

RON CHERNOW

Author of

TITAN *and* THE HOUSE OF MORGAN



HAMILTON

THE INSPIRATION
FOR THE HIT
BROADWAY MUSICAL

ALEXANDER

HAMILTON

Praise for *Alexander Hamilton*

“In *Alexander Hamilton*, Ron Chernow, author of *The House of Morgan*, *The Warburgs*, and *Titan* and a biography of John D. Rockefeller, has brought to vivid life the founding father who did more than any other to create the modern United States... [a] magisterial biography.” —Michael Lind, *The Washington Post*

“Ron Chernow’s new *Hamilton* could not be more welcome. This is grand-scale biography at its best—thorough, insightful, consistently fair, and superbly written. It clears away more than a few shopworn misconceptions about Hamilton, gives credit where credit is due, and is both clear-eyed and understanding about its very human subject....The whole life and times are here in a genuinely great book.”

—David McCullough, author of *John Adams* and *Truman*

“Ron Chernow ranks as one of today’s best writers of history and biography. Not only is his work compelling but, unusual among such writers, Chernow also has a sound understanding of finance and economics. These skills shined through in his previous books....They are once again on full display in *Alexander Hamilton* .”

—Raymond J. Keating, *Newsday*

“Chernow’s *Hamilton* is a success. Rarely does a biographer uncover so much new information about a long-dead, much-chronicled individual. Rarely does a biographer fill in the gaps with such incisive, justified speculation. Rarely does a biographer write narrative so well.” —Steve Weinberg, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

“Ron Chernow has produced an original, illuminating, and highly readable study of Alexander Hamilton that admirably introduces readers to Hamilton’s personality and accomplishments. Chernow penetrates more deeply into the mysteries of Hamilton’s origins and family life than any previous biographer ...Chernow’s accounts of Hamilton’s contributions to political theory, politics, and the law are compelling.” —Walter Russell Mead, *Foreign Affairs*

“Like a few hundred thousand other people, I’ve been reading Ron Chernow’s enthralling biography of Alexander Hamilton. It serves as a timely reminder that the era of the founding fathers, which we usually think of (correctly) as a time of highminded philosophical discourse, was also full of venomous vituperation that has no parallel in modern America.” —Max Boot, *Financial Times*

“A brilliant historian has done it again! The thoroughness and integrity of Ron Chernow’s research shines forth on every page of his *Alexander Hamilton*. He has created a vivid and compelling portrait of a remarkable man—and at the same time he has made a monumental contribution to our understanding of the beginnings of the American republic.”

—Robert A. Caro, author of *The Power Broker* and *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*

“Fascinating.” —*People* “Chernow’s gripping story sheds new light not only on Hamilton’s legacy, but also on the conflicts that accompanied the republic’s birth.... *Alexander Hamilton* is based on prodigious research, and it will likely prop up Hamilton’s reputation in the same way David McCullough’s biography bolstered John Adams’s....impressive detail.”

—Matthew Dallek, *Washington Monthly*

“Magisterial....Mr. Chernow has done a splendid job of capturing the backbiting political climate of Hamilton’s times....Mr. Chernow delivers a comprehensiveness that rivals Hamilton’s... [and gives] the full measure of such a tireless, complex, and ultimately self-destructive man.”—Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*

“A superb study....Chernow’s book is remarkable...for his unblinkered view of Hamilton’s thought and behavior ...Chernow’s Hamilton is a whirlwind of a man, always in action, always in pursuit of a goal not quite within his grasp, and beset by the demons that have so often afflicted great minds....It has been said that Hamilton was a great man but not a great American. Chernow’s Hamilton is both.”

—Edmund Morgan, *The New York Review of Books*

“Alexander Hamilton has been overshadowed by the founding fathers he served under, notably George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Ron Chernow’s magisterial new biography will certainly change that.... The first must-read biography of 2004.”

—John Freeman, *TimeOut New York*

“A splendid new biography ...Chernow unearths new information about Hamilton, but more importantly this beautifully written book recounts the formidable obstacles he surmounted to become, next to George Washington, the indispensable American founder. Chernow’s *Alexander Hamilton* is the best biography of Hamilton ever written, and it is unlikely to be surpassed.”

—Stephen F. Knott, *Claremont Review of Books*

“Superb ...Chernow is a shrewd student of power, and he couldn’t have

chosen a more compelling subject.” —James Aley, *Fortune*

“Chernow writes beautifully and skillfully, and opens up aspects of Hamilton’s life that others have not yet understood.” —Andrew Burstein, *Chicago Tribune*

“Now, Ron Chernow, whose previous books have chronicled the American Beauty roses and kudzu vines of mature American capitalism—*Warburg s*, Morgans, John D. Rockefeller, Sr.—examines the man who planted the seeds.... *Alexander Hamilton* is thorough, admiring, and sad—just what a big book on its subject should be.”

—Richard Brookhiser, *Los Angeles Times*

“Terrific...Ron Chernow’s magisterial *Alexander Hamilton* treats the first secretary of the treasury with the weight and gravitas of a nineteenth-century novel.” —John Freeman, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

“Powerful...Chernow’s magisterial work combines a biography of Hamilton and a political history of the United States in the early years of the republic. Exhaustively researched and beautifully written, the volume tells us a great deal about the founding fathers and helps restore one of them to his rightful place in the pantheon.” —Terry W. Hartle, *The Christian Science Monitor*

“Chernow has chosen an ideal subject....No other founding father more richly deserves the modern-eye-on-the-colonial-guy treatment... electrifying...Chernow does an admirable job.” —Justin Martin, *San Francisco Chronicle*

“[T]he life of Alexander Hamilton was ‘so tumultuous that only an audacious novelist could have dreamed it up.’ Such is the assessment of Ron Chernow in this splendid new biography of Hamilton.” —Steve Raymond, *The Seattle Times*

“In this engaging new book, Ron Chernow reassesses the historical legacy of the brilliant founding father, political theorist, and politician Alexander Hamilton.... Lively and beautifully written.” —Anne Lombard, *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

“*Alexander Hamilton* is a balanced portrait of the man and his many contradictions...Admirers of David McCullough’s *John Adams* or Walter Isaacson’s *Benjamin Franklin* will thoroughly enjoy this excellent book.”

—Roger Bishop, *BookPage*

“On July 11, 1804, on a ledge overlooking the Hudson River in Weehawken, New Jersey, Burr mortally wounded Hamilton ...For thirty days, the city’s residents wore black armbands.... The extraordinary and

improbable career of Alexander Hamilton had come to an end, and here we have another fitting tribute to it: Ron Chernow's massively researched and beautifully written biography."

—James Chace, *The New York Observer*

"Ron Chernow's absorbing, exhaustively researched *Alexander Hamilton* justifies his claim that Hamilton's was the most dramatic and improbable life among the founding fathers....Chernow, who won the National Book Award for *The House of Morgan*, shows all Hamilton's complexity." — David Gates, *Newsweek*

"Chernow's splendid, thorough and brilliantly written biography of Hamilton gives us a new understanding of Hamilton's vital role during the war and immediately after as secretary of the treasury....There have been other biographies of Hamilton, but Chernow's is far and away the most comprehensive and compelling of any I have read. It is a fitting tribute to the man who set the U.S. on the path that has made our nation the economic leader of the world."

—Caspar W. Weinberger, former secretary of defense, and chairman of *Forbes*

"As Ron Chernow points out in this magnificent biography, Hamilton was the boy wonder of early American politics." —*The Economist* "A splendid life of an enlightened and reactionary founding father . . . Literate and full of engaging asides. By far the best of the many lives of Hamilton now in print, and a model of the biographer's art." —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred)

"In *Alexander Hamilton*, his mammoth and comprehensive study of the nation's first treasury secretary, Chernow has captured the essence of the man....Chernow is especially skillful at evoking a sense of time and place, an achievement that dominates *Alexander Hamilton*. He goes beyond the stick-figure characters that often emerge from most stories about the founders to present three-dimensional portrayals....Now, with this carefully crafted revision of the record, Hamilton's accomplishments should be seen in a different light, one bright enough to show what he has meant for America." —Ray Locker, *The Associated Press*

"In this majestic and thorough biography, Chernow explores the conundrums and paradoxes of Hamilton's private and public life and gives the man his due." —John C. Chalberg, *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis)

"Ron Chernow's fascinating new biography of Alexander Hamilton is the best written about the man....Chernow sorts out this period of history and

humanizes Hamilton....Chernow obviously believes Hamilton has not received much of the credit he deserves, but this book will help rectify the situation.” —Larry Cox, *Tucson Citizen*

“In the first full-length biography of Alexander Hamilton in many years, Ron Chernow, known for his impressive work on the titans of American industry, has made an exceptional contribution to American history.”

—Dennis Lythgoe, *Deseret Morning News*

“Chernow’s achievement is to give us a biography commensurate with Hamilton’s character, as well as the full, complex content of his unflaggingly active life.... This is a fine work that captures Hamilton’s life with judiciousness and verve.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“[Chernow’s] sweeping narrative chronicles the complex and often contradictory life of Hamilton....A first-rate life and excellent addition to the ongoing debate about Hamilton’s importance in shaping America.” —*Library Journal*

“Ron Chernow’s altogether splendid, full-scale biography is a weighty and meticulously researched tome of more than 800 pages. It nonetheless reads like a great historical novel, because Chernow brings his central characters to such vivid life. This is a life not only of Hamilton the politician, lawyer, and technocrat, but of Hamilton the man.” —John Steele Gordon, *American Heritage*

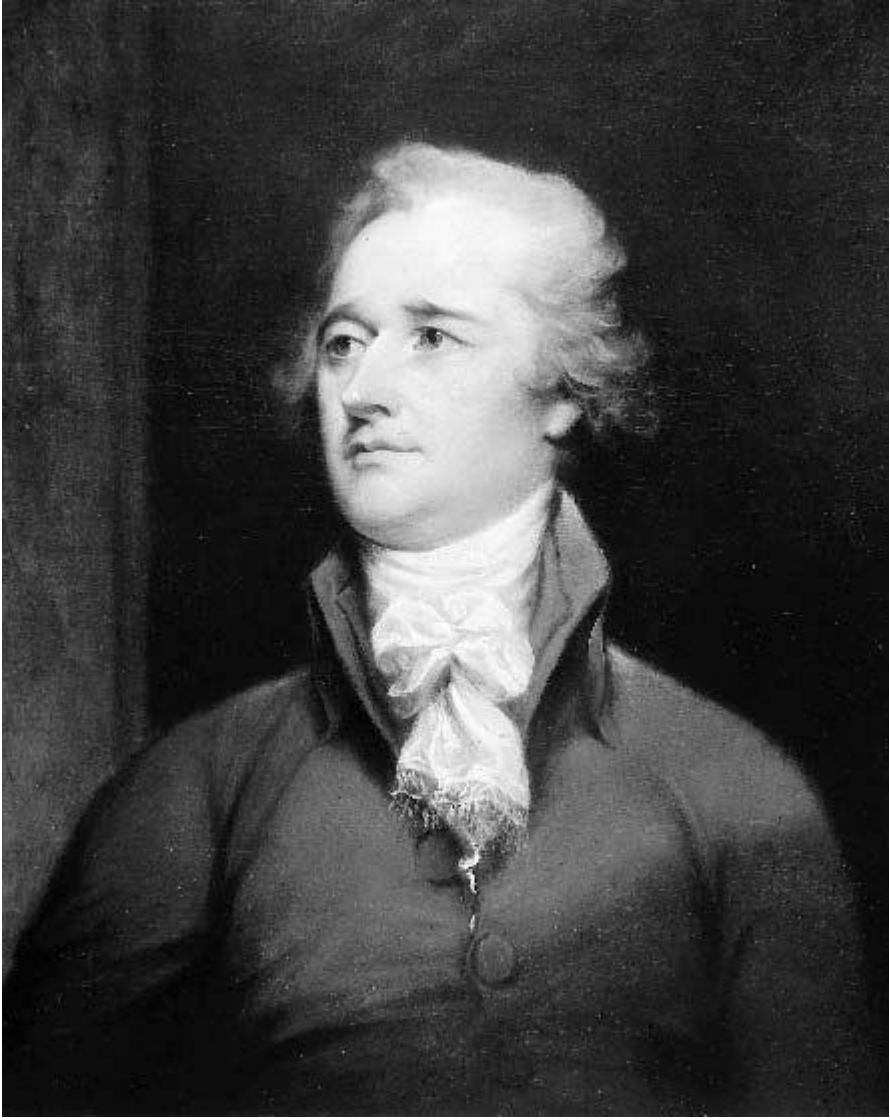
pinguin books ALEXANDER HAMILTON

A graduate of Yale and Cambridge, Ron Chernow won the National Book Award in 1990 for his first book, *The House of Morgan*, which the Modern Library cites as one of the hundred best nonfiction books of the twentieth century. His second book, *The Warburgs*, won the Eccles Prize as the best business book of 1993. His biography of John D. Rockefeller, *Titan*, was a national bestseller and a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist. Both *Time* magazine and *The New York Times* listed it among the ten best books of 1998. Chernow lives in Brooklyn, New York.

author’s note

In order to make the text as fluent as possible and the founders less remote, I have taken the liberty of modernizing the spelling and punctuation of eighteenth-century prose, which can seem antiquated and jarring to modern eyes. I have also cured many contemporary newspaper editors of their addiction to italics and capitalized words. Occasionally, I have retained the

original spelling to emphasize the distinctive voice, strong emotion, patent eccentricity, or curious education of the person quoted. I trust that these exceptional cases, and my reasons for wanting to reproduce them precisely, will be evident to the alert reader.



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TO VALERIE,

best of wives and best of women

Observations by Alexander Hamilton

I have thought it my duty to exhibit things as they are, not as they ought to be.

—LETTER OF AUGUST 13, 1782

The passions of a revolution are apt to hurry even good men into excesses.

—ESSAY OF AUGUST 12, 1795

Men are rather reasoning than reasonable animals, for the most part governed by the impulse of passion.

—LETTER OF APRIL 16, 1802

Opinion, whether well or ill founded, is the governing principle of human affairs.

—LETTER OF JUNE 18, 1778

PROLOGUE

THE OLDEST REVOLUTIONARY WAR WIDOW

I

In the early 1850s, few pedestrians strolling past the house on H Street in Washington, near the White House, realized that the ancient widow seated by the window, knitting and arranging flowers, was the last surviving link to the glory

days of the early republic. Fifty years earlier, on a rocky, secluded ledge overlooking the Hudson River in Weehawken, New Jersey, Aaron Burr, the vice president of the United States, had fired a mortal shot at her husband, Alexander Hamilton, in a misbegotten effort to remove the man Burr regarded as the main impediment to the advancement of his career. Hamilton was then forty-nine years old. Was it a benign or a cruel destiny that had compelled the widow to outlive her husband by half a century, struggling to raise seven children and surviving almost until the eve of the Civil War?

Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton—purbblind and deaf but gallant to the end—was a stoic woman who never yielded to self-pity. With her gentle manner, Dutch tenacity, and quiet humor, she clung to the deeply rooted religious beliefs that had abetted her reconciliation to the extraordinary misfortunes she had endured. Even in her early nineties, she still dropped to her knees for family prayers. Wrapped in shawls and garbed in the black bombazine dresses that were de rigueur for widows, she wore a starched white ruff and

frilly white cap that bespoke a simpler era in American life. The dark eyes that gleamed behind large metal-rimmed glasses— those same dark eyes that had once enchanted a young officer on General George Washington’s staff—betokened a sharp intelligence, a fiercely indomitable spirit, and a memory that refused to surrender the past.

In the front parlor of the house she now shared with her daughter, Eliza Hamilton had crammed the faded memorabilia of her now distant marriage.

When visi

tors called, the tiny, erect, white-haired lady would grab her cane, rise gamely from a black sofa embroidered with a floral pattern of her own design, and escort them to a Gilbert Stuart painting of George Washington. She motioned with pride to a silver wine cooler, tucked discreetly beneath the center table, that had been given to the Hamiltons by Washington himself. This treasured gift retained a secret meaning for Eliza, for it had been a tacit gesture of solidarity from Washington when her husband was ensnared in the first major sex scandal in American history. The tour’s highlight stood enshrined in the corner: a marble bust of her dead hero, carved by an Italian sculptor, Giuseppe Ceracchi, during Hamilton’s heyday as the first treasury secretary. Portrayed in the classical style of a noble Roman senator, a toga draped across one shoulder, Hamilton exuded a brisk energy and a massive intelligence in his wide brow, his face illumined by the half smile that often played about his features. This was how Eliza wished to recall him: ardent, hopeful, and eternally young. “That bust I can never forget,” one young visitor remembered, “for the old lady always paused before it in her tour of the rooms and, leaning on her cane, gazed and gazed, as if she could never be satisfied.”

For the select few, Eliza unearthed documents written by Hamilton that qualified as her sacred scripture: an early hymn he had composed or a letter he had drafted during his impoverished boyhood on St. Croix. She frequently grew melancholy and longed for a reunion with “her Hamilton,” as she invariably referred to him. “One night, I remember, she seemed sad and absent-minded and could not go to the parlor where there were visitors, but sat near the fire and played backgammon for a while,” said one caller. “When the game was done, she leaned back in her chair a long time with closed eyes, as if lost to all around her. There was a long silence, broken by the murmured words, ‘I am so tired. It is so long. I want to see Hamilton.’”

Eliza Hamilton was committed to one holy quest above all others: to rescue her husband's historical reputation from the gross slanders that had tarnished it. For many years after the duel, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and other political enemies had taken full advantage of their eloquence and longevity to spread defamatory anecdotes about Hamilton, who had been condemned to everlasting silence. Determined to preserve her husband's legacy, Eliza enlisted as many as thirty assistants to sift through his tall stacks of papers. Unfortunately, she was so self-effacing and so reverential toward her husband that, though she salvaged every scrap of his writing, she apparently destroyed her own letters. The capstone of her monumental labor, her life's "dearest object," was the publication of a mammoth authorized biography that would secure Hamilton's niche in the pantheon of the early republic. It was a long, exasperating wait as one biographer after another discarded the project or expired before its completion. Almost by default, the giant enterprise fell to her fourth son, John Church Hamilton, who belatedly disgorged a seven-volume history of his father's exploits. Before this hagiographic tribute was completed, however, Eliza Hamilton died at ninety-seven on November 9, 1854.

Distraught that their mother had waited vainly for decades to see her husband's life immortalized, Eliza Hamilton Holly scolded her brother for his overdue biography. "Lately in my hours of sadness, recurring to such interests as most deeply affected our blessed Mother ...I could recall none more frequent or more absorbent than her devotion to our Father. When blessed memory shows her gentle countenance and her untiring spirit before me, in this one great and beautiful aspiration after duty, I feel the same spark ignite and bid me...to seek the fulfillment of her words: 'Justice shall be done to the memory of my Hamilton.'"² It was, Eliza Hamilton Holly noted pointedly, the imperative duty that Eliza had bequeathed to all her children: *Justice shall be done to the memory of my Hamilton.*

Well, has justice been done? Few figures in American history have aroused such visceral love or loathing as Alexander Hamilton. To this day, he seems trapped in a crude historical cartoon that pits "Jeffersonian democracy" against "Hamiltonian aristocracy." For Jefferson and his followers, wedded to their vision of an agrarian Eden, Hamilton was the American Mephistopheles, the proponent of such devilish contrivances as banks, factories, and stock exchanges. They demonized him as a slavish pawn of the British Crown, a closet monarchist, a Machiavellian intriguer, a would-

be Caesar. Noah Webster contended that Hamilton's "ambition, pride, and overbearing temper" had destined him "to be the evil genius of this country."³ Hamilton's powerful vision of American nationalism, with states subordinate to a strong central government and led by a vigorous executive branch, aroused fears of a reversion to royal British ways. His seeming solicitude for the rich caused critics to portray him as a snobbish tool of plutocrats who was contemptuous of the masses. For another group of naysayers, Hamilton's unswerving faith in a professional military converted him into a potential despot. "From the first to the last words he wrote," concluded historian Henry Adams, "I read always the same Napoleonic kind of adventuredom."⁴ Even some Hamilton admirers have been unsettled by a faint tincture of something foreign in this West Indian transplant; Woodrow Wilson grudgingly praised Hamilton as "a very great man, but not a great American."⁵

Yet many distinguished commentators have echoed Eliza Hamilton's lament that justice has not been done to her Hamilton. He has tended to lack the glittering multivolumed biographies that have burnished the fame of other founders. The British statesman Lord Bryce singled out Hamilton as the one founding father who had not received his due from posterity. In *The American Commonwealth*, he observed, "One cannot note the disappearance of this brilliant figure, to Europeans the most interesting in the early history of the Republic, without the remark that his countrymen seem to have never, either in his lifetime or afterwards, duly recognized his splendid gifts."⁶ During the robust era of Progressive Republicanism, marked by brawny nationalism and energetic government, Theodore Roosevelt took up the cudgels and declared Hamilton "the most brilliant American statesman who ever lived, possessing the loftiest and keenest intellect of his time."⁷ His White House successor, William Howard Taft, likewise embraced Hamilton as "our greatest constructive statesman."⁸ In all probability, Alexander Hamilton is the foremost political figure in American history who never attained the presidency, yet he probably had a much deeper and more lasting impact than many who did.

Hamilton was the supreme double threat among the founding fathers, at once thinker and doer, sparkling theoretician and masterful executive. He and James Madison were the prime movers behind the summoning of the Constitutional Convention and the chief authors of that classic gloss on the national charter, *The Federalist*, which Hamilton supervised. As the first

treasury secretary and principal architect of the new government, Hamilton took constitutional principles and infused them with expansive life, turning abstractions into institutional realities. He had a pragmatic mind that minted comprehensive programs. In contriving the smoothly running machinery of a modern nation-state—including a budget system, a funded debt, a tax system, a central bank, a customs service, and a coast guard—and justifying them in some of America’s most influential state papers, he set a high-water mark for administrative competence that has never been equaled. If Jefferson provided the essential poetry of American political discourse, Hamilton established the prose of American statecraft. No other founder articulated such a clear and prescient vision of America’s future political, military, and economic strength or crafted such ingenious mechanisms to bind the nation together.

Hamilton’s crowded years as treasury secretary scarcely exhaust the epic story of his short life, which was stuffed with high drama. From his illegitimate birth on Nevis to his bloody downfall in Weehawken, Hamilton’s life was so tumultuous that only an audacious novelist could have dreamed it up. He embodied an enduring archetype: the obscure immigrant who comes to America, re-creates himself, and succeeds despite a lack of proper birth and breeding. The saga of his metamorphosis from an anguished clerk on St. Croix to the reigning presence in George Washington’s cabinet offers both a gripping personal story and a panoramic view of the formative years of the republic. Except for Washington, nobody stood closer to the center of American politics from 1776 to 1800 or cropped up at more turning points. More than anyone else, the omnipresent Hamilton galvanized, inspired, and scandalized the newborn nation, serving as the flash point for pent-up conflicts of class, geography, race, religion, and ideology. His contemporaries often seemed defined by how they reacted to the political gauntlets that he threw down repeatedly with such defiant panache.

Hamilton was an exuberant genius who performed at a fiendish pace and must have produced the maximum number of words that a human being can scratch out in forty-nine years. If promiscuous with his political opinions, however, he was famously reticent about his private life, especially his squalid Caribbean boyhood. No other founder had to grapple with such shame and misery, and his early years have remained wrapped in more mystery than those of any other major American statesman. While not

scanting his vibrant intellectual life, I have tried to gather anecdotal material that will bring this cerebral man to life as both a public and a private figure. Charming and impetuous, romantic and witty, dashing and headstrong, Hamilton offers the biographer an irresistible psychological study. For all his superlative mental gifts, he was afflicted with a touchy ego that made him querulous and fatally combative. He never outgrew the stigma of his illegitimacy, and his exquisite tact often gave way to egregious failures of judgment that left even his keenest admirers aghast. If capable of numerous close friendships, he also entered into titanic feuds with Jefferson, Madison, Adams, Monroe, and Burr.

The magnitude of Hamilton's feats as treasury secretary has overshadowed many other facets of his life: clerk, college student, youthful poet, essayist, artillery captain, wartime adjutant to Washington, battlefield hero, congressman, abolitionist, Bank of New York founder, state assemblyman, member of the Constitutional Convention and New York Ratifying Convention, orator, lawyer, polemicist, educator, patron saint of the *New-York Evening Post*, foreign-policy theorist, and major general in the army. Boldly uncompromising, he served as catalyst for the emergence of the first political parties and as the intellectual fountainhead for one of them, the Federalists. He was a pivotal force in four consecutive presidential elections and defined much of America's political agenda during the Washington and Adams administrations, leaving copious commentary on virtually every salient issue of the day.

Earlier generations of biographers had to rely on only a meager portion of his voluminous output. Between 1961 and 1987, Harold C. Syrett and his doughty editorial team at Columbia University Press published twenty-seven thick volumes of Hamilton's personal and political papers. Julius Goebel, Jr., and his staff added five volumes of legal and business papers to the groaning shelf, bringing the total haul to twenty-two thousand pages. These meticulous editions are much more than exhaustive compilations of Hamilton's writings: they are a scholar's feast, enriched with expert commentary as well as contemporary newspaper extracts, letters, and diary entries. No biographer has fully harvested these riches. I have supplemented this research with extensive archival work that has uncovered, among other things, nearly fifty previously undiscovered essays written by Hamilton himself. To retrieve his early life from its often impenetrable obscurity, I have also scoured records in Scotland, England, Denmark, and eight

Caribbean islands, not to mention many domestic archives. The resulting portrait, I hope, will seem fresh and surprising even to those best versed in the literature of the period.

It is an auspicious time to reexamine the life of Hamilton, who was the prophet of the capitalist revolution in America. If Jefferson enunciated the more ample view of political democracy, Hamilton possessed the finer sense of economic opportunity. He was the messenger from a future that we now inhabit. We have left behind the rosy agrarian rhetoric and slaveholding reality of Jeffersonian democracy and reside in the bustling world of trade, industry, stock markets, and banks that Hamilton envisioned. (Hamilton's staunch abolitionism formed an integral feature of this economic vision.) He has also emerged as the uncontested visionary in anticipating the shape and powers of the federal government. At a time when Jefferson and Madison celebrated legislative power as the purest expression of the popular will, Hamilton argued for a dynamic executive branch and an independent judiciary, along with a professional military, a central bank, and an advanced financial system. Today, we are indisputably the heirs to Hamilton's America, and to repudiate his legacy is, in many ways, to repudiate the modern world.

ONE

THE CASTAWAYS

Alexander Hamilton claimed Nevis in the British West Indies as his birthplace, although no surviving records substantiate this. Today, the tiny island seems little more than a colorful speck in the Caribbean, an exotic tourist hideaway. One million years ago, the land that is now Nevis Peak thrust up from the seafloor to form the island, and the extinct volcanic cone still intercepts the trade winds at an altitude of 3,200 feet, its jagged peak often obscured behind a thick swirl of clouds. This omnipresent mountain, looming over jungles, plunging gorges, and verdant foothills that sweep down to sandy beaches, made the island a natural fortress for the British. It abounded in both natural wonders and horrors: in 1690, the first capital, Jamestown, was swallowed whole by the sea during an earthquake and tidal wave.

To modern eyes, Nevis may seem like a sleepy backwater to which Hamilton was confined before his momentous escape to St. Croix and North America. But if we adjust our vision to eighteenth-century realities, we see that this West Indian setting was far from marginal, the crossroads of a bitter maritime rivalry among European powers vying for mastery of the lucrative sugar trade. A small revolution in consumer tastes had turned the Caribbean into prized acreage for growing sugarcane to sweeten the coffee, tea, and cocoa imbibed in fashionable European capitals. As a result, the small, scattered islands generated more wealth for Britain than all of her North American colonies combined. “The West Indians vastly outweigh us of the northern colonies,” Benjamin Franklin grumbled in the 1760s.¹ After the French and Indian War, the British vacillated about whether to swap all of Canada for the island of Guadeloupe; in the event the French toasted their own diplomatic cunning in retaining the sugar island. The sudden popularity of sugar, dubbed “white gold,” engendered a brutal world of overnight fortunes in which slavery proved indispensable. Since indigenous Caribbeans and Europeans balked at toiling in the sweltering canebrakes, thousands of blacks were shipped from slave-trading forts in West Africa to cultivate Nevis and the neighboring islands.

British authorities colonized Nevis with vagabonds, criminals, and other riffraff swept from the London streets to work as indentured servants or overseers. In 1727, the minister of a local Anglican church, aching for some glimmer of spirituality, regretted that the slaves were inclined to “laziness, stealing, stubbornness, murmuring, treachery, lying, drunkenness and the like.” But he reserved his most scathing strictures for a rowdy white populace composed of “whole shiploads of pickpockets, whores, rogues, vagrants, thieves, sodomites, and other filth and cutthroats of society.”² Trapped in this beautiful but godless spot, the minister bemoaned that the British imports “were not bad enough for the gallows and yet too bad to live among their virtuous countrymen at home.”³ While other founding fathers were reared in tidy New England villages or cosseted on baronial Virginia estates, Hamilton grew up in a tropical hellhole of dissipated whites and fractious slaves, all framed by a backdrop of luxuriant natural beauty.

On both his maternal and paternal sides, Hamilton’s family clung to the insecure middle rung of West Indian life, squeezed between plantation aristocrats above and street rabble and unruly slaves below. Taunted as a bastard throughout his life, Hamilton was understandably reluctant to chat

about his childhood—“my birth is the subject of the most humiliating criticism,” he wrote in one pained confession— and he turned his early family history into a taboo topic, alluded to in only a couple of cryptic letters.⁴ He described his maternal grandfather, the physician John Faucette, as “a French Huguenot who emigrated to the West Indies in consequence of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes and settled in the island of Nevis and there acquired a pretty fortune. [Revoked in 1685 by Louis XIV, the Edict of Nantes had guaranteed religious toleration for French Protestants.] I have been assured by persons who knew him that he was a man of letters and much of a gentleman.”⁵ Born ten years after his grandfather’s death, Hamilton may have embellished the sketch with a touch of gentility. In the slave-based economy, physicians often attended the auctions, checking the teeth of the human chattel and making them run, leap, and jump to test whatever strength remained after the grueling middle passage. No white in the sugar islands was entirely exempt from the pervasive taint of slavery. The archives of St. George’s Parish in the fertile, mountainous Gingerland section of Nevis record the marriage of John Faucette to a British woman, Mary Uppington, on August 21, 1718. By that point, they already had two children: a daughter, Ann, and a son, John, the latter arriving two months before the wedding. In all likelihood, lulled by the casual mores of the tropics, the Faucettes decided to formalize their link after the birth of their second child, having lived until then as a common-law couple—an expedient adopted by Hamilton’s own parents. In all, the Faucettes produced seven children, Hamilton’s mother, Rachel, being the second youngest, born circa 1729.

A persistent mythology in the Caribbean asserts that Rachel was partly black, making Alexander Hamilton a quadroon or an octoroon. In this obsessively raceconscious society, however, Rachel was invariably listed among the whites on local tax rolls. Her identification as someone of mixed race has no basis in verifiable fact. (See pages 734–35.) The folklore that Hamilton was mulatto probably arose from the incontestable truth that many, if not most, illegitimate children in the West Indies bore mixed blood. At the time of Rachel’s birth, the four thousand slaves on Nevis outnumbered whites by a ratio of four to one, making inequitable carnal relations between black slaves and white masters a dreadful commonplace. Occupying a house in the southern Nevis foothills, the Faucettes owned a small sugar plantation and had at least seven slaves—pretty typical for the

petite bourgeoisie. That Nevis later had a small black village named Fawcett, an anglicized version of the family name, confirms their ownership of slaves who later assumed their surname. The sugar islands were visited so regularly by epidemics of almost biblical proportions—malaria, dysentery, and yellow fever being the worst offenders—that five Faucette children perished in infancy or childhood, leaving only Rachel and her much older sister, Ann, as survivors. Even aided by slaves, small planters found it a tough existence. Skirting the volcanic cone, the Nevis hills were so steep and rocky that, even when terraced, they proved troublesome for sugar cultivation. The island steadily lost its economic eminence, especially after a mysterious plant disease, aggravated by drought, slowly crept across Nevis in 1737 and denuded it of much of its lush vegetation. This prompted a mass exodus of refugees, including Ann Faucette, who had married a well-to-do planter named James Lytton. They decamped to the Danish island of St. Croix, charting an escape route that Hamilton's parents were to follow.

Evidence indicates that the Faucette marriage was marred by perpetual squabbling, perhaps compounded by the back-to-back deaths of two of their children in 1736 and the blight that parched the island the next year. Mary Faucette was a pretty, socially ambitious woman and probably not content to dawdle on a stagnant island. Determined and resourceful, with a clear knack for cultivating powerful men, she appealed to the chancellor of the Leeward Islands for a legal separation from her husband. In the 1740 settlement, the Faucettes agreed to “live separately and apart for the rest of their lives,” and Mary renounced all rights to her husband's property in exchange for an inadequate annuity of fifty-three pounds.⁶ It is possible that she and Rachel traversed the narrow two-mile strait to St. Kitts, where they may even have first encountered a young Scottish nobleman named James Hamilton. Because her mother had surrendered all claims to John Faucette's money, sixteen-year-old Rachel Faucette achieved the sudden glow of a minor heiress in 1745 when her father died and left her all his property. Since Rachel was bright, beautiful, and strong willed—traits we can deduce from subsequent events—she must have been hotly pursued in a world chronically deficient in well-heeled, educated European women.

Rachel and her mother decided to start anew on St. Croix, where James and Ann Lytton had prospered, building a substantial estate outside the capital, Christiansted, called the Grange. The Lyttons likely introduced them to

another newcomer from Nevis, a Dane named Johann Michael Lavien, who had peddled household goods and now aspired to planter status. The name *Lavien* can be a Sephardic variant of *Levine*, but if he was Jewish he managed to conceal his origins. Had he presented himself as a Jew, the snobbish Mary Faucette would certainly have squelched the match in a world that frowned on religious no less than interracial marriage.

From fragmentary evidence, Lavien emerges as a man who dreamed of plucking sudden riches from the New World but stumbled, like others, into multiple disappointments. The year before he met Rachel, he squandered much of his paltry capital on a minor St. Croix sugar plantation. On this island of grand estates, a profitable operation required fifty to one hundred slaves, something beyond the reveries of the thinly capitalized Lavien. He then lowered his sights appreciably and, trying to become a planter on the cheap, acquired a 50 percent stake in a small cotton plantation. He ended up deeply in hock to the Danish West India and Guinea Company. Beyond her apparent physical allure, Rachel Faucette must have represented a fresh source of ready cash for Lavien.

For Alexander Hamilton, Johann Michael Lavien was the certified ogre of his family saga. He wrote, “A Dane, a fortune hunter of the name of *Lavine* [Hamilton’s spelling], came to Nevis bedizzened with gold and paid his addresses to my mother, then a handsome young woman having a *snug* fortune.” In the eighteenth century, a “snug” fortune signified one sufficient for a comparatively easy life. Partial to black silk gowns and blue vests with bright gold buttons, Lavien was a flashy dresser and must have splurged on such finery to hide his threadbare budget and palm himself off on Mary Faucette as an affluent suitor. Hamilton rued the day that his grandmother was “captivated by the glitter” of Lavien’s appearance and auctioned her daughter off, as it were, to the highest bidder. “In compliance with the wishes of her mother ...but against her own inclination,” Hamilton stated, the sixteen-year-old Rachel agreed to marry the older Lavien, her senior by at least a dozen years.⁷ In Hamilton’s blunt estimation, it was “a hated marriage,” as the daughter of one unhappy union was rushed straight into another.⁸

In 1745, the ill-fated wedding took place at the Grange. The newlyweds set up house on their own modest plantation, which was named, with macabre irony, Contentment. The following year, the teenage bride gave birth to a son, Peter, destined to be her one legitimate child. One wonders if Rachel

ever submitted to further conjugal relations with Lavien. Even if Lavien was not the “coarse man of repulsive personality” evoked by Hamilton’s grandson, it seems clear that Rachel felt stifled by her older husband, finding him crude and insufferable.⁹ In 1748, Lavien bought a half share in another small sugar plantation, enlarging his debt and frittering away Rachel’s fast dwindling inheritance. The marriage deteriorated to the point where the headstrong wife simply abandoned the house around 1750. A vindictive Lavien ranted in a subsequent divorce decree that while Rachel had lived with him she had “committed such errors which as between husband and wife were indecent and very suspicious.”¹⁰ In his severe judgment she was “shameless, coarse, and ungodly.”¹¹

Enraged, his pride bruised, Lavien was determined to humiliate his unruly bride. Seizing on a Danish law that allowed a husband to jail his wife if she was twice found guilty of adultery and no longer resided with him, he had Rachel clapped into the dreaded Christiansvaern, the Christiansted fort, which did double duty as the town jail.¹² Rachel has sometimes been portrayed as a “prostitute”—one of Hamilton’s journalistic nemeses branded him “the son of a camp-girl”—but such insinuations are absurd.¹³ On the other hand, that Lavien broadcast his accusations against her and met no outright refutation suggests that Rachel had indeed flouted social convention and found solace in the arms of other men.

Perched on the edge of Gallows Bay, Fort Christiansvaern had cannon that could be trained on pirates or enemy ships crossing the coral reef, as well as smaller artillery that could be swiveled landward and used to suppress slave insurrections. In this ghastly place, unspeakable punishments were meted out to rebellious blacks who had committed heinous crimes: striking whites, torching cane fields, or dashing off to freedom. They could be whipped, branded, and castrated, shackled with heavy leg irons, and entombed in filthy dungeons. The remaining cells tended to be populated by town drunks, petty thieves, and the other dregs of white society. It seems that no woman other than Rachel Lavien was ever imprisoned there for adultery. Rachel spent several months in a dank, cramped cell that measured ten by thirteen feet, and she must have gone through infernal torments of fear and loneliness. Through a small, deeply inset window, she could stare across sharpened spikes that encircled the outer wall and gaze at blue-green water that sparkled in fierce tropical sunlight. She could also eavesdrop on the busy wharf, stacked with hogsheds of sugar, which her son Alexander

would someday frequent as a young clerk in a trading firm. All the while, she had to choke down a nauseating diet of salted herring, codfish, and boiled yellow cornmeal mush.

As an amateur psychologist, Lavien left something to be desired, for he imagined that when Rachel was released after three to five months this broken woman would now tamely submit to his autocratic rule—that “everything would be better and that she like a true wife would have changed her ungodly mode of life and would live with him as was meet and fitting,” as the divorce decree later proclaimed.¹⁴ He had not reckoned on her invincible spirit. Solitude had only stiffened her resolve to expel Lavien from her life. As Hamilton later philosophized in another context, “Tis only to consult our own hearts to be convinced that nations like individuals revolt at the idea of being guided by external compulsion.”¹⁵ After Rachel left the fort, she spent a week with her mother, who was living with one of St. Croix’s overlords, Town Captain Bertram Pieter de Nully, and supporting herself by sewing and renting out her three slaves.

Then Rachel did something brave but reckless that sealed her future status as a pariah: she fled the island, abandoning both Lavien and her sole son, Peter. In doing so, she relinquished the future benefits of a legal separation and inadvertently doomed the unborn Alexander to illegitimacy. In her proud defiance of persecution, her mental toughness, and her willingness to court controversy, it is hard not to see a startling preview of her son’s passionately willful behavior.

When she left for St. Kitts in 1750, Rachel seems to have been accompanied by her mother, who announced her departure to creditors in a newspaper notice and settled her debts. Rachel must have imagined that she would never again set eyes on St. Croix and that the vengeful Lavien had inflicted his final lash. Alexander Hamilton may have been musing upon his mother’s marriage to Lavien when he later observed, “ ’Tis a very good thing when their stars unite two people who are fit for each other, who have souls capable of relishing the sweets of friendship and sensibilities....But it’s a dog of [a] life when two dissonant tempers meet.”¹⁶ When the time came for choosing his own wife, he would proceed with special care.

Hamilton’s other star-crossed parent, James Hamilton, had also been bedeviled by misfortune in the islands. Born around 1718, he was the fourth of eleven children (nine sons, two daughters) of Alexander Hamilton, the laird of Grange in Stevenston Parish in Ayrshire, Scotland, southwest of

Glasgow. In 1711, that Alexander Hamilton, the fourteenth laird in the so-called Cambuskeith line of Hamiltons, married Elizabeth Pollock, the daughter of a baronet. As Alexander must have heard ad nauseam in his boyhood, the Cambuskeith Hamiltons possessed a coat of arms and for centuries had owned a castle near Kilmarnock called the Grange. Indeed, that lineage can be traced back to the fourteenth century in impeccable genealogical tables, and he boasted in later years that he was the scion of a blue-ribbon Scottish family: “The truth is that, on the question who my parents were, I have better pretensions than most of those who in this country plume themselves on ancestry.”¹⁷

In 1685, the family took possession of ivy-covered Kerelaw Castle, set prominently on windswept hills above the little seaside town of Stevenston. Today just a mound of picturesque ruins, this stately pile then featured a great hall with graceful Gothic windows and came complete with its own barony. “The castle stands on the rather steep, wooded bank of a small stream, and overlooks a beautiful glen,” wrote one newspaper while the structure stood intact.¹⁸ The castle’s occupants enjoyed a fine if often fogbound view of the island of Arran across the Firth of Clyde.

Then as now, the North Ayrshire countryside consisted of gently rolling meadows that were well watered by streams and ponds; cows and horses browsed on largely treeless hillsides. At the time James Hamilton grew up in Kerelaw Castle, the family estate was so huge that it encompassed not just Stevenston but half the arable land in the parish. Aside from a cottage industry of weavers and a small band of artisans who made Jew’s harps, most local residents huddled in cold hovels, subsisted on a gruesome oatmeal diet, and eked out hardscrabble lives as tenant farmers for the Hamiltons. For all his storybook upbringing in the castle and highborn pedigree, James Hamilton faced uncertain prospects. As the fourth son, he had little chance of ever inheriting the storied title of laird of Grange, and, like all younger brothers in this precarious spot, he was expected to go off and fend for himself. As his son Alexander noted, his father, as “a younger son of a numerous family,” was “bred to trade.”

From the sketchy information that can be gleaned about James’s siblings, it seems that he was the black sheep of the family, marked for mediocrity. While James had no formal education to speak of, two older and two younger brothers attended the University of Glasgow, and most of his siblings found comfortable niches in the world. Brother John financed

manufacturing and insurance ventures. Brother Alexander became a surgeon, brother Walter a doctor and apothecary, and brother William a prosperous tobacco merchant, while sister Elizabeth married the surveyor of customs for Port Glasgow. Easygoing and lackadaisical, devoid of the ambition that would propel his spirited son, James Hamilton did not seem to internalize the Glaswegian ethos of hard work and strict discipline.

One has the impression that his eldest brother, John, now laird of Grange, was no country squire riding to hounds but an active, enterprising man who was intensely involved in the banking, shipping, and textile business revolutionizing Glasgow. This cathedral and university town, rhapsodized by Daniel Defoe in the 1720s as “the most beautiful little town in Britain,” already breathed a lively commercial spirit of the sort that later appealed to Alexander Hamilton.¹⁹ After the 1707 union with England, as Scottish trade with the North American and West Indian colonies boomed, merchant princes grew rich trafficking in sugar, tobacco, and cotton. In November 1737, John Hamilton took the affable but feckless James, then nineteen, and steered him into a four-year apprenticeship with an innovative Glasgow businessman named Richard Allan. Allan had executed a daring raid on Dutch industrial secrets (one that strikingly anticipates what Alexander Hamilton later attempted in bringing manufacturing to Paterson, New Jersey) and helped to pioneer the linen industry in Scotland with his Haarlem Linen and Dye Manufactory.

In 1741, John Hamilton teamed up with Allan and three Glasgow grandees — Archibald Ingram, John Glassford, and James Dechman—to form the Glasgow Inkle Factory, which produced linen tapes (inkles) that were used in making lace. Hamilton’s partners were the commercial royalty of Glasgow, who drove about in fancy coaches, presided over landed estates, and dominated the River Clyde with their oceangoing vessels. For many years these men would tirelessly bail out the hapless James Hamilton from recurrent financial scrapes.

The onerous four-year contract that James Hamilton signed with Richard Allan in 1737 was a form of legal bondage that obligated him to work as both “an apprentice and servant.”²⁰ John Hamilton paid Allan forty-five pounds sterling to groom his younger brother in the textile trade. In exchange, James would receive room, board, and fresh linen in the Allan household but no guaranteed holidays or free weekend time. John Hamilton must have thought that he was shepherding the wayward James into a