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# Review: The Overflowing of Friendship: Love Between Men and the Creation of the American Republic

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### **Comments**

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*The Overflowing of Friendship.* By Richard Godbeer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. Pp. 254. Cloth: \$35.00.)

*Reviewed by Jennifer Manion*

The central argument of Richard Godbeer's path-breaking new book is that intimate friendships between men—strengthened by frequent expressions of love and adoration for each other—were not only personally meaningful for individuals but also socially foundational to the creation of the American republic. Those versed in the literature on founding fathers will be taken aback by the suggestion that emotional intimacy rather than political theory may have been just the tie to bind men together through the tumultuous period of our nation's founding. But Godbeer pulls together a diverse array of convincing evidence demonstrating that from the colonial period through the early republic, men openly showered each other with declarations of desire, admiration, love, longing, despair, and affection. Such statements were not made in secret or with shame but rather appeared openly in the private and public writings of influential and socially respectable men. Godbeer argues that such romantic references did not necessarily signify sexual desire, attraction, or intimacies between the men, since a direct correlation between emotional intimacy and sexual desire did not become fixed in Western society until the early twentieth century.

Godbeer shows that intimacies between men were neither aberrational nor stigmatizing but rather were socially, religiously, and politically embraced and practiced by a wide range of men, including religious leaders, college students, militia members, and others. The strong bond between Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens was challenged when the two joined the Continental Army and found themselves apart. Godbeer writes, "Alexander and John now committed their love to paper as they sought to sustain themselves and each other through the hardship of separation" (126). Hamilton struggled without his friend, writing, "I hardly knew the value you had taught my heart to set upon you" (127). Evangelical ministers—encouraged by their bishops—formed strong bonds through letters and occasionally in person as they traveled the land saving souls. Itinerant Methodist ministers John Kobler and Stith Mead enjoyed a "close and loving relationship" that would not have appeared "unusual or problematic" to others (85). Kobler wrote to Mead

of “the warm feelings of my heart,” who responded, “I feel the same uniting flame glowing towards you, often I think of you in love and sympathizing prayers” (109).

At times, this thesis is advanced rather unproblematically through Godbeer’s aversion to dealing with sexuality more explicitly. He implicitly advances a thesis of social respectability rooted in the assumption that evidence of sexual deviancy would undermine the standing of these men. This need not be the case, however, as several scholars of the period (including Godbeer himself) have shown us that sexual transgressions, including sodomy between men, were tolerated by those who were otherwise upstanding citizens. This begs the question of why Godbeer did not also entertain the idea that the reason friends and family members embraced intimate relationships between men was in part because people chose not to care about the possible sexual intimacies that may have taken place.

While Godbeer appropriately goes to great lengths to avoid anachronistic projections of homosexual identity, some of his sources defy this analytical decision and beg for more expansive consideration of at least the function of sexual desire and intimacy. Take, for example, the story of James Gibson and John Smith, two friends and companions who shared each other’s lives in late eighteenth-century Philadelphia. Godbeer explains the likely perceptions of their relationship in the following way: “Given that eighteenth-century Americans had no difficulty imagining a physically affectionate and yet nonsexual love between friends, it is perhaps hardly surprising that John and James made little effort to conceal their devotion to one another, whether expressed through verbal declarations or physical affections” (38). Godbeer points to an unusual incident when they appeared not to want to be seen together alone, and he encourages the reader to accept their own stated reason for this at face value. As a student at Princeton, James wrote of this incident concerning John’s visit and their attempts to secure privacy while together in his study, “I fixing my gown across the window (to prevent the students seeing us) we looked over papers and talked till the dinner bell rang” (38). In one of the most sexually evocative passages in the book, Rhode Islander Virgil Maxcy wrote to his “dear chum” William Blanding explaining how much he missed sharing his bed with him, going so far as to say “Sometimes . . . I think I have got hold of your doodle when in reality I have hold of the bedpost” (58). Rather than explain how this rather suggestive physical reference complicates the possible role of

sexuality in this book, Godbeer simply defers to the reader and coyly states, “One cannot help but wonder.”

By arguing so strongly that sexuality was not a relevant component of such relationships, Godbeer has missed an opportunity to create a more complicated and expansive framework for intimate relationships. By focusing on emotional longing and taking an analytical sidestep around the existence of sexual desire, Godbeer creates a “break” between the two, an overcorrective that leaves the most exciting possible analysis—an advanced and expansive study of the range and depths of male emotional, physical, and sexual intimacy—unexplored. How did physical intimacy function to strengthen or intensify emotional bonds? When did physical intimacy develop into sexual intimacy, and did that transition mark a point of no return for those involved?

By situating men’s emotional experiences within the comparably loving and asexual paradigm of women’s romantic friendships in the nineteenth century, Godbeer adapts one of the oldest conceptual frameworks from the field of women’s history and uses it to dig deeper into the meaning of men’s relationships. In this respect, Godbeer contributes to a new wave of scholarship that incorporates feelings, friendship, and fraternal bonds into the histories of men’s sexuality.

Godbeer has staked out bold ground with this book. Some early Americanists will surely scoff at the notion that sentimentality was relevant even in the macho arena of state formation, just as historians of sexuality will freeze at the inference that there is no sexual attraction or intimacy between these men. That one book could successfully intervene with both the oldest historiographical and the newest theoretical questions is no small feat, but rather one for which Godbeer deserves the appreciation and admiration of his fellow historians.

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*Man of Douglas, Man of Lincoln: The Political Odyssey of James Henry Lane.* By Ian Michael Spurgeon. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008. Pp. 291. Cloth, \$42.50.)

*Reviewed by Cathy Rodabaugh*

In 1879, the Kansas state legislature considered a bill to fill the state’s two spots in Statuary Hall at the United States Capitol with likenesses of

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