The Papers of James Madison. Volumes 4, 5, 6, and 7. Ed. by William T. Hutchinson and William M. E. Rachal. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971. Vol. 4: *1 January-31 July 1782.* xxvii + 486 pp. illus-

trations, notes, and index. Vol. 5: *1 August 1782-31 December 1782.* xxx + 520 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. Vol. 6: *1 January 1783-30 April 1783.* xxxi + 545 pp. Illustrations, notes and index. Vol. 7: *3 May 1783-20 February 1784.* xli + 478 pp. Illustrations, notes, and index. Vols. 4 and 5, $12.50 per vol.; vols. 6 and 7, $16.00 per vol.)

Lord Chesterfield observed that a frivolous curiosity about trifles and laborious attentions to little things which neither require nor deserve a moment's thought show an incapacity for greater matters. These volumes both prove and disprove that observation. The editors cope excellently with Madison's constitutional principles, his nationalism, and his concern for diplomatic, financial, and political issues. But they never neglect trifles, whether documents or points for annotation, that do not deserve a moment's thought. Chesterfield approved of Cardinal de Retz's belief that Cardinal Chigi was petty-minded because he said that he had the same pen for three years, and it still wrote well. With an earthshaking fact like that to work with, the editors of these volumes would have given us an elaborate footnote-essay on Chigi's life and times, his pen, how he got it, the documents he wrote with it, the ink he used and how it was made, and, for good measure, a short history of pens. Whether such extravagantly labored learning advances the cause of scholarship is questionable.

These four volumes covering twenty-six months of Madison's career as a member of the Continental Congress tell us nothing of consequence previously unknown. That such impeccable research should be dissipated on a stupefying editorial apparatus without producing anything new of value is appalling. The one surprise is that Madison very probably did not write the *North American* essays attributed to him by Irving Brant; a twenty-seven page essay explains why those essays are not reprinted here. The documents that are reprinted reflect a prodigiously hardworking and shrewd politician so absorbed with daily, urgent problems that he was neither reflective nor, with few exceptions, even argumentative or analytical. He was mainly reportorial and brief, but every document reprinted here is annotated within a millimeter of its life. When an insignificant report in Madison's hand passingly mentions that certain letters should be referred to a committee, we get a sixty-one line footnote of useless explication unrelated to Madison. When he observes that Congress authorized Washington to exchange two unnamed foreign soldiers, the editors give us seventy-nine lines on their names and military careers. When Randolph writes, "I hope Browse has received his hat from Parish. I left the price of it with Mr. Norton," the long footnote dissolves all doubts about their identities—as if anyone should care.

Remorselessly, relentlessly, and rampantly the editorial apparatus surrounds and expounds anything on paper connected with Madison or with which he was concerned. The result is less luminous than voluminous. No

This content downloaded from
128.143.1.11 on Mon, 03 Jun 2024 15:09:47 +00:00
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

one has ever plunged more deeply than the editors into the primary sources of Madisoniana and come up drier. Utterly without a sense of discrimination, they reprint everything, whether niggling or nuclear, and treat every fact, whether concerning Randolph's hat or Madison's fight for a congressional revenue, as equally deserving of annotation as well as presentation. Like the fabled Toonerville Trolley, the editors have no terminal facilities. If they can spend four volumes on a couple of years of young Madison's career in the Confederation Congress, they might proportionately spend forty on Madison the President.

Obviously these volumes are being edited for posterity, and their publication will probably continue until their audience arrives. The question, though, is who is their audience? More broadly, does the business of editing complete editions of statesmen's papers serve a worthwhile purpose? Dumas Malone manages quite well with his life of Jefferson while Julian Boyd has become bogged down, though his editorial notes are models of conciseness compared to those in the Madison papers. Brant finished his huge biography before these volumes began to appear, and the misattribution of the *North American* essays does not mar his achievement. Douglas S. Freeman did a splendid, monumental life of Washington relying on the very sparsely annotated Fitzpatrick edition of his papers. Page Smith published his excellent life of John Adams before the Adams papers got launched, and Carl Van Doren's life of Franklin was a classic before the Franklin papers project was conceived. Not even the trimly edited Hamilton papers by Syrett and Cooke existed before Broadus Mitchell completed his standard life. If such volumes as these on Madison's papers are not crucial to the major biographers, have they a purpose that can be justified by their inordinate cost, time, and labor? As Robert Lynd put the question, "knowledge for what?" If you are not a textual deviate and want to read the documents to or from or concerning Madison exactly as they were originally written, larded with meticulous notes that exceed the length of the documents themselves, take this ambiguous advice: don't lose any time in reading these volumes. Hopefully the new editor, Robert A. Rutland, will be more selective in what he prints and will reserve annotations for essential facts only.

CLAREMONT GRADUATE SCHOOL LEONARD W. LEVY