THE AGES OF JACKSON

The most common reminder of Andrew Jackson today is his picture on the $20 Federal Reserve note. The irony could hardly be greater: Jackson destroyed the national banking system of his own day and did not believe in paper money. Nevertheless his face has graced the Twenty since 1929, when it replaced Grover Cleveland’s. His engraved image on the bill has evolved over time, recently in the direction of portraying a kinder, gentler Jackson. Historians’ images of the seventh president have changed too, as succeeding generations have reinterpreted him, usually but not always with an eye to sustaining his stature as a national hero or as a partisan symbol. To trace these changing images over time is to see a remarkable succession of different Andrew Jacksons.

From the start his public image generated controversy. When first running for president in 1824, he campaigned as a military leader and as a man of the people, an outsider who would redeem the nation’s virtue from a self-perpetuating clique of elitists (for so his campaign depicted the James Monroe Administration and the rival candidates). Jackson’s opponents saw him as a violent, undisciplined, uncouth brute, ill-suited to supreme responsibility in a republican government. During the 185 years since, rival groups have continued to portray contrasting images of Jackson.

The Democratic Party has always maintained a certain proprietary interest in his image, commemorating him as its founder in “Jackson Day” dinners—traditionally held on January 8, the anniversary of his victory over the British at New Orleans in 1815. Franklin D. Roosevelt, an admirer of Thomas Jefferson (perhaps a more appropriate hero for a patrician), changed the name of these events to “Jefferson-Jackson Day” dinners—traditionally held on January 8, the anniversary of his victory over the British at New Orleans in 1815. Franklin D. Roosevelt, an admirer of Thomas Jefferson (perhaps a more appropriate hero for a patrician), changed the name of these events to “Jefferson-Jackson Day” dinners. Tennessee and Louisiana Democrats, however, have continued to observe an undiluted Jackson Day. In recent years such dinners no longer recur on any fixed schedule. A Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner in Des Moines, Iowa, on November 10, 2007, drew both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

Uncovering Jackson

In our own day, even as the political use of Jackson continues, we are also fortunate to have at least one small group of scholars conscientiously dedicated to uncovering and preserving the most authentic knowledge of him possible, independent of all stereotypes: the Andrew Jackson Papers project at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, currently under the able direction of Daniel Feller, a professor in the history department. The project started in the 1970s, and is now working on volumes 7 and 8. These volumes cover 1829 and 1830, the first two of Jackson’s eight years in the White House. Feller expects the project will total 16 volumes and take until about 2030 to complete.

As they go along, Feller and his assistant editors make startling discoveries. In January 1825, John Quincy Adams received an anonymous letter threatening civil war if he did not withdraw from the presidential race rather than allow it to be decided as the Constitution provides by the House of Representatives (no candidate had received an absolute majority of the electoral votes in the 1824 election). Applying handwriting analysis, assistant editor Tom Coens traced the letter to William B. Lewis, a confidante of Andrew Jackson, Adams’s leading rival. Amazingly, Lewis also may have penned an anonymous letter to Jackson himself in 1830, warning the then president of assassination if he stood for reelection. The editors suspect that Lewis wanted Jackson to seek another term and knew that nothing was more likely to prompt the Old Hero to take that decision than such a threat!

I asked each of the three editors, so familiar with the documentary sources of Jackson’s life, which of the many Jackson biographies was their favorite. All picked the same one: Life of Andrew Jackson by James Parton, published in three volumes between 1859 and 1861.

Parton wrote a number of biographies, best-sellers in their time, but Jackson’s has remained his best known. He relied closely on documentary evidence, which he sometimes quoted at length and supplemented by interviewing surviving participants. Every later biographer has relied considerably upon him. Parton was critical of Jackson’s presidency, especially the “spoils system,” instituted by wholesale removals of federal employees down to the level of local postmasters, whom Jackson replaced with his own followers. Parton called this practice “an evil so great and so difficult to remedy, that if all his other public acts had been perfectly wise and right, this single feature of his administration would suffice to render it deplorable.” Later in the 19th century, legislation would create the tenured civil service to prevent wholesale partisan removals of the kind Jackson practiced, and more meritorious kinds of removals as well.

Writing at a time when Jackson’s memory was still vivid, Parton took account of Old Hickory’s “invincible popularity” with multitudes of Americans, particularly Democrats. “What we lovingly admire,” Parton declared, “that, to some extent, we are.” He concluded that Jackson—military leader, frontier Indian fighter, and self-described champion of the common man—was the “representative man” of what he termed “the combative-rebellious period of American history.” Parton’s choice of words implied an expectation that America would evolve away from an identification with Andrew Jackson. Nevertheless, Jackson’s political admirers have contrived...
to keep his image before us, even as we move away from his times. (How they have done so is worth investigating.)

Land of Frontiersmen

In the closing decade of the 19th century, Frederick Jackson Turner announced his famous thesis on “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” Turner claimed that the western frontier of white settlement had been the primary determinant of American history down to his own time, although with the closing of that frontier he foresaw that a new kind of America would emerge. American character, according to him, had been shaped both by the ability of people to escape from the East coast to the frontier and by the experience of life on the frontier. He described frontier life as individualistic, strong, inquisitive, acquisitive, pragmatic, and optimistic. Andrew Jackson could plausibly be taken to personify the American as Turner conceived of him. Turner’s famous thesis laid the foundation for a vision of “Jacksonian America” as a land of self-made frontiersmen—ignoring such other inhabitants as women, blacks, Indians, Hispanics, city-dwellers, sailors, investors, college professors, social reformers, factory workers, recent immigrants, and members of the Whig, Antimasonic, and “Know-Nothing” parties—many of whom actually opposed Jackson politically. Turner’s thesis, like many other historical generalizations, contained much truth but did not comprehend the whole truth.

Turner himself wrote comparatively little, but his outlook achieved wide currency and influenced the brief but powerful portrait of Andrew Jackson in the English professor Vernon Parrington’s Main Currents in American Thought (1927). The Turner-Parrington interpretation of Jackson was nowhere more fully exemplified than in the two-volume The Life of Andrew Jackson by Marquis James, which won the Pulitzer Prize for biography in 1938. James wrote beautifully and made extensive use of primary sources. He sympathized more with Jackson than Parton had. Though he minimized the number of federal office-holders Old Hickory had replaced, still he judged that Jackson left the public service “a great deal worse than he found it.” Significantly, James cast Jackson as a defender of the people against the cabal of capitalists who ran the national bank. He celebrated Jackson’s stand against South Carolina’s attempted nullification and portrayed his advocacy of “Indian Removal” (the expulsion of Native Americans from east of the Mississippi to Oklahoma and Kansas) as the best the Indians could hope for.

Seemingly, James had defined a version of Jackson for the New Deal generation. But things did not turn out that way. James was a professional writer (like Parton), not an academic. He went on to take commissions to write official biographies of businessmen and official histories of business corporations. Although these books sold well, they evidently cost James credibility with the liberal intelligentsia. His biography of Jackson disappeared from their canon.

The Court Historian

Replacing James’s biography in liberals’ affections soon appeared another Pulitzer Prize winner, The Age of Jackson (1945), by a 28-year-old prodigy, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., son and namesake of a Harvard professor who also had been a liberal icon. As its title indicated, this book offered a sweeping intellectual and political portrait of America from the 1820s through the 1840s, emphasizing parallels with the New Deal. Jackson’s personal biography was of interest only insofar as it related to public policy; indeed Schlesinger reproached a historian named Thomas Abernathy for paying too much attention to Jackson’s early life in his entry on Jackson for the Dictionary of American Biography. Schlesinger created “Jacksonian America” anew.

Explicitly breaking with Turner’s emphasis on the western frontier as the origin of American democracy, Schlesinger promoted a Jacksonian Democracy that was primarily an expression of eastern workingmen’s resentments. Taking some of Jackson’s class-conflict rhetoric with new seriousness, Schlesinger declared that Old Hickory’s “war” on the national bank rallied eastern workers against the changes being promoted by capitalism. Industrialization was rending their artisan skills obsolete and reducing once-proud craftsmen to the status of assembly-line wage earners. Jackson’s chosen successor in the White House, Martin Van Buren of New York, exemplified for Schlesinger the climax of the transformation of the old agrarian republicanism of Jefferson into a modern working-class democracy (or rather, Democracy, for the antebellum Democratic Party called itself “the Democracy” with a capital “D.”)

Schlesinger took his refusal to acknowledge the role of the frontier to such an extreme that he never even mentioned Indian Removal, the number one item on the agenda of Jackson’s first term in office. In a single allusion to the Supreme Court decision in Worcester v. Georgia (1832) that vindicated the Cherokee Nation’s treaty right to refuse removal—a decision that President Jackson famously felt free to ignore—Schlesinger simply calls it “the case of the Georgiа missionaries.” An unwary reader would have no inkling of all that the case involved. Indian Removal was by no means overlooked by historians at this time; Marquis James had recently treated the subject. Similarly, Schlesinger also ignored Jackson’s personal slaveholding, public support for slavery, and attempts to ban criticism of slavery from circulating through the mails. Schlesinger preferred to avoid any topic that might cast doubt on his characterization of Jackson as an appropriate hero for New Deal liberals. His work on Jackson became the first of a long series of volumes that established him as the more or less official historian of the Democratic Party.

No Coonskin Democrat

Schlesinger’s interpretation of Jackson and the Jacksonian movement as foreshadowing the New Deal provoked criticism very quickly, and from a variety of sources. In The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It (1948), Richard Hofstadter pointed out that Jackson was no simple “coonskin” frontier democrat, but a self-made planter aristocrat with “the habit of command.” (This was precisely the point Abernathy had been making in his account of Jackson’s pre-presidential career that irritated Schlesinger.) Jackson campaigned for president as a military hero, not on economic issues; his election in 1828 was “more a result than a cause of the rise of democracy.” Although Jackson’s attack on the Bank of the United States might seem similar to FDR’s denunciations of Wall Street, Hofstadter emphasized the difference between them: Jackson wanted to free the economy from the national bank’s central control, not impose federal control. And Jackson, unlike Roosevelt, wanted to keep the federal government from building roads, bridges, and canals across the Union.

The next major critique of Schlesinger dealt at length with the so-called Bank War and came direct from a scholarly banker: Bray Hammond, a member of the Federal Reserve Board from 1944 to 1950. Hammond’s Banks and Politics in America from the Revolution to the Civil War won the Pulitzer Prize for history in 1958. It showed how the Second Bank of the United States, modeled on Alexander Hamilton’s original one, had served a useful purpose. Hammond argued that the bank’s president, Nicholas Biddle, had behaved responsibly and honorably, and that Jackson’s destruction of the national bank had left the country prey to violent swings of the business cycle until the present Federal Reserve System was created in 1913.

The 1950s witnessed the publication of two more books about Jackson that have stood the test of time remarkably well. John William Ward’s Andrew Jackson, Symbol for an Age (1953)
His subject matter was attitudes and feelings the history of broader cultural and social trends. Meyers saw the Jacksonian "persuasion" not as innovative but as fearful or at best ambivalent about economic progress. This, he demonstrated, was the theme of Jackson's famous message in which he vetoed the re-charter of the national bank. By contrast, the Whigs spoke to America's hopes for the future and faith in economic enterprise. It seems relevant to point out that the Whigs took their name from the British political party that resisted executive usurpation and represented the freedom-loving, forward-looking middle class.

Modern Interpretations

In 1975, Michael Paul Rogin's Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian startled readers. A highly speculative contemplation of Jackson's personality, this book proved a precursor of two quite different historiographical trends. In the first place it commenced a renewed examination of Jackson's psychology, for it was followed by both James Curtis's Andrew Jackson and the Search for Vindication (1976) and Andrew Burstain's The Passions of Andrew Jackson (2003). One

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<tr>
<td>Life of Andrew Jackson, by James Parton. 3 volumes. Keessinger Publishing Company, 2,076 pages, $195 (cloth)</td>
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<td>&quot;The Significance of the Frontier in American History,&quot; in Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: &quot;The Significance of the Frontier in American History&quot; and Other Essays, by Frederick Jackson Turner, with commentary by John Mack Faragher. Yale University Press, 276 pages, $22</td>
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<td>The Life of Andrew Jackson, by Marquis James. The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 972 pages, out of print</td>
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<td>The Age of Jackson, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. Little, Brown &amp; Company, 577 Pages, $24.95 (paper)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life of Andrew Jackson, by James Parton. 3 volumes. Keessinger Publishing Company, 2,076 pages, $195 (cloth)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>The Presidency of Andrew Jackson, by Richard Latner. University of Georgia Press, 291 pages, out of print</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Andrew Jackson, by Sean Wilentz. Times Books, 224 pages, $22 (cloth)</td>
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<tr>
<td>American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House, by Jon Meacham. Random House, 512 pages, $30 (cloth), $17 (paper)</td>
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may justly wonder to what extent it is possible to psychoanalyze the dead, but the outcome of these studies would seem to confirm Jackson's contemporary opponents' estimate that he was militantly self-righteous, obsessed with vindicating his honor, and able to falsify his memory of events. Second and more importantly, Rogin's book called attention to the neglected subject of Jackson's Indian policy. In the 34 years since, the field of American Indian history has developed enormously, employing ethnographic as well as traditional methods. "Indian Removal" has been placed in a whole new context, the history of the Native American peoples themselves. In addition, political histories of Jackson's administration, like Richard Latner's The Presidency of Andrew Jackson (1979) and Donald Cole's The Presidency of Andrew Jackson (1993), have given large consideration to this 19th-century miscarriage. Remini has completed to date is Robert Remini's three-volume biography, Andrew Jackson (1977–1984). A forthright admirer of his subject, Remini is laudatory is his assessments of Jackson's achievements. At the same time, he is also a meticulous scholar who does not allow his prejudices to get in the way of the evidence he finds. For example, in 1790 young Jackson set up housekeeping with another man's wife, Rachel Donelson Robards. Rachel's husband eventually divorced her. Andrew and Rachel, after learning of the divorce, underwent a marriage ceremony in 1794. During the presidential campaign between Jackson and John Quincy Adams of 1828, an Adams newspaper unearthed the old scandal that Rachel and Andrew had "lived in sin" together for several years. Jackson's campaign headquarters responded that they had participated in a marriage ceremony in 1791 under the mistaken belief that a divorce had already been issued. Remini, scrupulously investigating, concluded that no such 1791 ceremony took place, and the story that it had was an elaborately orchestrated lie. Still, whatever evidence of duplicity or ruthlessness Remini uncovers, he remains firm in his overall judgment that Jackson was a very great and noble American hero. In more recent years he has continued to defend Jackson's policy of Indian Removal as a rescue of the natives from aggressive white settlers. By expelling them from their homelands, "[h]e saved the Five Civilized Nations from probable extinction." Remini has also minimized the importance of a document from 1789, which scholars unearthed in 1995, in which a young Andrew Jackson pledged his loyalty to the King of Spain!

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**National Hero?**

AFTER REMINI IT TOOK QUITE A WHILE BEFORE another major Jackson biography materialized. Although New Deal liberals had generally found Jackson (as portrayed by Schlesinger) a congenial hero, a tribune of the common man, liberals of the 1960s and afterward found it harder to overlook his slaveholding and his Indian wars. Then in 2005 two new biographies appeared. The prolific H.W. Brands of the University of Texas undertook to change Jackson from a liberal hero into a national one. He devoted over half of his biography, Andrew Jackson: His Life and Times (2005), to the pre-presidential years and emphasized Jackson as soldier. While not blind to Jackson's shortcomings, Brands credits the Old Hero with concern for national security. Jackson achieved U.S. dominance over the North American continent by fighting British, Spanish, and Indians. To a considerable extent Brands returns to Turner's frontier thesis. Jackson leads hardy western pioneers against snobbish easterners like John Quincy Adams. (Brands plays down Adams's nationalism and his support for Jackson's invasion of Florida.) In Brand's hands, Jackson still defends the common man, but he is no class warrior.
The other 2005 biography came from the Princeton professor Sean Wilentz, as part of the Times Books series of presidential biographies edited by Arthur Schlesinger. It was a much shorter biography than Brand's, but it arrived on the heels of Wilentz's massive political history, *The Rise of American Democracy* (2005). In both books, Wilentz re-states Schlesinger's thesis. He fully acknowledges changing liberal priorities and Jackson's ambiguous status in current American opinion, both popular and scholarly. Nevertheless he is determined to restore Jackson's image as a liberal hero. "Jackson aligned himself, in his own mind and those of his supporters, with the forces of movement rather than of order, on the side of egalitarianism and against privilege," writes Wilentz. Well, maybe in his own mind and those of his supporters, but not in the minds of the abolitionists whose mailings Jackson ordered his Post Office to censor, nor in the minds of stout Yankee commercial farmers or of enterprising traders who wanted the sound currency provided by the national bank. Not in the minds of the Native Americans and their Evangelical white allies, nor in the minds of the free black men who, wherever they were permitted the suffrage, voted solidly against Jackson.

In his book on American democracy, Wilentz is at pains to portray Abraham Lincoln as the heir of Andrew Jackson, notwithstanding the overwhelming fact that Lincoln opposed the party of Jackson vigorously throughout his adult life. The only part of Jackson's statecraft that Lincoln admired was his refusal to allow South Carolina to "nullify" the federal tariff laws in 1832–33—and in that, Lincoln was joined by his fellow Whigs, Daniel Webster and Henry Clay. Furthermore, Jackson had elevated his friend and kitchen-cabinet member, Roger Taney, to be Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Taney was true to Jackson's states-rights and pro-slavery bias. Lincoln had serious doubts about the man who put the author of the *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857) decision on the Supreme Court. Wilentz imitates Schlesinger in life as well as art, becoming a public intellectual of the present-day Democratic Party even as he writes about Jackson.

The newest significant book on Andrew Jackson is *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* (2008) by Newsweek editor Jon Meacham. In his study of Jackson's presidency, Meacham negotiates his way carefully among the pitfalls of Jackson's now-discredited public policies. The expulsion of the Indians from lands guaranteed by treaty was wrong, of course, but Meacham deftly observes that Jackson probably believed his own explanation that "Removal" placed the natives out of harm's way. Censoring the mail to prevent criticism of slavery is excused on the grounds that Jackson was just being a politician. Destroying the central bank was not in the national interest, but Jackson could not brook interference with his will. And, in the last analysis, for Meacham, Jackson's strength of will is what makes him, for all his faults, a great president, a liberal hero, and a great American. James Parton's hope that the American people would outgrow admiration for Jackson's combative nature has yet to be realized. However, Meacham, like Marquis James, dwells upon Jackson's softer qualities in relating incidents from his domestic life.

**Conflicted Images**

A recent television program aired on PBS, *Andrew Jackson: Good, Evil, and the Presidency* illustrates the present ambiguity regarding Jackson's image. Jackson's wrongs against African-Americans and Native Americans are admitted and deplored. The authorities interviewed give conflicting estimates of his other policies. The program offers no new synthesis. Meanwhile, it consistently identifies Jackson's white adversaries as "the Washington establishment," and portrays his opponent Henry Clay (a gregarious, poker-playing Kentuckian) with an inauthentic British, prissy accent. Evangelical Christianity, a prominent force in the politics of Jackson's time, is ignored completely. One would never guess from the program that most white abolitionists were Christians, or that many Cherokee were too. At the end, Harry Watson, professor and director for the Center of the Study of the American South at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, argues that although blacks, Indians, and women remained outside Jackson's own democratic vision, yet when they rose to defend their rights, they were embracing "Jacksonian Democracy." More logically, they could be seen as embracing democracy as defined by John Quincy Adams, who actually included them in the defense of natural rights he made repeatedly in July 4th orations, in his fight against the congressional gag rule, and in his once-famous speech celebrating the Jubilee of the Constitution in 1839.

Andrew Jackson was an important and influential president, and needs to be understood if we are to understand the America of his time. But is Andrew Jackson really suitable for us as a hero any longer? Today, Americans of all political persuasions deplore white supremacy, accept the need for a central bank, and recognize the convenience of paper currency. The spoils system Jackson practiced has long since been reformed by the creation of a civil service. Yet Old Hickory has so captured the imagination—at least of partisan Democrats—that he keeps being reborn. Should he now be taken over by conservatives as their hero? Jackson's strong concern for national security and honor might seem to make him a plausible candidate. But conservatives would be ill-advised to shoulder the burdens of Jackson's racism, hatred of banks and bankers, demagogic class warfare, and impatience with legal restraints.

A much more suitable conservative hero would be Jackson's longtime adversary John Quincy Adams, who was just as strong a nationalist and had a wiser vision for economic policy. That, however, is another story.

**Daniel Walker Howe is the Rhodes Professor of American History Emeritus at Oxford University and professor of history emeritus at UCLA. He is the author most recently of the Pulitzer Prize-winning* What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (Oxford University Press).**
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