ESSAY REVIEW

History and Biography in the Early National Period


John Armstrong, Jr., 1758–1843: A Biography. By C. Edward Skeen. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1981. xii, 277 p. Illustrations, bibliography, index. $22.00.)

Biography is a literary form with a long and rich heritage. Its enduring appeal rests, as much as anything, on the fascination of professional historian and educated layman alike with the personalities and characters of historical figures. And yet, since biography exists as a branch of history — a small part of a larger whole — the biographer’s responsibility is like that of any other historian. He must not only charm those with a special interest in his subject, but he must also cast light upon the larger patterns of which that subject is a part. The biographer, then, practices a special kind of history. As a consequence, he faces a number of unique responsibilities, challenges, and opportunities.

The primary responsibility involves the relationship between “biography” and “history,” or between “life and times.” Out of necessity the biographer needs to incorporate sufficient “background” material to make his subject intelligible. He should not, however, allow historical events, no matter how important, to swallow up the central figure. Too often ponderous tomes lose their subjects in a mass of detail. Equally frustrating, though, are the brief works — often resting on unsupported generalizations — which cast their primary figures adrift like disembodied spirits in a vacuum. The biographer, then, must carefully determine the proper balance between his subject and the environment in which he lived and present it in such a manner as to guarantee that the central figure does indeed remain central.

Closely related to this first problem is a challenge of great importance to the biographer. For, not only must his subject remain in the foreground, the biographer must depict the whole man. He must do all he can to recreate a human life in all its fullness. All too often “public” or “significant” figures emerge as cardboard characters or marble statues. This results from the
scholar focusing on his subject's behavior — the external world of action —
that can be easily observed and described, rather than on his personality —
the tangle of individual needs and strivings which underlie behavior and
form the system of motivation at the source of action. Any full portrait of an
individual demands that some attention be paid to his inner life. Without
knowledge of what occasioned a man's action, how fully can the scholar
understand the action? Often, however, the biographer, facing a paucity of
personal sources, focuses upon his subject's career, which is concrete and
definable. As a consequence, we have a seemingly endless number of biogra-
phies which describe in minute detail this individual's role in the XYZ affair
or that individual's involvement in the formation of the Federalist party.
While this is important information, it should not be offered in place of the
more difficult task of recreating personality, character, and individuality.
Thus, the biographer's foremost task is to recreate a whole life in such a way
as to provide insight into the individual's personality and character as well
as to establish his relationship to the social environment of which he was a
part.

Another challenge for the biographer has emerged in the last several
decades with the appearance of the "new" social history. For, if it is in the
nature of biography to focus intently upon the individual, social history
searches for serial rhythms and cycles and studies large-scale aggregate be-
havior. The reason and moral purpose of particular individuals do not seem
to matter. Indeed, from the perspective of social historians, the behavior of
the particular and the individual regularities and uniformities of recurring
events emerge from the impersonal data of parish registers, tax and price
lists, and census returns — none of which were influenced by the conscious
intentions of historical participants. Thus, for example, the demographer
considers individual behavior random and meaningless. Only in a series or
in aggregate do individual actions — births, marriages, deaths — form a
meaningful pattern. Social historians are, therefore, uneasy with the sources
and focus of the biographer. Traditional sources generally provide access
only to a literate elite and the attention devoted to personal intentions,
distinctive ideas, and concrete beliefs of specific individuals reveals only the
chaotic surface of life rather than its deep-lying, long-existing foundations.

While no biographer can hope to please the doctrinaire social historian, a
mutuality of interests is possible between these scholars. The social historian
contributes essential insights which the biographer must incorporate if he is
to present an adequate portrait of his subject. To ignore these contributions
is to present a skewed relationship between life and times, between personality
and behavior. At the same time, though, the biographer can engage the
feelings and emotions of his readers in a way that is lacking in much social
history. The biographer can supply the human qualities to so much bloodless analytic history whose appeal, if any, is only to the intellect.

While all biographers face the aforementioned challenges, those working in the early national period enjoy a unique opportunity as well. For, while the social, economic, and intellectual life of eighteenth-century America has been carefully recreated by such scholars as Kenneth Lockridge, Edmund Morgan, Gordon Wood, and Philip P. Greven, the same may not be said of the years following the Revolution. Since the work of Paul Johnson, Stuart Blumin, Edward Pessen and others focuses primarily on the post-1820 era, there is something of an analytic void for the period 1780–1820. And yet the research of these historians indicates that the time between 1780 and 1820 was one of wide- and deep-ranging transformations. These include the origin of sustained economic growth; the beginnings of urbanization; major demographic shifts affecting fertility and family patterns; a marked intensification of social stratification by wealth as well as an emerging inequality in the distribution of that wealth; the democratization of political life; and a host of other fundamental alterations in American society. If scholars are to deal adequately with the impact of these changes, they must break out of the traditional political approach to the period. They simply must not continue to bore readers with their repetition of half-digested background material for the struggles between Hamiltonians and Jeffersonians, the Republican schisms, or the causes of the War of 1812. There is a wonderful opportunity to revitalize the study of the early national period and the biographer must, not leave this golden chance solely to the social historian.

Three recently-published works graphically illustrate the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities of biography in the early national period. The subjects of Aleine Austin's *Matthew Lyon: "New Man" of the Democratic Revolution, 1749–1822*, Louis W. Potts's *Arthur Lee: A Virtuous Revolutionary*, and C. Edward Skeen's *John Armstrong, Jr., 1758–1843: A Biography* present a nice cross section of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century American life. Lyon, the brawling Jeffersonian-Republican Congressman, arrived in America from his native Ireland as an indentured servant and clawed his way to prominence on the Vermont frontier. Armstrong, a man from solid middle-class Pennsylvania origins, married into the aristocratic Livingston family of New York and held the posts of minister to France and Secretary of War. Lee, a hypersensitive, nearly paranoid, member of the Virginia gentry, served the revolutionary cause as a pamphleteer and then the fledgling government of the United States as a diplomat in the French court. The varied regional as well as socio-economic character of these three individuals offers marvelous possibilities to gain insight into a wide range of American experience during the years of the early republic. This potential
Alaine Austin portrays Matthew Lyon as a "new man" of the Revolution, one of a new breed of upwardly mobile individuals who fostered the Revolution to establish a more equitable society for all while simultaneously reaping enormous personal benefits. She does a fine job of drawing the main outlines of such a character and, in addition, here biography offers a good many fascinating observations on the early national period which add considerably to our knowledge of the social history of that era. For example, the reader sees the tension between established Congregationalists in Connecticut and their disaffected fellow citizens and how these problems intensified in the New Hampshire Grants when migrants entered that frontier region. By and large, law-abiding, conservative, Congregationalists settled east of the Green Mountains while a more restless and individualistic breed chose lands west of the mountains. New York's reactionary efforts to govern the Grants temporarily forced these groups to coalesce, but their underlying tensions formed the basis of politics when Vermont became an independent republic and then a state. Congregationalists tended to become Federalists and their opponents Jeffersonian Republicans. The reader discovers in graphic terms the ambivalence of a people torn between New England communalism and a burgeoning radical individualism. The tortured emergence of liberalism within a libertarian republican framework becomes clear in the efforts of Matthew Lyon and his associates to combine individual economic opportunism with a dedicated effort to create a republican form of government in Vermont.

The great strength of Austin's book lies in her provocative discoveries relative to the social processes of the early national period. Nevertheless, she neglects Lyon's personality and character. She offers intriguing glimpses of Lyon's behavior, but does not suggest any relationship between these and his inner life. Why, for example, would a man at the height of his social and political prestige, to say nothing of economic prosperity, suddenly uproot his family to begin life anew on the Kentucky frontier? Was this typical of the "new man"? Did these individuals enjoy only temporary success in their attempts to control the system? Or, was this restlessness an individual characteristic of Matthew Lyon? Austin would have done well to recapture Lyon's personality. How fully, after all, can we understand his public actions if we are not given some insights into what occasioned them? Austin, has, nonetheless, written an intriguing book that leaves her readers wanting more.

There is a marked contrast between Austin's approach to her subject and that of Louis W. Potts to his. Whereas Austin stressed Lyon's public career and its social context, Potts concentrates on developing Arthur Lee's personality. He provides an excellent picture of how a child of the powerful Lee
family grew to maturity nurtured on the idea that it was the mission of his family to be society's leaders. In his formative years Arthur lived in a world populated by powerful males and never found an affectionate normal relationship with women. A bitter struggle with his elder brother over their father's estate taught Arthur alienation and deprivation. Consequently, he grew to manhood hypersensitive about his own sense of values and integrity. Lee lived in a Manichean world of good and evil and whenever involved in a dispute, he perceived the cause of his distress as being external, and the work of some self-seeking opponent. By devoting himself to the virtuous republicanism of the American cause, Lee sought meaning and identity in his own life. Unfortunately, few men could measure up to his standards of republican virtue and the reader easily understands the evolution of Lee's imbroglio with Silas Deane, Lee's clash with Benjamin Franklin and a host of others, as well as the French distrust of his "militia diplomacy." What emerges is a clear understanding of Lee's life, first as a spokesman for the colonial cause in London and then as a diplomat in France. By exploring Lee's personality the reader gains enormous insight into the complexities and contradictions of motives of individuals caught up in the American Revolution.

The great contribution of Potts's book lies in its recreation of Arthur Lee the man. Readers will, however, find little new information relative to the social and intellectual environment within which Lee lived. Instead, Potts links his discussion of Lee to the interpretations of such scholars as Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood and others. While this is not necessarily a weakness, it might have been worthwhile for him to have probed more closely the dynamics involved in, say, Lee's adherence to libertarian republicanism. In any event, Potts has written an interesting and worthwhile book.

This may not be said of C. Edward Skeen's biography of John Armstrong. Claiming a significance for Armstrong that has long been overlooked through excessive devotion of scholarly attention to the "great men" of the age, Skeen sets out to rectify the situation. However, instead of providing fresh analysis, Skeen simply recounts the traditional political history of the early republic and inserts Armstrong here and there. His discussion of the Newburgh Address, for instance, offers little about its meaning and significance beyond the fact that Armstrong wrote it. Like any number of biographies of Jefferson's contemporaries, Skeen repeats a familiar story in a familiar way, only with a different minor character playing the lead role. Not only do we learn little if anything new about the times in which Armstrong lived, we learn precious little about Armstrong himself. He remains a cardboard character. Worse yet, the picture that does emerge is distorted. Skeen devotes over one-third of the book to the two year period during which Armstrong served as
Secretary of War. In contrast, the following twenty-nine years until his death in 1843 receive a scant sixteen pages. The reader learns far more about the day-to-day affairs of a second-rate Secretary of War than he either needs to or cares to and gains little if any insight into the life of a man who married into the New York aristocracy and lived the life of the landed gentry in a middle Atlantic state in the throes of transition from a traditional to a modern society. As a consequence, this book offers little insight into Armstrong, his times, or the social environment of which he was a part. It is neither good biography nor good history.

The works of Austin, Potts and Skeen illustrate the difficulties in writing biography in the early national period or in any other time. Although biography is a literary form with a long history, it has produced fewer recognized masterpieces than any other type of writing. Perhaps this is because it is a complex and difficult undertaking that appears deceptively simple. Many scholars manage to capture their subjects, but fail to set them within their larger social or intellectual contexts. Others skillfully portray the environments of their subjects, but either lose their men in mazes of detail or do not recreate them as believable human figures. No matter how difficult biography may be, though, scholars must never cease their attempts to accomplish the ideal work. It is through biography, more than any other form of history, that scholars achieve the full evocative description of the past that is able to arouse the feelings of their readers and to stir their emotions. It is biography that allows readers to make contact with past individuals and to relive their experiences with them. This intimacy with the past is history's greatest strength, the source of its appeal through the ages. It must not be lost.

University of Oklahoma

ROBERT E. SHALHOPE