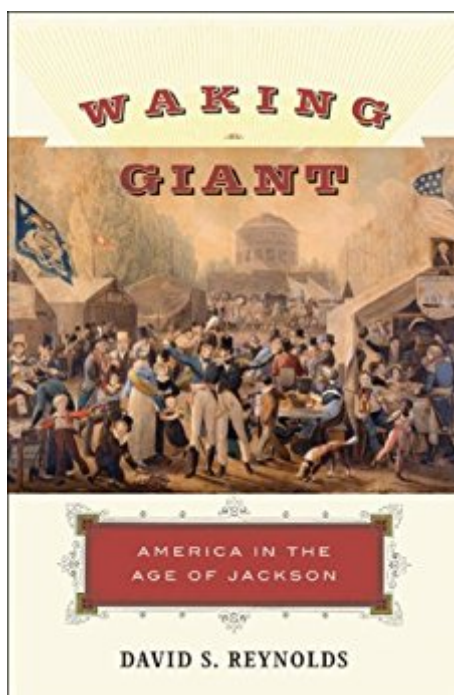


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Waking Giant: America In The Age Of Jackson (American History)



Synopsis

Waking Giant is a brilliant, definitive history of America's vibrant and tumultuous rise during the Jacksonian era from David S. Reynolds, the Bancroft Prize-winning author of Walt Whitman's America. Casting fresh light on Andrew Jackson, who redefined the presidency, along with John Quincy Adams and James K. Polk, who expanded the nation's territory and strengthened its position internationally, Reynolds captures the turbulence of a democracy caught in the throes of the controversy over slavery, the rise of capitalism, and the birth of urbanization.

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Customer Reviews

I had thought David Walker Howe's "What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848" (2007) was the final word on this period of U.S. history. But having read Reynolds' excellent study of Whitman, I decided to give "Waking Giant" a chance. I was not disappointed. Walker's work is more comprehensive than Reynolds' - going deeper into the political and especially economic changes of the period. Reynolds' strong suit is social and cultural history. After reading

chapter 4, "God's Many Kingdoms" - a fascinating journey through the religious upheavals of the time - I thought, this is the author's most solid contribution; this chapter alone makes the book. Then I read the following two chapters on reform movements, literature, the arts, fads, inventions - overall, a notably rich cultural survey. This is not to suggest that "Waking Giant" is merely a cultural history of the Jackson era. Over half the book is devoted to politics, and here the treatment is more than just competent. I gained several new insights into the phenomenon that was Jackson. Calhoun and Webster become a little more comprehensible. If Walker leans toward the Whigs, Reynolds is more of a Jackson man, presenting a sympathetic appraisal of a historically controversial figure. I offer one criticism of the book: Reynolds' writing style - though fluid, lively, rich, engaging - could here and there benefit by some minor editing.

David Reynolds, a preeminent historian, brings together many of his writings (Whitman, John Brown, George Lippard) in this survey of 19th century America in the Age of Andrew Jackson. Calling the period one of the most culturally rich in our history, while his focus is on presidential politics (Jackson, Van Buren, Harrison, Tyler, Polk), Reynolds also describes the age's pervasive Christian religiosity, its penetrating literature (Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne, Whitman) and its exquisite artistry (Allston, Cole), its eccentricities, foibles and its failed struggle between the abolitionists (Garrison and others), and the Southern leaders (Calhoun and others) to confront and abolish slavery in America. Reynolds is a fine writer, never pushy, never over stressing his points, who cameos many of the major figures between 1815 and 1848. Survey books, like Reynolds', are launching pads for further reading and study and this book is surely that. He gives the reader an extensive, up-to-date bibliography of other more detailed histories.

If you are not familiar with the period 1815 to 1848, this is a good general history of the era. Some topics are covered in just a couple of paragraphs, in which cases a bit more detail would have been helpful. I think the author tried very hard to give a balanced view of controversial topics such as Indian removal and slavery, which I think adds to the quality of the book. As a general history this is very informative and a good introduction. I am just starting with the 1815-48 era and am glad I read this book as it has provided topics that I can seek out for greater detail in other books.

I bought this book a few years ago when I was in a Jacksonian America phase of reading. It is hard not to contrast this book with "What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848" by Daniel Walker Howe. When I began reading Waking Giant, I found myself making negative

comparisons to this book compared to What Hath God Wrought. Thankfully, I pressed on. In terms of information, Waking Giant is not as complete or exhaustive a history. However, there are some stories that Reynolds tells better than Howe. The real benefit for me in reading Waking Giant was to get contrasting perspectives on various aspects of the characters and events that made this the most dynamic period in American history. Reynolds is far more sympathetic to Jackson, Van Buren, Polk and the democratic movement. Howe is more inclined to John Quincy Adams and holds Jackson in lower regard. (My own sympathies are in line with Daniel Howe - Jackson has more to condemn than to applaud.) In one area of their comparative histories that I am well-informed about, that of the rise of Mormonism, there is no comparison who is the superior scholar. Howe has a far better grasp of the beginnings of my religion than Reynolds. I assume this is likely true of his history of many of the spiritual movements that stirred America around the time of the Second Great Awakening. As has been pointed out by others, Reynolds has a special interest in the literature and art of this period. His chapter on this aspect of American History is fine. I am personally less interested in this, so it is not a big plus for me. I strive for balance when forming my opinions. This book was a wonderful addition to the insights I had gathered from other sources.

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Purchased on the Marketplace. Easy to make the selection and the transaction. Book arrived in great shape. Price was good. The book was shipped right away. A great experience. I am really enjoying the book. It covers the early 1800s in a manner that gives me much more insight to the developing nation than I had before. Interesting personal and cultural information brings the insights to light. Highly recommended to the history buff or anyone interested in how Americans came to be such unique people in this world.

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