

The most well known and misinterpreted document in the history of the United States is the Declaration of Independence. This is the premise of Pauline Maier's work American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence. Her primary argument is that the Declaration of Independence is a document that was written for a specific purpose and once served the authors never expected to see it again. Maier's work assesses the origins of the drive for independence, the many independence documents that preceded it, the fact that the Declaration was not an original concept and that it borrows heavily from many sources and lastly, how the Declaration and those most closely tied to it rose to mythic status.

Maier's discussion begins with the colonist's road to independence. Like other works, she points out that the war for independence need not have occurred, however, where her work differs is in the road to the concept of Republican government and the crafting of the document that would create it. Maier emphasizes the basic problem facing the colonies: prior to the formation of the United States, every republic ever created had failed.

Maier also focuses on dispelling some of the myths surrounding the Second Continental Congress. Our national myths lead us to believe that the drive to independence was almost instantaneous and unanimous. In reality, Independence was a bitter drawn out battle that featured sectional disputes. The signatories knew they were signing their death sentences should the newly formed nation lose; a sobering thought.

The next section of her work focuses on the Declaration itself. Maier makes the point that the Declaration of Independence was not the only one of its kind; in fact it was the last one written. The fundamental reason for the misuse of the Declaration is the inclusion in the preamble that ". . .all men are created equal." The purpose of the Declaration was to simply explain to the nation, parliament, and Great Britain the reasons why the colonists were declaring themselves an independent republic.

Included in appendix B is a selection: Local Resolutions on Independence, and she analyzes many more in order to assess the Declaration of Independence. While she makes the point that the Declaration was never meant to make people equal, she points out an historical ironies. South Carolina's Constitution granting of freedom was " . . . not limited to any rank of men . . . indiscriminately of all. (93)".

In the third chapter, Maier goes after another of the cherished national myths, that Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration on his own. The Committee of Five were responsible jointly for its creation and it included two other well known figures John Adams and Benjamin Franklin. Much of what we know of its creation comes from the conflicting notes of Adams and Jefferson. Maier sifts through the evidence and it seems that Jefferson claims more credit for the Declaration than is rightly his. While Jefferson accepted comments from Adams and Franklin Maier also makes it clear that Jefferson was not happy to have the larger body of the Continental Congress adding their thoughts Secondly, the concepts within the document were taken from other sources. Also included in Appendix C is the Declaration of Independence, with the edits included.

Given the famous preamble, the issue of slavery must be addressed and while the committee and the Congress were aware of the inherent contradictions between all men are created equal and then enslaving those equals. This was a battle for another time, the most important aspect and job of the Declaration was to establish the case against the British and George III, Slavery would have to wait.

After the Declaration had been signed and sent to the king, Maier traces it's less than revered history. The myth of our founders signing this document, thanks in large part to the Trumbull painting that Jefferson encouraged him to paint, and the unity that followed is shattered with the knowledge that they did not send it to the people of the colonies until the Continental Army had secured victories at Trenton and Princeton more than a year later.

After the Revolution, the document essentially lay forgotten. As time went on and the 25th anniversary was drawing near naturally people became more nostalgic especially as the founders were all but extinct. In one of the great historical coincidences Adams and Jefferson, political opponents, and then, in old age friends, died on July 4th, 25 years to the day the Declaration was signed.

Maier and many others discuss the tendency to hero worship that naturally followed. We began ascribing the ideals in the Declaration to the founders themselves. Today this is a prevalent problem, when various groups and politicians claim original intent. Her title, American Scripture, suggests that the Declaration became a transcendent document containing the spirit of the nation. Like the Bible, which has been taken out of context, the Declaration has also been used inappropriately, by anyone who has cited it for any purpose but declaring independence from Great Britain.

Lincoln summed up who Jefferson became and what the Declaration evolved into:

--to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times, and so to embalm it there, that to-day, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling-block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.

Besides Washington, Jefferson is probably the most well known founder, primarily because he claimed authorship of this document. Because the preamble stated that all men are created equal, any group that experiences discrimination: African Americans, women, disabled Americans, even ironically, White men can claim equality in the United States. Despite the fact that this was unintentional, or at least not the document's intended purpose, it is this unique statement and characteristic that is the enduring legacy of the document; the soul of the nation.

Stylistically, Maier writes in an academic fashion which is a little on the dry side, the main text is a little more than 200 pages long, though it feels longer. The work is extremely well researched which is

evident in her discussion of other state's and region's declarations. She is thorough in her explanations almost to the point of repetitiveness. Her conclusion's and analysis are sound and she is very successful at debunking and demythologizing this seminal document.

For use in a public high school it is a bit advanced, however, the key points of the work are easily transferable to the classroom. This is an excellent book for anyone interested in the time period and also anyone interested in the mythologizing of historical figures.

Book Review

American Scripture:
Making the Declaration
of Independence

Michael A. Perreault

PDMT 6105

September 22, 2010

Maier, Pauline. American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence. Vintage Books, New York, 1997.