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## Vice

By JILL LEPORE

“I leave to my actions to speak for themselves,” Aaron Burr once wrote, “and to my character to confound the fictions of slander.” His faith was ill placed, at least according to Nancy Isenberg, who in her fascinating new biography, “Fallen Founder,” argues that Burr has been misunderstood, and underappreciated, for two centuries. The Burr you know — for killing [Alexander Hamilton](#) in a duel in Weehawken, N.J. — is the bad boy of the early American Republic: rash, dissipated, self-interested and, by the end of his life, half-mad. But the Burr Isenberg knows is witty, wise and very, very sexy.

### FALLEN FOUNDER

The Life of Aaron Burr.

By Nancy Isenberg.

Illustrated. 540 pp. Viking. \$29.95.

Burr was born in Newark in 1756. He could hardly have boasted more eminent forebears. His father, after whom he was named, was the president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton); his mother, the brilliant diarist Esther Edwards Burr, was the daughter of the New England theologian Jonathan Edwards. Both died before he was 3. Raised by an uncle, Burr went on to become a precocious student and, beginning in 1775, a valiant soldier. In 1777 the Continental Congress promoted him to lieutenant colonel. By all accounts, he was a man of extraordinary physical courage. His war record and daunting ambition propelled him into politics, where his early career can justifiably be called meteoric. In 1784 he was elected to the New York State Assembly; 12 years later, he was [Thomas Jefferson's](#) running mate for president.

Strangely, his most devastating political defeat came with his election to the vice presidency in 1800. Before the passage of the Twelfth Amendment in 1804, presidential and vice presidential candidates did not run for separate offices. In 1800, Jefferson and Burr received equal votes in the Electoral College, but Burr, who had campaigned essentially as Jefferson's vice president, did not exactly step down, which made things more than a little awkward between the two men during — and long after — the painful weeks of deadlock in the House of Representatives. When Jefferson finally took office, he shut Burr out of his cabinet and made clear he would favor Madison as a running mate in the next election. Burr, spurned, ran for governor of New York and lost, in part because of the machinations of his longtime political adversary, Alexander Hamilton, whom he subsequently challenged to a duel. On July 11, 1804, Burr shot Hamilton in the hip. Both men fired, though there remains considerable dispute about who fired first and about whether Hamilton aimed at his opponent; Isenberg believes he did intend to shoot Burr — why else bother to put on his spectacles? Hamilton died the next day. With warrants out for his arrest on murder charges, Burr — who was still vice president — became a fugitive.

If you know much of this story, but not much more, you're not alone. After 1804, Burr's life, as Isenberg observes, became a comedy of errors: “Once he had killed Hamilton, Burr could do nothing right.” Newspapers reported that he was trying to start his own country west of the Mississippi, and in 1807,

charged with treason, he was brought to trial in Virginia. Acquitted, he went into exile. He spent years in Europe, indulging his insatiable sexual appetite and documenting his exploits in a secret journal, with entries like this: “Vis. inv. pr. U. pa. bi. jo. ma. bi. fa” (decoded: “after repeated invitations, I had sex with a Swedish maid who was not very handsome, but well built”). Eventually, he returned to New York to take up, once again, the practice of law. He died in Staten Island in 1836, at the age of 80.

“For too long,” Isenberg writes, “prejudiced characterizations of Burr have been repeated as received wisdom.” In other words, Burr’s comings and goings have inspired a good deal of slander, fiction, popular history and even pornography — including the circa 1861 “Amorous Intrigues and Adventures of Aaron Burr” (in which Burr often quaffs “the sweetest joys ever vouchsafed to man”) — but not a lot of scholarly inquiry. Popular historians, Isenberg argues, have “failed to do the legwork” — the archival research — necessary to gain a more accurate understanding of Burr. As a result, they “have unconsciously mimicked fictional portrayals.” If Americans think Burr was a schemer, a traitor and a crazed sex fiend, it’s because his enemies and a bunch of hack writers said he was a schemer, a traitor and a crazed sex fiend.

Isenberg, who holds the Mary Frances Barnard chair in 19th-century American history at the [University of Tulsa](#), is unapologetically a Burr apologist. He “was far more sincere, and far more enlightened, than he has been given credit for,” she writes. But her biography has greater ambitions, too. It is intended, in part, as a challenge to popular histories of the founders, which she disparages for their shoddy research and, especially, for their sloppiness in using Burr as a foil, without bothering to think hard about ways in which the 18th century is very different from the 21st. These popular historians don’t find out more about the real Burr, she suggests, because the fictional Burr is so useful, and versatile, from a narrative point of view. Burr didn’t just kill Hamilton; he also crossed Washington, Adams, Jefferson and Madison, and if you want to make those guys look good, it’s hard to imagine a better bad guy. “History is not a bedtime story,” Isenberg says. But because most people who’ve written about Burr act like it is, “everything we think we know about Aaron Burr is untrue.”

For example, Isenberg argues that the episode known as the “Burr conspiracy” — in which he was said to be plotting the conquest of the West, an invasion of Mexico and even a march on Washington — was actually a conspiracy against Burr, not one of his own making. And far from being a mere womanizer, Isenberg insists, Burr was “a feminist — every bit a feminist, in the modern sense of the word.” He ardently admired Mary Wollstonecraft. He married a woman 10 years his senior, and his intellectual equal. He gave his daughter the education other men gave only to their sons.

Whatever his views on women, much of the rhetoric of Burr’s career involved his manliness. Burr is to Hamilton as “a Man is to a Boy,” one supporter wrote in 1800. He “never penned a declaration of independence,” another advocate observed, “but he has done much more — he has engraved that declaration in capitals with the point of his sword. ... He has been liberal of his blood, while Mr. Jefferson has only hazarded his ink.”

Burr lived in an age of manliness. As Isenberg points out, he also lived in an age in which men’s sexual conquests, and even the keeping of secret journals about one’s sexual adventures, were not at all unusual. “The nation was simply not as virtue-bound as we would like to imagine,” she writes, and with good cause. A generation of social historians has demonstrated as much. “The sexualized image of Burr,” Isenberg insists, “was principally a function of political rivalry.”

Not coincidentally, Burr's chief rivals, Hamilton and Jefferson, were also the two men with whose manliness his was most often compared. "They felt threatened by him," Isenberg concludes, "not by any discernible immorality, as they pretended, but by his potential popularity, detrimental to their ambition."

Isenberg's call for a better, less fetishistic history of the founding fathers is eloquent and inspiring. And her study of Burr is full of insight and new research. It is an important and engaging account. But Burr may not be the best vehicle for challenging our piety about the founders. The problem is, it's hard, even after reading "Fallen Founder," not to agree with Burr's enemies that he was a bit of a schemer, probably a traitor and at least some kind of fiend. Surely we would understand the founders better if we followed Isenberg and put a little more flesh on their bones. But Aaron Burr has a little too much on his.

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