ISSN: 1753-5794 (online)

Joshua Kendall, *The Forgotten Founding Father: Noah Webster's Obsession and the Creation of an American Culture*. New York: Putnam, 2011. 368pp.

Tom Cutterham*
University of Oxford

Recent treatments of Thomas Jefferson and George Washington have worked to carve, from the mountain of each man's public myth, a more flawed and complex, more human likeness.[1] It is a harder task to build the mountain at the same time as you cut it down. Perhaps that was the genius of David McCullough's *John Adams*. But Adams was an important Founding Father by anyone's count. In trying to raise Noah Webster to that status, Joshua Kendall's book raises some interesting problems about how individuals matter, and how they don't.

There are two parts to Kendall's case for Webster. In the first, he has tried to paint Webster as an ideas-man whose relatively minor reputation is belied by his real influence on policy, a sort of eighteenth-century Karl Rove. A prologue in which Webster calls on Washington at Mount Vernon is meant to set this up. Thucydides-like, Kendall invents a conversation with lines like this one (about whether to hire a secretary from abroad): "Immediately grasping Webster's point, a humbled Washington asked, 'What shall I do?'" It is not altogether convincing. And from this we are given to believe that "Washington relied time and time again on his trusted policy advisor." The actual text of Washington's 1785 letter of recommendation for Webster gives us an immediately different impression of their relationship:

> Sir, this letter will be handed to you by Mr. Webster whom I beg leave to introduce to your acquaintance. He is author of a Grammatical Institute of the English language – to which there are very honorable testimonials of its excellence & usefulness – The work must speak for itself; & he, better than I can explain his wishes.[2]

* Tom is a Graduate Student at the University of Oxford and is working on political thought and culture in the early American republic, with a strong emphasis on "Federalist" ideas. He can be reached at tom_cutterham@yahoo.co.uk.

[1] See for example, John Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009); Peter Onuf, *The Mind of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 2007).

[2] See David Micklethwait, *Noah Webster and the American Dictionary* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000), p.76. In fairness, Kendall does quote most of this letter, but at p.118, not in the prologue.

Kendall's presentation of Webster as "Washington's trusted protégé" seems half-hearted at best. A few meetings, and a few jobs as a Federalist propagandist, do not a Founding Father make. Not even Kendall can take very seriously Webster's later claims to have come up with the idea for the Constitution. He quotes Madison's politely lukewarm 1804 acknowledgement, and concludes that "while Webster had not produced something entirely original, he had made his singular contribution by his thoughtful compiling and arranging, as well as his clear articulation of critical points." Here then is our link to the second part of the argument: the importance of Webster's "compiling," his spelling book and dictionary.

Jefferson claimed that the Declaration of Independence was merely "an expression of the American mind."[3] That paradoxical half-truth is where Kendall wants to situate Webster as well. With his "monumental contribution to American letters [...] to redo the leading British work on language for a native audience," was Webster reflecting the birth of a national identity, or actually causing it? The parts of his work that were original, "the new mode of spelling recommended and exemplified in the fugitiv Essays ov No-ur Webster eskwier junier, critick and coxcomb general of the United States" as Jeremy Belknap put it, were more mocked than adopted; the famous purge of superfluous U's had already gotten well underway before he wrote.

At best, Kendall establishes Webster as a witness at the creation, an ambitious young man "adept at ingratiating himself with the powerful," who was in more or less the right place at the right time. But similar things could be said about almost any Founding Father. In the end, the meaning – or meaninglessness – of that label is not really what concerns Kendall, whose previous book was about the creator of *Roget's Thesaurus*. What interests him is not the impact of Webster's life on the world, but the hidden motives and mechanisms of that life itself. In that sense, his book embodies *the anti-historical thrust of biography*, its inherent tension with historical analysis, each form looking past the other in the opposite direction.

The core of this account is the idea that Webster "battled an intractable form of mental illness [...] what contemporary psychiatrists call obsessive-compulsive personality disorder." This diagnosis then takes on the bulk of the explanatory work in Kendall's narrative. "Webster's pathology was instrumental to his success." A capacity for obsession enabled him to "take on a series of monumental intellectual labors," and "precisely because of his shaky self-esteem, Webster turned out to be a natural at self-promotion." He was "a socially awkward loner" with a "one-track mind," "emotionally tone-deaf" and "self-absorbed." It

[3] Merrill Jensen ed., *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1984), p.1501.

ISSN: 1753-5794 (online)

doesn't help much for me to point out that these symptoms sound more like Asperger's Syndrome than Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. What matters is that Kendall has chosen to pathologise his character-assessment, to locate the meaning of Webster's life not in the substance of social relationships or even thought, but in "illness."

Webster has been an attractive subject for writers interested in personality. Richard Rollins' biography, and his introduction to Webster's "autobiographies," is avowedly psychological, with his religious conversion at centre-stage, as an explanation of his later conservatism.[4] Jill Lepore takes him as an example in her exploration of the problems of biography itself. Both find Webster dislikeable; in Lepore's words, "he was, even as a young man, sour, bitter, and friendless."[5] Kendall has tried to make him "a more sympathetic figure," to show him struggling with his own flawed character, and often failing, like the rest of us. In that, this book follows the path of most modern founding father biographies.

But we are left wondering what we have gained from the anachronistic idea that Webster suffered from "obsessive-compulsive personality disorder." Webster's friend Benjamin Rush, the pioneer of American psychiatry, once suggested that the "excesses of passion for liberty... constituted a species of insanity, which I shall take the liberty of distinguishing by the name of *Anarchia*."[6] As an historical tool, Kendall's diagnosis is no more relevant or insightful than Rush's. Worse, it serves to disconnect Webster from his social, political, and ideological contexts. This book might have had much to say about a volatile post-revolutionary world, and the "forgotten" characters that populated it alongside the founders we know. Instead it is a bold portrait, against a blank backdrop, of a curious and singular man.

[4] Richard Rollins, *The Long Journey of Noah Webster* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980); Rollins ed., *The Autobiographies of Noah Webster* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989).
[5] Jill Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *Journal of American History* 88 (2001), pp.142.
[6] Dagobert Runes ed., *The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), p.333.