

A Review Essay

The Congressional Papers of James Madison

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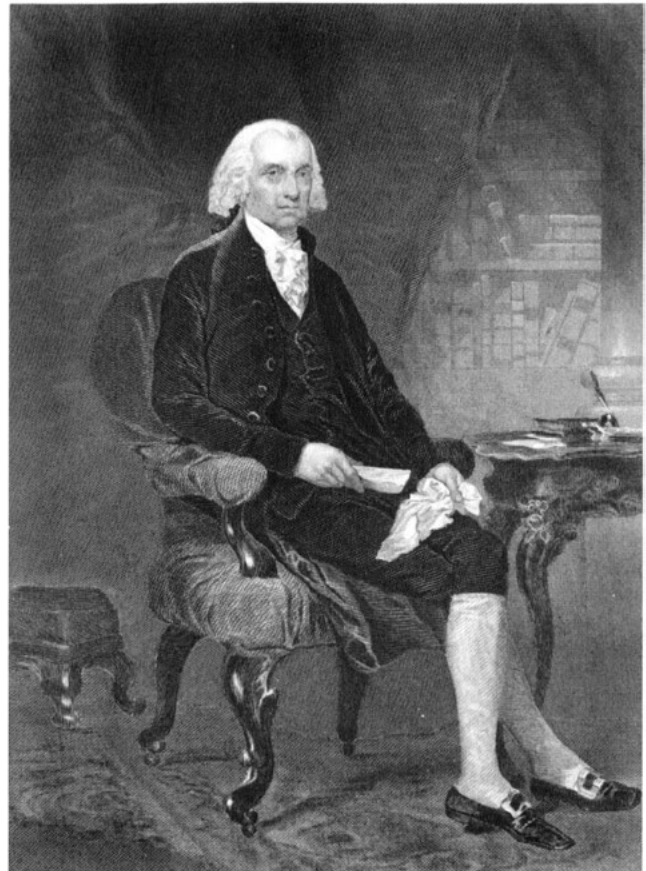
The Papers of James Madison. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia. Volume 12: 2 March 1789–20 January 1790 with a Supplement 24 October 1775–24 January 1789 (1979), edited by Charles F. Hobson, Robert A. Rutland, William M. E. Rachal, and Jeanne K. Sisson, pp. xxiv, 498, \$37.50; volume 13: 20 January 1790–31 March 1791 (1981), edited by Charles F. Hobson, Robert A. Rutland, William M. E. Rachal, and Jeanne K. Sisson, pp. xxviii, 423, \$37.50; volume 14: 6 April 1791–16 March 1793 (1983), edited by Robert A. Rutland, Thomas A. Mason, Robert J. Brugger, Jeanne K. Sisson, and Fredrika J. Teute, pp. xxx, 495, \$37.50; volume 15: 24 March 1793–20 April 1795 (1985), edited by Thomas A. Mason, Robert A. Rutland, and Jeanne K. Sisson, pp. xxix, 561, \$47.50; volume 16: 27 April 1795–27 March 1797 (1989), edited by J. C. A. Stagg, Thomas A. Mason, Jeanne K. Sisson, and Susan H. Perdue, pp. xxviii, 527, \$45.00; volume 17: 31 March 1797–3 March 1801 with a Supplement 22 January 1778–9 August 1795 (1991), edited by David B. Mattern, J. C. A. Stagg, Jeanne K. Cross, and Susan Holbrook Perdue, pp. xxviii, 610, \$47.50.

He thinks so much of you in the day that he has
Lost his Tongue, at Night he Dreames of you &
Starts in his Sleep a Calling on you to relieve his
Flame for he Burns to such an excess that he will
be shortly consumed.

—Catharine Coles to Dolley Payne Todd,
1 June 1794 (15:342)

Few would imagine James Madison as the dreamy, tongue-tied romantic type, yet this description of the Father of the Constitution during his courtship of Dolley Payne Todd is but one of many wonderfully revealing documents that appear in the Congressional series of *The Papers of James Madison*. The completion of Series 1 of this edition provides an opportunity to review how well the six volumes document Madison and the history of the early republic under the Constitution.

Established in 1956, the Madison project is in the process of supplanting all previous editions of Madison's papers, including the nine-volume edition by Gaillard Hunt, which was published between 1900 and 1910. The Hunt edition printed only one-sixth of the extant documents written by Madison and only forty-nine of



James Madison by Alonzo Chappel, circa 1861 (courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society: Mitten Collection).

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the more than fifteen thousand letters addressed to him. The first editors of this new edition, Leonard White (who died in 1958) and William T. Hutchinson (who served as editor until 1970), projected the completion of the series by 1976, a date that proved wildly unrealistic. Jointly sponsored by the University of Chicago and the University of Virginia, the project maintained editorial offices at Chicago and at the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond. With dual offices, Hutchinson deferred to his Virginia colleagues, William M. E. Rachal and Robert Scribner, on questions of annotation.

Following Hutchinson's retirement, Robert A. Rutland consolidated the editorial offices at the University of Virginia. Volume 8, the first under Rutland's direction, bore his mark, with its revised transcription and annotation policies that "emphasized accuracy of texts and de-emphasized annotation." According to Rutland, "the guiding philosophy was to try and stay out of the scholars' way by giving researchers a clear, reliable text that was relatively free of encumbering footnotes."¹ The result was a more rapid publication schedule that met the approval of reviewers.

Rutland retired in 1986 after publishing ten Madison volumes—eight in the initial series and one each in the presidential and secretary of state series. J. C. A. Stagg replaced Rutland, and the project has since published two volumes (16 and 17) under his editorship. Remaining to be completed are fifteen volumes out of a projected sixteen in the secretary of state series (1801–1809); eleven out of twelve volumes in the presidential series (1809–1817); and a yet to be determined number of volumes in the fourth series that covers Madison's retirement years (1817–1836).

The six volumes reviewed here take Madison from the opening of the first federal Congress in 1789 to the presidential inauguration of Thomas Jefferson in 1801. They conclude what the editors of the Madison Papers call the Congressional series and cover Madison's service in the House of Representatives from 1789 to 1797 and his life during his retirement from political office during the Adams administration. Collectively, the volumes offer a fascinating insight into the world of politics, nation-making, and the social life of the founding generation.

The private Madison remains relatively obscure, although this edition goes as far as possible in unearthing his inner life. The discerning reader can understand the nature of his relationships with his colleagues in the mutual respect and confidences exchanged in the Jefferson-Madison or Monroe-Madison correspondence. The editors help the readers understand Madison's private life by including letters to and from Dolley Madison that shed light on their relationship. We know little about their courtship and marriage from

Madison's own writings, and so the decision to include selections from Mrs. Madison's letters was a wise one. There are relatively few of these; consequently, their inclusion does not make the volume bulk in size. Without them, such gems as Catharine Coles's marvelous description of Madison, quoted at the beginning of this article, would have remained inaccessible.

Although Madison, according to Coles, burned for the eligible Widow Todd, the other main source of heat in his life was a consuming interest in politics and the nature of government. Appearing cold and unemotional to succeeding generations, Madison was driven by a passion for tinkering with government. Despite the disclaimers that Madison and his generation made about their interest in high office, he and his peers found public service irresistible. Few were as frank as South Carolinian Charles Pinckney, who admitted to Madison "But you know I always Loved Politics & I find as I grow older I become more fond of them" (17:428). Madison never would have put it as bluntly; he was repelled by popular politics and excelled in behind-the-scenes efforts. Nonetheless, his single-minded concern with government and politics is evident to even the casual reader. This becomes especially clear when his letters are contrasted with those of his friend Jefferson. Because Madison's letters are so full of details about the political life of the new nation, we are richer for it.

The six Congressional volumes consist largely of letters to and from political allies. Jefferson and Monroe are among the most frequent correspondents. The editors print the texts of Madison's anonymous newspaper essays as well as selected speeches reported in contemporary newspapers. During the period covered in volume 12, the first of these six, Madison held extraordinary influence in both the executive and legislative branches. His role in molding the initial directions of the federal government is well known, but the breadth of his influence becomes ever more evident to the reader of this volume. As the editors note, Madison "was in dialogue with himself" (12:120 n.) during this period, for he drafted Washington's inaugural address, the House's response, and the President's replies to the House and the Senate. The texts of these four documents are printed here. Volumes 13–15 (1790–1795) find Madison increasingly on the losing side of the conflict with Hamilton. Madison's detailed notes of his conversations with Washington are invaluable, showing Madison's efforts to persuade the president to accept reelection in 1792 (14:299–304).

By 1793 (volume 15), Jefferson and Madison revived their practice of writing sensitive passages in code due to fear of tampering with the mail. The editors continue their sensible practice of printing the decoded message according to the letter writer's intention and footnoting

any misreadings by the recipient. The Jay Treaty, deteriorating relations with France, and the close presidential election of 1796 dominate volume 16.

Madison retired from Congress in 1797, but few of his contemporaries believed that he truly had withdrawn from public affairs. The editors cite John Adams in the preface to volume 17, who noted that "it seems the Mode of becoming great is to retire. . . . Madison I suppose after a Retirement of a few Years is to become President or V.P. It is marvellous how political Plants grow in the shade" (17:xix). This final volume verifies Adams's suspicions about the temporary nature of Madison's retirement and is the most revealing about his partisan activities, as he orchestrated opposition to the Alien and Sedition Acts and directed Jefferson's successful presidential campaign.

Volume 17 contains a supplement of recently discovered documents for the years 1778–1795, which includes thirty-seven previously unpublished letters from Edmund Pendleton. The location of the Pendleton letters had been unknown from 1892 until 1990 when they were purchased by Richard Gilder, Jr., of New York. Gilder has provided a model for responsible stewardship of historical manuscripts in private hands and should be commended for sharing this treasure.

Like Sherlock Holmes's famous "dog that did not bark," volume 17 is significant for the documents that it does not contain. The editors chose not to print the Virginia Resolutions of 1799 nor the 1799 "Address of the General Assembly to the People of the Commonwealth of Virginia," documents that had been previously attributed to Madison and printed in earlier editions. In an editorial note, they convincingly make the case against Madison's authorship (17:199–206). The new attribution of authorship will change interpretations of Madison's views on freedom of the press, for the author of these two documents opposed the Sedition Act, yet affirmed the authority of state courts over cases of seditious libel. If Madison was not the author of these pieces, as now seems to be the case, then his position on freedom of the press becomes more internally consistent.

The Congressional series of the Madison edition is nearly comprehensive, and relatively few documents are calendared. The diversity and quality of the letters confirm the wisdom of the editors' decisions, although there are cases where selectivity might have been more in order. Correspondence with Madison's Philadelphia tenant, Stephen Moylan, quibbling over rent or letters dealing with Madison's efforts to collect debts might have been safely relegated to an abstract or a footnote. Likewise, Edmund Randolph's Notes on the Common Law, although found among Madison's Papers and undoubtedly read by Madison, could have been cited rather than printed in full. Because of the sheer mass of

materials, the Madison secretary of state and presidential volumes will be of necessity selective.

The editors provide accurate yet readable texts, with a minimum of editorial intervention. The Madison edition has always been one of the more literal editions, long before the changes wrought in transcription policies at other projects in the 1970s. Nonetheless, the editors have pursued a sensible middle ground and do not clutter the text with editorial symbols noting every interlineation, deletion, or superscript. Sample checks of transcriptions indicate that the editors have carefully rendered Madison's somewhat crabbed handwriting.

The editors have provided helpful annotation, using several devices. Each volume includes its own chronology of Madison's activities, an exceptionally helpful aid to which I frequently referred while using the volumes. A very brief preface, usually three to six pages in length, opens each volume and sketches the major events covered in the text. Finally, the editors use a mix of conventional footnotes and editorial notes that provide context for the documents. Because of the complexity of Congressional actions and the multiple issues with which Madison dealt at any given time, the series includes an editorial note on Madison's role in each Congress. The notes trace the issues and legislation, describe Madison's position on them, and analyze the accuracy of sources for his speeches. These notes are exceedingly helpful and allow the edition to avoid repetitious footnotes as issues unfold.

Over the years, the editors of the Madison edition have adopted different annotation policies. These changes mirror the problems faced by documentary editors in striking a balance between inadequate and excessive annotation. The initial volumes under Hutchinson's editorship had been roundly criticized for "lavish editorial annotation which frequently amount to pedantry."² Under the direction of Robert A. Rutland, the series was characterized for its crisp and to-the-point annotation. Rutland provided full background for the Congressional sessions; in headnotes, identified individuals mentioned in the text, and offered additional guidance only when necessary, although some reviewers wished for more detail in the footnotes.³ Under the editorship of J. C. A. Stagg, the series has made a substantial change in both the nature and quantity of annotation, and, while making improvements, some might feel that the edition has again provided Madison readers with too much annotation.

The changes are striking when one compares the annotation of the first and last volumes of the Congressional series. In volume 12, which deals with the crucial first session of the first Congress, annotation takes up only 11 percent of the text. By contrast, 26 percent of the text of volume 17, which covers 1797–1801, is devoted to annotation.

Quantity, however, is not the primary issue here; annotation should be judged by its usefulness in helping the reader understand the text. At times, the annotation in the Stagg-era volumes provides significant connections that might not otherwise be evident to the reader. For instance, in his letter of 15 January 1797 to Thomas Jefferson, Madison shows his prowess as a political strategist. Madison carefully dissects a draft letter sent to him by Jefferson congratulating John Adams on his election to the presidency. Madison considers "the probability that Mr. A.s course of administration may force an opposition to it from the Republican quarter" and fears that Jefferson's polite words might create "real embarrassments" for the Republicans in the future (16:456). Madison rationally ticks off six reasons for not sending the letter. Alone, the letter would imply Madison was seeking to block a rapprochement between Jefferson and Adams. In a concise, well-written footnote, the editors cite a letter from the Adams Papers revealing that Madison carefully had leaked Jefferson's sentiments in a way that they reached the president-elect without leaving a damaging paper trail. The linking of the text with the letter in the Adams Papers provides an example of the documentary editor exercising his craft at its best (16:457 n. 1).

In many cases, however, the annotation in Stagg's volumes 16 and 17 is excessive and, while interesting and informative, is not necessary to understand the text. For example, the text of a letter from Jefferson to Madison of 3 January 1798 runs slightly more than two pages and is accompanied by twenty-three footnotes that go on for another two pages (17:64–68). When Jefferson writes "The bankruptcies here continue," the editors provide a ten-line gloss on these four words. They not only note that the Philadelphia bankruptcies of 1796–97 were related to the collapse of Robert Morris's land speculation, but they also go on to quote a letter from William Hindman to Rufus King and a diary entry from Benjamin Rush. Neither of these quoted items offers additional insights into Jefferson or Madison, nor are they necessary to help clarify the letter. In the same letter, a reference identifying Maryland Senator James Lloyd includes quotes from both Uriah Forrest and William Lloyd describing Lloyd's politics, which could have been better summarized by the editors. In another case, the editors print a letter from Madison's Philadelphia tenant who threatens to move to alternate rental property if he and Madison cannot come to terms on the rent. The editors add a six-line footnote noting the location of the competing rental property, its owner, and its style of construction (17:293 n. 1). Thus, while the annotation in volumes 16 and 17 is often insightful and helpful, both volumes bear evidence of the need for more editorial restraint.

Like the annotation, the indexing in the Congress-

sional series has changed over the years and also reflects the hard decisions faced by documentary editors. The Madison edition is important not only for what it tells about its subject, but also for the immense riches that it contains on other subjects. This requires expert indexing that will allow readers access to the material. The indexes provide good access to names, even to those mentioned elliptically. Likewise, Madison's own activities are well indexed.

Editors who focus on a single individual face difficulties in providing entries for subjects. Torn between offering access to information about the central figure of their series as well as other subjects and the insistence of publishers on controlling the size of the volumes, they need to make significant choices about the nature of their indexes. The Madison edition, especially in the early volumes of the Congressional series, usually placed subjects as subentries under names. The result is that much valuable information is lost. For instance, a letter from Edmund Randolph to Madison of 12 May 1789 (12:169) suggests that Randolph might move to Philadelphia and adds that "if I found that I could live there, I should emancipate my slaves, and thus end my days, without under going any anxiety about the injustice of holding them." This reference appears only under Randolph's name, but no reference to Randolph's anxieties can be found under the entries for "Slaves" or "Slavery." Consequently, Randolph's remarks are lost except to those who are interested in Randolph as a subject. Elsewhere in the same volume, the editors print a four-page speech by Madison on the subject of citizenship (12:178–82). The index contains no reference to "Citizenship" as a topic, but only provides a subentry under Madison's name.

Later volumes in the Congressional series provide fuller entries, especially for subjects. Whereas volume 12 contained one index page for every thirty pages of text, the most recent volume has an index-to-text ratio of 1:19. The four volumes under Rutland's editorship showed a steady increase in the amount of material indexed, with an average index-to-text ratio of 1:25. The two Stagg volumes have a 1:21 index-to-text ratio.

The later volumes have addressed some of the issues of subject indexing, but there remains room for improvement even in these. Many important subjects could be dealt with simply by adding cross-references. For instance, even though volume 16 contains twelve references to the impressment of seamen, there are no main entries under "Impressment," "Seamen," or "Sailors," although there is a subentry under "Great Britain." In the same volume, the heading "Mississippi River" contains a cross-reference to "Spain, and navigation of Mississippi." The reader interested in Mississippi River navigation, however, is not led to the six nonduplicative references that can be found under

"Great Britain, and navigation of Mississippi." Sub-entries for "letters to" and "letters from" are very helpful, although a sampling indicates that they are not included for all letters. The index to volume 15 lists three letters to or from Dolley Payne Todd Madison, but neglects to include the letter quoted at the beginning of this review—ironically, one of the most interesting letters published in that volume.

On balance, the editors in both the Rutland and Stagg eras have produced an excellent edition that grateful scholars will find invaluable. They have offered texts that are accurate and readable. The editorial notes and footnotes reflect sound historical research and provide assistance to readers in understanding the text. The series has had varying annotation policies and could be improved by a more balanced policy that will prevent the text from being swamped by the notes. The editors also have created useful tools such as chronologies that help the user navigate the volumes. The indexes improve with each volume in the series, and the development of more comprehensive indexes through the use of additional cross-references would give readers assistance in retrieving the riches found here. The Madison volumes will be important to historians for a very long time to come. They not only provide insight into the mind of one of America's greatest political theorists, but they also reveal a great deal about his circle of acquaintances and about the beginnings of American government under the Constitution of 1787.

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When Charles Pinckney acquired a portrait of Madison, he hung it in the drawing room of his South Carolina home. He told Madison, "it is a Most exact likeness in the face—But makes you about the Body much fatter than when I saw you. If it is so I suppose you have thriven upon Matrimony & find it a good thing" (17:428). Like the limner of the painting in Pinckney's drawing room, the editors of the Madison edition have striven to supply us with an "exact likeness" of James Madison and his world. Researchers will "find it a good thing."

NOTES

1. Robert A. Rutland, "James Madison Papers Approach Bicentennial Peak," *Documentary Editing* 9 (June 1987): 6–8.
2. Leonard W. Levy, review of *Madison Papers, Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 49 (1962–63): 504–6.
3. For criticism of the sparseness of the annotation, see Gaspare J. Saladino, "Charmed Beginnings and Democratic Murmurings: A Review Essay," *Documentary Editing* 6 (March 1984): 5.