

Book review

ALEXANDER HAMILTON

Ron Chernow

This book is the basis for *HAMILTON*, the hip-hop musical currently on Broadway about the life of Alexander Hamilton. Though hip-hop may seem a curious genre for a musical about the life of one of the Founding Fathers, after reading this book, I think it was a good choice. Hip-hop allows for far more words per minute than ordinary speech and Hamilton was well known in his day for the prodigious number of wordy, detailed and brilliantly-reasoned texts he frequently cranked out at short notice or under tight deadlines. In fact, today he might well be diagnosed as bi-polar, all the words pouring from his pen when under pressure; his stunningly imprudent adulterous love affair; and the many near-duels and final duel with Aaron Burr representing his manic side while his periods of gloom show the depressive side. A man of great charm with many powerful friends, among them George Washington, Hamilton also had powerful enemies in men such as Thomas Jefferson, the Virginia planter whose vision of a nation of yeoman farmers untainted by manufacture was very different from the manufacturing economy that Hamilton, with his urban perspective, was convinced was essential to making a great nation.

This story of Hamilton's improbable life and career reads like a novel, starting with his illegitimate birth into a dysfunctional family and his early years in Nevis in the West Indies, where his first job at age 15 in the office of a shipping firm of slave traders gave him a life-long aversion to slavery but also taught him about maritime issues (knowledge of which enabled him years later to establish the U.S. Coast Guard as a means to curtail smuggling), as well as introducing him to the international trade and financial accounting that showed him the way business actually "worked," shaped his own understanding of how wealth was created, and planted the seeds for his future establishment of a single national currency and a national bank.

He left Nevis for New York a few years later to study at Kings College (now Columbia University), but before he graduated the Revolutionary War broke out and he became the trusted aide and almost alter ego of George Washington. Hamilton may best be remembered as one of the Colonies' leading intellectuals primarily responsible for the replacement of the Articles of Confederation and its problematic, decentralized federation of states with the Constitution that still governs us today. Later, as the first Secretary of the Treasury under George Washington, he insisted that the national government repay its international creditors for debts incurred during the war, ensuring our future economic relationships with these countries. And by persuading the national government to absorb the war debt of the individual states, he did much to encourage the novel view that these individual states were part of a unified nation.

And yet, Hamilton is far less well-known than many of the other Founding Fathers. Reading the descriptions of all of his accomplishments and his wide-ranging genius, one thinks "He really should have been president." But that never happened. His human flaws led to the self-inflicted wounds to his reputation and political career that ended his presidential hopes, and ultimately to his untimely death in a foolish duel that need not have happened. And though we can only imagine what more he could have accomplished if only he'd been able to control some of his impulsiveness, or if only he'd been more tactful, or less human, what he did accomplish was astounding, almost singlehandedly creating the political and economic systems that catapulted our country into the position of prominence we have enjoyed over the last century, and leading ultimately to the nation and the people we are today.