

Daniel Webster. By Irving H. Bartlett. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978. Pp. xii, 333. Illustrations, notes, index. \$12.95.)

Few politicians or statesmen have achieved the fame of a Daniel Webster. At a time when the United States struggled to establish a sense of identity, the "Godlike Daniel" emerged as a potent national symbol, famed for his oratorical prowess and his stirring debates in Congress. Symbol he has remained in most accounts of his life and that of the infant republic. In this graceful and stylistic biography, Irving H. Bartlett tries to place the symbolism in perspective and help readers to see "the man behind the image, who succeeded, failed, laughed, loved and sometimes found himself ensnared in webs of his own making but beyond his understanding" (p. 11). In large measure, Bartlett's venture proves successful; he has brought the reader to a new understanding of this powerful and influential public figure.

In assessing Webster's public career and private life, Bartlett wants to answer a fundamental and disturbing question: how could a politician so lionized in his own day fail to win the presidency, a prize Webster coveted intensely? Bartlett sees the answer in the nature of the image itself. Webster's status as a powerful, eloquent, and dynamic statesman was often at odds with the democratic tendencies of the era, where political fortunes came to rest on the need for humble origins. Webster may have learned to wear the coonskin cap, but it never fit comfortably. As the supreme orator and senatorial gladiator, Webster was too closely tied to the established structures of wealth and political bureaucracy. His fame became a two-edged sword, able to humble less talented adversaries but always subject to misrepresentation as aristocratic ambition in democratic disguise. Webster's Federalist heritage, his ties to the Second Bank of the United States, and his chronic financial problems made him an easy target for political enemies.

Persuasive though Bartlett's analysis is, it does not penetrate very far beneath the surface of the image. The author skillfully unravels the layers of fiscal indebtedness that plagued Webster throughout life yet rarely pauses to speculate about the origin or significance of this spendthrift behavior. Similarly, Bartlett charts Webster's political progress but not his motives nor the compelling irony of the independent, stentorian statesman who placed himself in such debt to his friends and supporters. Such concerns would have carried Bartlett away from political narrative, at which he excels, into the

realm of intellectual and psychosocial history, where he seems uncomfortable. Bartlett's biography is clearly the best one-volume life of Webster. It is stimulating, well-written, and carefully researched. That it raises more questions than it answers is in part a measure of the book's success.

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Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream. By G. S. Boritt. (Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1978. Pp. xxiv, 420. Historiographical essay, notes, bibliography, index. \$15.00.)

This is a book with one over-riding thesis. Economics, G. S. Boritt insists, was central to the beliefs and faith of Abraham Lincoln, or, put another way, "the *right to rise* [which Boritt views solely in economic terms] . . . was Lincoln's central ideal" (p. 281). Lincoln's central ideal was also that of America. The right to rise, the right to get ahead in life—in short, the American Dream—was the central ideal of the Republic, and it was Lincoln who made it so. No one, Boritt suggests, "placed the Dream so clearly on the highest pedestal as the *central idea* of the Republic" (p. 160); more than anyone else Lincoln "helped institutionalize the American Dream—made it perhaps the most *central idea* of the nation" (p. 161). It was Lincoln "who uplifted America's coarse materialism and gave it a spiritual dimension" (p. 160). It was Lincoln who extended the Jeffersonian meaning of equality to encompass equality of opportunity, which Boritt feels may be "one of the most important metamorphoses of an idea in American history" (p. 158). In fact, Lincoln himself was not fully aware of his "creative approach" to Jefferson's dictum. To support these contentions Boritt has painstakingly combed the Lincoln literature, amassing evidence from Lincoln's own words and from the words of those who knew him and remembered him. The result is a truly formidable array of documentation, demonstrating the central importance of economics to Lincoln's outlook from his early career as an Illinois legislator to the end of his presidential years.

While the course of Boritt's reasoning is not always clear, it is apparent that he has both his subject and his sources well in hand. There are pitfalls, however, in Boritt's approach, and he does not always avoid them. To prove his case he frequently employs a type of selective quotation, piling up citations without regard for their contexts. His zeal at times leads him into