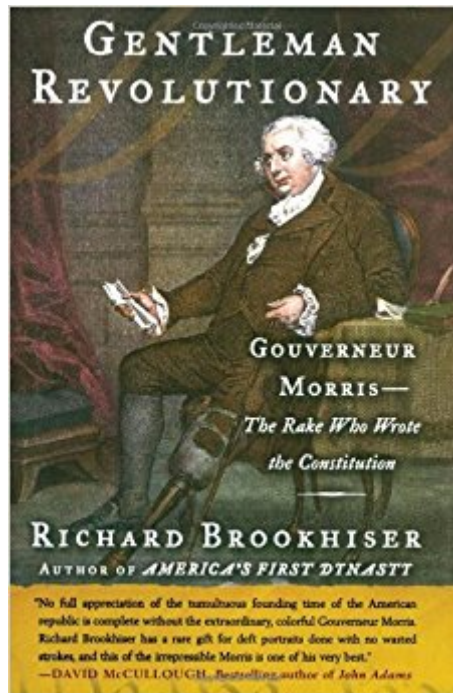


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Gentleman Revolutionary: Gouverneur Morris, The Rake Who Wrote The Constitution



Synopsis

Since 1996, Richard Brookhiser has devoted himself to recovering the Founding for modern Americans. The creators of our democracy had both the temptations and the shortcomings of all men, combined with the talents and idealism of the truly great. Among them, no Founding Father demonstrates the combination of temptations and talents quite so vividly as the least known of the greats, Gouverneur Morris. His story is one that should be known by every American -- after all, he drafted the Constitution, and his hand lies behind many of its most important phrases. Yet he has been lost in the shadows of the Founders who became presidents and faces on our currency. As Brookhiser shows in this sparkling narrative, Morris's story is not only crucial to the Founding, it is also one of the most entertaining and instructive of all. Gouverneur Morris, more than Washington, Jefferson, or even Franklin, is the Founding Father whose story can most readily touch our hearts, and whose character is most sorely needed today. He was a witty, peg-legged ladies' man. He was an eyewitness to two revolutions (American and French) who joked with George Washington, shared a mistress with Talleyrand, and lost friends to the guillotine. In his spare time he gave New York City its street grid and New York State the Erie Canal. His keen mind and his light, sure touch helped make our Constitution the most enduring fundamental set of laws in the world. In his private life, he suited himself; pleased the ladies until, at age fifty-seven, he settled down with one lady (and pleased her); and lived the life of a gentleman, for whom grace and humanity were as important as birth. He kept his good humor through war, mobs, arson, death, and two accidents that burned the flesh from one of his arms and cut off one of his legs below the knee. Above all, he had the gift of a sunny disposition that allowed him to keep his head in any troubles. We have much to learn from him, and much pleasure to take in his company.

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Customer Reviews

Does Richard Brookhiser plan to write a biography for every single Founding Father? Based on the three books of his I've read so far (on George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and now Gouverneur Morris), one can only hope so. Brookhiser's latest biography is of a somewhat neglected Founding Father, whose greatest accomplishment was his authorship/editorial work of much of the U.S. Constitution. Late in his life, Morris also played an invaluable, but often overlooked role in pushing the U.S. to create a system of canals linking New York State's Atlantic coast with the northern interior of North America. (These canals were, once created, as important for the young country's economic growth in the early nineteenth century as railroads would be for it in the late nineteenth century.) For a major public figure, Morris led a balanced life. His serious pursuits did not keep him from enjoying women, travel and outings, or a well-told joke. He was a good friend, especially towards those who he felt were unfairly treated by others. As Morris would drift in and out of public service throughout his life, much of the biography focuses on this personal side of the man. Brookhiser's skill as a biographer is to reveal aspects of his subject's character with just a well-written phrase or two. He does this in a straightforward way without the need for any conceptual baggage (such as Freudianism). Few biographers nowadays are willing to be so concise or risk interpreting their subjects in such a direct manner. But unlike with two of his previous and better-known subjects (Washington and Hamilton), Brookhiser is perhaps too brief in dealing with Morris's life. Whereas the basic outlines of both Washington and Hamilton's lives are fairly well-known to most readers, and therefore more amenable to Brookhiser's kind of abbreviation, Morris's life is not. As a result, the transitions in Morris's life covered in the book seem to rush by and background information is uneven. This is still a fine work, one I can easily recommend, but it is not as impressive as Brookhiser's earlier biographies.

With his well-written and highly entertaining biography, "Gentleman Revolutionary," author Richard Brookhiser has resurrected the memory of founding father Gouverneur Morris for the modern reader. Among his many accomplishments, as the book's subtitle points out, it was Morris who wrote the final version of the American Constitution, the single greatest document of governance in world

history. For that accomplishment alone, his memory should not be allowed to fade in comparison to his contemporaries. Morris's career encompassed, among much else, two terms in the Continental Congress during the height of the American Revolution. His financial expertise was vital to keeping the war effort afloat until the victory at Yorktown secured American independence. He also served as America's Ambassador to France during the French Revolution, keeping a meticulous account of events as they unfolded. Much of the rest of his life was spent as a successful lawyer and financier, who occasionally engaged in such acts of public service as championing the Erie Canal and laying out the streets of Manhattan. All of this Brookhiser captures with his lively narrative prose. The book is a relatively quick read at just over 200 pages of narrative, and Brookhiser concentrates his efforts on those periods of Morris's life that were devoted to public service. A generous helping of illustrations are also provided. Brookhiser also avoids being too overly fawning of his subject, pointing out those ideas of Morris's that were either dangerously flawed or just plain wrong. Overall, a fascinating biography that can be enjoyed by history buffs as well as general readers.

Most accounts of the American Founding are filled with tales of prim and proper Puritans or unremarkable commercial men. Not so with Gouverneur Morris (1752-1816), a New York aristocrat whose ancestral roots in this country went back to Dutch-controlled New Amsterdam. His family owned much of the Bronx in the 17th and 18th centuries. Morris had an astonishingly varied career. A friend of George Washington, Marquis de Lafayette, and Thomas Paine, Morris was the primary architect of the U.S. Constitution. He was a successful ladies' man, enjoying a succession of lovers before finally marrying in his late 50s. An expatriate in France during the French Revolution, he advised Louis XVI and wrote a constitution for that troubled nation. A senator from New York, he opposed the War of 1812 and advocated the secession of Northern states. Back in New York, while practicing law and tending to business interests, he found time to establish Manhattan's street grids and begin work on the Erie Canal. He started a family in his early 60s. Above all, he enjoyed life. Observers make much of the fact that as a teenager Morris sustained severe burns to his right arm and later lost part of a leg in a carriage accident, but these are arguably the least interesting things about the man. The one black mark on an otherwise admirable record was his anti-Catholicism. Brookhiser says little about it apart from arguing that Morris, a deist, wasn't as anti-Catholic as some of his Protestant colleagues. In other words, "Morris could have been worse," the author seems to say. This is a quick and easy read. Brookhiser writes well. Still, it's not altogether clear why the author, a senior editor at the neoconservative National Review, would want to write about someone like Morris. It's not even clear that in the end the author finds him

particularly appealing. Brookhiser's critical remarks about Edmund Burke and John Randolph of Roanoke, both of whom admittedly are more interesting figures, detract from the story and may turn off more conservative-minded readers. Why is Morris important to us? America, especially New York, has changed considerably since Morris's time; some might say it has become decidedly less civilized. We live in an age of mass democracy, globalism, and consumerism where monetary values are held to be supreme, the sole measure of one's worth. The state of once-grand places like the Bronx, as Brookhiser shows in the concluding chapter, is a living symbol of this decline. If Morris was a rare enough individual in his own time, he would be inconceivable in ours. Yet, his rich life represents to modern Americans a model for a better way of living. Take heart from his cheerful fortitude, his aristocratic acceptance of life's vicissitudes, the sheer pleasure he got out of living according to God's plan. As Morris said: "To enjoy is to obey". Life is good.

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