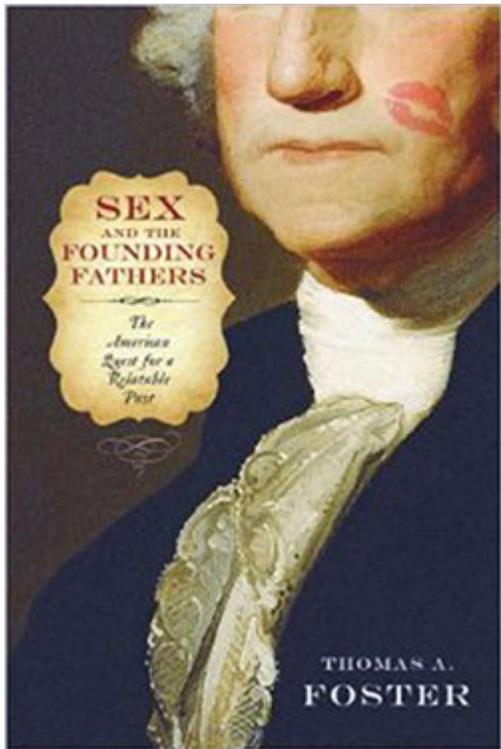


Turning Sexual Vice into Virtue



Thomas A. Foster, *Sex and the Founding Fathers: The American Quest for a Relatable Past*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014. 232 pp., \$28.50.

Biographies are among the most popular forms of history because reading about individual lives humanizes historical moments. Like a new friend, we learn about the secrets, foibles, and successes of individuals and rediscover aspects of ourselves in the process. Historians have long suggested that objectivity and perspective are especially difficult to achieve (if ever possible) in biographical endeavors, because writers become attached to their subjects. In addition, the present has a way of creeping into our reading and writing, as our current code of morals, anxieties, and desires influence the types of questions we ask and the answers we seek. These problems are especially pronounced when dealing with the Founding Fathers, according to Thomas A. Foster, associate professor of history at DePaul University, who investigates the nature of biography and America's relationship to sex in his book, *Sex and the Founding Fathers*. Foster's work does not attempt to reconstruct the sexual lives of the Founding Fathers, but rather analyzes the biographies and historical memories related to six of the founders from the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries. He finds that Americans' contemporary sexual and gender mores consistently contribute to our narratives about the sex lives of the founders—often more than the historical record allows—and are important sources of our national and civic identities.

Sex and the Founding Fathers is not Foster's first work positing the importance

of sexuality and masculinity in understanding the United State's national identity. In tackling the historical remembrance of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and Gouverneur Morris, Foster brings his expertise to bear on the way Americans have interpreted the lives of the men whose life and history have greatly affected Americans' imaginations. Foster is careful not to offer his own analysis of each founder's sexual past, and gives only short synopses of the historical documentation available to the biographers who crafted their narratives over three centuries. Nevertheless, some moments cry out for his own interpretation: How likely was it that Benjamin Franklin moved beyond flirtation in Paris given the gender and sexual mores of the time? With his expertise in the field, it was a loss not to have Foster's full perspective and even more context for the sexual histories he provided. But this is not the task Foster set for himself in this book. He sought to reveal our perceptions of the founders, not scour the historical record for evidence of sexual "truths" that does not exist.

As Foster writes, "we are stuck with the Founding Fathers," and over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in particular, their romantic liaisons, adulterous affairs, and marriages have provided a way for new generations to assess the early nation (168). That is not to say that nineteenth-century Americans had no interest in the founders' sexual lives. Indeed, they wrote biographies of the founders that touched on their sexual and personal lives. However, the general trend was to ignore indelicate information—such as Alexander Hamilton's affair with Maria Reynolds, or Thomas Jefferson's sexual relationship with Sally Hemings. Perhaps most compellingly, Foster shows that Gouverneur Morris' frank and exuberant writings about his own sex life, which offer the clearest picture of any founder's sexual encounters, were "whitewashed" (144) by his family and historians until the twentieth century. The turning point in discussions of the founders' sexual lives occurred in the early twentieth century, when many Americans began to more openly embrace sex as a positive force in their lives. At this point, biographers began to consider Benjamin Franklin's ribald humor and behavior in France, George Washington's romantic past before his marriage, and Thomas Jefferson's desirability, among other topics. By the twenty-first century, according to Foster, the founders became emblematic of a masculinity that valued successful marriages, as in the case of John Adams, while also being symbols of virility and a passionate sex life. In this way, the founders' sexual vices became virtues in the hands of biographers. Understandings of Thomas Jefferson, for example, transformed from a "chaste widower" (46) in nineteenth-century biographies to a modern "multicultural hero" (75) in the twenty-first century as Americans increasingly accepted evidence of his affair with Sally Hemings and mostly ignored any possibility of sexual coercion on his part.

Each generation has contextualized the sexuality of the founders differently but ultimately came to value them as role models for their masculinity and sexuality. The desire to laud the founders has resulted in faulty histories more useful in nation building than innate historical worth. Foster writes that our quest for virile and faultless founders reveals the importance of sexuality

and gender in our national narratives and identities. Why, for example, Foster asks, has the marriage of John and Abigail Adams been idealized and covered in a "romantic gauze" (90) given John Adams' prioritizing of politics and his career goals over his family? The couple's long-term separations suggest their marriage was not the consistently romantic union it is characterized as today. The way we dismiss, embrace, and analyze information about each man suggests how caught up we are in the mythmaking of the founders—always finding ways of celebrating them to stand as a contrast to present day sexual and moral dilemmas, such as the 1872 Beecher-Tilton affair or the 1998 Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. Even the capitalization of "Founding Fathers" suggests our deification of their historical contributions and personal lives, and our difficulty in treating the founders as actual men. "[A]nd so we rewrite and respin and remember them in various ways to present them in a positive light," Foster concludes (168).

Foster's book would have benefited from further in-depth analysis of the gendered constructs existing in the historical refashioning of the founders' past. Expanding his discussion of the changing ideals of masculinity and male bodies would have added a fuller picture of the motives of writers, particularly during the re-imaginings of the 1950s and twenty-first century, though Foster briefly details these issues with Gouverneur Morris and George Washington. Alexander Hamilton's physicality and recent makeover is especially ripe for this line of inquiry. Some attention to the gender and sexual privileging of the founders is also necessary. Certainly the founders' masculinity has been heralded, but what were the gendered implications of this in the writing of history? The discovery and celebration of the founders as ribald and virile depend upon an acceptance of patriarchal sexual ethics, and analysis of this would flesh out the interrelationship between writing, historical memory, and gender systems over time. Time and again, the adjustment in turning a founder's previously unacknowledged sexual vice into a virtue was the reinterpretation of a woman's sexual and moral nature. Thus, Maria Reynolds became a conniving lower-class woman who duped Alexander Hamilton; Martha Jefferson a frigid woman who withheld love from Thomas; and several French women lustful partners willing to forgo morality for a momentary sexual tryst. Studying the gender and sexual biases of authors would more fully reveal the way myths of the founders were created and how biases influence our history-making and nation-building.

Foster's narrative is a thoughtful one that subtly challenges readers and historians to consider their motives in reading and writing history. Readers walk away with an understanding of how contemporary trends influence historical output and perceptions of the founders outside of academia. However, Foster's real contribution here is his evidence of the ways manliness and sexuality influence our understanding of the founders and the subtle ways that sexuality influences our mythmaking. Reading Foster's narrative, one concludes that the discipline of history provides a starting point for understanding the human experience, and self-consciously works toward creating histories true to the past while also relevant to our current moment. In this way, we will continue

to build a truer past—full of vice and virtue.

This article originally appeared in issue 15.1 (Fall, 2014).

Kelly A. Ryan is an associate professor of history at Indiana University Southeast. She is the author of *Regulating Passion: Sexuality and Patriarchal Rule in Massachusetts, 1700-1830* (2014), and is currently working on a project examining the implications of violence in the early national Northeast.