

David W Fletcher, January 2002

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HENDRIK BOORAEM'S *YOUNG HICKORY*:
THE MAKING OF ANDREW JACKSON

In his biography of Andrew Jackson's early life from 1767 to 1788,¹ Hendrik Booraem examines a wealth of primary sources in order to "add some context and depth to the standard version and enrich it with some new material." He also aims to offer correction to some of the "false material" circulated in numerous biographies of Jackson as a result of the work of Augustus C. Buell, "an uncommonly gifted pseudohistorian" (see Appendix I, 201-204). The book surveys "the early development of Jackson's character" in the Carolina backcountry during the Revolutionary era, especially the border area between North and South Carolina known as the Waxhaws. Booraem highlights the distinctive traits of Jackson's character in youth—"a willingness to challenge older and more powerful people . . . an immense self-confidence . . . a touchy concern about his personal image . . . an unhesitating resort to a quick, simple, and [sometimes] violent method of handling a problem . . . and in the end, a levelheaded perception of reality." He argues that these traits of character were formed in Jackson's youth, never left him, and became "the hallmarks of his later military-political career." According to Booraem, "Jackson at twenty-one was essentially the same person he would be for the rest of his life. Tennessee would be the theater of his exploits, but it did nothing to shape his personality. His character had been shaped before he crossed the mountains" (xii - xiii).

¹*Young Hickory: The Making of Andrew Jackson* (Dallas, TX: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2001), hardback, 318 pages with preface, illustrations, one map, appendices, timeline, notes, bibliography, and index.

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Booraem possibly oversteps the boundaries of his inquiry with such a broad thesis, since he does not examine the character of Jackson past April 1788 when Jackson left Carolina for Tennessee. But this overstatement does not at all affect the quality and importance of Booraem's extensive research. Booraem examines archival material from nearly thirty repositories and libraries in both the United States and Northern Ireland (see his Acknowledgements, xv - xvi). His exhaustive work scrutinizes deeds, diaries, family and personal papers, graveyards, inventories, marriage records, pension applications, probate records and other wills, slave records, trial dockets, and a wide variety of court records (282-285). He carefully inspects important primary documents pertinent to the Carolinas in the Revolutionary period (286-292), and he interacts with a large body of interpretive studies (292-308). Notes and documentation alone comprise about a third of the book. They could be used to fill the pages of a small and interesting book about the interpretation of the early life of Jackson, since they are well worth a read on their own (213-281). In this respect, apart from the chance discovery of new archival material about young Jackson or his early environment, Booraem's thorough and insightful study represents the definitive biography of young Andrew Jackson.

Booraem's *Young Hickory* excels, though, in more than just its quantity of documentary evidence. In this work, Booraem proves himself to be a master of the craft of historical inquiry. The author sifts through sources in order to glean the factual from the hypothetical, the real from the supposed. He generally values oral tradition as equal to written testimony (but cf. 187, 194-195), and he is careful to give opposing viewpoints their rightful voice (see his treatment of the

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testimonies of Susan Alexander and Susan Smart, Appendix II, 205-209). For example, the debate over the birthplace of Jackson on March 15, 1767—whether the Crawford house in North Carolina or the McCamie house in South Carolina (only a mile apart)—still remains undecided. Booraem presents a reasoned explanation of each tradition, and then he concludes: “What is indisputable, however, is that Jackson grew up in a South Carolina family and considered himself a South Carolinian, and that this identification, at a couple of points in his early life, held important consequences for his future” (12). Booraem also is careful to note lacunae, just as he is firm about things that can be known for sure (i.e., his rationale for Jackson’s two trips to Charleston instead of just one, 118-129; cf. his treatment of two traditions about Jackson’s stay in Guilford County, 141-142). This sort of dispassionate approach to oft-disputed events of Jackson’s early years makes Booraem’s study a solid model of critical historical investigation and a gold-mine of interpretive data. But Booraem does not bog down in an endless plethora of details, as he offers provocative summaries about the young Jackson (25-26, 35, 75, 148-150, 199-200).

To be sure, historical records preserve few details about Jackson’s early years, and Booraem indicates this clearly (2, 24, 36, 53, 70, 77, 134, 135, 166, 198). His timeline of “Andrew Jackson’s First Twenty-One Years” fills a scant three pages (Appendix III, 210-212). But this is what makes *Young Hickory* enjoyable and helpful, since the author, in a very convincing way, weaves a plausible story that provides the framework for Jackson’s early years. Booraem builds a contextual setting for understanding Jackson’s formative years—the Irish

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(Presbyterian) backwoods settlement of the Waxhaws, the violent devastation of the Revolutionary conflict between Tories (British) and Whigs (Continental) in the Waxhaws, and the world of influential “Virginia-style gentlemen” who practiced law and enjoyed an affable social life in central North Carolina (213-215). In this respect, *Young Hickory* reads more like a cultural and social history of the Waxhaws (1760-1780), of the Revolutionary War and its aftermath in the Carolina backwoods (1780-1782), and of the life and work of young lawyers in central North Carolina (1784-1788). But Booraem never loses sight of placing his subject, young Andy, in this contextual framework. He laces his delightful and instructive narrative with anecdotes about Jackson and tidbits about experiences common to Jackson and the people with whom he mingled. What is nice about the book is that it can be read either casually or critically. The reader can ignore the notes and read the book casually to gain a basic understanding of young Jackson and his times. Or, the reader can absorb the notes and their interpretive nuances to assess the work more critically. Either way, the reader is sure to be challenged, to learn something new, and to enjoy it in the process. Booraem knows how to tell a story well, and he tells this story about young Jackson convincingly.