

THE PAPERS OF JAMES MADISON. Vol. I, *16 March 1751–December 1779*; Vol. II, *20 March 1780–23 February 1781*; Vol. III, *3 March–31 December 1781*. Edited by William T. Hutchinson and William M. E. Rachal. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962-63. Pp. xlii, 344; xix, 344; xxv, 381. \$10.00 each.

Making large amounts of material hitherto buried in archives and private collections easily available, the massive new editions of the papers of so many American political leaders are of great significance to the study and writing of American history. No longer will it be necessary to rely upon a select group of biographers for an understanding of the men involved; no longer will anyone have to place his trust in another to ask the relevant questions of the material, to determine which bits of evidence are sufficiently meaningful and revealing to be elevated to the status of biographical facts, and to arrange those bits into a coherent and accurate characterization. Now, it will be possible for anybody to confront large amounts, and in many cases all, of the remaining evidence directly, and the proliferation of special studies and new insights that will hopefully result can scarcely fail to contribute substantially to the reassessment of the American past that is currently under way.

It is perhaps no mere coincidence that the early fruits of these editorial projects have been accompanied by a rising interest in, and a growing awareness of, the importance of psychological elements in historical explanation. Over the past decade values, moral imperatives, basic assumptions about such things as the nature of man and society, and perceptions of the meaning of events have received an increasing amount of emphasis, and that emphasis has inevitably led back to the study of individuals and individual psychology. Although it cannot be said that the new editions have been primarily responsible for stimulating such inquiries, they have at the very least encouraged them and made them easier.

Because so many of the editorial projects are devoted to the Founding Fathers, these observations are particularly appropriate for the study of the American Revolution. The papers of Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and now James Madison along with the results of similar projects to publish the records of John Dickinson, John Jay, Henry Laurens, John Marshall, George Mason, James Iredell, Albert Gallatin, James Monroe, and probably others will, when completed, constitute a body of published personal materials unequalled for any other group at any other point in history. A wide variety of individuals will then be able to subject that extraordinary group and the creative period in which they lived to a more rigid and thorough scrutiny than ever before. They will be able not just to reconstruct the public lives of some of the major figures in terms that will be more congenial to the second half of the twentieth century but more importantly to identify more precisely their basic drives and values, to comprehend more fully how they conceived of and reacted to the important events with which they were associated, and to appreciate more thoroughly both the variety and diversity of individual talents and responses and the community of assumptions, attitudes, and purpose that bound them together. It is precisely in this direction that scholarship on the Revolution has been moving and that the understanding of the Revolutionary generation is likely to be most significantly advanced. At every stage of the enterprise, the new editions will be indispensable.

At first glance the initial three volumes of *The Papers of James Madison* do not seem to be especially well suited to such an undertaking. Painstakingly gathered from approximately 250 different sources, they are definitive in the sense that they include "all extant Madison writings," are thoroughly annotated, and competently introduced. But they contain disappointingly little personal material. Letters to Madison and to and from the Virginia delegation to the Continental Congress and records of the Virginia Council of State while he was a member fill a large portion of the volumes. Considerably less than half of the documents are from his hand, and a large majority of those are formal and

impersonal state papers and committee reports. Despite the small amount of personal evidence, however, it is possible to piece together—from his commonplace book and commentaries on the Bible, some of his state papers, and especially his private letters to William Bradford, Edmund Pendleton, Thomas Jefferson, and Joseph Jones—at least a tentative picture of the primary drives and values of the young Madison and of his responses to the central problems he encountered during his early years in public office.

What impresses one most about Madison from a reading of his early writings is his quiet determination to excel. He seems to have had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, boundless curiosity, and a deep-seated love of study, but it was not knowledge and study per se that he seems to have coveted so much as the improvement he hoped they would bring him. The “prospect . . . of three years confinement” at Nassau Hall, “however terrible” it “might sound” to others, was to Madison tremendously exciting because of the “advantages” he hoped “to derive from it.” Though he tried his hand at poetry while in college and diverted himself with belles-lettres, he had little time for frivolity and quickly decided that “Poetry wit and Criticism Romances Plays &c” deserved “but a moderate portion of a *mortal's* Time,” that one might more properly engage himself with “something more substantial more durable more profitable.” “History and the Science of Morals” he thought especially worthwhile because they were helpful in “settling the principles and refining the Judgment as well as in enlarging Knowledge & correcting the imagination.” Behind this purposeful study, underneath this constant striving for improvement, was, ultimately, the desire to distinguish himself. Not just knowledge but “fame and knowledge” were what he wanted, and so intent was he upon readying himself to take advantage of any “noble enterprise,” any “expanded prospect” that might come his way that he pursued his studies even to the point of seriously impairing his health.

The peculiar good fortune of Madison and, for that matter, all his contemporaries with similar aspirations was that the Revolution provided the opportunities for gratifying their ambitions. Given Madison's talents and his passion for distinction, it was inconceivable that he would not become involved in the Revolution. His first serious interest in politics dates from late 1773 or early 1774 when, still in his early twenties, he was caught up in the debate over religious toleration in Virginia, and the pains with which he investigated all aspects of the question as well as the strong arguments for toleration and disestablishment which his inquiry produced were characteristic of his later responses to political problems. As a youthful member of the Virginia House of Delegates in 1776-1777 and of the Virginia Council of State in 1778-1779, he rendered conspicuous service, and his philosophical bent helped to gain for him the admiration of his fellow politicians. But

it was in the Continental Congress, to which he was elected in December, 1779, that Madison found an arena worthy of his talents. Although he kept closely in touch with the Virginia scene and was, in fact, especially concerned that Virginia's "national character" not suffer because of any insufficiency in its contributions to the revolutionary effort, he quickly became a national rather than a Virginia politician. It was in reaction to national problems that the political ideas for which he became famous a decade later began to take shape. Repelled by the dilatoriness and the parochialism of the state governments, he became within a year after he went to Congress a proponent of a strong and continuing union under a vigorous national government. Just as individual achievements depended upon strength of character, perseverance, and knowledge, so also, Madison quickly recognized, a government had to have energy, power, ability to command respect from its constituents, and superior leadership if it was to fulfil its necessary functions, and the promotion of such a government whether by cementing the union by giving Congress control over western lands or devising a scheme to endow Congress with a coercive power over the states commanded a significant portion of his attention and sharpened his analytical genius.

To what extent Madison's passion for distinction and his commitment to the achievement of a vigorous government to fulfil the promises of the Revolution animated and were characteristic of other members of the revolutionary generation can only be determined by a systematic examination of the careers and concerns of his contemporaries. Such an undertaking, so essential to a more thorough understanding of the psychology of the Revolution and of what it meant to the men involved, will be hastened by well-edited volumes such as these.

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