BOOK REVIEWS


The Age of Jackson has been a fertile era for provocative historical studies in recent years. Numerous monographs and scholarly articles have added new dimensions to the understanding of American society during the reign of Old Hickory. What has been needed, however, was a new synthesis to tie together all the new insights and interpretations. With this volume, Professor Pessen has attempted to meet the need.

By focusing on a single period, vaguely defined as the 1820's and 1830's, the author has liberated himself from the conventional chronological pattern. This approach has enabled him to discuss the recent research according to topics. He concerned himself with such subjects as the character of Americans in this era, social developments, agriculture, transportation, labor and commerce. The author reveals his own interests in the period, however, by devoting over half of his book to the politics of Jacksonian America.

Especially interesting is the delineation of the American personality during the Jackson period. Relying upon the observations of European travelers in the United States at the time, Pessen has presented a most interesting composite picture. The most attractive feature of the American was his "natural or unspoiled part." Americans were also notable for their generosity, curiosity and industriousness. But the portrait has its less flattering aspects: Americans were also prone to violence, humorless, anti-intellectual and unrefined.

Pessen argues, too, that while Americans preached egalitarianism, rigid class distinction thwarted a true realization of social democracy. In fact, the author contends that the concept of this era being known as the Age of the Common Man has been overdrawn. Recent research has shown that social mobility up the ladder of success was not as widespread as we once had believed. Instead, class lines tightened and social tension increased in this period.

In his chapters on Jacksonian politics Pessen offers a well-argued statement of the so-called "consensus" view of history. This view maintains that ideology played a small role in political matters and that major leaders and parties were politically and socially conservative. The primary goal of the leaders was to gain power and enjoy
the spoils of victory rather than offering enlightened leadership. Being practical men, they avoided questions that could not be compromised, flattered the voters with platitudes and hard cider, and gave long-winded speeches that contained little substance. Many historians will disagree with Pessen’s analysis of Jacksonian politics and already a reaction against the “consensus” view has appeared. But a frontal assault of Pessen’s view will be hard to mount.

Pessen’s most blasphemous statement is that this era “was not really the age of Jackson.” Old Hickory had very little to do with the shaping of this period. Except for the momentous battle with the Bank of the United States this reviewer agrees with Pessen. Yet, it should be noted that Pessen has offered no new label but sticks to convention by entitling his book *Jacksonian America*.

One might quibble too with the author for ignoring significant features of the period such as the growing interest in the West, the enthusiasms for reforms, and the emerging sectional issues. Still, the author has artfully pieced together a rich mosaic of a period historians once called the Age of Jackson.

*Indiana University of Pennsylvania*  
W. Wayne Smith


Isabel Gardner Malone’s story of her childhood covers an era from the early 1900’s into the 1920’s. She has given a clear picture of three sides of life in Pittsburgh at that time: that of the educated wealthy class (of which she was a part), that of the poor immigrant class, and that of the thoughts and wonders and misgivings of a child and growing girl.

In a lively, rapidly moving, flowing style (which continues throughout), she begins the account of her recollections with the curiosity and questions and hurt feelings connected with the discovery of a new baby in the house and the change of her position in the household. One is immediately drawn back sympathetically to his own thoughts and feelings at that time and stays there to the story’s end. She also reflects immediately her own personality: that of a warm, sensitive, observant person with a deep feeling toward others. This she portrays in her protection of a younger brother who does not