

CURRENT BOOKS

Reviews of new and noteworthy nonfiction

A Rake's Progress

GOUVERNEUR MORRIS:

An Independent Life.

By William Howard Adams.
Yale Univ. Press. 334 pp. \$30

GENTLEMAN REVOLUTIONARY:

Gouverneur Morris—The Rake Who Wrote the Constitution.

By Richard Brookhiser.
Free Press. 251 pp. \$26

Reviewed by Max Byrd

The two best-known stories about Gouverneur Morris are probably not true, alas.

In the first, during the summer of 1787 a mischievous Alexander Hamilton bets Morris a dinner that he will not walk up to the supremely aloof and dignified George Washington and slap him on the back. Morris does, and the General slowly removes his hand and stares in frozen silence until, as Morris says afterward, he wishes he could sink through the floor.

In the second, Morris, the "Tall Boy," as he was known to his contemporaries, notoriously successful with women, is said to have lost his left leg not in a carriage accident but diving through the bedroom window of a woman whose husband had come home inconveniently early. (Hearing the rumor, John Jay wrote a friend that he wished Morris "had lost *something* else.")

Crusty, puritanical John Adams, who knew Morris well, once described him as a man of wit and pretty verses, but "of a character *très légère*." It was a criticism Gouverneur (his mother's maiden name,

pronounced "Gov'nor") heard all his life, and it seems to have bothered him not a whit. For one thing, Morris's temperament, as a friend said, "admitted of no alliance with despondency." He enjoyed unashamedly his wealth, his wit, his wine, his women. "With respect for our Taste for Luxury," he wrote one day from Paris, "do not grieve about it." But for another thing, Morris was well aware that as far as political accomplishment and public service went, he had achieved far more than pretty verses.

He was born in 1752, on his father's splendid estate, Morrisania, in what is now the South Bronx. By the time of the Revolution he was a prosperous lawyer, active in New York politics, a warm friend to independence, but an even warmer skeptic in regard to the emerging democracy of the streets. "The mob begins to think and reason," he scathingly said in 1774. "Poor reptiles!"

Despite his aristocratic leanings, Morris served with distinction in the Second Continental Congress. In 1780 he lost his leg to a perhaps overly hasty amputation, and gaily told the "beau monde" that they were

acquiring a “wooden member.” In 1781 he was appointed assistant superintendent of finance for Congress and was instrumental in raising and dispensing the money that sustained the Revolution; two years later he returned to the practice of law. Then, in 1787, in one of the two great defining periods of his life, he found himself once again in Philadelphia, a delegate to the Constitutional Convention and, fatefully, a member of James Madison’s Committee on Style.

The new biographies by William Howard Adams and Richard Brookhiser, the first in many years, both offer solid, carefully detailed cradle-to-grave narratives of Morris’s life. And rightly, both devote many pages to Morris’s performance in the extraordinary Philadelphia gathering. His role, of course, hardly went unnoticed by previous historians. Despite being absent for a full month, the voluble and self-assured Morris spoke more often than anybody else, 173 speeches to Madison’s 161. Again and again he rose in support of what would finally emerge, a strong central government vis-à-vis the states. His rhetorical tactics were effective but abrupt, as Catherine Drinker Bowen has said: “first an eloquent, explosive expression of his position and then a cynical waiting while the Convention caught up with him.”

William Adams, a fellow of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History and the author of *The Paris Years of Thomas Jefferson* (1997), is very good on the theoretical issues debated by the Constitutional Convention and their implications for the practical politics of the Federalist era. He and Brookhiser both give Morris admiring credit for his unbending opposition to the institution of slavery. But for most readers, Brookhiser, the author of books on George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and the Adams dynasty, goes right to the core: Morris not only debated the Constitution, he literally wrote it. For whatever reason, Madison’s weary committee turned over to Morris alone the task of putting the convention’s ideas into words. Those familiar, elegant words by which we are governed are his.

In an acute discussion, Brookhiser demonstrates at length how the Tall Boy’s conciseness and intelligence sharpened and

improved the convention’s wordy, prosaic draft. And he is elegant himself on the significance of one immortal revision: By changing “We the people of the States of New Hampshire, Massachusetts,” etc., into “We, the people,” Morris crafted “a phrase that would ring throughout American history, defining every American as part of a single whole. Those three words may be his greatest legacy.”

The second important period in Morris’s life began just two years later, when the New Yorker, traveling on private business, hobbled down the gangway at Le Havre and climbed into a waiting carriage for Paris. He was to live in France for six dramatic and passionate years altogether, as if on the stage of a stupendous theater, eventually becoming American minister plenipotentiary. Adams is surely right to say that Morris had a special affinity for cities and “seemed to draw his creative energy from . . . vital, restless urban centers.” In the spring of 1789, as all the world knew, there was no urban center more restless than Paris on the eve of revolution.

Three themes intertwine in both writers’ accounts of the Paris years. First is the striking contrast between two great Founding Fathers, the cerebral, supple, and democratic Thomas Jefferson, already there as minister (“cold as a frog,” Morris thought), and the extroverted, dashing Morris, distinctly aristocratic in his sympathies. The two men saw a great deal of each other, never openly quarreled, but remained, as personalities, mutually opaque. Their opposite reactions to the savage excesses of the French Revolution (the second major theme) were characteristic. “The liberty of the whole earth,” Jefferson famously said, “was depending on the issue of the contest, and was ever such a prize won with so little blood?” But Morris, encountering a mob with a head on a pike, its mouth stuffed with hay, recoiled in horror: “Gracious God, what a People!” “The best picture I can give of the French Nation,” he wrote home later, “is that of Cattle before a Thunder Storm.”

The third Parisian theme is beautifully handled by both biographers. Morris first met Adèle de Flahaut at a dinner in Versailles, and noted that night in his diary: “She speaks English and is a pleasing

woman. . . . If I might judge from Appearances, not a sworn enemy of Intrigue.” Not in the least, as it turned out. Adèle de Flahaut was married to an elderly *comte*, lived in an apartment in the Louvre, and was the acknowledged mistress of Talleyrand, the Bishop of Autun (and father of her son). Quickly, however, she made room in her ménage for Morris, and the two embarked on a dark and seductive affair whose frustrations and complexity sometimes seemed too great even for so sophisticated a celebrant of the “Connubial Mysteries” as Morris. (Adèle’s quality comes through nicely in her idea for how to manage the pious yet sensual Marie Antoinette: “I would give her a man every night, and a mass every morning.”) In the end, their affair, like so much else, could not survive the Revolution. Adèle’s husband was guillotined, she escaped to Germany and remarried, and Morris, like a character in Henry James, returned to the New World a sadder but wiser man.

The last phase of his life was eventful but lacks the clear patterns of the Paris years. In 1800, one of New York’s U.S. senators resigned, and Morris was chosen to serve out the remaining three years of his term. But the republican atmosphere of Jefferson’s capital was not to his taste—he was a staunchly conservative Hamiltonian—and he was not reelected. He promptly retired to Morrisania. On Christmas Day 1809 (“no small surprise to my guests”) he married his housekeeper, Anne Cary Randolph, who was, ironically enough, a distant cousin of Jefferson, and who had figured prominently a decade earlier in a lurid scandal involving adultery, infanticide, and perjury. (The events occurred on a Virginia plantation named Bizarre. If the Founding Generation did not exist, it would be impossible to invent them.)

Even in retirement Morris managed to



Gouverneur Morris (1752–1816)

leave his literal imprint on American life, for he was one of the first proponents of constructing a national canal system and served as chairman of the board of commissioners that created the Erie Canal. Perhaps more important to many Americans, Morris worked on a three-man commission appointed to plan for Manhattan’s growth above Houston Street. The classic grid of 12 parallel avenues and 155 streets at right angles is his work, and the commission’s report, as Brookhiser observes, is “marked with his prose rhythms.”

And, ultimately, for most people these prose rhythms are what count. It’s easy to caricature the aging rake, with his French cooks, his wooden leg, his thinning hair foppishly turned up in a hundred paper curlers. But beneath the caricature is a man of formidable intelligence, “cheery pessimism” in Brookhiser’s words, and remarkable literary powers. Morris’s *Diary of the French Revolution*, published only in 1939, is one of the great unknown documents in American history. Both biographers are good psychologists, and both do justice to Morris’s eclectic and enduring achieve-

ments. Adams's portrait is fuller in detail, though occasionally marred by his unrelenting hostility to Jefferson. Brookhiser comes closer to saying why a modern reader would want to know about Gouverneur Morris: "Good principles make a man admirable; a good style makes him arresting. Morris's sparkling prose still shines

after two centuries. Reading it, we hear a voice—so vivid, we imagine the speaker has just left the room, and so delightful that we want him to come back."

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Selling Style

THE SUBSTANCE OF STYLE:
*How the Rise of Aesthetic Value Is Remaking
Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness.*
By Virginia Postrel. HarperCollins. 237 pp. \$24.95

Reviewed by Paul Fussell

This book is a further emanation of the spirit of "futurism" by the author of *The Future and Its Enemies: The Growing Conflict over Creativity, Enterprise, and Progress* (1998). It might be thought to resemble recent books of literary and artistic criticism by Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure* (1995), and Denis Donoghue, *Speaking of Beauty* (2003). But there the similarity ends. Those critics address the nature of what was once revered as high culture, whereas Virginia Postrel's book concerns low and middle "consumer culture" aiming at mercantile profit. "Style," design, and color, Postrel insists, are, happily, imposing themselves in places formerly valued for "substance"—function alone. To sell successfully now, she implies, a monkey wrench or tire pump ought to exhibit "aesthetic" but unfunctional elements. This I find curious, like much of the book, and rather depressing. For the aestheticized object is found to carry a higher price and thus to augment both the profit of the seller and the annoyance of the buyer.

But there is a moment of relief from such suggestions. A few of Postrel's pages are devoted to the work of sociologist Stanley Lieberman, who has studied changing styles in the naming of children, the way Sean has replaced John or Robert, and Kimberly has

replaced Mary or Susan. Why do these few pages seem an oasis of harmless interest? The answer is that they alone are not devoted to the topic of low moneymaking.

The current "Age of Aesthetics" that delights Postrel turns out to rely largely on trivial novelty for its success in moving merchandise. For example, one of the notable creations of the age is the reform of the old-fashioned toilet brush, which seemed to the uninformed to do the job without recourse to anything like beauty or charm. "Every day all over the world," she trumpets, "designers are working to make a better, prettier, more expensive toilet brush for every taste and every budget. The lowliest household tool has become an object of color, texture, personality, whimsy, even elegance. Dozens, probably hundreds, of distinctively designed toilet-brush sets are available—functional, flamboyant, modern, mahogany.

"For about five bucks, you can buy Rubbermaid's basic plastic bowl brush with a caddy, which comes in seven different colors, to hide the bristles and keep the drips off the floor. For \$8 you can take home a Michael Graves brush from Target, with a rounded blue handle and translucent white container. At \$14, you can have an Oxo brush, sleek and modern in a hard, shiny