

Timothy Pickering and the American Republic. By GERARD H. CLARFIELD. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980. Pp. viii, 320. Preface, epilogue, notes, note on sources, index. \$19.95.)

A disconcerting reality of the historian's craft is that often biographies are the converse of what Mark Antony said of Caesar in Shakespeare's play: "The evil men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones." Writers of biography often fall into the trap of overstating the virtues of their subjects and downplaying their faults. This is not the case with Clarfield's excellent work on Timothy Pickering which superbly combines thorough scholarship with a perceptive psychological interpretation, though, strictly speaking, not an outright psychohistory.

Not only did Pickering have the misfortune of being a political mediocrity in America's golden age of political geniuses, he also had an erratic personality that led him astray politically with increasing frequency as he aged. His unfortunate entanglement in the Essex Junto and the Hartford Convention have blinded posterity to his long but, unfortunately, undistinguished career as a public servant. He possessed the self-defeating personality quirk of constantly making serious policy blunders and alienating powerful political personalities.

While Clarfield's masterful work does nothing to improve Pickering's historical image, it does serve to make understandable the life of one of the most important exponents of the High Federalist creed in the early Republic. The phrase "self-righteous" recurs with frequency in Clarfield's interpretive comments on Pickering. Although this volume is not a psychohistory in the strict sense of the word, the author laces his narrative with numerous efforts to analyze his subjects.

As the long story unfolds through more than a half century of public service, the conclusion is inescapable that the core of Pickering's personality was an unyielding identification of himself, his views, and his interests as innately righteous and those of his opponents as "devilish." His rigid "white-black" view of reality caused him to quarrel with almost all the great figures of the early Republic, including Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and John Quincy Adams. In the end, he died, as he had lived, a bitter man, convinced of his rectitude and of the corruption and ineptness of the Founding Fathers. Modern readers, reared on the Olympian myth of Washington, Adams, and Jefferson, must realize that often

one's worst critics are those in one's own generation. As Pickering aged, he developed a "fixation . . . that somehow the growing myth of the Founders would have to be punctuated, that Washington's mediocrity, Adams's vanity, and Jefferson's hypocrisy would have to be brought home to the people." To this end, he intended to write his own history of the Revolution, but died before he could undertake it.

Some new insights into the history of the early Republic emerge from this volume. Most notable is Clarfield's claim that it was Pickering, rather than Hamilton, whose political maneuvering resulted in the latter's appointment as Washington's second in command during the difficulties with France in the Adams administration. Similarly, the key role of Pickering as the uncrowned leader of the cabal against Adams within his own cabinet is well developed by Clarfield. One of the most perceptive comments made by Clarfield about the long, eccentric career of Pickering is that "there was no subtlety to Pickering; there never had been. Throughout his lifetime he had repeatedly shown a facility for moving swiftly from one extreme to its opposite with little concern for consistency" (p. 179). Few scholars will quarrel with the comment that "Pickering was incapable of keeping his emotions completely under control. It was one of the ironies of his career that although he consistently sought power, he really had no idea of how to exercise it, recognizing few limits and seldom acting with restraint" (p. 171). The colorful, vituperative language which characterized historical debate in the days of the early Republic is illustrated by the numerous quotations from Pickering's satiric pen. One of the few inaccuracies of any importance in this work is the author's description of the aging, retired Washington as near senile in 1798.

This volume fills a conspicuous gap in our knowledge of the leaders of the early Republic. Though it by no means raises Pickering to the front rank of the Revolutionary generation, it does an exceptional job of giving us a penetrating interpretation of one of the more important figures in the Federalist party. In doing this, it lends understanding to the career of a figure who too often has been a subject of historical parody. Clarfield's biography belongs in the library of all scholars of the early Republic.

Department of History
West Liberty State College
West Liberty, West Virginia

KENNETH R. NODYNE