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Gordon S. Wood *EMPIRE OF LIBERTY* A history of the early Republic, 1789-1815 800pp. Oxford University Press.

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The early years of the United States are surely the best-documented and most thoroughly analysed moment of state-formation in world history. In the four decades after 1776, the creation of state governments, a national Constitution, Congress, the Presidency, the Departments of State, Treasury and War, a federal judiciary and a new capital city foreshadowed the efforts of other newly independent societies to forge the instruments of self-rule. The same inventive ferment that produced the cotton-gin, the torpedo and the submarine also bred most of America's enduring national symbols: the Declaration of Independence and the Liberty Bell, the Capitol and the White House, the Star-Spangled Banner and the Great Seal of the United States. Americans congratulated themselves on being the creators of "the greatest political phenomenon... that all modern ages have produced", in the immodest words of the republican poet Joel Barlow. As the first successful modern instance of anti-imperial secession, the United States has had longer than any other postcolonial society to compile its archives, fabricate a heritage and generate historiography.

Precocious, persistent and prolific though American historians have been in recounting their national origins, outsiders have been less captivated. Foreigners such as Tocqueville and James Bryce looked in the early American mirror to find a reflection of their own societies. Few social scientists, even in America, took the early United States as a model for theories of economic development or nationalism, with Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution* and Seymour Martin Lipset's *The First New Nation* (both 1963) the rare exceptions.

Even the literary and cinematic heritage of the Founding remains meagre. Where is the American Tale of Two Cities or Danton, its Ten Days that Shook the World or Battleship Potemkin? At once undeniably epochal and imaginatively unengaging, the early American republic presents a formidable challenge for historical reconstruction. No one is better prepared for the task than Gordon S. Wood, the doyen among historians of the American Founding. Professor Wood's major monographs and extended essays on the period comprise an oeuvre greater than any since George Bancroft's in the late nineteenth century. A talent for narrative, a staunch commitment to political and institutional history and a well-made case for America's novelty, uniqueness and modernity have won him a wide general readership in the United States. His latest book, *Empire of Liberty: A history of the early Republic, 1789-1815*, is the culmination of an interpretation Wood first unveiled forty years ago, and which he has pursued with amendments and additions ever since. It will stand as this generation's grand historical synthesis on the turbulent beginnings and dynamic development of the Early Republic.

Wood sprang fully armed into the conflict over the meaning of the American Revolution with *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (1969), a book that is both prequel and precondition for *Empire of Liberty*. In that dazzling debut, he argued that the Revolution "was meant to be a social revolution of the most profound sort", but that its unintended consequences far outran the intentions of the Founders. The social contradictions unleashed by American Republicanism generated a democratic energy that could not be restrained. Classical politics gradually withered in the years after 1776, to be replaced by an incipient liberalism, with the

Constitution representing “both the climax and the finale of the American Enlightenment”.

Even as Wood traced these fundamental ideological innovations, he dealt less with the accompanying social transformations. Those would be the subject of his next major book, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1992), which was a salve for the revolution envy American historians experience vis-à-vis their French, Russian or Chinese counterparts.

The American Revolution - bewigged and relatively bloodless, constructive rather than self-consuming, offering little in the way of liberation for subaltern groups such as women and the enslaved - could hardly pass muster alongside the great upheavals of 1789 and beyond. Au contraire, Wood argued, the Revolution was “as radical and revolutionary as any in history”: maybe more so if judged by its relative rapidity, its anticipation of all later revolutions and the scale of the social change it unleashed. In barely half a century, a hierarchical, deferential colonial society had given way to “the most egalitarian, the most materialistic, most individualistic - and most evangelical Christian - society in western history”, “the most liberal, democratic, and modern nation in the world”: the United States of the late twentieth century, perhaps, seen in early-nineteenth-century embryo.

Empire of Liberty absorbs the achievements of these earlier works, even to the extent of adapting whole sentences and paragraphs from them, though not always with a footnote to alert the unwary reader. At a little under 800 pages, it also substantially outweighs Wood's previous books. If the length seems daunting, consider the alternative. Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick's *The Age of Federalism: The early American Republic, 1788-1800* (1993) covered a dozen years in as many pages and was rejected for the multi-volume *Oxford History of the United States*, leaving a conspicuous gap in the series *Empire of Liberty* has now comprehensively filled.

The book begins where *The Creation of the American Republic* left off, with the Constitution ratified, a new Congress elected and the first President installed. Wood's first eight chapters cover much the same ground as Elkins and McKittrick in a well-paced highpolitical narrative that peaks with Thomas Jefferson's ascent to the presidency in 1800. He portrays the political battles of these years as fundamentally ideological, with Jeffersonian Republicans and emergent Democrats arrayed against the aspirant Federalist “aristocrats” and Hamiltonian proponents of America's future as a European-style centralized fiscalmilitary state. Wood rightly notes the irony that “the Revolution of 1800” brought the anti-modernizing Jefferson to power as the first President in the new federal city on the Potomac, as the head of an empire of liberty designed to spread American principles along with legal and cultural pluralism to a whole continent.

In a series of masterly thematic chapters, Wood gives equal attention to westward expansion and the origins of judicial review, to America's emerging civil society and its entrenchment of slavery, to republican religion and republican diplomacy. A penultimate chapter on “the strangest war in American history”, the Anglo-American War of 1812, resumes the chronological narrative before the book ends, like *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, with a pen-portrait of the “bustling democratic world that required new thoughts and new behavior” on which the surviving Founders, especially Jefferson, looked with equal amounts of disappointment and apprehension.

Empire of Liberty is a chronicle of waning Enlightenment and waxing democracy, and a narrative of social transformation, economic commercialization and demographic expansion. It is also a story of destructive tensions and potentially fatal conflicts, among them the bitter partisan strife between Federalists and Republicans, the beginnings of North-South sectionalism, slave-revolt and popular insurrection, the divisive responses to the French Revolution and the struggle to break free of British influence. Though Wood does not note the fact, it is remarkable how often the rhetorical threat of civil war recurs in the period, as variously a response to the rise of democracy, an independent judiciary, the election of Thomas Jefferson, slave emancipation and the secession of New England from the Union. All this testimony supports Wood's judgement that “the last several years of the eighteenth century were the most politically contentious in United States history”, when the new nation could have come unstuck under the pressures exerted from within and without.

Yet, by 1815, the Union was still intact, thirteen states had become eighteen (along with five territories), the

Louisiana Purchase had doubled the country's size and the United States was by the standards of its time a tiger economy, enjoying twice the growthrate of most contemporary European nations. However, slavery remained a festering wound between an increasingly abolitionist North and an economically dependent South. Wood concludes his account with a dash of determinism: "The Civil War was the climax of a tragedy that was preordained from the time of the Revolution". It would take another 800 pages to substantiate such a gnomonic claim, which sits uneasily with the generally more upbeat story of American democratization - at least for free white Americans - that Wood has consistently told throughout his career.

The question-begging note on which Wood ends does not reflect the judiciousness of his whole vast volume. A synthesis of such scope necessarily depends on the work of a great many other historians. Wood deftly reconciles the interpretation of the early Republic as an incipient market economy with the seemingly anomalous fact that the United States was still overwhelmingly rural and agricultural in 1815. He also shows how the population of a country which publicly affirmed in the Treaty of Tripoli (1797) that its government was "not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion" could have been so rampantly religious even before the Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century. As in his earlier work, Wood makes clear his disagreement with neo-Progressive historians who would organize the politics of the period around class conflict, but he does not belabour the point. His aversion to cultural history - a booming field in studies of the period - is expressed more by elision than by direct engagement. And for a work of such length, there are remarkably few slips, the most egregious being the description of the Swiss jurist Emer de Vattel - perhaps the most globally influential European writer of the late eighteenth century - as a "sixteenth-century thinker".

Empire of Liberty will not soon be surpassed for its comprehensiveness or for its erudition. Yet whether it represents the climax or the finale of Gordon Wood's interpretation of the Founding remains to be seen. The demands of a series telling a national narrative constrain him from making essential Atlantic, hemispheric and global connections, despite the assertive comparisons that pepper his work: for example, that the United States was "the most thoroughly commercialized society in the world", or the American press "the most important instrument of democracy in the modern world". The French Revolution, the slave revolt on Saint-Domingue and the opening of American trade with India and China all have their place in Wood's narrative. However, links with Iberian America, the dynamics of commercialization in Asia, and even the indifference of Tokugawa Japan to developments in North America do not. These more radical shifts of perspective will be needed to place the infant United States within the broader regional and global patterns of imperial morphology, commercial development and statist resurgence, in what John Adams called in 1815 "the age of revolutions and constitutions".

Such cosmopolitan contexts might in turn bring the early Republic into discussions outside American history and beyond American historians. Until then, the very scope and solidity of Empire of Liberty may make it hard for others to see the trees for the Wood.

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