

started incorporating machinery and experimenting with standardized output for his silver shop operations by the early 1780s, and by the early 1800s his Canton mill . . . made even greater strides toward the methods and goals of the American system” (p. 297). When it came to the rise of industrial capitalism, the past was always in flux with the present, and the future hinged upon nothing inevitable but, rather, the daily and often seemingly mundane choices made by men such as Paul Revere. Martello deserves credit for portraying these choices in a way that makes the famous ride a prelude to national innovation rather than an isolated act of bravery.

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*The Forgotten Founding Father: Noah Webster’s Obsession and the Creation of an American Culture.* By Joshua Kendall. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 2010. Pp. xii, 356. \$29.95 cloth; \$16.00 paper.)

In 2008, Joshua Kendall published his first single-authored book, *The Man Who Made Lists*. In it, he explained the achievement of Peter Mark Roget, the eponym of *Roget’s Thesaurus*, in terms of the mental illnesses that a number of his closest relatives suffered. Kendall concluded that Roget was driven to classify concepts and words as a means of preserving his own mental stability. Roget was, Kendall remarked, “obsessed with words” (*Man Who Made Lists*, p. 1); he had an “obsession with words” (p. 18); making wordlists “quickly became an obsession” for him (p. 40); classifying things was “an obsession that would preoccupy him” (p. 45); he brought “obsessive energy” to it (p. 45); and so on. Simon Winchester’s *The Professor and the Madman* (1998) had already shown how profitable a popular book about a mentally ill lexicographer could be.

The year 2008 happened to be the two-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Noah Webster, which was marked by celebrations at Yale, Webster’s and Kendall’s *alma mater*. In their course, the historian Howard Lamar gave a lecture identifying Webster as “Revolutionary Patriot, Outspoken Federalist . . . and Intellectual Nationalist” and characterizing him as “a multiple American founding father,” while Kendall gave a lecture titled “Noah Webster’s Obsession and the Creation of America’s First Dictionary.” *The Forgotten Founding Father* argues, first, that Webster was all the things that

Lamar called him and, second, that his dictionary making can be related, just like Roget's, to his obsessive temperament.

*The Forgotten Founding Father* is handsomely produced, thoroughly copy edited, and modestly priced. It sports multiple celebrity endorsements on its dust jacket, among them one from Lamar and one from Jack Lynch of Rutgers, a notable historian of lexicography. Up to a point, the book deserves them: it is smart, lively, and tells its tale at a good pace. It draws on a wide range of sources and presents Webster's interventions in public debate, his work on the English language, and his personal life in a coherent narrative. Its anachronisms—Webster was “a seasoned networker” (p. 78), he discussed “global warming” (pp. 177, 243), and was a “born-again Christian” (p. 266)—may add to its appeal for many readers.

Its overstatements are perhaps more of a problem. For instance, when Kendall claims that Webster “proposed to create an entirely new language” (p. 232), he says in the next breath that this would simply be “an American version of English.” Furthermore, his assertion that “most leaders of the early Republic would later concede that Webster's efforts were instrumental in shaping the contours of the new central government” (p. 99) is supported by one single piece of evidence: an 1804 letter from James Madison to Webster in which Madison says that while “the general idea of revising and enlarging the scope of the federal authority . . . grew up in many minds . . . that the public attention was called to it by yourself at an early period is well known.” Shaping something and calling attention to it are different. Here, at least, Kendall quotes the evidence: elsewhere, one must draw on knowledge extraneous to his text to challenge Kendall's statements. It is not true, for example, that Webster's newspaper questionnaire of 1795 on yellow fever was “the world's first scientific survey” (p. 201); the Royal Society had issued multiple surveys in the 1660s. It is not true that “continental Europe had always seen dictionary-making as a group enterprise” (p. 297); one might cite Covarrubias, or Furetière, or J. C. Adelung, or one of the hundreds of other makers of single-authored European dictionaries who worked outside the academy tradition.

As in *The Man Who Made Lists*, Kendall's treatment of the inner life of his subject is repetitive. Samuel Johnson is Webster's “idol” (pp. 53, 89, 204, 235, 306, 336), his “hero” (pp. 56, 105), or one of his “heroes” (pp. 150, 228). No evidence is given for all this, except that Webster found Johnson's *Rambler* inspiring when he read it around 1778. Nor is evidence given for the statement that “by early 1800

Samuel Johnson, the idol whom Webster had worshipped since adolescence, became the father figure whom he sought to slay” (p. 229). Kendall claims that Webster “battled an intractable form of mental illness,” this being “what contemporary psychiatrists call obsessive-compulsive disorder,” so that “defining became his ruling obsession . . . inextricably linked to the fight to maintain his own sanity” (p. 8); we are told a dozen times that he was obsessed, or obsessive, or governed by an obsession. Webster certainly liked to gather information, but that is not an illness. Late in life, he recorded that in 1782, “for some months, he suffered extreme depression and gloomy forebodings”; thereafter, his memoir suggests, he enjoyed good health, an active public life, and a contented marriage, the one exception to a general mental stability being a religious crisis in 1808, followed by a period of “perfect tranquility of mind” (Webster, *Autobiographies*, ed. R. M. Rollins, pp. 136, 165, 177). Diagnosing pre-contemporary people with the illnesses, particularly mental illnesses, defined by contemporary physicians is a very uncertain business. But Kendall finds it as easy as he finds reading his subject’s thoughts. When Webster imagines going to a dance and being attracted to a woman, he is “besieged by . . . sexual fantasies” (p. 151); when he fills space in a newspaper which he edits by copying information about births and deaths from a London paper, his “statistical impulses run amok reflected Webster’s sadness and loneliness” (p. 153); when he writes about Johnson’s poverty, Webster himself is “teeming with envy because he had no patron” (p. 249).

This level of certainty is impossible for a serious biographer. A biography is a book about a real person, and real people are mysterious. They change; they contradict themselves; they have quirks and depths of character that surprise their best friends after many years of intimacy. Biographers acknowledge and respect the humanity, and the surprisingness, and the mysteriousness of their subjects: the three qualities go together. Joshua Kendall never doubts that he sees into the soul of Noah Webster, as he never doubted that he saw into the soul of Peter Mark Roget. Every statement he makes about Webster’s emotions or mental state is a confident assertion. That is why, although it is fluent, well paced, and readable, *The Forgotten Founding Father* really is a fundamentally unsatisfactory book.

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