

THE MADISON PAPERS

By BENJAMIN F. WRIGHT

IT is difficult, probably impossible, to recall a series of contributions to constitutional government made in a brief span of time which will compare with those of

James Madison between May 25, 1787, and June 25, 1788.

The Papers of James Madison. Volume I. 1751-1779. Volume II. 1780-1781. Edited by William T. Hutchinson and William M. E. Rachal. University of Chicago Press. \$10 each volume.

They include chief authorship of the Constitution, keeping the only comprehensive record of the debates in the Federal Convention, writing some twenty-nine numbers of *The Federalist*, and a leading rôle in securing ratification of the Constitution in the largest, wealthiest, and most influential state, Virginia. In 1787 Madison had been in public life for over ten years, and he was almost continuously in public office until he retired from the Presidency in 1817. Nor did his influence cease then, as witness his successful exertions against South Carolina's attempt at nullification when he was nearing eighty.

Here surely is one of the stories of truly great achievement in the long, and far from uniformly successful, history of popular government. Though John Marshall once said that Madison was the most convincing speaker he ever heard, how many persons can recall one of his sentences? Nor are there legends associated with him: no dashing about, no graceful if excessive locutions, no thundering orations, no military exploits, no duels. Major Pierce may have written that he took the lead in the Convention (when, certainly, men of ability were not in short supply), that he was always the best informed man on "any point in debate," but Pierce also says that he was no orator, meaning, probably, that he spoke calmly and effectively but not in ringing tones nor in phrases that linger in the memory. These characteristics help to explain why the scholarly and almost excessively hard-working little man has been the subject of few biographies, when compared with the libraries devoted to several folk heroes, and of none worthy of the subject until Irving Brant's six-volume life was completed last fall. Gaillard Hunt's edition of Madison's "Writings" (1900-1910) is better than many collections of works of the Founders, especially when the difficulties of collecting the dispersed papers are taken into account, but a more comprehensive and more scholarly edition was badly needed.

We are indebted to the University of Chicago and the

University of Virginia for sponsoring this new edition of Madison papers. The University of Chicago Press, the editors and their assistants, and the numerous persons who gave aid or encouragement to the project are all to be congratulated on the quality and the inclusiveness of the undertaking.

These two volumes are concerned with the earlier stages of an apprenticeship which continued until the Federal Convention. That this edition is far superior to the best of the preceding editions will be immediately evident to any one who makes a superficial comparison. Hunt's edition ran to nine volumes. It is expected that the present one will be twenty. Hunt's begins with a letter from the eighteen-year-old Madison, newly arrived at the College of New Jersey (Princeton), to his former tutor, the Reverend Thomas Martin, in August, 1769. That letter appears at page 42 of volume I of the new edition. Before it, in addition to an account of the history of the dispersion and the collection of Madison's papers, a description of the editorial method followed in preparing this edition, a chronology of the years covered in this first volume, and a table of contents, there is a record of the birth and baptism of Madison, a *Commonplace Book* illustrative of the reading of his boyhood, and "Notes on a Brief System of Logick." Both the *Commonplace Book* and the Notes are the subject of detailed editorial comment and explanation.

Where Hunt gives 127 pages to the writings of Madison up to February, 1781, these two volumes include 642 pages, exclusive of the full index at the end of each volume. The difference in amount is explained by the inclusion of numerous documents not before known, or thought unworthy of inclusion, of letters to as well as from Madison, and by the extensive and extremely helpful editorial notes.

Like so many of the men who did most to frame our governments, state and national, Madison combined an extraordinary education (by no means limited to formal instruction, as is indicated by the evidence of the breadth and

depth of his reading) with years of experience in the offices of government. He began as a member of the Orange County Committee of Safety; then, at twenty-five, he was a delegate to the Virginia Assembly which became the Virginia Convention of 1776, the body which framed the first bill of rights (to which Madison contributed a broader conception of religious liberty, an act prophetic of his life-long philosophy) and the first state constitution intended to be a permanent instrument of government. He continued to serve Virginia as a member of the Council of State until elected by the Assembly a delegate to the Continental Congress. The second volume of the present edition includes papers from the first eleven months (March 20, 1780-February 23, 1781) of his long and immensely valuable service to the nation.

A generation later, during the gloomy closing months of what the hostile New Englanders called Mr. Madison's War, the Hartford Convention met in perhaps treasonable assemblage to protest the War and to advocate limitations on national powers. Volume II of this edition concludes with a Committee Report on another Hartford Convention. It illustrates the rise and decline of state rights sentiment in almost every state of the Union, for, in February, 1781, this early Hartford Convention proposed that Congress call upon Washington to use troops when necessary to force a state to provide its quota of soldiers, funds, or supplies to the common cause. To this committee report, which may never have been submitted to Congress, Madison probably offered an amendment. This minor item is evidence of both the thoroughness of the present edition and the range of Madison's experience with attempts by Congress under the Articles of Confederation to govern and to carry on a war when it could deal only with states, and not with individual citizens. His experience, plus his reading and reflection, led eventually to the Virginia Plan, the speeches in the Federal Convention, and the remarkable essays he contributed to *The Federalist*.