BOOK REVIEWS


Patrick Henry left so few papers that it seems unlikely we will ever have a definitive biography of the Virginia statesman, although numerous scholars over the past century-and-a-half have made the attempt. Most have followed the tone set by William Wirt, who published his admiring Sketches of the Life and Character of Patrick Henry in 1817. This panegyric portrayed Henry as a model frontierman, a liberty-conscious backcountry Virginian who advanced by virtue of his natural talents to triumph over the entrenched Tidewater aristocracy. Wirt’s views were highly influential. Even the most recent complete biography, Robert D. Meade’s two-volume Patrick Henry (1969), identifies Henry as “a flaming apostle of American democracy,” a product of the frontier environment in which he functioned.

Richard R. Beeman, in Patrick Henry: A Biography, fortunately, does not succumb to past eulogy. He does not offer another detailed biography of Henry or new information about his private life or his public career. Instead, Beeman presents an astute, balanced account that places Henry in the context of the community in which he operated to achieve power. He skillfully weaves the record of Henry’s public and private affairs into a concise survey of the structure of Virginia society and the planter elite that controlled it.

Henry was the favorite of frontier Virginia, the spokesman for a narrow-bound society that was often at odds with the Tidewater oligarchs. He was not, however, a part of the “vulgar herd” with a disadvantaged background. His family, while not as illustrious or prosperous as that of some Tidewater aristocrats, had substantial holdings in land and slaves. Henry had certain talents — a quick, incisive mind and phenomenal oratorical gifts — that he exploited fully to build a successful law practice and to thrust himself into the public eye. But equally important was the fact that he was a member of a “privileged class” of western Virginia planters and lawyers. Never the impoverished frontiersman of tradition, he remained highly acquisitive throughout his lifetime and managed to amass a sizable personal fortune. And, like other Virginia leaders, Henry’s
"enhanced economic position was an important key to his rise in the social and political structure."

Henry's Stamp Act Resolves, introduced only nine days after he first entered the House of Burgesses in 1765, set his reputation as an outspoken defender of legislative autonomy in Virginia. Taking a bold stand again in 1774 in reaction to the Intolerable Acts, he used fiery oratory to call for the mobilization of military forces, and he became a rallying point for opposition to the interfering British. This has prompted some scholars to identify Henry as a "radical." But Beeman convincingly argues otherwise. He sees Henry's attitude toward the struggle with the British as the product of his particular situation as a rising member of the Virginia ruling class. He and others in that class were willing to take a radical stand in order to protect their positions of power. But Henry was hardly radical once the crisis with British authority was over. He saw no need for social reform in Virginia and worked to maintain the old order. Although he occasionally decried the evils of slavery, he took no steps to correct the institution and continued to increase his personal slaveholdings.

In addition, he opposed the separation of church and state in Virginia because he was concerned that the state needed a strong, state-supported church to preserve morality and virtue. He did not attempt to liberalize suffrage in Virginia or to weaken the oligarchic control of the ruling class in which he operated. As the first governor of the independent state of Virginia, Henry was fearful that increasing centralism would weaken the local interests of Virginians. He pursued a vigorous but unsuccessful fight to block ratification of the Constitution in his state, passionately articulating the doctrine of states' rights in the process. Closely attached to provincial interests, the base of his popular support, Henry had no radical view of the social order nor was he ever a radical politician challenging the traditional structure in Virginia.

Beeman, an associate professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania, has managed to combine the most recent scholarship on the revolutionary era with a concise, readable biography. He obviously admires Henry, but his account is reserved and balanced, making it the best profile of the Virginian to date.

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