

# America the Good, America the Brave, America the Free: Reviewing the Oxford History of the United States

TREVOR BURNARD

Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763–1789* (rev. ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945–1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

James T. Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

## INTRODUCTION

With the publication of Gordon S. Wood's *Empire of Liberty*, the Oxford History of the United States, first envisioned nearly fifty years ago, has finally reached the two-thirds mark. Seven of its eleven chronological volumes and one thematic volume are now published. This essay reviews these eight works. It would be best to wait until all twelve volumes are published but, given the glacial progress of the series, who can wait that long? The first volume, Middlekauff's narrative of the American Revolution, was published in my final year as an undergraduate. The series will not be finished until I reach my late fifties. Individual works, all intended to

School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, University of Melbourne. Email: [tburnard@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:tburnard@unimelb.edu.au).

adhere to the plan initially laid down by the series's first editor, C. Vann Woodward, that these be narrative histories readily accessible to the educated general public, have met with great acclaim, winning three Pulitzer Prizes, a Bancroft and a Parkman. Each volume, except Patterson's second volume on contemporary American history, is hernia-inducingly heavy, containing between 736 and 1,035 pages. The total number of pages so far produced is 6,570, of which 5,215 are text. If we assume that each of the next four volumes comes in at over eight hundred pages, then the series will amount to ten thousand pages of narrative on the prehistory and history of the United States.

Oxford University Press thinks it "by far the most respected multi-volume history of our nation." That is true when one looks at each volume individually. Wood's volume exhibits the strengths of the series. Wood is the dean of modern American historians of the Revolution and the early Republic. His book is written with verve and elegance. It rehearses and extends the arguments made in Wood's previous books that this period was revolutionary in its overturning of old ideas of hierarchy and in its assertion of egalitarian doctrines for ordinary white men. But paradise had its dark side. Wood sees the years of the New Republic as a period in which the high ideals of the Founding Fathers were corrupted, distorted and betrayed by the forces of egalitarianism that they had deliberately but naively set into motion. Instead of America surpassing in cultural power and political sagacity the old and tired world of Europe, cultural patterns in an aggressively democratic and narrow-minded United States were vulgarized so that the republican experiment of the late eighteenth century was compromised. Americans chose not to follow enlightened and cosmopolitan leaders – such as Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton and even John Adams – but instead, Wood argues, followed, calamitously, the "romantic, undisciplined, and untutored" Andrew Jackson (a putative villain for Wood and a real villain for Daniel Walker Howe), whose "bumptious nationalism and ... defiant abandonment of Europe ... repudiated the enlightened and cosmopolitan ideals of the Revolution" (Wood 4).<sup>1</sup>

### INDIVIDUAL EXCELLENCE, COLLECTIVE CONCERNS?

But if each volume is individually excellent, the Oxford History of the United States has serious problems as a series. The problems go beyond the interpretive problems caused by its glacial publication record: it is jarring to read Middlekauff and Wood together realizing that Middlekauff wrote his book a decade before Wood wrote his major reinterpretation of the American Revolution, a reinterpretation that in turn forms the scaffolding for *Empire of Liberty*, published twenty-seven years after Middlekauff's title.<sup>2</sup> The problems also go beyond occasional disagreements of historical interpretation. There are some. Middlekauff, for example, believes that the Founding Fathers were deeply influenced by Providentialism and by the dictates of a Protestant faith that he (wrongly) believes led their ancestors to flee England so as to create a City upon a Hill in the New World. Wood argues that the Founding Fathers

<sup>1</sup> References to each volume will be by author followed by page number.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

were noticeably irreligious (Middlekauff 52; Wood 583–89). McPherson contends that before the Civil War it was the North, not the South, that was exceptional and unique (McPherson 860); Wood argues that as early as 1800 it was the South that was anomalous (Wood 353). But these disagreements are, in the main, minor. Indeed, what is most striking – although, as I will discuss below, hardly surprising given the starting point of each author – is how unified the series is in respect of its understanding of American history.

My criticisms of the series are criticisms about the architecture of the series rather than of the individual books in the series, all of which are outstanding works of historical scholarship. Daniel Walker Howe's book, for example, is easily the best single-volume treatment of what used to be called the Middle Period. McPherson's book is a classic; Patterson's *Grand Expectations* marries the study of high politics with popular culture in brilliant fashion; Kennedy offers a compelling synthesis of the Great Depression and World War II. But one does not need to praise these books too much given how extensively the general editor praises each author. Wood is "admirably lucid"; Patterson shows "remarkable qualities of courage and skill"; Kennedy is "richly endowed" with "remarkable talents" and "unusual skills"; Howe writes "deftly" and with "admirable clarity"; Herring, Wood, Patterson and McPherson are all "masterful." It is all a bit over the top. Why can we not make our own judgements about the quality of the book we are about to read? That is what J. M. Roberts allows us to do in his more restrained introduction to each volume in the New Oxford History of England, a series that compares favourably to this series. The editors of the Oxford History of the United States, however, are making a point. Their authors are great historians who can be relied upon to pronounce upon what we need to know about the great men whose exploits are the stuff of history proper.

The proper history of the United States, in this series, is the history of great men – political leaders and generals almost exclusively.<sup>3</sup> This is problematic. The sign in the Johns Hopkins seminar room used to be "History is past politics and the present is present history," derived from the time when Henry Adams was a professor there in the late nineteenth century. C. Vann Woodward, the original editor of the series, followed after his death by David Kennedy, would have seen the motto when he was a professor at Hopkins after World War II. He clearly believed the slogan to be correct. No one would think that the Annales school or the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure had existed if one read these histories. What social history there is in this series is only there to illuminate

<sup>3</sup> The inattention given to great men in other fields, like literature, technology, business or science is lamentable. McPherson does not find space to mention *Moby-Dick* (1852); Kennedy only mentions F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway in order to explain popular reactions to political events and does not mention William Faulkner or Ezra Pound at all. One could go on. The contrast with the New Oxford History of England is remarkable. Hoppen, for example, devotes a large section of his history of mid-nineteenth-century England to Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope and Charles Darwin, apologizing for not treating properly the work of James Clerk Maxwell, the pioneering physicist. K. Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation 1846–1886* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 6.

political themes. Ordinary people seldom rate a mention. Martha Ballard, for example, a Maine midwife, gets mentioned only once even though Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, the recent past president of the American Historical Association, wrote a best-selling and highly acclaimed book about her.<sup>4</sup> And, of course, no author shows any sign of caring about recent historiographical developments like the cultural or linguistic turns.<sup>5</sup>

In part, this reflects the authors' Olympian detachment from historical debate. Middlekauff's neo-Whig book on the American Revolution and the Constitution virtually ignores any insight from the progressive school of interpretation that sees the American Revolution and the making of the Constitution as being deeply contested events, reflecting class conflict. Howe notes in a footnote that his treatment of Jacksonian "democracy" is at variance with that put forward in a major book by Sean Wilentz. Nevertheless, he chooses not to engage directly with Wilentz's argument (Howe 330, 359). Significantly, the historiographical debate, such as it is, is carried out discreetly in footnotes.<sup>6</sup>

### WOODWARD'S VISION

This determination to ignore historians' differing interpretations of major events and topics is not accidental. It comes explicitly from Woodward's vision for the series. He conceived the series (along with Richard Hofstadter of Columbia University, but Hofstadter died before the series got going) as an antidote to the type of social-science histories that he felt were creating a gulf between what the "educated reading public" wanted to read and what academics doing social history were writing. As is well known, Woodward, famous for being a historian with an affinity for dissent, moved to the right from the 1960s. It may be, as Sheldon Hackney argues, that it was not so much Woodward but the times that changed. Nevertheless, one result of Woodward's growing conservatism was that he set his face against methodological innovation. His editor's statements are almost defiant pronouncements for doing history in an old-fashioned way. David Kennedy is not, he argues, "the kind of historian who dwells on 'abstract forces'" (take that, "new" social historians) but writes about "*people*" (Kennedy xiii). These people were "statesmen and commanders," both American and foreign. He anticipates criticism of McPherson for not dwelling upon themes such as westward expansion and settlement, Indian removal and resistance, economic growth and the tides of European immigration. Such themes, Woodward suggests, could be ignored in part because they were mere "continuations of familiar themes in American history," but in the main because "it is hard to imagine a historian in his right mind pausing between the roar of Gettysburg and the fall of Vicksburg for a topical chapter on internal improvements or the westward movement" (McPherson xviii). Well, Boyd Hilton, in his

<sup>4</sup> Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812* (New York: Vintage, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> See Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2005).

New Oxford History of Britain between 1783 and 1846, pauses for over a hundred pages between describing Nelson's famous victory at Trafalgar and the equally famous victory of Wellington ten years later at Waterloo in order to discuss the social, economic and cultural structure of Britain in the age of the French Revolution.<sup>7</sup> Hilton's approach works well and is not a radical approach to writing about the past, at least not to anyone without a profound aversion to social history.<sup>8</sup>

### THE PROBLEM WITH NARRATIVE HISTORY

Does it matter? Yes. The Oxford History of the United States is a poor guide to important facts that readers need to know in order to understand the social and economic contexts of American politics. It is hard to find information in the series on such important matters as population or economic wealth. The series has very few tables, although it has a number of maps (usually describing battles). The New Oxford History of England, by contrast, has lots of useful tables on such things as the size, growth and distribution of population, as well as a variety of maps that show important geographical features of England over time. The New Oxford History of England does social history so much better than the Oxford History of the United States. Of course, the English series has its own limitations, some of which it shares with the Oxford History of the United States. It has a metropolitan bias, it overemphasizes leaders and underemphasizes followers, and it too exhibits a glacial rate of production. It also has no female authors. But it is a livelier, more informative and more historiographically *au courant* series than its American counterpart.<sup>9</sup> Certainly, the British series has a different focus. The authors do not ignore politics but attempt to survey the totality of experience. Each volume discusses at length the social, economic and cultural patterns in England. Wars are covered, but not exhaustively, and at least as much attention is given to society, people and even the environment as to war. It is adventurous in other ways, too. Robert Bartlett, for example, finishes his marvellous evocation of England between 1075 and 1215 with a fascinating disquisition on how medieval English people placed angels, demons and other nonhuman apparitions in their cosmological scheme. One gets a sense of how different their world was to ours. There is nothing in the more genteel American series that is as imaginative, as speculative or as revealing about what people actually thought as in Bartlett's extended commentary on spiritual creatures.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England 1783–1846* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> For Woodward and his conservative turn from the mid-1960s, see Sheldon Hackney, "C. Vann Woodward, Dissenter," *Historically Speaking*, 10 (2009), 31–34.

<sup>9</sup> For a similar argument see Benjamin Schwarz, "The Path of Least Resistance," *Atlantic Monthly*, October 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings 1075–1225* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 686–92.

## BOYS' HISTORIES

There is nothing wrong, of course, with taking a sceptical, somewhat conservative, approach to the writing of history. The New Oxford History of England is also conservative in political and historical viewpoint. But some of the traditionalism in the Oxford History of the United States is remarkable for books being published in the twenty-first century and seems to reflect the social and gender composition of the authors of the series. Of course, it is simplistic to assume that just because a historian is a certain kind of person then the histories written by that person will reflect personal experience. Scholarship has its own dynamic, arising out of historical reflection upon seminal discoveries and interpretations. But the historian's background does say something about how that historian will write history. What is remarkable, therefore, about the twelve historians writing Oxford histories is their social uniformity. Most strikingly, every historian is a white male. Each man, according to his acknowledgements, is married. As one might expect, each historian works (or worked – seven of the twelve are presently emeriti) in an American research university, although Howe taught at Oxford for ten years. All are American and all seem to have been born in either the American North or the American West. None of the historians is a southerner, although Herring taught at the University of Kentucky. None is black, Hispanic, Asian or even an ethnic Catholic.

The most striking social characteristic of this group of historians is that they are white men. It seems extraordinary in 2010 (or even in 1982, when the first volume came out, but when Sandra Day O'Connor had already been appointed by Ronald Reagan to the US Supreme Court) that no one involved in the planning of this set of volumes thought fit to include a woman in the list of authors. No modern history faculty in America or Britain looks like this collection of historians. Its social composition and maleness makes even the US Supreme Court, with its three women, one Hispanic, one African American and one Italian American, seem wildly diverse. There has not been a white male US Secretary of State since Warren Christopher left in January 1997. And the last five presidents of the American Historical Association have been women.

The maleness of the authors makes a big difference to the histories they write. These histories are about men and about the sorts of things that stereotypically we think boys are interested in – high politics, statecraft and, above all, war. It is not an accident that the general editor describes individual authors as “masterful.” It is a startling statistic that other than Eleanor Roosevelt, who is famous by virtue of the man she married, the woman given the most space in these volumes – references on thirteen pages – is Monica Lewinsky, whose main claim to fame is that she provided certain types of service to an American President. Susan B. Anthony, on the other hand, famous enough to get onto American currency but not into these volumes about American history, is given two index entries, one of which merely states that a Civil War soldier was her brother. There are 299 references to women as a general category in the indexes to these books, of which 112 come in Howe's book, the only book to deal with feminism. Middlekauff, Wood and McPherson refer to women's issues less than twenty-five times each in their volumes, while Patterson's second book on very modern America notes women's issues eighteen times. Herring gives women only five mentions. By contrast, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, neither of

whom was American, have 302 references between them. The lack of attention given to women makes it all the more curious that the only thematic subject thought important enough to warrant a book of its own is foreign relations. It is not as if the writers of the normal chronological volumes do not deal with diplomacy. Middlekauff and Wood each devote most of a chapter to diplomacy. McPherson also deals extensively with foreign affairs while Kennedy and Patterson devote large amounts of space to America's relations with the rest of the world.

### THE LURE OF THE PRESENT

In addition, the focus in Herring's volume on more recent history accentuates a bias in the series towards contemporary history. Less than a tenth of his book deals with foreign relations before 1800, with no space given to international affairs as they affected the colonies. Given that much of colonial history was contingent on dealing with international friends and foes, be they Native American, French, Spanish or Dutch, starting a volume on foreign relations with the formation of the United States is regrettable. It also highlights how little attention in this series is going to be paid to the colonial period. Peter Mancall, the author of Volume I, and Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton, authors of Volume II, have to deal with whole centuries rather than the sixteen or seventeen years that McPherson and Kennedy can concentrate upon. There is certainly a case, I would argue as a colonial historian myself, that the 250 years of European settlement in British America that preceded the creation of the United States deserve as many volumes as the seventy-two years that span the period between the start of the Great Depression and 9/11. After all, it was during this period that some of the most important underlying structures of American life – the introduction of slavery, the establishment of legislative bodies, a particular kind of state–church relationship – were established.

Fitting colonial British America into the series is going to be extremely difficult. Early Americanists do not write their histories along narrative lines, or at least not along the narrative lines favoured in the later histories. They write general surveys that are organized around regional themes rather than chronological narratives focussed around presidential terms. The Oxford History of the United States is organized differently. What counts most in the Oxford History is Presidents. Each President, except for William Henry Harrison, is extensively treated. What also is important in this series is national as opposed to state or local politics. Ronald Reagan, for example, gets the full treatment once he becomes President but his controversial and important two-term gubernatorial stint as governor of America's most populous state, California, is barely mentioned. Not examining Reagan as governor makes it hard to understand how the grassroots suburban conservative movement beginning in Orange County in southern California, which has shaped the modern Republican Party, developed from the mid-1960s.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, famous

<sup>11</sup> Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

city mayors, like Fierolla La Guardia, Ed Koch and Rudy Giuliani of New York City, receive no attention.

The series evidences a strong bias ideologically towards federalism and towards the importance of the Union as opposed to the interests of states, cities or individuals. The people who count are those men who favoured a strong national government. Consequently, the Founding Fathers who were federally minded in the 1780s are praised vigorously while the anti-Federalists are neglected and even accused of lowering the tone (Middlekauff 684). The Whig party of John Quincy Adams and then, in its Republican Party guise, of Abraham Lincoln is praised consistently and effusively by Howe and McPherson. Franklin Roosevelt is given sustained attention by Kennedy, who believes that whatever small faults he had (most of which revolved around developing divisive policies in the late 1930s as the New Deal started to unravel) can be forgiven given that he rose to meet every challenge as effectively as one could have hoped to expect (Kennedy 380).

### WAR DEFINES AMERICA

Roosevelt, like Abraham Lincoln and George Washington, was a great wartime leader, symbolizing and encouraging national unity in times of crisis. Whatever keeps the Union together is considered praiseworthy; whatever weakens the Union or divides the American people is deemed regrettable. Alongside a bias towards federalism is also a fervent wish that Americans get along and agree about the fundamental goodness of the country and its extraordinary commitment to freedom. Americans, one always feels on reading these volumes, need to feel good about themselves and their place in the world. That place, we are assured in Herring's volume, is one in which the rest of the world values America's ideological example and their commendable desire (brief periods of isolationism notwithstanding) to take on the international responsibility that their economic power and military might mandates. Bringing Americans together rather than driving them apart is consistently considered a good thing. One might think of people like Roosevelt and Reagan as devoted to the interests of their particular party and as highly divisive figures, but that is not how they are described here. Instead, they are lauded as naturally cheery men and as great communicators who managed to make Americans feel good about themselves and the future of the country following lamentable periods when America seemed to be in terminal decline and in moral disarray.

Military history in particular features as a major theme in the series. One gets the impression forcefully from these volumes that what has defined American history has been armed conflict with other nations (the Confederacy is another nation in this reading). Even the less important wars get considerable attention. The War of 1812 is dealt with in fifty-three pages, the Korean War gets thirty-six pages, and Vietnam is covered in seventy-two pages. The three big wars – the American Revolution, the Civil War and World War II – receive an inordinate amount of attention, taking up 1,483 pages, which is 28.4 percent of the total pages in the series, despite these wars comprising just fourteen of the 173 years – 8 percent – covered in these eight volumes. War and its consequences are central to the design of the series, in which America is defined, and defined positively, by war. Through the cleansing



experience of battle, ordinary and elite Americans were given a sense of purpose that sustained them through many wartime hardships. Americans' experience of war in turn prepared them for a new involvement on the world stage as (mostly) a powerful international player and a moral force for good.

One problem with taking war so seriously is that it distorts everything else. This distortion is especially apparent in the treatments of the American Revolution and the Civil War by Middlekauff and McPherson. Their narratives are war narratives, designed to explain, first, how war came about; second, how the war proceeded; and finally, how and why the victors won. But treating the 1760s and the 1850s as merely prologues to the war years that followed diminishes the importance of those years of prologue as important decades in their own right. In addition, it advances a teleological and Whiggish view of history. Take the 1760s, for example. Middlekauff does not discuss, even in passing, one of the most important changes in American life that occurred in that decade. The slave population of South Carolina began to become self-sustaining, meaning that by the time of the American Revolution South Carolina did not need to secure additional slave labour through the Atlantic slave trade.<sup>12</sup> Would South Carolina have declared for independence if they had not been confident that they could maintain their slave populations through natural increase? I doubt it. Would South Carolina have pursued the path it did as a fervently pro-slavery state from the Constitution to Appotomax if its slave demography been more uncertain? Again, it is doubtful.

My main concern with an excessive focus on war is that war and the experience of war is used as the central interpretive device in the narrative of American life. The central message of the series is that America was created by war (the American Revolution), was sustained and confirmed by war (the Civil War) and was made great by war (World War II). When one realizes how important war is to the conception of the series, the absence of attention given to women seems deliberate. Women are involved in war, to be sure, but it is mainly men who fight and it is mainly men who are transformed by their experience of being comrades in battle. The real American, it seems, is the general (Washington, Ulysses Grant, Dwight D. Eisenhower), the war leader (Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt) and the common soldier (the "greatest generation" of World War II). War makes America great and reaffirms its moral purpose as a City upon a Hill, shining a light to the rest of the world.

The problem with this historical interpretation is that it is strikingly informed by a pervasive sense of declension in which an initial generation of high-minded Americans was let down by less public-spirited descendants. Decline was halted only when Americans renewed themselves through war. Americans were cleansed by war because when they went to war it was not for tawdry materialistic aims. Americans went to war for lofty moral purposes, such as the "Glorious Cause" of republican liberty in 1776, the freedom of the slaves after 1863, and countering Japanese imperialism in the Pacific and fascism in Europe after 1941. There is a whiff of Perry Miller's *Errand into the Wilderness* in these accounts, as Americans start from perfection, decline as a result of devotion to crass materialism and inattention to godly

<sup>12</sup> Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Low Country* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 83.

issues and then are brought back to near perfection through a gruelling examination of national purpose conducted in battle.<sup>13</sup>

### A TRUE NARRATIVE OF AMERICAN HISTORY

The story goes like this. The United States came into being as a result of a worthy campaign against Britain where rightly aggrieved Americans were united in a glorious cause to establish freedom and a republican form of government. Fortunately for posterity, the men who established the United States were an extraordinary generation (the first “greatest generation”) of selfless natural aristocrats who almost magically created the best system of government that man has so far devised. This glorious cause was not only just, it was also godly and what one would expect from Americans steeped in a providential way of seeing the world. Reluctantly, Americans went to war against a mother country that had abandoned them. They did so under the leadership of morally inspiring figures. Middlekauff insists that virtually all the delegates who met for the first time in the Continental Congresses of 1774 and 1776 and who left personal accounts of their time in those congresses confessed to admiring the ability and the character of other delegates (Middlekauff 246–48). United under these men, the colonial rebels created a close-to-perfect constitution.

But the high hopes of the disinterested men who created the United States were soon dashed. The leaders who followed were not up to the standard of the Founders. We can trace the apogee of American greatness and the beginning of its decline precisely: the Farewell Address of the first and greatest of the American Presidents. Wood elegantly parses the elegiac words of warning that George Washington chose to leave to his country in 1796. He endorses Washington’s idealistic but realistic depiction of America as a uniquely situated experiment in republicanism, comments favourably on Washington’s insistence that the national union made Americans “one people,” and discusses at length Washington’s admonitions. For Wood it is clear that Washington’s retirement marked the end of American harmony. Decline soon set in. Wood notes that the last several years of the eighteenth century were the most contentious and most miserable years in American history, save for the years of the Civil War (Wood 206–9). By 1798 even high-minded revolutionary leaders were establishing a partisan party political system. More importantly, a new and inferior generation of Americans were coming of age. Intensely materialistic and aggressively democratic, these uncultured egalitarians rejected their European experience and devoted themselves to materialism, consumption and the pursuit of the dollar. In Wood’s words, republicanism as it transitioned to democracy was “popularized and vulgarized.” This materialism may have brought America economic wealth but it

<sup>13</sup> Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956). For an acute comment on how Wood follows the declension model in one of his previous books see Joyce Appleby, “The Radical Recreation of the American Republic,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 51 (1994), 681. The comment also holds true for his work in this series.

corrupted its soul, as seen in southern devotion to chattel slavery and in the general American embracement of vulgarity.

The Empire of Liberty became an Empire of Slavery, aided and abetted by the boorish, southern, slaveholding, Indian-hating vulgar democrat, Andrew Jackson, the man who most betrayed American ideals before the Civil War (Zachary Taylor, another southern slaveholder, is also a villain). The result of these mistaken attempts to transform the vision of the Founders was the national trauma of the Civil War, in which, fortuitously, another great man, Abraham Lincoln, rallied Americans (northerners, of course, not southerners) to defend the true meaning of what Jefferson intended in the Declaration of Independence. Fortunately, Lincoln's vision prevailed over the narrow, state-rights vision of the southern rebels. America was born again, although, presumably, only to once again decline as the grand ideal of the Civil War became tarnished in the tawdry excesses of Reconstruction and the Gilded Age. I write "presumably" because one awaits Volumes VII and VIII in the series, where the denouement of the Civil War is played out.

Similarly, World War II, like the American Revolution and the Civil War, was another catalyst of good, another period where the higher purposes that had led to America's founding were harnessed in the fight against evil. As Kennedy notes, this war is properly regarded in the way that it is popularly remembered: a just war, fought by the greatest generation of Americans, several of whom became President, beginning with Kennedy and ending with George Bush Sr. (Kennedy 856–57).<sup>14</sup> These junior officers in wartime were preceded in office by the commander in chief during the war, Roosevelt, and by one of the most important wartime generals, Eisenhower. They skilfully guided America through the crisis of war, Roosevelt doing double duty by coping well with the Great Depression. By 1945, America was in a position of unparalleled economic and military power, matched by its sense of moral purpose, manifested not just in politics but also in private life. Not everything was perfect – Patterson is at pains to point out the less savoury aspects of life in the late 1940s and 1950s – but the fifteen years or so after World War II as much marked a peak in American life as did the fifteen years between Yorktown and Washington's Farewell Address. Under their underestimated leader, Eisenhower, America prospered (Patterson, *Grand Expectations* 243–49). The peak years were probably in Eisenhower's second term – years, not coincidentally, when the authors in this series were experiencing the halcyon days of high school and college.

After that came decline, as in the 1790s. The 1960s were turbulent years, marked by political contention where some groups of Americans were in conflict with other groups of Americans. With the significant exception of Reagan, whose ability to bring Americans together is especially lauded, as noted above, and, to an extent, George Bush Sr., whose bravery in World War II demands respect and who exemplified the sort of moderation and small-c conservatism that always meets with favour in this series, the Presidents of America's imperial age – Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Carter – are not rated highly. Indeed, the dominant tone in discussing

<sup>14</sup> Patterson makes a point of emphasizing Bush Sr.'s wartime service, counterposing it with Bill Clinton's failure to serve in Vietnam (Patterson, *Restless Giant* 218, 249).

these Presidents is one of disappointment. These flawed men let down the members of the “greatest generation” from which they came by their divisiveness, partiality and small-mindedness. The President of modern times, however, who disappoints more than the rest is, surprisingly, Bill Clinton. Patterson admits that Clinton had great political skills but sees him as personally deficient: indecisive, sloppy, hot-tempered, manipulative, remarkably self-absorbed, desperately eager to please, habitually late and a tawdry sexual opportunist. He notes several times that Clinton failed to become a “great” President (Patterson, *Restless Giant* 318–21, 345, 387–95, 399). One reading of the 1990s – not favoured by Patterson – is that these were years of growing confidence as the United States emerged as the sole superpower in the world, as the growing deficits of the Reagan years were addressed and overcome, and as important areas of what Patterson correctly terms the “rights revolution” of the last quarter of the twentieth century came to full fruition. But that is not how Patterson sees this decade. Concluding his preface, written in 1995, he contends that the period from 1974 to when he wrote was one where “Americans displayed an often rancorous disillusionment.” “We live,” he laments, “in a more troubled and contentious society” (Patterson, *Grand Expectations* ix). The title of his chapter on the 1990s contains the words “culture wars” and “decline.” Even though Patterson insists that “decline” was more perception than reality, his judgement about these years is consistent with his belief that modern life is full of divisive issues. Moreover, one cannot help but think that the cause of division was the selfish “behavioural excess” (Patterson, *Restless Giant* 269) that is associated with baby-boomers – the moral opposites of the self-denying, security-obsessed “greatest generation.”

### ROOM FOR ALTERNATIVES

Of course, my summary of the history of America in the series is simplistic and does not take account of the many qualifications that each historian is careful to make in his narrative account. Moreover, this view of how American history unfolded bears some resemblance to what actually happened. The authors of the Oxford History of the United States do not present an incorrect version of American history. They do present, however, a partial, one-sided and overly congratulatory interpretation of American history. It is a view of American history that I suspect has an appeal for men of a particular place and a particular generation. It is noteworthy that all the writers of the volumes so far published are men of a certain age. The last four volumes have all been written by men who published them when in their seventies in the first decade of the twenty-first century and when just retired from academic service. Significantly, none themselves served in war, although some were servicemen. Too young to really experience the Great Depression or World War II, although keenly aware of the importance of those crises in American life from what they heard from their parents or from other people, they came of age in the 1950s and early 1960s, ages of affluence, abundance, “grand expectations” and, not least, remarkable opportunities for ordinary American men to go to university. It was a period, moreover, when well-qualified young historians had little difficulty finding good jobs. One should not make

simplistic sociological judgements, as I am about to do, but there is, I believe, some point in stressing the common experiences of the authors of these volumes. The narrative structure of the series is noticeably inflected by a sensibility formed in the years of plenty and confidence that followed the end of World II and which pre-dated the supposedly tumultuous 1960s. One can have doubts about how widely this sensibility has been shared in America. It is noticeable that with the defeat of John McCain in 2008, people born in the 1930s are the only people over forty who have not experienced having a United States President who was born in the same decade as them. Being neither the “greatest generation” nor baby-boomers, men born in the 1930s have not dominated American life or politics in the late twentieth century.<sup>15</sup>

Imagine how different this series might have been if a different historical sensibility informed it, a sensibility that was not hostile to social history but which, as with the New Oxford History of England, was interested in applying the insights of social and cultural history to narratives of the American past. The problem, at bottom, with the type of history that is done in the Oxford History of the United States is that in seeing American history as a cyclical narrative of high expectations, chastised innocence, political disillusionment and enormous trauma, followed by national resilience leading eventually to regeneration, as Kennedy succinctly describes it in his editor’s introduction to Patterson’s history of very recent times, captures only a partial truth about American history (Patterson, *Restless Giant* xi–xiii).

Whether one believes in a narrative history depends on where one starts from. For the writers of the Oxford History of the United States, the start is from perfection, or near-perfection, proceeding into decline, as Americans succumb to primal sins – loving money too much and failing to love their neighbours sufficiently. One can start from a different position, however, than from seeing the United States through the prism of a providential vision of Eden and the Fall. One does not even have to start in New England. At the same time that Woodward was beginning to structure this series, his Yale colleague, Edmund Morgan, wrote *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*, one of the great works in modern American history, which used the tools of social history to excoriate the first English settlers in mainland America. Morgan was as interested in abstract “forces” as in people, in population data as much as in politics. Morgan closed his book with the following rhetorical question: “Was the vision of a nation of equals flawed at the source by contempt for both the poor and the blacks?” His answer, of course, was “yes.” For Morgan, the history of early Virginia showed that there was no golden age in America and that paradox, rather than certainty, was what should most influence any narrative of American history. There was no “decline” because America was never godly.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> No one born between 1924 and 1946 (22 years) became US President. The next-longest span of years in which no one was born who became President was between 1809 and 1822 (13 years).

<sup>16</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 387.

We do not need to substitute Morgan's tragic view of American history for that expressed in the Oxford History of the United States. That would just be exchanging one sort of narrative history for another. There should be room for both views of what constitutes the history of the United States. What I would like to suggest, however, is that the educated lay public, who is the primary audience for this series, and professional historians, who are a secondary audience for this series, deserve to know not only that there can be multiple visions of how to write American history, but also that narrative history is not the only means whereby we can learn how to structure the past. In sum, there are many missed opportunities for educating the public and the profession in this series, almost all of which come from denying that history is a house of many mansions.



Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

**Author/s:**

Burnard, T

**Title:**

America the Good, America the Brave, America the Free: Reviewing the Oxford History of the United States

**Date:**

2011-08

**Citation:**

Burnard, T. (2011). America the Good, America the Brave, America the Free: Reviewing the Oxford History of the United States. *JOURNAL OF AMERICAN STUDIES*, 45 (3), pp.407-420. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875811000508>.

**Publication Status:**

Published

**Persistent Link:**

<http://hdl.handle.net/11343/33008>