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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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### THE AGE OF JACKSON

"In their speech they produced 'strange' accents and inflections to the English language, and they no longer wore powdered wigs and silk stockings. They were restless and aggressive and highly mobile. More than anything else, they were consumed with a desire to be better off, to make money, to succeed in business . . ."

And how to succeed? "The answer was simple. Work! That was the first command of this new society."

Such were the "new" Americans who emerged in the Jackson era, writes Robert V. Remini in his fat (638 pages), anecdotal, and somewhat breathless **Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Democracy, 1833–1845** (Harper, 1984). "They no longer seemed English or European in any way. They had their own unique characteristics now that set them off as an individual people."

Remini's book, third in a trilogy, is the most positive academic appraisal of Old Hickory since **The Age of Jackson** (Little, Brown, 1945, cloth; 1963, paper) by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., whose portrayal of Jackson as a 19th-century FDR stirred scholarly debates for years. While all agree that the age was (as Daniel Webster said) "full of excitement," historians have differed in their measurements of the general himself.

Few have been as underwhelmed as Samuel Eliot Morison: In **The Oxford History of the American People**, vol. 2 (Oxford, 1965, cloth; Mentor, 1972, paper), he argues that Jackson "catered to mediocrity" and was so flawed ("too personal and instinctive") that "it is doubtful whether he should be included in the ranks of the really great Presidents."

Other works have been more approving: James MacGregor Burns's

**The Vineyard of Liberty** (Knopf, 1982, cloth; Vintage, 1983, paper); Clinton Rossiter's **The American Quest, 1790–1860** (Harcourt, 1971); Daniel J. Boorstin's **The Americans: The National Experience** (Random, 1965, cloth; Vintage, 1967, paper); Glyndon G. Van Deusen's **The Jacksonian Era: 1828–1848** (Harper, 1959, cloth; 1963, paper); John William Ward's **Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age** (Oxford, 1955, cloth; 1962, paper); Marquis James's **Andrew Jackson: The Border Captain** (Bobbs-Merrill, 1933; Peter Smith, 1981) and **Andrew Jackson: Portrait of a President** (Bobbs-Merrill, 1937; Grosset, 1961).

James Parton's early study, first issued during 1859–60 in three volumes and most recently published in condensed form as **The Presidency of Andrew Jackson**, edited by Robert Remini (Harper, 1967, paper), made history itself, signaling the debut of modern American biography. Seeking popular success, Parton talked to Jackson cronies (such as Sam Houston of Texas) and retraced the general's march to glory (including the Indian campaign sites) in search of telling detail. And he found it—e.g., when one Jackson chum expressed regret that, due to a brawl with Thomas Hart Benton, the general was "not in a condition" to join in the War of 1812, Jackson replied, "The devil in hell, he is not."

Closer still to the subject was the great George Bancroft, the first scholar to attempt a comprehensive study of the nation's past. He published 10 volumes between 1834 and 1874, which are now most accessible in the abridged **History of the United States of America from the Discovery of the Continent**, edited by Russel B. Nye (Univ. of Chicago, 1966, paper).

The eclectic Bancroft—he knew Jackson, founded the United States Naval Academy as Secretary of the Navy in 1845, and served as ambassador to England and Prussia—was a “root and branch Democrat and the best writer in the U. States,” in Martin Van Buren’s judgment. Sharing the dialectical world view of the Hegelian nationalist historians in Germany, he regarded America as the highest point yet reached in man’s quest for the perfect state, which he thought should be “a determined, uncompromising democracy.”

As some saw them, however, the young nation’s achievements were mixed. Alexis de Tocqueville, who published **Democracy in America** in 1835—best read now in Richard D. Heffner’s 1956 condensation (New American Library, paper)—found his affection for Jacksonian egalitarianism tempered by concern that as the gentry declined and “a middling ability becomes common,” a “tyranny of the majority” might appear.

As Burns notes, Charles Dickens, having won fame for *The Pickwick Papers* (1836–37) and other fusillades against England’s Victorian establishment, toured America during 1842 only to be disappointed. U.S. politics were fraught with “despicable trickery at elections; underhanded tamperings with public officers; cowardly attacks upon opponents, with scurrilous newspapers for shields, and hired pens for daggers.”

Russel Nye, in **Society and Culture in America** (Harper, 1974), details the flowering in the arts during the years around Jackson’s Presidency. The painters included not only ornithologist John James Audubon and portraitist Gilbert Stuart but also the men of the Hudson River school (Asher Durand, Thomas Cole, Sam-

uel F. B. Morse, et al.) who focused on the natural world and framed a Yankee version of the Romanticism that would sweep the arts in Europe as a reaction against complexity and commercialization.

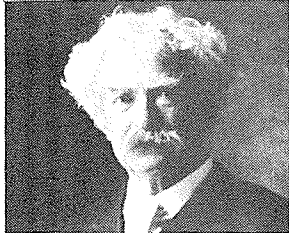
Writers, too, were voicing worry about the pursuit of wealth. Squires such as James Fenimore Cooper and plainer folk such as Nathaniel Hawthorne shared the Jacksonians’ qualms about the accretion of power in the hands of bureaucrats and businessmen. “Instead of setting man free,” argued the *Washington Globe’s* Amos Kendall, industry “only increased the number of his masters.”

None agreed more than the Transcendentalists, the influential if unworldly band of New England thinkers led by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, and others. They were wary of economic growth and disliked the new commercial middle class; Americans, they felt, must rediscover simplicity and espouse “Self-Reliance,” the title of the widely read 1841 Emerson essay.

What the Transcendentalists preached was practiced by Henry David Thoreau. On July 4, 1845—less than a month after Andrew Jackson’s death—he left his parents’ Concord, Mass., home to begin his two years of solitary homesteading on nearby Walden Pond. Thoreau was an odd duck, a loner and near-misanthrope, but his observations struck chords among at least some of the “new” Americans who were remaking the country during and after Jackson’s day. “In the long run,” he wrote in *Walden* (1854), “men hit only what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high.”

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