

The Fallen Founder; The Life of Aaron Burr, Nancy Isenberg

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Aaron Burr killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel. This, Burr killed Hamilton in a duel if anything, is the limit of most knowledge of Aaron Burr. A slightly more informed person might also state that Aaron Burr was the third Vice President of the United States, he was tried for treason against the United States and he coldly murdered Alexander Hamilton after Hamilton fired his own pistol into the air. *Fallen Founder*, is the title of a biography by Nancy Isenberg and the term that easily sums up the historical image of Aaron Burr in the minds of Americans and in the paragraphs of American History texts. Nancy Isenberg's biography of Aaron Burr is an attempt to redeem the fallen villain of the founding fathers by setting the historical record straight. Isenberg goes to great lengths to clear up the many, as she strongly believes, misconceptions regarding Aaron Burr. *The Fallen Founder; the life of Aaron Burr* strikes the reader as some sort of closing argument in the trial of the historical personage of Aaron Burr.

Isenberg moved very quickly through the childhood and adolescence of young Aaron Burr. The author notes quickly that the young Aaron, like his father, "grew up as orphans of means."¹ Aaron was a well educated, connected and at least moderately wealthy member of the upper echelon of colonial society. Alexander Hamilton makes his first, possible, appearance in the life of Aaron Burr at this early point. Hamilton prepared for admission to the College of New Jersey (what would later become Princeton), in Elizabethtown, at the same time as Aaron, but Isenberg reminds the reader that there is no historical evidence of meeting only that "both spent time there in 1773, as teenagers."² Isenberg then swiftly transitions into, based on the scant pages allocated to his first decade and a half, what the author considers the most important element of Aaron's

¹ Isenberg p. 7

² Isenberg p. 9

youth; his education at the proto-Princeton. Aaron, under the aegis of John Witherspoon the transformative president of the college, became an enthusiastic practitioner of the Enlightenment.³ Concurrent with exposure to the ideals of the Enlightenment young Burr began to foster close fraternal relationships with his fellow students. Burrs relationships with young men, something the author returns to throughout the work, provide both one important mechanism for Burr's political advancement toward fame and one mechanism for Burr's descent into infamy.

Isenberg expends the vast majority of her historical and literary efforts in the biography by dividing Burr's life into three stages. In addition to the three main arcs of the historical Burr developed in the work Isenberg goes to some lengths in relating Burr's revolutionary attitude toward women. The first stage focuses on Aaron's military career as a continental officer during the American Revolution and the circumstances of his first marriage. The second stage charts Burr's practice of law and his rise to challenge for a position of leadership in the fledgling United States government. The third stage deals with Burr's involvement in the new western territories of the United States and his subsequent trial for treason.

According to Isenberg young Aaron was quickly caught up in the spirit of Revolution after the shooting began at Lexington and Concord. Burr joined with the group of volunteers that marched to Massachusetts to assist in the famous siege of Boston.⁴ Burr volunteered for the expedition to invade Canada. Burr participated in the disastrous battle of Quebec and was recognized for his gallantry in the face of the

³ Isenberg p. 10

⁴ Isenberg p. 22

enemy.⁵ Isenberg suggests that Burr was different than most of his fellow officers, “Burr had no intention of groveling for a promotion.”⁶ The author appears to suggest that Burr was made from sterner stuff than his peers and that he was superior, at least morally, to most of the other officers in the Continental Army. Others might play at politics in war but Burr reacted to such things with disdain and refusal. Isenberg also focuses on the flaws of Washington as a counterpoint to the merits of Burr; the author reports on, “Washington’s questionable decision making.” and his “...indecision”⁷ The, not so subtle, suggestion offered by the author is to imply that the Revolution succeeded in spite of the many who were like Washington because of the few who were like Burr. Aaron served with the Continental Army until 1779. Burr left the army in March of 1779 the reasons hinted upon by the author deal mainly with politics and infighting for position in the army.⁸ Isenberg leaves the reader with the feeling that Burr: one did his duty, two, was an excellent officer, three refused to participate in the politics of position in the army, and four, because of his successes he inspired jealousy among his fellow officers. “His words state that other people’s jealousy was not a motive for his departure, but is certainly seemed otherwise.”⁹

The second, the chronicle of Aaron’s adult private and political life, of the three foci of the Burr biography consumes over two hundred plus pages of the four hundred and seventeen page biography. Isenberg presents Burr as a proto-feminist truly interested in women as equals to men. The author is certain Aaron is the only one of his kind among the founding fathers. The author provides a well developed image of Burr as an

⁵ Isenberg p. 29

⁶ Isenberg p. 32

⁷ Isenberg p. 34

⁸ Isenberg p. 52

⁹ Isenberg p. 53

outstanding lawyer and excellent politician; often negatively contrasting Alexander Hamilton, while grudgingly admitting his genius, as a grossly flawed rival and nemesis.

Burr possessed truly revolutionary ideas about marriage and indeed the female gender itself. “Burr distinctly pursued a marriage based on a very modern idea of friendship between the sexes.” And again, “...Burr had already begun practicing...egalitarian marital principles...”¹⁰ The author illustrates to the reader that Burr, while an exemplar of times, possessed a modern sensibility. Here is a man, the reader is led to believe, who has more in common with the Western 21st century’s attitude toward women. Burr himself wrote “But I hope yet by her, to convince the world what neither sex appear to believe-that women have souls.”¹¹ Burr, unlike some among the founders was willing to put questionable, unpopular and revolutionary ideas into active and open practice. “Burr was unique in treating his daughter as his apprentice. He conceived of her enlightenment as a professional calling, more or less.”¹²

In the arena of, specifically New York State, politics Burr gained much advantage as a foil for Hamilton. “There can be no doubt that the alliance between these two New York power brokers proved crucial to Burr’s career. Clinton and Livingston backed Burr so as to punish Hamilton.”¹³ Burr’s political friendships and alliances placed him as a political rival and as a legitimate enemy in Hamilton, at least in Hamilton’s eyes. Hamilton wrote, “...that Burr was ‘unprincipled, both as a public and private man’ and in another letter that he was an ‘embryo Caesar’”¹⁴ Isenberg considers Hamilton a reckless and unpredictable adversary, except on one point, that always sought to ensure his own

¹⁰ Isenberg p. 72

¹¹ Isenberg p. 81

¹² Isenberg p. 81

¹³ Isenberg p. 106

¹⁴ Isenberg p.120

goals. “In Hamilton’s mind, having a rival within his own party, and from his own state, was far more dangerous than a Jefferson presidency. It meant the end of his political career.”¹⁵ On the other hand Isenberg considers Burr a man of principle, forced into an unwilling rivalry with Hamilton.

Their rivalry would end in death for one, Hamilton, and political suicide for the other, Burr. Burr was told that Hamilton had expressed a “...despicable opinion...of Mr. Burr.”¹⁶ in a public conversation. An extensive process developed, all adhering to the code duello practiced by many gentlemen of the period. Burr made several efforts to force Hamilton into an apology and Hamilton made several efforts to avoid any acknowledgement of wrongdoing. Isenberg, with both fine and broad strokes, paints Hamilton as the villain of the duel who earns his just rewards.¹⁷ Burr becomes the victim again after the conclusion of the duel, instead of being treated as the aggrieved party who with manly virtue defended his honor is instead attacked and maligned by the press, public and peers. “Burr was shocked by the mounting ‘persecution.’”¹⁸

Isenberg dwells on Burr’s negative treatment by the politicians of the day. Burr was replaced as Vice President and was distrusted by the leadership in the Republican Party. Burr’s activities in the West and his interests in filibustering caused concern with Jefferson. The President, Jefferson, claimed that “Burr had aroused ‘suspicions, as every motion does of such a Catalinarian [sic] character’”¹⁹ Rumors and lies dominated the information out of the West and, seemingly, every negative tale involving Burr was

¹⁵ Isenberg p. 213

¹⁶ Isenberg p. 257

¹⁷ Isenberg p. 263

¹⁸ Isenberg p. 267

¹⁹ Isenberg p. 307

believed, regardless of the quality of information or of the person delivering the information. Burr was subsequently tried for treason against the United States.

Isenberg notes that the charges against Burr were unsubstantiated based on hearsay and failed to meet the Constitutional requirement for a treason case. According to Chief Justice Marshall “the Constitution offered a precise definition: Treason had to consist of levying war or giving aid and comfort to the enemy; this high crime required over acts testified to in open court by two witnesses. For probable cause that Burr had levied war, troops had to have been assembled.”²⁰ There was absolutely no credible evidence that Burr hoped to raise a rebellion against the United States Government. Justice Marshall was relentless in his chastisement of the prosecution during Burr’s trial.²¹ Politics seemed to dominate the affairs of the founders. The law, even the Constitution, was twisted to fit the political requirements of the moment.

Isenberg’s conclusion to the biography outlines a slow painfully slide into obscurity for Burr. Throughout the work the author attempts to illustrate and add depth to the historical Burr. Isenberg suggests that the founders were a disparate group of flawed men, for all their greatness and heroic qualities. Burr should, according to the author, be accorded a higher position among the founders. Politics, in relation to Burr, can be seen to be both the instrument of Burr’s climb to influence in New York State and to the Vice Presidency and politics can be understood as the tool that laid Burr low in the eyes of his peers and in the pages of American History.

Fallen Founder; the life of Aaron Burr is a very useful tool for a classroom history teacher. The counter point offered by Isenberg provides an invaluable insight into

²⁰ Isenberg 336

²¹ Isenberg 336

the actions of founders and their political adversaries. By introducing an informed historical point of view on Burr students can be helped to better understand the actions and intentions of founders that inhabit the heroic position in the historical narrative of this nation. Perhaps the villains of history can be shown to be less one sided and the heroes of history can also be shown to less one sided. Perhaps there is more to the story of Aaron Burr beyond his murder of Alexander Hamilton. Perhaps there is more to the story of the election of 1800.

Bibliography:

Isenberg, Nancy. *Fallen Founder; The Life of Aaron Burr*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2007

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