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Books and the Founding Fathers

by Dr. George H. Nash

A lecture delivered under the auspices of Mrs. Richard P. Taylor, Librarian General of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution in the DAR Library, Washington, D.C., November 1, 1987.

It is a happy coincidence that this year of the Bicentennial of the Constitution is also—by official edict—the Year of the Reader. In so designating it some months ago, the Congress of the United States declared that America is “built on ideas expressed through books and the printed word.” In his ensuing proclamation of the Year of the Reader, President Reagan observed that “our history demonstrates that literacy and real political freedom go hand in hand.” “Our nation’s heritage of liberty and self-government,” he added, “depends on a literate, informed citizenry.”

In the past eleven years, as Americans have celebrated the two hundredth anniversary of our independence and of the Constitution that secured it, we have been treated to a veritable feast of books and articles assessing the achievement of the men who comprised the revolutionary generation. Just this year more than a dozen scholarly volumes have been published—narrating, interpreting, and documenting the process by which the Founding Fathers and their contemporaries created a regime of government unique in all history. I shall not tread directly on this now familiar ground. Instead, I propose to explore a theme that has received comparatively less attention. In this Year of the Reader, I wish to examine some of the ways that the written word—specifically, books and libraries—molded the

remarkable elite that made and preserved our revolution.

The first observation that comes forcibly to mind as we begin our inquiry is that the great majority of the Founding Fathers were, in fact, *readers*. Surveying the records of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, of the state ratifying conventions that followed, and the political/philosophical tracts produced by Federalists and Anti-Federalists alike, one is struck repeatedly by the debaters’ invocation of history, particularly that of ancient Rome and post-Elizabethan Britain. With seeming ease and obvious confidence that their audiences would understand them, they referred to past episodes and personages, thereby exhibiting a form of knowledge derived, in the last analysis, from books.

What did these busy lawyers, merchants, agribusinessmen, and politicians actually read? From their surviving correspondence and other writings, a clear, composite picture quickly emerges. First, the men of the revolutionary generation were, for the most part, steeped in what are known as the classics. Herodotus, Thucydides, Plutarch, Tacitus, Sallust, and Cicero—from these and other famous men of letters the framers of the Constitution obtained their knowledge of ancient history. History, in fact, was of consuming interest to the Founders; it was not just something they had to study in school. Nor was its subject matter confined to far-off Greece and Rome. The history of modern Great Britain—and particularly its generations-long internal struggles for liberty—had, for the catalysts of our independence, an endless appeal. Not surprisingly, many of them were strongly attracted to the so-called Whig theory of history, propounded by

(among others) the British writer Catherine Macaulay, whose eight-volume *History of England* (1763-1783) achieved great popularity on this side of the Atlantic. When Mrs. Macaulay, who sympathized with the American cause, visited the United States in 1785, she was entertained by George Washington himself at Mount Vernon.

Ranking with history as a focus of the Founders’ reading interests was what we today call political philosophy. Their favorite sources were extraordinarily varied: from Aristotle among the ancients to their Scottish contemporary, David Hume (“The Judicious Hume,” Alexander Hamilton once labeled him). Particularly prominent on the Founders’ bookshelves was the outpouring of eighteenth century English libertarian or “Opposition” literature exemplified by Bolingbroke, James Burgh, and *Cato’s Letters*, authored by John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. Another exceedingly popular political theorist was John Locke, whose *Two Treatises of Government* achieved almost iconic status; Jefferson ranked Locke with Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton as the three greatest men who had ever lived. Also significant was the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment, particularly in the emerging field of political economy pioneered by Sir James Steuart and Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). From France came Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws* (1748) and, a generation later, the writings of the physiocrats. From Switzerland came the natural law writings of Burlamaqui and Vattel.

This is not the place to appraise the relative impact of the streams of thought represented by these towering and

extremely diverse thinkers. My point, rather, is that the leading political figures of late eighteenth century America were generally, and often intimately, acquainted with the output of the greatest European minds of their day—and of the minds of the ancient western world. I repeat: the Founding Fathers (with few exceptions) were readers.

Not surprisingly, since so many of them by profession were lawyers, Sir William Blackstone's massive *Commentaries on English Law* became a fixture of their personal libraries and a resource that they repeatedly cited in public debate. And although history, political philosophy, and law dominated their serious reading, these practical-minded statesmen were by no means unfamiliar with literature—or, as it was then often called, belles lettres. John Adams, for instance, owned complete sets of Homer, Plato, Horace, Ovid, and Marcus Aurelius—to mention a few of the classical authors most popular in his generation. The Bible and Shakespeare also formed part of the literary patrimony of the Founders. Even contemporary English poetry and fiction did not escape their attention. In his later years Adams, for one, frankly enjoyed what he called “romances.”

Two factors above all placed an ineffaceable stamp on the reading habits of the American revolutionaries. The first was the prevailing mode of their education: rigorous, classical, and thoroughly book-oriented. As early as the ages of eight or nine, either in schools or the custody of private tutors, colonial boys entered into concentrated study of Greek and Latin. This was no casual affectation; demonstrated proficiency in these languages was a prerequisite to entrance into college (and more than half of the fifty-five men who convened in Philadelphia in 1787 were college graduates). Upon entering college, which American males in those days customarily did in their early to mid-teens, they could expect to encounter most of the authors whom I have previously mentioned.

Consider, for example, the higher education of William Paterson, who later represented New Jersey at the Constitutional Convention. After passing entrance examinations in Latin and Greek, he enrolled in the College of New Jersey (now Princeton) in 1759, at the age of fourteen. For the next four years he immersed himself in ancient history and literature, as well as such English authors as Shakespeare, Milton, Swift, and Pope. Here also, like James Madison, who matriculated after him, young Paterson took the required senior course in moral

philosophy, a crucial transmission belt for the ideas that young men absorbed about human conduct. It was, in part, through Princeton's curriculum that the writings of such eminent Scottish social theorists as Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and Thomas Reid entered American intellectual and political life.

Even legal education was not exempt from this relentlessly bookish approach to learning. Consider the course of study that Thomas Jefferson composed in 1767, at age twenty-four, for a friend about to study to be a lawyer. Before you do, Jefferson counseled, you must “absolutely” learn Latin and French, and should become conversant with mathematics, astronomy, geography, and natural philosophy. Having laid this foundation, said Jefferson, his friend could properly embark on his quest.

*“In eighteenth
century America,
education was a
serious enterprise. . . .”*

This, however, was only the beginning. With characteristic thoroughness, Jefferson next prescribed a systematic outline of study for his friend, including every single book that the would-be lawyer should read. Before eight o'clock in the morning he should employ himself in what Jefferson called “Physical Studies,” including agriculture, chemistry, anatomy, zoology, botany, ethics, “natural” religion, “secular” religion, and natural law. From eight until noon he should read law. From twelve to one he should read politics; during the afternoon, history. From dark until bedtime he should concentrate on belles lettres (notably Shakespeare), criticism, rhetoric, and oratory, particularly the orations of Demosthenes and Cicero. In other words, to obtain a satisfactory legal education one should read books for as many as twelve hours a day — and only a third of that time books about law!

If Jefferson's advice appears manifestly utopian to us, one suspects that it seemed much less so to his contemporaries. Only fourteen years before the future Sage of Monticello offered his formidable regimen

to his young acquaintance, another American statesman-in-the-making, John Dickinson, sailed to London for four strenuous years of legal studies. Rising daily at 5:00 a.m., he would read for nearly eight hours, dine at four, and then retire early in the evening — all the while mingling his scrutiny of legal texts with such authors as Tacitus and Bacon. In 1757, his formal education complete, Dickinson returned to Pennsylvania and a distinguished career culminating in the “miracle at Philadelphia.”

This, then, was the first influence that made the Founding Fathers the kind of readers they were. In eighteenth century America, education was a serious enterprise, entailing disciplined exposure to the “great tradition” of classical and enlightened learning. The colonial educational system imbued in its ablest matriculants a lifelong practice of diligent, humanistic reading.

The second factor that profoundly affected the Founders' reading was, of course, the political and social upheaval of which they were the architects and beneficiaries. The illustrious men whom we celebrate today were contemplative activists engaged in a daring endeavor to which they had solemnly pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. Under these circumstances, it is not so startling that they repeatedly consulted the experience of the past — as recorded in works of history, law, and political theory— both to make sense of their current tribulations and to guide them in their epic task of nation-building.

The Founding Fathers' interest in books as a means of understanding “politics and war” had another, less conservative dimension. Like many European men of learning in that age known as the Enlightenment, the Americans who met in Philadelphia in 1787 believed that human nature was both universal and immutable and that through the comparative study of past civilizations they could adduce the fundamental principles of human behavior. In other words, history—particularly the history of ancient republics—could yield pertinent lessons for men embroiled in fashioning the unprecedented: a self-governing republic on a continental scale. In short, by careful historical research one could hope to gain an understanding of what Alexander Hamilton, in *Federalist* No. 9, unabashedly called the “science of politics.” It was part of the Founders' faith that the “science of politics” had advanced so rapidly in “modern times” as to render feasible their experiment in ordered liberty.

The luminaries of the revolutionary generation were more than readers and book

collectors, however. They were also, in a sense that I have already intimated, *users* of books. I do not mean to suggest that these extraordinary men could not enjoy reading for its own sake. Long after he had ceased to have any utilitarian reason for doing so, for instance, John Adams found delight in books. In his eighty-second year he read no fewer than forty-three of them. Jefferson in *his* retirement shared this enthusiasm, at one point confessing to a “canine appetite for reading.” Years earlier, not long before he assumed the presidency, the Virginian wrote to a friend: “To read Latin and Greek authors in their original, is a sublime luxury.”

Nevertheless, what seems most noteworthy about the Founding Fathers’ reading habits, at least during their active years on the public stage, was their tendency to regard books not as ornaments but as tools. Once again, John Adams provides an apt example. In his surviving library there are more than one hundred works of eighteenth-century European political philosophy containing extensive marginal notations by Adams himself. From these sometimes mordant, often argumentative, and occasionally lengthily handwritten comments one can at times construct a virtual line-by-line dialogue between the European author (Rousseau, Voltaire, or whoever) and the feisty New Englander who penned his responses right on the printed page. In fact, a generation ago a scholar in Boston compiled these marginalia into a fascinating book entitled *John Adams and the Prophets of Progress*. It is one of the most unusual evidences we have of how the Founding Fathers reacted to books, interacted with books, *used* books.

Surely the most spectacular instance, however, of the Founding Fathers’ use of books was provided by that other scholarly gentleman from Virginia, James Madison. In 1784, as the Articles of Confederation increasingly manifested their fatal flaws, the youthful protégé of Thomas Jefferson launched a comprehensive study of all previous confederations in history. What were their characteristic strengths and deficits? Why did they fail? How could Americans avoid a similar fate?

To facilitate his project, Madison required books, and for these he turned, appropriately, to Jefferson. In a letter dated March 16, 1784, Madison asked his friend to purchase for him “whatever may throw light on the general Constitution and droit public of the several confederacies which have existed.” In a few months Jefferson was in Paris, and from France he sent back books by the score. Eventually, in the spring of 1787, after three years of determined investigation, Madison dis-

tilled his research into two memoranda and devised the Virginia Plan that framed the debate at the Constitutional Convention. Madison did not obtain all that he wanted in Philadelphia; in many respects the resultant Constitution was antithetical to what he desired. Nevertheless, without his self-imposed historical inquiry undertaken in 1784, and the uses to which he then put it, the very structure of our republic might have been different indeed.

In surveying the role of books in the lives of the Founding Fathers, we must not overlook still another dimension: that many of them were themselves *creators* of books, including several that have deservedly become classics. One thinks of Franklin’s *Autobiography*, Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Adams’ *Defence of the Constitutions of the Government of the United States of America*, John Dickinson’s *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*, and the late-eighteenth century explosion of political pamphleteering to which I alluded earlier. One thinks also of Edmund Randolph’s *History of Virginia*, unpublished until 1970. And, at the pinnacle, the *Federalist*, America’s greatest contribution to political theory: a work produced by Madison, Hamilton, and Jay in just a matter of months. Is there anyone alive today who could accomplish a similar feat of intellect in the same limited amount of time—and expect the product to be read two hundred years hence?

I would not want you to conclude from all of this that the Founding Fathers were somehow denizens of an ivory tower—“bloody-minded” intellectuals given to abstract, doctrinaire speculation. They were, as I said earlier, practical men of affairs. As John Dickinson told his fellow delegates in Independence Hall in the sweltering summer of 1787, “Experience must be our only guide. Reason may mislead us.” But—and the historian Douglass Adair made this point years ago—the experience which Dickinson and his confères brought to bear upon their deliberations was not simply their personal experience, rich and instructive though it was. It was the accumulated experience of past ages derived from books. The past was real to them. It mattered. Their respect for what it could teach them was profound.

The generation of the Founders differs from today’s in another respect. Unlike ourselves (their distant and often uncomprehending legatees) Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, and the rest had to struggle—both physically and intellectually—to create a free and independent polity. Remember: no other republic in history had ever survived very long or had successfully established itself over such a vast

expanse of territory. It was not hyperbole for the Founders to fear that if their experiment in government-making failed, the cause of republicanism would be discredited forever. It was not hyperbole for James Wilson, a signer of the Constitution, to tell the Pennsylvania ratifying convention that “on the success of the struggle America has made for freedom will depend the exertions of the brave and enlightened of all nations.” As men who had endured both war and revolution, the farmers of the Constitution had to grapple with the consequences of their deeds. For better or for worse, we do not have to preoccupy ourselves with the issues that so perplexed them. Their very success has freed us for other endeavors.

In our ever-accelerating “information age,” dominated by the computer, the imagery of television, and the pervasiveness of musical sound, an age packed with fact yet increasingly devoid of cultural literacy, we can still derive inspiration from the fifty-five Framers of the Constitution and their contemporaries who read, collected, used, and created books. Through books they sought both knowledge and self-knowledge, the means by which better to live. For them books were not irrelevancies but bulwarks against barbarism and tyranny.

Yes, it is fitting that this year of the Bicentennial of the Constitution is also the Year of the Reader. “I cannot live without books,” said Jefferson. And neither, as a civilized people, can we.

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Dr. George H. Nash, is a member of the U.S. Commission on Libraries & Information Science. Dr. Nash serves as an Editorial Advisor to *Modern Age Magazine* and is a member of the Advisory Board of *Continuity: A Journal of History*. He is currently engaged in the preparation of a definitive, multivolume, scholarly biography of Herbert Hoover. Dr. Nash has been published extensively, including articles in *Journals* such as *Modern Age*, *National Review*, *The American Spectator*, *University Bookman*, *Annals of Iowa*, *Labor History*, *The Catholic Historical Review*, *The Journal of Presbyterian History* and *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*. Dr. Nash graduated from *Amherst College* with a degree in history, *Phi Beta Kappa*, *Summa cum laude*. He then went on to earn his M.A. and Ph.D. from *Harvard University*, where he was a graduate prize fellow in history.
