

*The Papers of James Madison. Presidential Series. Volume 1: 1 March–30*

*September 1809.* Edited by Robert A. Rutland *et al.* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1984. Pp. xxx, 414. \$37.50.)

This volume begins a departure in historical editing. Hitherto the publishing projects have proceeded in strict chronological order, or simply pulled out special portions of the papers clearly needing separate treatment, as in the diaries and family papers of the Adams project or the law papers of Alexander Hamilton. Recognizing that the regular chronological series of Madison's papers, now at 1793 and in 14 volumes, will take years to reach Madison's important tenures as secretary of state (1801–1809) and president (1809–1817), the editors have decided to do those two periods as separate series. One editor has special responsibility for the secretary of state series, another for the presidential series, and yet another continues the regular chronological series. Though this represents an ambitious enlargement of the work going on in the editorial office and will doubtless result in some overlapping of effort and some lapses in continuity, the departure on the whole seems worth the risk. Most important, more papers over a longer span of Madison's career will become available sooner to scholars and students.

This volume also is the first of the modern projects on the period of the first American presidency (1789–1829) to cover a president in office. Thus the editors must decide how to deal with the immense amount of routine paper at least formally to or from the president. They have decided, for example, to print only "a few samples of the crank letters, bureaucratic

pettiness, and job-seekers' pleas that afflict every president" (p. xxi). Furthermore, they depend on, and refer to, microfilm already available of massive but generally unimportant record groups, such as "solicitations for government patronage" (p. xxi). The result is an interesting, surprisingly fresh, and revealing body of papers that afford a much more detailed look at Madison's often belittled presidency than has been available before. The record does indeed reveal the president's standing as a thoughtful and competent leader, and letters to him and resolutions of local government bodies show the wide support Madison had in the country. Surely, though, the editors fall too much under the spell of their subject when they surmise that history's judgment will agree with John Adams's, that Madison's "Administration has acquired more glory, and established more union, than all his three Predecessors, Washington Adams and Jefferson, put together" (p. xxi). This may be closer to the mark than the 150,000 words used by Adams's great-grandson to disparage Madison's presidency, but one still wonders if he rises above even one of his three predecessors.

The focus of the volume is on the settlement with Great Britain negotiated in Washington in the first seven weeks of Madison's administration (the *Erskine* agreement). This agreement, had it not been dishonorably repudiated by the British government in London, would have been regarded as a stunning victory for Madison, embodying the protection of neutral rights on the high seas and establishing the genuine American independence of Great Britain that had been Madison's steady goal throughout his long public career. Instead, the repudiated agreement resulted both in serious damage to the United States' international position and in a frustrating setback to Madison's presidency. The documents in this volume put the agreement and its rejection in a much clearer light than heretofore and show Madison's basic optimism in depending on its good-faith fulfillment and his resilience and nerve in coping with the crisis of repudiation as well. All together, we can applaud the editors for tough decisions wisely made in this new venture, and for continued skillful work in making the rich trove of Madison's papers more fully available.

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