

What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America 1815-1848
Daniel Walker Howe
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Review by
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On January 8, 1815 American forces under the command of Andrew Jackson turned back an attempt by the British army to capture New Orleans. Unfortunately for the men involved, their sacrifices on that day were for naught for by the time battle was joined the War of 1812 was already over as a peace had been signed between the U.S. and Great Britain some weeks earlier. That the Battle of New Orleans was strategically irrelevant did not stop it from becoming the stuff of legend and it quickly assumed its place in the pantheon of American folklore. The fight, seen as match-up between arrogant European professionals and a rag-tag force of sharpshooting Kentucky militiamen, simply added to the growing sense of American exceptionalism. Upon closer examination however the myth proves to be more fancy than fact as Daniel Howe makes clear early in his superb new book, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America 1815-1848*, the latest addition to the multi-volume Oxford History of the United States and the 2008 winner of the Pulitzer Prize in history. In this telling, what Howe reveals is that it was technology in the form of artillery rather than the expertise of the Kentucky riflemen that gave Jackson his victory on that January day, and that the lesson to be taken is the role that technology, especially advances in communication, played in the development of the United States during the first half of the 19th century.

Compressing three decades into a single, albeit large, volume is a challenge and Howe has shown that he is more than up to the task. Combining synthesis with analysis, Howe's command of the scholarship and engaging prose have resulted in sweeping portrayal of a changing United States that is as entertaining as it is informative.

Transformation is the pivot on which the book turns and as Howe makes clear, few periods in the nation's history have been witness to the variety, duration, and the extent of change as those the country underwent between 1815 and 1848. In this narrative, Howe chronicles the major developments of the time; the religious and social experimentation that were adjuncts of the Second Great Awakening, the emergence of a mass-based two party political system, the struggle over slavery, the nascent women's rights movement, and America's rise as a continental power, and how all were accelerated and expanded by revolutionary developments in communications. Howe insists that inventions like the telegraph brought meaning to American democracy by broadening the consumer and vocation choices the market economy made possible, by encouraging vigor in increasingly democratically organized Protestant churches and voluntary organizations, and by the mass-based political party system that offered voters more options.

Since this book covers ground that has been gone over many times before one might be tempted to conclude that there is little in the soil waiting to be uncovered. That is hardly the case. Whether it be the Bank War, the War with Mexico, or the rise of the Mormons or the myriad other things that may be familiar to those readers who know the territory, because Howe's excavates with different tools he has unearthed different things. By viewing the period through the prism of the communications revolution Howe has

produced a book that is rich in texture and one that will put him in direct conflict with many of his peers.

In What Hath God Wrought Daniel Howe challenges those historians who insist that the transition to a market economy, the shift from agrarianism to capitalism, was the driving force that recast society in the 1800s. He not only argues that the market revolution, occurring as it did in the previous century, had already become the prevailing paradigm by 1812, he also takes exception to the view that Americans were content with self-sufficiency arguing that they had always been eager for wider access to larger markets.

It is however, for those who trace the expansion of democracy in the 19th century to Andrew Jackson, that Howe reserves his harshest judgments. The Jacksonian period, he asserts, rather than nurturing an expanded democracy, was instead an incubator for white supremacy and naked imperialism. Howe casts Andrew Jackson as an authoritarian “impatient with limitations” on his will, a man with little respect for the law if the stood between him and whatever it was he wanted to accomplish. In Howe’s view, Jackson’s insistence on limited government, rather than unshackling American potential, was a short-sided obsession that actually stifled it. He finds Old Hickory guilty of undermining the nation’s prosperity by destroying the National Bank, condemns him for Indian Removal and the protection of slavery, and argues that the spoils system he installed “diminished the competency and prestige of public service” for generations. These and the other failings Howe maintains, Jackson imprinted on the Democratic Party and that they reverberated in one form or another until well into the twentieth century.

While Jackson and his acolytes are Howe’s rogues, his paladins are the Whig Party and John Quincy Adams. Howe established his reputation in 1979 when he produced *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* and his enthusiasm for the party has not diminished in the years since. The tendency to refer to this time in American history as the “Age of Jackson” Howe believes masks the contributions of the Whigs whom he argues “were the party of America’s future.” In Howe’s estimate it was the Whigs rather than the Jacksonian Democrats who led the United States out of its parochialism and allowed it to become a “. . . cosmopolitan nation integrated by commerce, industry, information, and voluntary associations. . .”

Howe’s dedication of *What Hath God Wrought* to John Quincy Adams testifies to the regard he has for this overlooked president. A capable and high-minded man, John Quincy Adams is seen here as everything Andrew Jackson was not. Howe especially takes issue with the notion that Jackson’s encouragement of popular sovereignty is something to be celebrated, seeing it as producing Indian policies and attitudes towards slavery which Howe, rightly, sees as being morally reprehensible. In contrast he applauds Adams for his commitment to public service, his life-long refusal to allow political expediency to undermine his devotion to principle, and for demanding that the rule of law never take a backseat to populist demands.

Arthur Schlesinger once commented that when writing history, “objectivity is not neutrality” and that is certainly the case here. If this book has any weakness it is the difficulty Daniel Howe had in avoiding the presence that haunted him during its creation. Howe’s comments regarding Andrew Jackson’s authoritarianism and willingness to side-step the law when it got in his way; his descriptions of how James Polk maneuvered the country into war with Mexico by discovering “. . . latent constitutional powers of the

commander-in-chief to provoke war,” and to “secure congressional support for it” makes it clear that the presidency of George W. Bush was never far from his thoughts when we wrote them.

Presentism is also evident in Howe’s averment that the malfeasances of the Jacksonians were facilitated by the “remarkable changes in transportation and communications” of the time. Producing a story built around the impact of the telegraph on American life in the 19th century in the internet age of the 21st, Howe reminds us that we’ve been here before and advises us to be wary, that improvements in our ability to transmit and receive information also have a dark side. But these are minor complaints at best and do not detract in any way from the overall impact of this magnificent book.

The Oxford History of the United States is an esteemed series and *What Hath God Wrought* is a worthy addition to it. For readers, regardless of background or grounding in the subject, who are willing to invest the time, the returns from reading this comprehensive and compelling book will far outweigh the outlay of time required to do so.