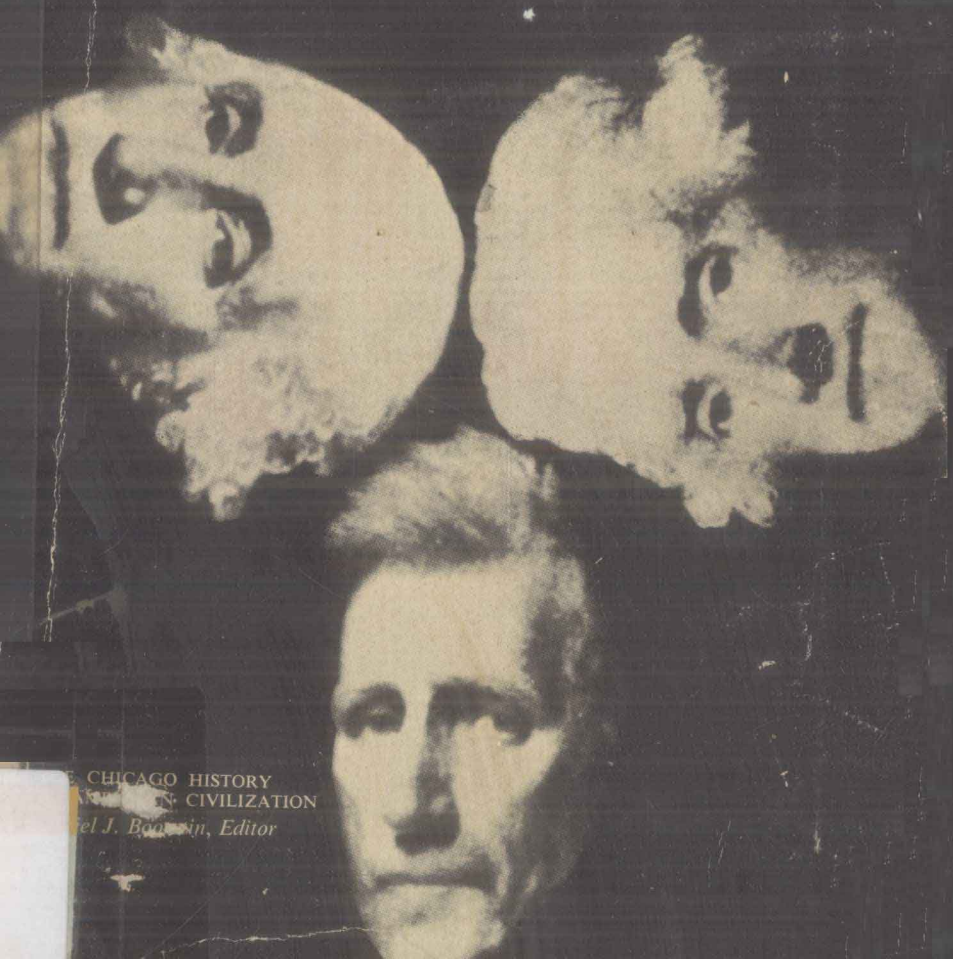


THE NATION TAKES SHAPE

1789★1837 MARCUS CUNLIFFE



CHICAGO HISTORY
CIVILIZATION

el J. Boonin, Editor

Takes Shape: 1789-1837

By Marcus Cunliffe



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
CHICAGO AND LONDON

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, CHICAGO 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London W. C. 1

© 1959 by *The University of Chicago*. All rights reserved
*Published 1959. Tenth Impression 1969. Printed in the
United States of America*



Editor's Preface

In recent years, we have become more than ever self-conscious in quest of our national character. Social scientists have used the specialized tools of sociology, psychology, and economics to describe what is characteristically American. But our historians have long been engaged in this search. In their attempts to portray the many-sidedness of life in America, they have been helping us discover ourselves.

Mr. Cunliffe, in his account of the first half-century (1789–1837) of life under the federal Constitution, sees an American character emerging as the new nation expanded across the continent. He shows us how colonials began to become Americans, how a new nation found itself. He uses his lively narrative not only to describe a people making its own way but to warn us against tempting oversimplifications. In the critical years between the adoption of the Constitution and the end of the presidency of Andrew Jackson, he clearly discerns a number of strong and conflicting tendencies—among others, the conflict between city and countryside, between the nation and the region, between conservatism and experimentalism. He

Editor's Preface

finds what is characteristically American not in the emergence of a few simple and permanent features but in a peculiar and continuing tension among contending forces.

For his use of our history to help us discover ourselves, Mr. Cunliffe is well fitted, not only from his familiarity with the documents of that age but also because he was educated in England and has lived most of his life there. He has the special advantage of one who stands at a friendly distance. With this book he puts himself in the company of the perceptive and articulate visitors from abroad who, since the early nineteenth century, have been discovering things about us which we might not have been able to discover for ourselves.

The "Chicago History of American Civilization" aims to bring to the general reader, in compact and readable form, the insights of scholars who write from different points of view. This series contains two kinds of books: a *chronological* group, which will provide a coherent narrative of American history from its beginning to the present day, and a *topical* group, which will deal with the history of varied and significant aspects of American life. Those which have already been published are listed at the end of this volume. Mr. Cunliffe's book—one of the chronological group—picks up the story where it was left by Edmund S. Morgan's *The Birth of the Republic: 1763–1789*.

DANIEL J. BOORSTIN

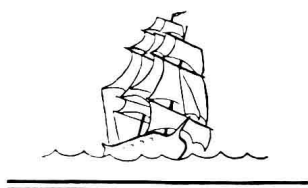
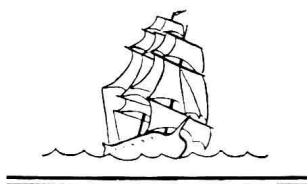


Table of Contents

I. "Half a Century of Progress" /	1
II. The Union Defined: Government, Politics, and Law /	11
III. The World Outside: Foreign Policy /	40
IV. The West: Territorial and Agricultural Expansion /	70
V. Commerce and Industry /	96
VI. Nationalism and Sectionalism /	122
VII. Conservatism and Democracy /	150
VIII. The American Character /	181
Bibliographical Note /	202
Important Dates /	211
Index /	215



I

“Half a Century of Progress”

In 1841 a distinguished American cleric, scholar, and reformer who was then in his early sixties gave a talk in Philadelphia. The man was William Ellery Channing; the theme of his address was “The Present Age”; and in the course of his lecture he cast a look back at the previous age:

In the period through which many of us have passed what thrones have been shaken! what hearts have bled! what millions have been butchered by their fellow-creatures! what hopes of philanthropy have been blighted! And, at the same time, what magnificent enterprises have been achieved! what new provinces won to science and art! what rights and liberties secured to nations! It is a privilege to have lived in an age so stirring, so pregnant, so eventful. It is an age never to be forgotten. . . . Its impression on history is indelible. Amidst its events the American Revolution, the first distinct, solemn assertion of the rights of men, and the French Revolution, that volcanic force which shook the earth to its centre, are never to pass from men’s minds.

It had been, Channing thought, an age of giants, with George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Napoleon Bonaparte pre-

The Nation Takes Shape

eminent. But there was "something greater in the age than its greatest men; it is the appearance of a new power in the world, the appearance of a multitude of men on that stage where as yet the few have acted their parts alone."

Revolution, nationalism, and democracy were, then, among the major themes of Channing's lifetime as he saw it in retrospect. Change was the universal rule. In 1789, when our story begins, the French were following their former American allies in the path of revolution. In their case the experiment got out of hand. Their king perished on the guillotine; the République became a military dictatorship; Europe was plunged into warfare that lasted with brief intermissions until 1815, when Napoleon was finally overthrown. America too was involved in the world conflict; and even when the fighting ended and Napoleon was consigned to fretful exile in the island jail of St. Helena, the unrest continued to spread, old empires to crumble. Spain lost most of her provinces in the New World; in the Old World Greece, Italy, and other areas were in turmoil.

In the United States, where that "first distinct, solemn assertion of the rights of men" had been made, the era had revealed an astonishing growth. Looking back from the vantage point of 1839, a writer in the *Democratic Review* claimed that his country had achieved half a century of "progress in all the substantial elements of national grandeur which is believed to have had scarce a parallel in the annals of mankind." The new science of statistics made good reading for Americans, for everything that could be measured had got bigger and better during the fifty years since the establishment of the Constitution in 1789. The territory of the Union, according to the *Democratic Review*, had increased threefold, "without conquest or violence." Population had quadrupled, from less than four million

“*Half a Century of Progress*”

to about sixteen million. Exports had increased in roughly the same proportion, from an annual value of under \$20 million to between \$80 and \$100 million in the closing years of the 1830's. The nation's shipping tonnage had tripled. National revenue had expanded so as to provide a comfortable surplus of “some twenty or thirty millions of dollars yearly, instead of only three or four millions, as at first.” The national debt was entirely paid off by 1835.

The *Democratic Review* listed other achievements with the same justifiable gratification. “A respectable Army and Navy, as well as the Judiciary, Legislative, Executive and other establishments of the Government, have, during the same period, been organized and respectably maintained.” Forts, navy yards, and dry docks had been constructed. In 1789 America's coastline was marked by only eight or ten lighthouses; in 1839 by two hundred and fifty. Harbors had been improved, rivers and lakes rendered more navigable, roads and public buildings constructed. From a mere seventy-five post offices, scattered about the Union, the number had soared to over twelve thousand. There were now twenty-five hundred miles of canals, though none had existed while Washington was in office; and the railroads “beginning only ten or twelve years ago, are already completed over one thousand miles” (the figure was actually almost three times as large). Schools, colleges, lyceums, and institutes were multiplying in scores.

To this glorious extent, said the patriotic journalist (paraphrasing the poet Milton), had the American commonwealth, “unterrified and free . . . spread its wings like a young eagle, opened its undazzled eye to the midday sun, and, soaring far aloft, purged and unsealed her long abused sight at the fountain itself of heavenly radiance; while the whole noise of tim-

The Nation Takes Shape

orous and flocking birds, with those also that love the twilight, flutter about, amazed at what she means, and in their envious gabble would prognosticate a year of sects and schisms."

A fine piece of spread-eagle prose. The facts, though, were incontrovertible whatever the interpretations put upon them—and whatever the less attractive sides of the story might be. America's first half-century of independence under the Union was in truth a time of extraordinary growth. When George Washington was inaugurated as first President of the United States at New York City in 1789, only eleven of the thirteen states had ratified the new constitution. It was not certain that the recalcitrant two, Rhode Island and North Carolina, would change their minds; Rhode Island, in the throes of "democracy," was particularly stubborn. Several others had ratified only after heated debates, and with the understanding that the Constitution would be amended as quickly as possible by the addition of a bill of rights. There was considerable dissension, in and out of Congress, but as yet there were no political groupings to regulate and focus conflict. There was an alarming national debt, and the individual states were likewise in financial straits. New York was a mere temporary home for the federal government; "Federal City," which was to be christened Washington, District of Columbia, did not even exist on an architect's drawing board; its very location was as yet unknown. The President was acutely conscious of the difficulties that lay ahead and of his own lack of training to deal with them.

What a contrast with the situation in 1837, when Martin Van Buren was inaugurated as America's eighth President! The Union now consisted of twenty-six states, the most recently ad-

“Half a Century of Progress”

mitted of which were Arkansas (1836) and Michigan (1837). Others, created from the territories between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains, would join them in due course. There was still considerable dissension in and out of Congress. Sectional controversy was casting a portentous shadow across the future: the day before Van Buren's inauguration, in March, President Jackson recognized the formal independence of the Republic of Texas, and later that year an Illinois mob at Alton murdered Elijah P. Lovejoy because he was an abolitionist. But there were full-fledged political parties to reconcile or at least represent the varied shades of local and sectional opinion within the vast country. The federal government was firmly ensconced in Washington, D.C., though the Capitol and other federal buildings were still under construction.

The look of the land had altered; so, profoundly, had the personnel. Such was the speed of change, such the compression of the American time scale, that the Founding Fathers were now remote, awesome, and shadowy figures. Of the previous presidents, Washington himself was long in his Mount Vernon grave; John Adams and Thomas Jefferson had died—with a symbolic symmetry rare in history and not lost upon their contemporaries—within a few hours of one another, at Quincy in Massachusetts and Monticello in Virginia, on July 4, 1826; James Madison had lingered on, in poverty and comparative obscurity, until 1836; James Monroe, likewise impoverished, had died five years earlier. Only John Quincy Adams—grim, combative “old man eloquent”—serving in the House of Representatives as a member from Massachusetts, and Andrew Jackson, who was about to retire to his western home in Tennessee, were surviving. Aaron Burr had hung on quietly until 1836, thirty-two years after the duel in which he killed Alex-

The Nation Takes Shape

ander Hamilton. John Jay had clung to life until 1829. Chief Justice John Marshall had remained a force in the land until 1835. But most of the other great men of the Revolutionary era and the early Republic—Sam Adams, Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, Patrick Henry—had gone many years before.

True, there was a continuity in government, in fact a presidential tradition. Of the pre-Jacksonian figures, all except the two Adamses—father and son—were Virginians; after Washington all, including the Adamses, had stepped into the presidency from the vice-presidency or the secretaryship of state. With Andrew Jackson another atmosphere prevailed. Yet even he came out of the historic haze of revolutionary America, though he had been little more than a pugnacious boy at the time. With Martin Van Buren of New York the case was different. Fifteen years the junior of Jackson, a veteran in politics but not in war or constitution-making, he was the first American President to be born after the Declaration of Independence. No special aura of the past, he knew, surrounded him. He was a manipulator, the Sly Fox of Kinderhook. "Unlike all who have preceded me," Van Buren confessed in his inaugural speech of 1837, uneasy in grammar and apologetic in tone, "the Revolution that gave us existence as one people was achieved at the period of my birth; and whilst I contemplate with gratified reverence that memorable event, I feel that I belong to a later age and that I may not expect my countrymen to weigh my actions with the same kind and partial hand."

His countrymen had in actuality never shown marked kindness in commenting upon the actions of his predecessors. Still, Van Buren was remarking on an obvious truth when he emphasized the distance between himself and the others. Anyone who compared Van Buren with George Washington and John

“*Half a Century of Progress*”

Adams could see that the nation had traveled a long way. Van Buren with his quick, temporizing, managerial skill, his tact, and his professional affability, belonged to another world than that of Washington, the Virginia planter and soldier-hero, with his “immutable taciturnity,” his handsome clothes, his crested coach, his retinue of white servants and black slaves, another world than that of peevish, learned, sober John Adams. The costume, demeanor, vocabulary, and acts of Washington and Adams linked them with the America of what might almost be called antiquity, just as Van Buren’s costume and gestures and turns of phrase established him as a representative of the American Democracy.

Did the change amount to a second revolution? Was the shift in America as great from 1789 to 1837 as that in contemporary Britain—from the reign of George III to that of the young princess, Victoria, who came to the throne in the same year that Van Buren moved to the White House? Or as in France, where no small gulf separated the reign of Louis XVI from that of Louis Philippe? Was it even more dramatic than these?

Much, it is clear, had been initiated, developed, defined in the America of our period. The process as it could be recorded and gauged in treaties, maps, almanacs, treasury returns, and statistical tables is described in the four chapters that follow. Here are the external lineaments of young America, the story of progress that the *Democratic Review* and many another source chronicled with such pride. It is a straightforward saga that requires no further explanation at this stage. But the three final chapters, which examine deeper aspects of American experience, do perhaps call for an introductory word.

First, their organization. In analyzing the half-century, historians have frequently chopped it into short chronological

The Nation Takes Shape

blocks, each corresponding to a presidential administration or to a political alignment. Thus, we are accustomed to read of the "Federalist Era" of Washington and Adams, 1789–1801; of "Jeffersonian America," 1801–9; of "Madison and the War Years," 1809–17; of Monroe and the "Era of Good Feeling," 1817–25; of J. Q. Adams and the "Revival of Party Spirit," 1825–29; of "Jacksonian America," 1829–37. Useful, unexceptionable divisions.

But they have certain drawbacks. They focus too exclusively upon the federal government, as if the essential story were contained in the character of individual presidents and in the outcome of congressional debates. Much of the story is exemplified within the arena of national government and politics, but not the whole story. Again, conventional interpretative frameworks assign an arbitrary quality—"Good Feeling," "The Rise of Nationality," "Jacksonianism"—to brief periods of years, as if the quality were confined to those few years, and were sudden in genesis and abrupt in transition. Such interpretations push into the background the local, state, or regional situation, except insofar as this may be reflected in Congress. They are likely to oversimplify conflicts and to portray American history as though it were almost entirely a matter of conflicts. The harmonies, the continuities, or the sheer weight of popular indifference may be equally important.

This is not to say that the half-century should be viewed always as a whole, without chronological subdivisions. One could make a good argument for splitting it in half at the year 1815, a year in some respects more crucial for the United States than it was for Europe. The period 1789–1837 is not a perfect entity, any more than other equivalent spans of time. History is a

“*Half a Century of Progress*”

continuum; we risk falsification by isolating a segment of it, as we must do for practical purposes.

But in this instance we are perhaps justified in attempting to assess the period as a whole, and to seek its broader characteristics in the three final chapters. There is nothing particularly novel in doing so. Much recent historiography has avoided, or at least qualified, the conventional chronological arrangement mentioned above. “Jacksonianism” and other movements have been subjected to detailed investigation. The results, while still indefinite, are full enough to permit a description of this vital era in fairly wide terms.

That it *was* vital, and that in many ways it is still bafflingly unknown to us, may emerge in the course of this book. After dealing with America’s surface achievements during half a century, we must come to grips with its inner history and try to answer the questions that arise when one looks again at the *Democratic Review* and at Channing’s oration. That American nationality, American democracy, the American temperament, as we recognize them today, existed in outline by 1837 should become evident in the course of this narrative. In 1789 a group of revolted colonies embarked upon their fateful experiment, under the tutelage of the man who had led them to victory by armed resistance. Forty years afterward a French observer, Alexis de Tocqueville, was able to theorize on what we may with a few reservations call a finished product, the American character. When and by what means did it finally evolve?

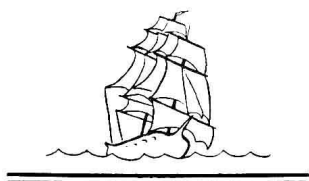
According to the *Democratic Review*, America owed its success to a rare combination of “position and principles. . . . We have started forward in a benign climate, with abundance of healthy food, with great exemptions from the waste of wars,

The Nation Takes Shape

and perfect liberty in the choice of business and place of settlement," in a land almost as large as Europe. These circumstances are examined in chapters ii-iv; they refer to America's "position."

The "principles" are the theme of chapters vi-viii. Channing felt that the "one commanding characteristic" of the age was "the tendency in all its movements to expansion, to diffusion, to universality. . . . This tendency is directly opposed to the spirit of exclusiveness, restriction, narrowness, monopoly which has prevailed in past ages." Did he mean that the new tendency was not apparent until the age of Jackson and Van Buren? Did he signal a fresh movement or one that was coeval with American independence?

To what extent American attributes were already formed by 1789, how much they developed from something else, what these attributes were, and why they did not lead to disaster, despite dire predictions to the contrary—these are questions of infinite scope and significance. How much the "democratic bent" is a peculiarly American phenomenon, and how much part of a common Western heritage; what its inherent strengths and shortcomings are—these too are vast questions germane to the subject of this book, which is, in a word, the shaping of the American nation.



II

The Union Defined: Government, Politics, and Law

In the struggle for independence against Britain the need, in Benjamin Franklin's vivid phrase, was to make thirteen clocks strike as one. Such unanimity of effort was never achieved by the thirteen colonies. Nor did they contrive to act smoothly together under the Articles of Confederation. They would not have met to revise their form of federal government, nor would the resulting Constitution have been ratified by the necessary majority of individual state conventions, if there had not been a substantial measure of agreement that some reform, some more unifying element, was needed. As a Philadelphia journalist said in 1788, in another memorable phrase, "thirteen staves and ne'er a hoop will not make a barrel."

George Washington's task as America's first chief executive was, in conjunction with Congress and the federal judiciary, to provide the hoop. His great advantage lay in his unique popularity. He more than any other person or institution *was* the