



To Begin the World Anew: The Genius and Ambiguities of the American Founders

Bernard Bailyn

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With these character sketches of key figures of the American Revolution and illuminating probes of its circumstances, Bernard Bailyn reveals the ambiguities, complexities, and uncertainties of the founding generation as well as their achievements.

Using visual documentation—portraits, architecture, allegorical engravings—as well as written sources, Bailyn, one of our most esteemed historians, paints a complex picture of that distant but still remarkably relevant world. He explores the powerfully creative effects of the Founders' provincialism and lays out in fine detail the mingling of gleaming utopianism and tough political pragmatism in Thomas Jefferson's public career, and the effect that ambiguity had on his politics, political thought, and present reputation. And Benjamin Franklin emerges as a figure as cunning in his management of foreign affairs and of his visual image as he was amiable, relaxed, and amusing in his social life.

Bailyn shows, too, why it is that the Federalist papers—polemical documents thrown together frantically, helter-skelter, by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay in a fierce political battle two hundred years ago—have attained canonical status, not only as a penetrating analysis of the American Constitution but as a timeless commentary on the nature of politics and constitutionalism.

Professor Bailyn concludes, in a wider perspective, with an effort to locate the effect of the Founders' imaginative thought on political reformers throughout the Atlantic world. Precisely how their principles were received abroad, Bailyn writes, is as ambiguous as the personalities of the remarkably creative provincials who founded the American nation.

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