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REVIEW OF BOOKS

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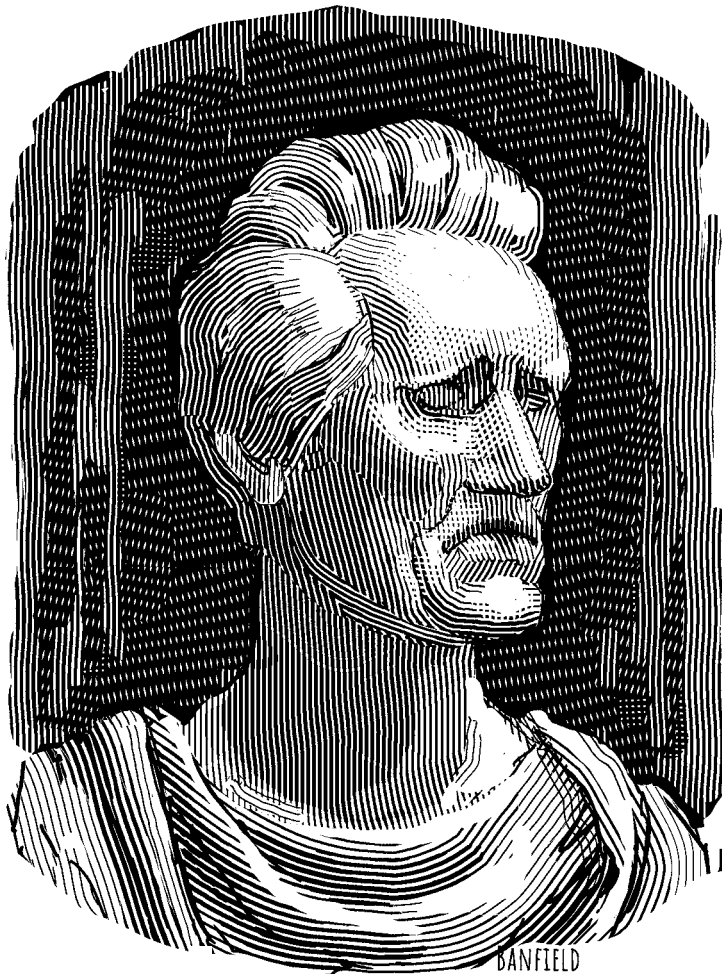
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Book Review by Allen C. Guelzo

KING MOB

The First Populist: The Defiant Life of Andrew Jackson, by David S. Brown.
Scribner, 432 pages, \$30



Andrew Jackson

Drawing after plaster bust by Hiram Powers, modeled 1835

ANDREW JACKSON STALKS THROUGH the corridors of the early republic like some passionate beast, goaded by revenge and resentment, wielding terrible weapons with which he smashes down everything in his path—the British, whose swords scarred him for life in the Revolution; the Cherokee, Creek, and Choctaw, whose lands he coveted; the Spanish, dismissed with a slap of his hand; the British again, who scattered like chaff at New Orleans before the rifles of his buckskin-clad militia; Henry Clay and John Quincy Adams, who challenged him as “the Military Chieftain” and “King Andrew”; Nicholas Biddle and his “Monster” Bank; John C. Calhoun and the nullifiers whom Jackson took as a direct challenge to his presidency. And this doesn’t include the men he literally killed, or tried to kill: Waightstill Avery, John Sevier, Charles

Dickinson, and his would-be assassin, Richard Lawrence, whom he counter-attacked with his cane. Jackson is the object of massive multi-volume biographies—from Robert Remini (1977-84), Marquis James (1934-37), John Bassett (1911), and James Parton (1859-61)—and a full-length biopic, *The President’s Lady* (1953), in which Charlton Heston played Jackson, almost as a warm-up to playing Moses in *The Ten Commandments*.

YET JACKSON IS ALSO A MAN OF BIZARRE contradictions. He claimed to speak for the “farmers, mechanics, and laborers” of the vast American trans-Appalachia, yet he was the owner of a great estate, the Hermitage, outside Nashville, and (according to the inventory compiled after his death) of 161 slaves. He insisted that those slaves be treated “with humanity,” yet he advertised for the return of

a fugitive with the offer of a \$50 reward, and “ten dollars extra, for every hundred lashes any person will give him, to the amount of three hundred.”

It gets worse. He eloped with another man’s wife, Rachel Robards, though for the length of their marriage (once the legal embarrassments had been cleared away) he remained utterly and devotedly faithful to her. Almost by compensation, he spent wasteful amounts of political capital during his first administration as president (1828-32) defending the innocence of the wife of one of his cabinet members, John Eaton. “Mrs. Eaton is as chaste as those who attempt to slander her,” Jackson thundered, which was patently untrue, at least in her case. (One U.S. senator protested that Peggy Eaton had been the mistress of her current husband, “and the mistress of eleven doz. others!”). The Her-



mitage touts Jackson as “the People’s President.” But Thomas Jefferson (according to Daniel Webster) once complained that Jackson’s “passions are terrible” and often made him “choke with rage.”

TO ATTEMPT A SINGLE-VOLUME BIOGRAPHY of these contradictions seems a recipe for frustration. That, however, is exactly what Amos Kendall (1843), John William Ward (1955), Michael Paul Rogin (1975), H.W. Brands (2005), Sean Wilentz (2005), Jon Meacham (2008), Mark R. Cheatham (2013), and many others have produced over the years. To this thickly sown field comes David S. Brown of Elizabethtown College, a wonderfully talented intellectual historian of the American 20th century, with impressive books on Henry Adams, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Richard Hofstadter. For those who have followed Brown’s work with applause over the last 16 years, this detour into the 19th century—and into Andrew Jackson—will seem like an eccentric departure. But Brown, by his own acknowledgment, first developed a curiosity about Jackson (and Jackson’s mortal Whig enemies) while still a graduate student in Ohio in the 1990s, so in a personal sense, Brown’s biography is a professional seed which was merely waiting to sprout. But a larger reason for the book is buried in its title, *The First Populist: The Defiant Life of Andrew Jackson*. For as soon as the word *populist* appears, we have no trouble guessing what the immediate inspiration for the book has been: Donald Trump.

This is not a matter of guesswork, either. “Donald Trump’s provocative appeals to working-class voters” is a line which appears as early as page five in *The First Populist*. Like Jackson, Brown believes that Trump “either stated or suggested a return to a polity or an economy premised on popular control.” Both Trump and his admirers have drawn comparisons to Jackson, and Brown agrees that the presidents, though separated by almost two centuries, practiced the same “politics of disruption and populism, while fostering an anti-establishment ethos.” In fact, the parallels jump out even when Brown isn’t being explicit. Jackson saw the presidency as “ultimately answerable to the public, and thus, by implication less so to Congress,” as did Trump. Jackson understood his electoral mandate in 1828 as “preventing social elites and financial aristocrats from bullying, bestriding, or otherwise buying Congress,” as did Trump. Jackson presided over a large-scale elimination of the “permanent government bureaucrats” who thought they could “govern the country, and do so beyond the reach of the people,” as

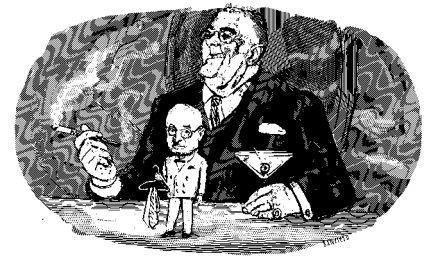
though Jackson was a template for draining swamps.

Above all, Jackson’s loss in the savage presidential contest of 1824—an election decided in the House of Representatives after Jackson won the popular vote but failed to get an electoral-vote majority—was packaged by Jackson as a clever sabotage by “a cabal of politicians and businessmen,” culminating in the so-called “Corrupt Bargain” of John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay. “Thus you see here,” Jackson raged to John Overton, “the voice of the people of the west [has] been disregarded, and demagogues barter them as sheep.” On those terms, 1824 could almost have been a pattern-piece for 2020. No wonder that, at some moments, Trump almost channeled Jackson. “We must all remember Jackson’s words that in the planter, the farmer, the mechanic and the laborer we will find the muscle and bone of our country,” Trump remarked when he visited the Hermitage in 2017; “So true.”

BEFORE ANYONE CONCLUDES THAT *THE First Populist* is merely a political performance, it needs to be said that Brown’s chief concern is populism, not Trump. Jackson also bears comparing in Brown’s hands with other iterations of American populism, from William Jennings Bryan to Bernie Sanders, and Brown is conscious that “comparisons between” Trump and Jackson “break down” on the very significant differences which separate the two from each other, and from the populism of the Sanders, Bryan, Huey Long, James Weaver, and George Wallace schools. For instance: Evangelical Christians detested Jackson, but rallied in large numbers to Trump. And again: Jackson wrecked the American financial system with policies which were indistinguishable from Occupy Wall Street, and loudly opposed the protectionist tariff policies promoted by Trump—and by Henry Clay and the Whigs.

Brown’s long suit in *The First Populist* is his ability to draw clear, concise pictures of the people and events of Jackson’s administration, starting with Jackson himself. The 54 chapters of the book are short—sometimes no more than four pages—and precise in their deployment of statistics and exemplary maps. Jackson’s obsession with Indian removal affords Brown’s most detailed investigations into Jackson’s policies, but Old Hickory’s fury against business, banks, and commerce comes in a close second. What Jackson got away with politically astonishes even Brown. Justice Joseph Story complained that living under Jackson was like being “called back to the last days of the old Roman Republic, when the people

CLAREMONT REVIEW OF BOOKS FREE 2023 Calendar



The four-term president was, with a suddenness that startled the whole world, replaced by someone who seemed a very average, decent, but unexciting man.

—Conrad Black, “Wild About Harry,” Summer 2022

| SEPTEMBER | | | | | | |
|--|--------------------------------|---------|-----------|-----------------------------------|--------|----------|
| Sunday | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday |
| 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 1 | 2 | |
| 3 | 4 <small>Labour Day</small> | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 |
| 17 <small>Claremont Festival Constitution Day Sept!</small> | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 <small>Paul Hinkley</small> | 22 | 23 |
| 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 |

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shouted for Caesar, and liberty itself expired." But Jackson outfoxed the Washington establishment with an uncanny ability to read the public mind, often "far better than Congress did." He vetoed 12 bills (more than all his predecessors combined) and employed the unprecedented tactic of announcing pre-emptive vetoes of legislation he opposed—and all of the vetoes survived.

FOR ALL THE CONTRADICTIONS IN THE man's actions, there was no depth in Jackson's character. He interpreted criticism as insult, and made it his policy "never to institute a suit for assault or battery," but rather to settle those matters personally—and violently if necessary—because "the law affords no remedy for such outrages that can satisfy the feelings of a true man." Jackson was possessed, says Brown, by "a tremendous confidence that often bordered on conceit," which convinced him that he could never be defeated except by others' chicanery. He was a generous patron to those willing to subordinate themselves to his will; but to "his equals and superiors," Jackson was (in James Parton's description) "self-willed, somewhat overbearing, easily offended, very irascible, and upon the whole, 'difficult to get along with.'" He read law as a 17-year-old in Salisbury, North Carolina, but his principal energies, writes Brown, were "roaring, rollicking, game-cocking, horse-racing, card-playing," and maneuvering for government appointments which would yield financial and political advantages. He admired Aaron Burr, and only barely avoided indictment when Burr went on trial for treason. It was through his political connections that Jackson won appointment as major-general of the Tennessee militia, which in turn led to the celebrated victory at New Orleans (the centerpiece of yet another movie, *The Buccaneer* (1958), also

featuring Charlton Heston as Jackson) that made him a national hero.

Jackson took no counsel of anyone but himself, but that counsel marched hand in hand with the most unbelievable political good fortune. He flung international law to the breeze by trying to force the Spanish to surrender Florida, and, with Eutychia casting her customary smile on him, the Spanish eventually yielded. The financial Panic of 1819 confirmed Jackson in his hatred of banks, and induced him to believe that "the principles of general justice" as well as "the Constitution of the United States prohibited the Establishment of Banks in any state." He carried that loathing into the presidency when he finally gained it in 1828, and took as a personal mission the destruction of the Second Bank of the United States, vetoing its recharter in terms which would send a latter-day progressive's nervous system into sympathetic vibration. The economy cheerfully obliged him by waiting until he left office in 1837 before collapsing in the greatest economic failure of the American 19th century.

BUT JACKSON WAS AT LEAST RIGHT IN one very important point: his resistance to Calhoun and the South Carolina nullifiers in 1832. However much Jackson privately shared the nullifiers' loathing of tariffs, he took Calhoun's attack on the tariff both as a personal affront and, with his usual political perspicacity, as a cover for the real issue in nullification, the protection of slavery in the Southern states. "The tariff was only a pretext, and disunion and southern confederacy the real object," Jackson wrote after forcing the nullifiers to take a knee. "The next pretext will be the negro, or slavery question." No wonder that, three decades later, Abraham Lincoln—who as "an old Henry Clay Whig" was inclined to dislike Jackson—incorporated

Jackson's warnings against secession into his own first inaugural address.

David Brown's *The First Populist* will make a smooth and direct introduction to Andrew Jackson, but given its brevity, it will not be able to do more than that. It contains, curiously enough, no workable definition of "populism" by which to measure or understand how Jackson conforms (or doesn't) to the image of a populist. Even more curious, it lacks much attention to some of the most dramatic moments in Jackson's drama-soaked life. The famous toast Jackson devised at the Jefferson Birthday dinner in 1830 to discomfit Calhoun ("Our Union—It Must Be Preserved") gets only two paragraphs of explanation. Absent is Thomas Hart Benton's famous reply to the nervous nullifier who wondered whether Jackson was in earnest when he threatened to hang the first man he met when federal troops crossed the South Carolina state line ("I tell you, Hayne, when Jackson begins to talk about hanging, they can begin to look out for ropes!"). Also absent is Jackson's merciless promise after Rachel Jackson died of heart failure following a smear campaign against the Jacksons in 1828 ("In the presence of this dead saint I can and do forgive all my enemies, but those vile wretches who have slandered her must look to God for mercy"). But there is more than enough color left in Jackson, even after these subtractions, to make *The First Populist* satisfying. What Brown cannot do—and probably does not want to do—is make Jackson admirable, and on that point, Brown is not wrong.

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