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America’s Coming of Age: Daniel Walker Howe’s What Hath God Wrought

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(Review)

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According to Daniel Walker Howe, the three decades between the end of the War of 1812 and the end of the Mexican War (1848) witnessed “the transformation of America.”1 Of what did this transformation consist? What drove it? What were its larger implications? These questions lie at the very center of historical writing about the early and middle decades of nineteenth-century America. Howe’s monumental effort goes far in answering them. In the process, he upends several well-known interpretations of the so-called Jacksonian period.

Howe knits together a complex tapestry of seemingly unrelated historical events with keen insight and wonderfully lucid prose. His intermittent snapshots of American society between 1815 and 1848 are well done, as are his depictions of American science and literature. Of greater significance, however, are the connections he establishes between evangelical religion, social reform, sectional politics, and economic development as key elements in America’s transformation. His discussion of the Second Great Awakening, with its focus on revival-oriented Protestant preachers like Charles Grandison Finney and Lyman Beecher (the father of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom’s Cabin) is extremely well done. Owing to the efforts of Finney, Beecher, and other “New Light” evangelists, the Second Great Awakening became a major force that not only ignited widespread millennial fervor in America but also spawned numerous voluntary associations calling for the reformation of society in preparation for the second coming of the Christ. Among these associations numbered temperance, missionary, Bible distribution, and pacifist groups as well as the most important of all, the abolitionist movement aimed at ridding the country of slavery. What is

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more, white middle-class women joined these movements and, through their experiences, came to the realization that their rights needed to be legally recognized. Some of Howe’s best writing centers on the rise of the women’s rights movement and its association with abolitionism. Equally interesting is his discussion of how evangelical revival methods influenced politics, resulting most notably in the “political revivalism” that characterized William Henry Harrison’s successful campaign for the presidency in 1840 (p. 573).

Howe’s chapters on Andrew Jackson, the Democratic Party, and the so-called “second party system” that emerged during the 1830s are particularly telling. Howe is no admirer of Jackson. Rather than applauding him as a national hero and “man of the people,” he portrays “Old Hickory” as a self-absorbed white supremacist with “profoundly authoritarian instincts”—definitely “not a man to be crossed” (p. 328). Particularly noteworthy are Howe’s observations on Indian removal, a brutal process that he describes as a form of ethnic cleansing (pp. 423, 810). “The fundamental impulse behind Jacksonian Democracy,” he emphasizes, “was about the extension of white supremacy across the North American continent,” adding that “Indian policy, not banking or the tariff, was the number one issue . . . during the early years of Jackson’s presidency” (pp. 356–57). Jacksonian America was many things, but it was not essentially democratic. To be sure, the franchise expanded during the period, but only for white men. Indians, free blacks, undesirable immigrants, and women were systematically excluded from citizenship, to say nothing of the terrible plight of slaves. An unswerving commitment to America’s “Manifest Destiny” and the protection of slavery accordingly became central tenets of Jacksonian Democracy (p. 524).

Contrasted with his critical view of Andrew Jackson and the Democratic Party, Howe portrays the Whig Party as a force for innovation and change in antebellum America. If Andrew Jackson and his successors Martin Van Buren and James K. Polk are the villains of his story, John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay are its heroes. Indeed, Howe dedicates What Hath God Wrought “to the memory of John Quincy Adams”! While neither Adams nor Clay succeeded in garnering the degree of public adulation and support that Jackson did, their visionary ideas about American advancement provided a blueprint for transforming rural America into a modern urban-industrial nation.

In Howe’s view, Adams and Clay were “improvers” who resisted Jackson’s expansionist policies, including the expansion of slavery. They opted instead for “public improvement” within the existing states and territories of the United States. Unlike the states’ righter Jackson, Adams and Clay viewed the federal government as the great instrument of improvement that would propel the developing nation into a millennial age of progress and prosperity. Both men supported the Second Bank of the United States, a vast national program of internal improvements, and a tariff aimed at
protection for American manufacturers. Clay called his program the “American System” and considered it “the economic basis for social improvement” (p. 570). State involvement in economic development, especially federal planning and support of a national transportation system, was critical to their vision of a new, more modern America.

The contrast Howe establishes between the Jacksonian Democratic Party and the Whig Party is stark. In a particularly revealing paragraph he notes that

Adams [and Clay] stood for a vision of coherent economic progress, of improvement both personal and national, directed by deliberate planning. Instead of pursuing improvement, Jacksonians accepted America the way it was, including the institution of slavery. They looked upon government planners as meddlesome, although they were more than willing to seek government favors on an ad hoc basis. . . . But they too had a vision of the future, and theirs centered not on economic diversification but on opening new lands to white settlement, especially if those lands could be exploited with black labor. (p. 279)

“This imperialist program,” Howe asserts, became “a primary driving force” of the antebellum period (p. 852). It reached its apex when the United States declared war on Mexico in 1846 using the questionable pretext that the Mexican Army had “shed American blood upon . . . American soil” (p. 741). Howe leaves no doubt that the expansionist president James K. Polk, intent on pushing America’s empire to the Pacific, purposely provoked the conflict. The spoils of the war yielded all of California (where gold would soon be discovered) as well as Texas, plus the vast territory of New Mexico, which later formed the states of Arizona, Nevada, and Utah as well as parts of New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming.

Near the end of What Hath God Wrought Howe states that “this book tells a story; it does not argue a thesis” (p. 849). Doubtless Howe provides an excellent narrative history of the years between 1815 and 1848, but his contention that the book “does not argue a thesis” is debatable. His depiction of Andrew Jackson and Jacksonian Democracy explicitly challenges what Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and Sean Wilentz have written about the “Age of Jackson.” Moreover, his rejection of Charles Sellers’s influential “market revolution” thesis flies in the face of much recent scholarship published about the same period. Particularly striking for readers of this jour-


3. Charles Sellers, The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1848 (New York,
nal, however, is the prominence Howe assigns to technology. At the outset of *What Hath God Wrought*, he declares that “I provide an alternative interpretation of the early nineteenth century as a time of a ‘communications revolution.’” He maintains that that revolution “would be a driving force in the history of the era” (p. 5).

According to Howe, America’s communications revolution comprised three major technological innovations introduced after the War of 1812: the advent of steam-powered rotary presses capable of mass producing all sorts of printed materials; the reorganization of the U.S. postal system to one capable of distributing these printed materials over vast distances; and, most awesome of all, the introduction of Samuel Morse’s “lightning” electric telegraph in 1844. All three speeded the flow and geographic reach of information, thus impacting everything from religious revivals and social reform movements to politics, business, and war making. Coupled with the contemporaneous advent of a “transportation revolution” consisting of improved roads, canals, steamboats, and railroads, these technologies played an essential part in shaping modern America (p. 854).

Throughout the text Howe points to the “transforming impact” of these “twin revolutions” (pp. 627, 854). Indeed, he refers to their influence at least sixty times in the text. Given the weight he assigns to the communications and transportation revolutions, one might legitimately ask whether Howe is a technological determinist. At times it appears that he is. Reference has already been made to his statements about the new technologies of the era as a “driving force” that had a “transforming impact” not only on “political, economic, and academic life,” but “literature, the arts, and social reform as well” (p. 627). He quotes approvingly of Frederick Douglass’s observation in 1848 that “thanks to steam navigation and electric wires, a revolution now cannot be confined to the place or the people where it may commence, but flashes with lightning speed from heart to heart, from land to land, until it has traversed the globe” (p. 848). Douglass made this comment with reference to the gathering momentum of the antislavery and women’s rights movements of the day. Howe contends that these transformational activities were “no accident.” “The same technological developments that permitted the formation of the new mass political parties likewise empowered other agencies for influencing public opinion,” he asserts. Indeed, he adds, “the abolitionist movement could not have flourished without the mass production of periodicals, tracts, and inexpensive books (including antislavery books for children), the circulation of petitions to Congress, the

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ability to gather national conferences, and convenient travel for its agents” (p. 646). These and other activities point to “the importance of the distribution of information to the cause of antislavery” and, of course, other reform movements like temperance and women’s rights (p. 647).

Clearly Howe does flirt with technological determinism. It’s not unusual for historians to fall into the determinist trap. Witness, for example, the deterministic role Alfred Chandler assigns to technology in The Visible Hand, his classic study of the rise of modern management. This happens because historians tend to “black box” technology rather than carefully assess its complexities, contradictions, and ultimate consequences. Like Chandler, Howe avoids grappling with things technical, accepting them at face value without carefully considering their multifaceted implications. Doing so gives his narrative a deterministic flavor, even though at times he seems to view technology more as a facilitator and/or catalyst of socioeconomic change than an autonomous driving force. One consequently leaves the book with a somewhat muddled understanding of the relationship of technology to sociopolitical change. Such a mixed message weakens the overall effect of what is otherwise a brilliant study.

To his credit, Howe devotes more attention to technological developments after the War of 1812 than do most historians of the period. His treatments of textile manufacturing, canals (notably the Erie Canal), railroads, and telegraphy, though lacking in detail, are adequate to his larger purpose. On the other hand, his discussions of papermaking and metalworking, notably printing and interchangeable manufacturing, gloss over those subjects and leave much critical information wanting. He encapsulates the advent of high-speed printing innovations in just five sentences (p. 227). Given the importance he assigns to printed materials in propelling social reform and reconfiguring politics, he should have devoted more space to the subject. Doing so would have doubtless complicated his contention about the larger benefits of industrialization, but in the end it would have strengthened his overall argument about the transformation of America (pp. 538–39, 541–42, and esp. 849).

The same goes for Howe’s discussion of the advent of interchangeable manufacturing, often referred to as the “American system of manufactures.” He points to its early development in the military firearms industry, but he fails to appreciate its larger influence on the development of the


American machine-tool industry and the subsequent spread of “armory practice” to other technically related manufacturing activities such as sewing machines and pocket watches in the antebellum period and typewriters, business machines, bicycles, and automobiles after the Civil War. Given the fact that the book closes with an extremely insightful discussion of the women’s rights movement and its connections to the larger evangelical reform impulse of the 1830s and 1840s, his discussion would have benefited by noting that the first domestic product made with armory methods was, ironically, the sewing machine. An opportunity is missed here to enrich and complicate the relationship of technological change to the emergence of social movements, especially the way sewing machines impacted women’s work and the “separate spheres” women were expected to occupy.

Howe’s emphasis on communications and transportation raises a related question about the role of manufacturing in the transformation of America. Although he does not overlook the subject, it definitely occupies a second tier in his exposition. But should it? Sophisticated tooling and machining methods preceded rather than followed the developments in mass communications and transportation that Howe stresses. Indeed, the ability to make steam engines and large rotary printing presses required metalworking methods that originated in the firearms, forge, and textile industries. In the end, Howe’s argument about the centrality of technology in the transformation of America would have been more compelling if he had developed an interactive model of modernization in which communications, transportation, and manufacturing played more equal parts.

That said, What Hath God Wrought is a wonderfully evocative book. In terms of balance, conceptualization, and breadth of vision, it supersedes Arthur Schlesinger’s classic, The Age of Jackson, as well as Charles Sellers’s Market Revolution as the best general synthesis of the period between the War of 1812 and the Mexican War. Howe deserves high praise for producing such a comprehensive yet eminently readable work. One leaves it convinced that the years between 1815 and 1848 constituted a critical transformational period in American history. It is not a short book, but it does a splendid job of integrating many disparate factors into a coherent explanation of how and why the United States emerged as a modern industrial nation at the very time it was dividing along bitter sectional lines. For anyone who wants to understand the origins of modern America, this is the book to read. It fully deserves the many accolades it has received, including last year’s Pulitzer Prize in history.