Book Review

Benjamin Justice, ed. *The Founding Fathers, Education, and "The Great Contest": The American Philosophical Society Prize of 1797.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 304 pp. Cloth $90.00.

The 1790s was a stressful decade in the United States. The newly formed nation's future appeared to be very much in doubt despite the recently concluded efforts of its founding fathers to fashion a better system of national government. Many believed that the new republic's success, perhaps even its survival, depended upon the "virtue" of its citizens. Would enough of them be able to set aside self-interest in favor of the common good? Disinterested behavior, its leaders thought, depended upon the plentiful provision of liberal education and the careful cultivation of every man's innate moral sense. But the new Constitution took no account of either, and the arrangements for schooling in almost all the states were localized and haphazard.

Given these conditions, it should come as no surprise that one of the country's oldest and most prestigious scholarly organizations sponsored a national competition to elicit proposals for a "system of liberal education" and "a plan for instituting and conducting public schools" in America. Founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1743, the American Philosophical Society (APS) issued a call in 1795 for proposals to be submitted anonymously, expecting to be overwhelmed by submissions. But when only seven had arrived after two years, the leaders of the APS decided to declare a winner. Actually, it named two because the prize committee could not distinguish between what it deemed to be the top two submissions. Written by Samuel Knox (1756–1832), a Presbyterian minister, and Samuel Harrison Smith (1772–1845), a publisher and APS member, both plans proposed that the nation adopt a hierarchical system of schooling from the primary to the college level. Both called for the establishment of a national university, as did another proposal (referred to by the prize committee as no. 3) that also received serious consideration. When it did not win, it was returned to its author through a third party and disappeared. Identified by pseudonyms, the remaining four were quickly dismissed.

The story of this competition has long been a standard part of the history of early American education. But until now the identities of the unsuccessful authors have been a mystery, and, according to Carl Kaestle, who wrote the book's foreword, the historical significance of this well-known contest has not been fully explored or demonstrated. The editor and the eight other historians represented in this collection sought to rectify this situation by answering two important questions:

Who were the anonymous authors and what is the "meaning" of the contest itself in the social and cultural history of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian America? The book answers the first question definitely if not completely by employing intensive historical research methods. It tries to answer the second by placing the contest into its historical context. But the editor is not able to keep all the book's elements in balance because two of the essays he has included examine topics whose relationship to the APS contest is ancillary at best. Their authors fail to make a convincing case for their essays' relevance.

The three proposals that made the cut at the APS all emphasized the importance of building a system or systems of schooling in the United States. Three of the chapter authors build explicitly on this idea. Campbell Scribner examines the gap between the educational centralization and standardization favored by the APS and the localized realities of schooling in America at the end of the eighteenth century. Nancy Beadie analyzes the top-down role of government and the bottom-up role of voluntary organizations—especially the Free Masons—in the promotion of educational systematization. She calls the APS contest "a local initiative with national ambition" (p. 96). Adam Nelson explains that men like George Washington and Benjamin Rush favored a national university because they believed that such an institution would promote national unity (Washington) and economic development (Rush). Justice, the editor, adds some depth by showing how Massachusetts, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and Virginia developed education plans between 1783 and 1800 that pushed the separation of church and state to its locally feasible limit.

Gender, race, and national origin are among the most popular themes in the history of American education today. This was not always the case. Before social history's rise in the 1970s, historians of education seldom focused on them, but now they occupy a distinguished place in the historiography of American education. Perhaps this explains why three of this book's nine chapter authors—Hilary Moss, Kim Tolley, and Margaret Nash—deal with one or more of them. According to Moss, the white assumption that public education in Philadelphia need not include African Americans was sufficiently discredited by 1853 that schooling for blacks no longer required justification. Never mind that almost all of the city's public schools were still segregated. She attributes this change to an aggressive campaign by free blacks like Robert Purvis for recognition as citizens. Tolley shows that affluent white families in America often chose a French style finishing school for their daughters because it legitimized their social status and increased their eligibility in the marriage market. The Catholic parents among them also believed that it might preserve their daughters' faith. But Nash does the best job of connecting her essay to the APS education contest. All the men

who submitted proposals to the Society either ignored or downplayed women's education, she argues, because they associated schooling with citizenship, an all-male political status, and/or because they wanted to strengthen the connection between education and manliness. As learned men, they feared that their gender identity might be compromised by "too much interaction with women in the realms of philosophy, science, and literature" (p. 129). However speculative this claim may be, at least it is anchored in the book's raison'd'etre, the APS education contest.

Academic books published by trade presses like Palgrave Macmillan often carry a hefty price tag. At $90 list ($65–$70 in hardcover or for an electronic copy on Amazon), *The Founding Fathers, Education, and "The Great Contest"* is no exception. So does this book have a market? Some university libraries will buy it, for sure, and perhaps a few scholars interested in the topic or the historical period. Teachers cannot make it required reading for undergraduates; it is too expensive. But what about graduate students? Might this book be good for them?

To answer this question one need only consider how the book came to be. It derived from a research methods session at the 2009 annual meeting of the History of Education Society in Philadelphia. The APS hosted this session at which the participants, who included six graduate students, considered the as-of-then completely unanswered question: who wrote the five submissions that were still anonymous? The book's first two chapters not only address this question, they answer it, at least in part. In chapter two Lisa Green shows how she concluded that the author of essay no. 3 was probably William Smith, twice the provost of the University of Pennsylvania (1756–1779 and 1789–1791). Using a technique known in historical research as external criticism, Green analyzed the linguistic and literary characteristics of proposal no. 3 to eliminate some likely candidates (e.g., Thomas Jefferson). She then brought "circumstantial evidence" to bear on the problem (e.g., the identity of the third party to whom the proposal was returned) before settling on Smith. The two other authors Moss was able to identify were John Hobson, a teacher and minister from Birmingham, England who emigrated to America in 1791, and Francis Hoskins, a clerk in the Philadelphia office that registered deeds. It is an intriguing discussion that would be helpful to almost any doctoral student in the history of education. All of the submissions appear in full text or in summary in the book's final section where graduate students might analyze them.

In chapter three Eric Strome uses what he calls "stylometry, or the mathematical measuring of literary style" (p. 48) to rate the probability that the anonymous submissions were the work of several well-known candidates. This technique relies upon computers to compare the compositional characteristics of attributed and unattributed writing samples. It is heady stuff that only an expert in linguistic computing or the

digital humanities would be qualified to teach. And even Strome admits that it has its limitations. "Quantitative analyses such as this study," he writes, "must be regarded only as supplemental to the painstaking and specialized work of historians" (p. 62).

Over the past fifty years training in the history of education has undergone significant changes. Once confined largely if not exclusively to schools and colleges of education, it was short on methodological sophistication because most of its practitioners worked in service departments that supported M.Ed. and Ed.D programs in fields like educational administration and teacher education. Historians of education today learn their craft in many different academic settings, including history departments, and their job prospects are less well defined. Perhaps this is good news for the editor and authors of *The Founding Fathers, Education, and "The Great Contest"* because the topic their book treats and the sophistication in historical research methods it manifests might be better preparation for someone hoping to work in public history or the humanities.

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