

subjects about which far less was known. But that is beside the point. Clearly Najder has written the finest work of which he is capable.

*Joseph Conrad: A Chronicle* will provide much useful information for future biographers, particularly with respect to Conrad's Polish connection, an aspect of the author's life about which data have been scarce. For the rest, however, Najder presents us with a cipher, swaddled in facts, who fails to achieve an independent existence.

— Reviewed by Larry Williams

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## The Edmund Burke of Massachusetts

**Works of Fisher Ames**, as published by Seth Ames, edited and enlarged by W.B. Allen, *Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1983. Vol. I: liii + 842 pp. Vol. II: xxxvii + 777 pp. \$30.00/set (paper \$15.00/set).*

FISHER AMES WAS a major second-ranking figure of his day, one of those of every age who, possessing solid talents and distinctive gifts, affect the course of government and public life without achieving real greatness. He was celebrated during his public career as an essayist of learning and as an eloquent speaker. Both Daniel Webster and Abraham Lincoln memorized his greatest declamation — a speech on the House floor in 1796 that assailed an effort to use the House's discretionary power of appropriation, in this case for the implementation of the Jay Treaty with Britain, as a means not specifically authorized in the Constitution to approve or disapprove a treaty. Yet after the mid-nineteenth century, Ames had been pretty well forgotten, and he is not much remembered now.

It is easy to see why. As an essayist, he was no Madison, as a thinker no Burke (although Boston's *Columbian Centinel* in 1814 called Burke "the Fisher Ames of Europe"). His style often ran to romantic excess. Even his compact essays were *pièces d'occasion* and have no particularly enduring value. His pen could be lively and his wit sharp, and he delivered himself of views with a kind of winning sulphurousness and force. But where his reputation must stand or fall is as a conservative political thinker and commentator. And in this respect he ranks high on lists of men of like efforts in the early republic. Among his fellow Federalists, he was not so great a strategist as Hamilton, never so penetrating a thinker as John or John Quincy Adams. Yet, except for the Adamses, until his early death at age fifty in 1808, Ames was the ablest thinking conservative in New England, surely the ablest among the Massachusetts Federalists.

Although, as is so often the case, this conservative often set forth his views in radical hyperbole, he was a moderate who condemned the secessionist impulses of some of his New England party brethren and who supported cautious party-building efforts in behalf of partisan principles. He was a staunch champion of property, writing that "the essence, and almost the quintessence, of a good government, is to protect property and its rights." Not surprisingly, therefore, he viewed the American Revolution not in any way as a social revolution, but as "a resistance to foreign government." He also assailed as "self-conceited blunderers" those statesmen who, like Thomas Jefferson, acted "without regard to circumstances, but solely according to speculative principles."

His opposition to greater democracy — to the greater participation of the people (that is to say, white males) in public life — was typical of most contemporary Federalists. Democracy, he thought, "pollutes the morals of the citizens before it swallows up their liberties." Such views did not endear Federalism to the public,

and they did not long endure after 1815. Likewise with Ames's concern about the nation's size and the inability of a continental state to maintain a republican form of government: It was a posture invalidated by experience, long after James Madison, in his great and revolutionary *Federalist No. 10*, had provided its theoretical refutation, even though Ames's argument was momentarily useful in arousing partisan opposition to the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. We should probably therefore study much of Ames's thought as we would any period piece, not for its guidance but for its interest and historical illumination. His ideas were well and strongly put. They were not fresh.

Other aspects of his thinking, less attractive, reveal the dark strains of early republican conservatism. Chief among these was his nativism, a legacy of political Federalism to a long, ugly, and continuing element of American public thought. The security of a republic, Ames once wrote, "plainly requires the power of expelling or refusing admission to aliens, and the rebel Irish" who believed that "a mob should govern us." Although linked to Ames's widely shared conviction that republican government could survive only in a small community of homogeneous population, such attitudes expressed a degree of ethnocentrism that helped seal the defeat of political Federalism while exposing its blacker side.

The appearance of this new and enlarged edition of Ames's works should be the occasion of satisfaction and praise. It puts at our disposal a body of writings long out of print and never so handsomely produced. Unfortunately, this edition falls far short of what could have and should have been endeavored and calls into question the value of the efforts undertaken by the Liberty Press to make available in fresh editions many of the major works of the Western conservative and libertarian tradition.

The standard collection of Ames's works has been the two-volume edition brought out in 1854 by Seth Ames. Though reprinted in at least one instance in the

past fifteen years (I know of the Da Capo Press reprint of 1969), the nineteenth-century edition has long been unavailable. To this older and incomplete group of letters, speeches, and essays, W.B. Allen has added many new items, including eighty-five letters and twenty-three essays, making this edition without question the most complete gathering of Ames's writings that we have. I wish that I could report as favorably on its scholarly utility, its organization, its internal consistency, and its dependability.

In most respects, aside from greater comprehensiveness, this edition represents no significant scholarly gain over its 1854 forerunner. Despite a list in the preface of the repositories in which the manuscript texts are to be found, the location of each item has not been indicated — thus effectively barring the verification of the accuracy of each text and making difficult any research associated with its provenance or context. Source notes would have been particularly useful in the case of Ames's congressional speeches, whose texts vary widely and whose reportage grew increasingly unreliable from the mid-1790s on. Not even the name and the date of the newspapers in which Ames's essays originally appeared are consistently indicated. As for the texts of Ames's letters, some of the originals are known to have been lost — but we are not told which ones can no longer be found. Some elisions in the original edition have been restored, but others — without apparent consistency and, judged by a sampling that I took, not always justified — have been created; and in any case it is now impossible without *both* editions in hand to determine which elisions originate with Seth Ames and which with Professor Allen.

In the original edition, Ames's letters and essays were grouped separately and arranged within each group chronologically. Here his letters and speeches are intermixed and the essays are gathered separately. Furthermore, the essays are grouped by subject, not by date of appearance. The advantage of this approach

lies in the proximity into which it brings Ames's views on separate issues. Yet it sacrifices something far more important: a sense of developments and changes in the author's thought. It is difficult to understand why all of Ames's works — letters, speeches, and essays — were not arranged, as in most other modern letter-press editions governed by now standard editorial practices, in strict chronological order. This approach would then have made advantageous another feature lacking here: a comprehensive index.

In addition, for reasons not at all clear, Allen has omitted Ames's admittedly idiosyncratic and not always useful headnotes to the 1854 edition but has neither appended new ones, struck out his predecessor's footnotes, nor added much in the way of explanatory or identifying notes of his own. As far as I can tell, the transcriptions from those original texts that do exist are accurate. However, if I may be forgiven an author's jealous regard for his own scholarly progeny, I must report that both my name and the title of a work of mine are incorrectly cited in a brief prefatory note. Such errors do not inspire confidence in the dependability of the rest.

If the purpose of this edition was simply to make available to a wider reading public the works of a thoughtful, if cranky, conservative thinker of the early nation, it serves its purpose well. If the aim of the Liberty Press was instead to offer a fresh scholarly edition of Ames's works, that aim has not been achieved. That failure is greatly to be regretted, both on the grounds of scholarly standards and of the frustrations of others' hopes. A modern edition of Ames's works has long been desired. It looks now as if that new edition will be delayed even further by the appearance of this one. I can only urge, as a result, that the Liberty Press, which has provided such great benefits to learning in recent years, alter its policies and use its resources more providently and wisely.