Martin Van Buren's Autobiography


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The fashion moved above, more than sixty years before, and there was no
written, there comes to light one
of the greatest autobiographies ever
produced in this country. It is
interesting that shortly after his death
in 1862, the papers of the day
and occasionally discount or
appreciate the value of this
pamphlet. The

not. He had quite the Rooseveltian
characteristics, if he resembled the
New York President in nothing else,
of refusing to be drawn into any
discussion of his position in
life, He had thoroughly thought it out.
Once Van Buren had made up his
mind he was indivisible, and he could
not be swayed from it or forced into
a compromise. He generally tested
the legislature, and

not, he did not. To say that he was a
man of the Republican

not, so was it then
called, the Repeal
Cabinet. Van Buren
used the latter name to
the end of his days.

This fixture of his was nowhere better shown than in the famous

war that raged over Peg O'Neale. That was her maiden
name, and she was the wife of Major
Van Buren, Jackson's first

Secretary of War. She had been a gay

girl, and her father was a tavern

keeper. The high-browed Cabinet
tables refused to recognize her, and

Van Buren thought it was an actual
antagonism between those who believed in

and those who were

prejudiced against them. To say
that one was a friend of the people
meant that he was a member of the

Democratic Party, or, as it was

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hands it becomes a matter of absorbing interest. But that may be said of everything he writes. He goes deeply into what appear to him the motives of all the actors in that great battle, though with never any apparent desire to do injustice to any of them, or in fact to any of the statesmen of whom he treats. Indeed, he manages to find some good qualities even in Webster, whom he evidently loathes, and is never so happy as when he is telling of a reconciliation with some one who had injured him—Clay, for instance, or Calhoun, both of whom had conspired in the plot to recall him from England. As has been said above, he discloses his character unconsciously, and it is the character of a brave, true gentleman, mild in manner, immovable in policy, generous in heart, and afraid of nothing.

The character of his hero, Jackson, rises and grows in the same steady manner in these deliberate pages. Some of his pen portraits are very striking; one can fairly see the "demonic look" that blazed in the eyes of Calhoun, standing close to the Vice President's desk, while the Senate was trying to humiliate that officer, Van Buren. Clay appears constantly and is always characterized, or else his acts characterize him. He pays a curious tribute to the Adamses, not knowing that their family had not finished with its fame. Once he approached John Quincy Adams, intending to shake hands and end their enmity, but Adams drew away with so fierce a look that Van Buren feared he meant to strike him. But he always admired Adams, and though there was never any reconciliation, it was not Van Buren's fault; nor does he utter anything but praise for the Old Man Eloquent.

It is a most remarkable book, a great autobiography despite its incompleteness. It covers an immense amount of ground, including the early days of Tammany Hall, and is embellished with the shrewdest and most thought-provoking commentaries on life and politics. He had a great reputation for common sense when he was alive, and his memoir proves that if anything it was underestimated.

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