provides an introduction and little paragraphs of comments throughout which serve as guidepost to the reader. He arranges his selections both chronologically and topically, with the result that one sees from his nineteenth to his forty-seventh year the unfolding of a sprightly and agile mind. Dr. Morris includes as well the big public issues of finance and politics and war and peace, liberty and loyalty and freedom, as the private turmoils, even the Reynolds affair in all its sordidness, and the final, deeply moving documents of the appalling collapse and the duel on the heights in Weehawken. Unusually illuminating is the section of little sketches and reflections on public men of his day which have been extracted from Hamilton's letters; and in the section Dr. Morris calls "On Life and Death" we are closer, I think, than we have ever been before to the elusive personality of this exotic, disturbing creature whose name somehow, through the ironic twists of reputation in history, has become the symbol of all that is commercial and industrious in the material part of Americans.