



American Heroes: Profiles of Men and Women Who Shaped Early America

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(Norton Spring Catalog 2009)

From the best-selling author of 'Benjamin Franklin' come a remarkable work that will help redefine our notion of American heroism. As Edmund S. Morgan, the recent winner of the Pulitzer Prize, explains, Americans have long been obsessed with their heroes, but the men and women dramatically portrayed here are not celebrated for the typical banal reasons contained in Founding Fathers hagiography. He reexamines the lives of bona-fide American heroes such as George Washington or Benjamin Franklin, and reevaluates the legacies of religious figures such as Anne Hutchinson, whose trial for heresy and banishment riveted the colonies in 1637. . . .

American Heroes: Profiles of Men and Women Who Shaped Early America Details

Date : Published 2009 by Norton

ISBN : 9780393327

Author : Edmund S. Morgan

Format : hardcover 304 pages

Genre : History, North American Hi..., American History, Nonfiction, Writing, Essays, Biography,
Military History, American Revolution

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From Reader Review American Heroes: Profiles of Men and Women Who Shaped Early America for online ebook

Craig says

One of historian Edmund S. Morgan's final books, structured as a series of essays he wrote from the 1940s to the early 21st century. Collectively, they showed why Morgan was such a preeminent expert on the Colonial and Revolutionary War time periods. This book spans 200 years or so of American history so it may not go into the depth you'd find in more focused history books, but it does contain some great observations and analysis of a crucial era.

Amy says

Based on the cover (I know, I know, you can't judge a book by it's cover), but still, based on its cover, I assumed this would look at our founding fathers -- Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, etc.

While the author does include Washington and Benjamin Franklin, he also includes many earlier influences - people or otherwise!

A fascinating piece of literature relating to our country's history.

Michelle says

Bleh. Not what I was expecting, even from such an established member of the Ivory Tower Club of History Writing. :-) Some pieces mildly interesting, some tedious, many just odd. A somewhat interesting piece on the Salem Witch Trials was marred, for example, by a very odd reference to the Puritans of the time being superior to us because at least they later admitted the trials were a travesty, and no one has yet apologized for the Sacco and Vanzetti trial. HUH? No links drawn, I guess he takes it on faith that his readers will all nod and say "Oh, yes." Bizarre.

Mike Prochot says

What an odd little book.

The cover is misleading.

A selection of essays about or in regard to various figures in the history of the American continent - or maybe the "New World" is a better description. There seems to have been an attempt to link this collection together by an oblique definition or ancient translation of the word "Hero". While a couple may be classified as heroes and a few certainly American, and agreeably some of the characters discussed had at least a measure of "effect" on the future of the New World, "hero" is not a description or classification I would consider lumping them under - "American" even less so.

I read all the essays, I suffered through some left field analysis and sometimes hard to follow recognition of principled stands taken by various early pilgrim/explorers (including "participants" in the Salem witch trials) and aside from the writings on Washington and Franklin, I have to say that - to quote a synopsis of the book - I find that I most assuredly do prefer my heroes to be: "... celebrated for the typical banal reasons contained in Founding Fathers hagiography."

If I have to choose between banal and painfully oblique, I am going for banal.

I don't think this book celebrated much of anything....I have to stop these impulse purchases.

Mark says

The title, btw, is misleading - but probably more retail-friendly than "A Bunch of Old Essays on Early American History My Agent Suckered My Publisher Into Reprinting". Snarky comment on the title aside, there's some interesting stuff in here - some real insight into the Puritan mind & society, along with an extensive essay on Ben Franklin that makes me want to read Morgan's biography of the man.

OTOH, there are other essays that haven't aged well or were never printed in the first place... and the ode to a historian that closes the book seems radically out of place.

Julie says

The title of this book is very deceiving. You open it believing that Morgan started this book with the intent to construct a book centering around the contributions certain people have made that then have caused them to be "heroes" in the founding of our country. Instead, he did not write the book using that premise but instead went back and picked through previously published (and unpublished) essays on varying subjects that could all be contorted to fit the definition of "hero". Many of them were, in fact, heroes, but some of the essays did not even focus in on one "hero" for its entirety. Most of the essays seemed to me to go along the lines of "here is a point which had led to arguments in academic circles for a long time and here is my opinion on the matter" and while that's not necessarily bad, those who are picking up this book probably are not looking for arguments over small historical tidbits but larger facts and biographies. This book is not bad, not in the slightest, but it is misnamed and a poor choice for a school summer reading for the facts are not all listed out and some previous knowledge is required to fully appreciate what Morgan constructs.

But seriously, doesn't a book like this require a bibliography?

Scott Pierce says

Morgan explains how for both the Spanish and English settlers in the New World, there was a misunderstanding as they assumed that the natives would want to live a life like the settlers, as the settlers viewed their life as "better," but the culture of the natives may not have been hospitable to changing their way of life.

Morgan lauds Washington not for what he did, but for what he didn't do - he didn't veto bills just because he

didn't like them, and he didn't campaign for other candidates.

Morgan also honors Franklin for not being so stuck on his own view that he was unable to broker so many compromises even if it meant he didn't get his way.

Jonathan says

This is a book of essays by Edmund Morgan, whose work I have read and enjoyed in the past. The essays in this volume that I enjoyed the most were "Dangerous Books," which discusses the donation, in 1714, of some 500 books to Yale University by such figures as Isaac Newton and Edmund Halley, and the revolution in thought that these books caused among the educated youth of New England; "The Contentious Quaker: William Penn," which made me realize how little I knew of the Quakers and the contributions to thought made by William Penn; and the essays in Part III, "Revolutionary Leaders," which shed light on the origins of the U.S. constitution.

Brian Andersen says

I thought this was a good collection of revealing essays on Early American history by Edmund S. Morgan. I think too much time was spent on the Puritans though and could have been devoted to other individuals. I was especially impressed by the section on the Korbmacher Witch Hunt mob incident that occurred in 1787 in Philadelphia while 55 enlightened men were in Independence Hall debating the US Constitution. It was well covered in the local press which was at least bold enough to be on the side of the woman. She survived one beating by the people of the City of Brotherly Love but died from her wounds eight days after being attacked a 2nd time for "sorcery", which they thought caused events such as the current heat wave and the death of a local child. The juxtaposition of incidents like this remind us that much history has been sanitized for our protection.

Noah Goats says

This is one of those books where they came up with a title that they thought would sell books, and didn't care that it doesn't really describe the book. This is not a collection of profiles about "American Heroes"; it is a collection of essays on American history (some of these are profiles, some are not). I really enjoyed some of these essays, the one on the Salem Witch trials and the profile of Franklin, for example, but others were dull.

Steven Peterson says

This is an odd little book by the well-known--and respected--historian, Edmund Morgan. This is a collection of brief essays, focusing on what the author refers to as "men and women who shaped early America."

The essays really aren't tied together, but many of these are still interesting reflections that trigger the reader's reflections about subjects covered. Subjects considered run from Christopher Columbus (and his imposition of slavery on native Americans), to the Puritans of New England (e.g., essays focus on such

various topics as "The Puritans and Sex," "John Winthrop's Vision" [of the City on the Hill:], Salem witch trials), to the Quakers (and William Penn), to revolutionary leaders (an interesting comparison of Washington versus Franklin, rather flattering to both).

A couple important essays in the section on Revolutionary leaders stand out for me. One chapter focuses on a key issue in the understanding of representative democracy--the nature of representation. Morgan makes the intriguing point that representation is a "fiction," (page 225) "by which the larger fiction of popular sovereignty has been itself sustained." A fiction. . . . And with that, what of democracy as a form? That is why the chapter immediately following makes so much sense--the role of the Antifederalists, those who opposed the Constitution because of their fears that it would undermine some of the democratic impulses of the time.

Like many collections, sometimes this does not hold together too well. There are some idiosyncratic judgments by Morgan. Still, if you want to read a book that will make one reflect, this does its job well.

Stephanie P. says

The book consists of a collection of essays, many previously published, but a few new ones as well. Morgan's goal in putting together this book was to focus on more ordinary people, so while there are chapters discussing Ben Franklin and George Washington, the majority of chapters focus on people who are probably less well known to the population at large.

If you enjoy reading about the early history of our country then you will probably enjoy this book. It is relatively short and a fairly easy and quick read. If you want to read an interesting history book without feeling like you are giving up the next month or two of your life, then this book is for you.

Mike says

As many other reviewers have written, the title and cover of this book do not accurately depict what this collection of essays are about. The essays generally cover the colonial period in New England, with a few sprinkled in about Washington and Franklin late in the book. The idea that the central thesis of the essays is about Heroes is also not true as the essays generally handle a topic or specific aspect of an historical person but do not focus on whether or not those action are heroic.

I enjoyed a few of the essays, but there were too many that were too narrowly focused for my tastes. I think Morgan writes well, but most of these essays were obviously written for other scholars and for academia and not for the general public (even those of us who are well-read in the time period).

Brian Koser says

This collection of essays on the Puritans, Quakers, and Founding Fathers has some interesting observations:

- "Libraries will remain the nurseries of heresy and independence of thought. They will, in fact, preserve that

freedom which is a far more important part of our life than any ideology or orthodoxy." From an essay written in 1959. I've been wondering about the Internet's effect on this idea; it's easier to get access to "heresy", but it's also easier to surround oneself only with those who agree with you.

- Our representative government is a fiction: it is impossible for a representative to exactly represent the beliefs and desires of thousands of others. Their job rather is to work for the good of the country instead of just their constituency.

- Washington refused to endorse political candidates to avoid, in his words, "interfering directly or indirectly with...the choice of their representatives". In the same spirit, he also refused to veto many bills that he personally disagreed with.

Amy says

I started reading this book and then got a feeling of deja vu. As I looked through the book and back at the Table of Contents, I realized that I had already read this book!

Excellent!

One of my favorite quotes in this book is when the author states that "there is no more insidious instrument of change than a library in which professors or students or people in general are allowed to read the books" when talking about books and libraries in Chapter 2.

People (in general) always assume that libraries are slow to change.
