
Book Review

The Wrong Book At the Wrong Time

by Nancy Spannaus

Alexander Hamilton, A Life

by Willard Sterne Randall

New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003
476 pages, hardbound, \$32.50

Never in recent American history has the world, and especially the United States, been in more need of the ideas of leading American Revolutionary, and our first Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton. From that standpoint, it is unfortunate that Randall's biography of Hamilton is not only not what's needed, but is counterproductive to the interests of the nation.

Originally, I was excited by this book, which features a lot of detailed material on Hamilton's early life, and the networks which he connected with in order to join the American Revolution at the age of 17. The role which Hamilton played during his college years, and his important contributions to the early military engagements of the war, were highlighted, and proved to be quite fascinating. Randall also provides considerable detail about Hamilton's life on the Caribbean Islands, which is illuminating.

But, eventually, it becomes clear that Randall has a quirky psychological agenda, which not only skews the content of his biography, but destroys the usefulness of his meticulous research. Randall is seeking to make the case that Hamilton's career was, to a large degree, shaped by his relationship with his mother, who was stigmatized for her divorce, and abandoned to a cruel fate. The author keeps interrupting discussions of Hamilton's historical role and activities, in order to reflect on, and speculate about, his relationships with various women—which relationships are allegedly colored by his reactions to what happened to his mother.

What's wrong with this method, we will elaborate in this short review.

How To Write History

The art of writing history appears to have gone by the wayside, much as have other Classical arts. It should be man-

datory for all historians to at least read the lecture by German Classical poet and historian, Friedrich Schiller, on "What Is, and to What End Do We Study, Universal History?"

In response to the first question, Schiller answers as follows:

"Out of the entire sum of [these] events, the universal historian selects those which have had an essential, irrefutable, and easily ascertainable influence upon the contemporary form of the world, and on the conditions of the generations now living. It is the relationship of an historical fact to the *present* constitution of the world, therefore, which must be seen in order to assemble material for world history. World history thus proceeds from a principle, which is exactly contrary to the beginning of the world. The real succession of events descends from the origin of objects down to their most recent ordering; the universal historian ascends from the most recent world situation, upwards toward the origin of things. When he ascends from the current year and century in thoughts to the next preceding, and takes note of those among the events presented to him containing the explanation of the succeeding years and centuries, when he has continued this process stepwise up to the beginning—not of the world, for to that place there is no guide—but to the beginning of the monuments, then he decides to retrace his steps on the path thus prepared, and to descend, unhindered and with light steps, with the guide of those noted facts, from the beginning of the monuments down to the most recent age. That is the world history we have. . . ."

From this standpoint, the biographer of Alexander Hamilton should begin from his influence, as a personality and through his ideas, to the present day. That reflects his place in history, and his actual lasting character. But Randall lacks such an ordering principle in his volume, and thus trivializes even those aspects of Hamilton's contribution to the nation's founding and institutions, which he acknowledges to have been Hamilton's work.

Who Was Alexander Hamilton?

Alexander Hamilton was one of that generation of youth who played an indispensable role in establishing the fundamental character of our republic. To him belongs the credit for having organized the process leading to the Constitutional Convention, the process of ratification of that great document, and the bedrock principles of the American System of Political Economy which led to our emergence as the world's premier industrial republic. In addition, as Randall illuminates with seldom-discussed source materials, Hamilton had a significant hand in helping Gen. George Washington at crucial points during the Revolutionary War itself.

It is impossible to know Hamilton without understanding his connection, through ideas, to subsequent generations of great American leaders. One of the first to pick up on his economic ideas, especially the promotion of manufacturing



President Washington (right) confers with Alexander Hamilton (standing) and Thomas Jefferson. It is impossible to grasp Hamilton's importance by scrutinizing the minutiae of his private life, as Randall does; only by studying Hamilton's connection, through ideas, to subsequent generations of great American leaders, does a real understanding emerge.

and protection of the U.S. producer, was Mathew Carey, a young Irish revolutionary recruited by Benjamin Franklin. Carey passed on Hamilton's "American System" to his son, Henry C. Carey, and to the greatest President our nation has ever had, Abraham Lincoln. The next great leader to pick up the Hamiltonian thread—which he understood as being part of his own family tradition—was Franklin Delano Roosevelt, another President who "saved the Union," this time from the Great Depression and Fascism.

It is also necessary to know Hamilton's antecedents, which emphatically include the Colbertian, Leibnizian tradition of nation-building—a tradition Randall totally ignores.

Indeed, Hamilton's political and economic ideas were crafted as a means of defending the nascent republic, from possible dissolution—militarily, politically, or economically. He insisted that the Federal government embody full national sovereignty, on behalf of the general welfare of the population as a whole, and that it be given the ability to act energetically for the sake of the nation. He argued vigorously for promoting the productive powers of labor on which the prosperity, and survival, of the young embattled United States would depend.

These contributions define Hamilton's identity on the stage of history—not whether he was resentful over being born in illegitimacy, or whether he had poor judgment about women, and carried on several affairs. That he might have made a more positive legacy to our nation if he had not had such weaknesses, could be argued, but it is not those weaknesses that define who he was.

Why We Need Hamilton Today

What is most problematic about Randall's biography, however, is not just that it belittles the institutional and conceptual contribution to our nation, which Hamilton made. The crying shame is that this current period of financial and political crisis cries out for our citizens to return to, and master, the ideas of Alexander Hamilton. We cannot afford to have people misled by the likes of Willard Randall.

The guts of any true biography of Hamilton, must deal with the coherent conception he had, behind the fundamental institutions of the United States: the conception of the American System, as opposed to the British System. Randall mentions that Hamilton was affected by the work of Emmerich Vattel, a Swiss Leibnizian who wrote a very popular book on natural law, but he otherwise pays lip-service to the standard line that Hamilton simply packaged the work of the imperial British and French economists. Anyone who can overlook the fact that Hamilton was attacking both the theory, and practice, of free-trader Adam Smith, in Hamilton's *Reports to Congress*, has a very impaired—at best—idea of Hamilton's role in founding the American Republic.

As Schiller said, one starts studying history from understanding the *principle*, not simply by aggregating the facts. The principles Alexander Hamilton fought for, and successfully embedded in our nation's institutions, must be revived today. But for that, people will have to turn to works like those of Forrest McDonald, and Hamilton's own *Reports to Congress*, not this biography.