

The real America

Book Review: *Who We Are – America’s Fight for Universal Progress, from Franklin to Kennedy (Volume 1: 1750s to 1850s)*, by Anton Chaitkin, Amazon.

By Robert Barwick

This is an amazing, crucial and timely book. Author Anton (Tony) Chaitkin has conducted a forensic study of a current of patriotic nationalism—in the best sense of those terms—as it flows through and shapes a century of American, and world, history. He sets the scene for a second volume that will cover the following century up to John F. Kennedy and the rise of the America that dominates the world today.

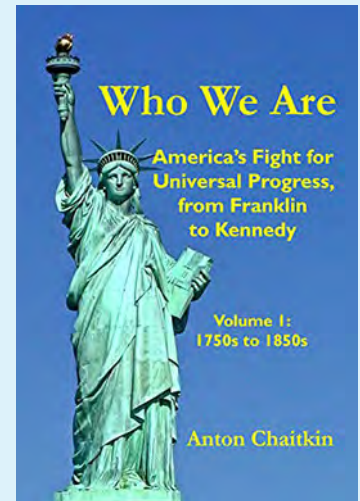
As the son of an activist Jewish lawyer who led the American Jewish Congress boycott against Hitler’s Germany in the 1930s, Anton Chaitkin is well positioned to clarify true nationalism, so often associated with Hitler. He calls the conflation of nationalism with Nazism “deceptive”, observing that America’s greatest and most humane statesmen such as Abraham Lincoln were passionate nationalists, opposed to the slavery and backwardness enforced by imperialism. This is a crucial point to establish, because Tony draws out the nationalist tendency that drove America’s economic and political progress against the opposition of British imperial interests and their American loyalists. The nationalist current he identifies was committed to the betterment of people’s lives, through scientific discovery, technology and industry, and to the political freedom and economic policies necessary to foster that progress. Its greatest exponents were not hostile to foreign countries, and in fact were collaborative with like-minded thinkers all over the world, but also fought for and were protective of America’s sovereignty while determined to stay out of conflicts between Europe’s colonial powers, unlike the prevailing US tendency today.

Who We Are traces this nationalist tendency to Great Britain, where a circle of collaborators around American envoy Benjamin Franklin, the father of American nationalism, actively conspired to advance productive technologies in canal construction and steam engines. Famous English industrial names such as Boulton, Wedgwood, Wilkinson and Priestly allied to Franklin made breakthroughs in technology and industry that advanced Britain, and shared those breakthroughs with America; they organised themselves into an association which exists to this day called the Lunar Society, whose modern office-holders endorsed this book. Tony takes delight in skewering myths, such as the “market” being the driving force behind economic progress: he shows that English canal construction, which spurred the burst of industrial progress in the 18th century, was initially motivated simply by a desire to make improvements to land and production, and only later did market opportunities emerge.

The extraordinary Benjamin Franklin organised a parallel collaboration in America, which included recruiting leading British and Irish intellectuals to relocate and consolidate an American commit-

ment to scientific breakthroughs to uplift mankind. While also documenting the British imperial resistance to this intention, the highlight of Tony’s book is the clear evidence he presents of an unbroken line of collaboration from the circle around Franklin through to Abraham Lincoln’s Republicans. An example is the father-son duo of economists directly connecting Franklin and Lincoln, Mathew and Henry Carey: Franklin employed the 19-year-old Irish firebrand Mathew Carey as a printer at his French base of operations in 1779, before Carey emigrated to Philadelphia in 1784, where he played a leading role in the promotion of nationalist economics against British free trade; Henry Carey expanded on his father’s work to become one of the greatest economists of the 19th century, and economics adviser to Abraham Lincoln.

In between the two bookends of Franklin and Lincoln, Tony presents a wonderful cast of characters, all linked through the decades, and their collaboration around specific historical events and projects. These collaborations include: the American Revolution and Constitution; Alexander Hamilton’s First Bank of the United States and its successor under Nicholas Biddle and John Quincy Adams, the Second Bank of the United States; the West Point Military Academy and its supremely accomplished Army Corps of Engineers; and the construction of the canals and then railways that industrialised the North and Mid-West. As well as the Careys, the personalities include: Alexander Hamilton; Congressman Henry Clay; West Point founding superintendent and Ben Franklin’s grandnephew Jonathan Williams; Second Bank of the United States President Nicholas Biddle; President John Quincy Adams; Senator and Governor of New York DeWitt Clinton; West Point Graduate and Army Chief Engineer Joseph Gardner Swift; locomotive manufacturer Mathias Baldwin; German economist Friedrich List; and scientist and Ben



Ben Franklin (left) and Abraham Lincoln (right) are bookends for the century of progress detailed in this book; these two giants of American history were directly connected by the father-son economists Mathew (centre left) and Henry Carey (centre right). Photos: Wikipedia; Flickr

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Franklin's great-grandson Alexander Dallas Bache. There are many more, too many to list here, and everyone should read the book to find out who they are.

The long arc of collaboration between the circles around these individuals that Tony documents is a profound insight into how history is made. From conspiring to achieve specific political outcomes involving everything from the writing of the US Constitution, the outcome of John Quincy Adams' presidential election, and the passage of important acts of Congress relating to tariffs, national banking, and infrastructure projects, to their more general shared commitment to national economic development and scientific progress, these remarkable statesmen re-shaped the world, defining new standards of human welfare and human progress, which made America a "beacon of hope and temple of liberty" for all mankind. For instance, it was this progress that inspired Australia's great republican statesman the Rev. Dr John Dunmore Lang to call for the establish of the United States of Australia, the "Great Republic of the South Seas".

Importantly, lest anyone think that progress is easy won, *Who We Are* also documents the opposition to these nationalists, including the British imperial interests who co-opted the industrial revolution in their own country, introducing the human exploitation and misery of child labour and other great evils. Not surprisingly, the slave-owning and -trading interests in the United States, economically allied with the British imperialists, also opposed these policies. Initially allies in the fight for independence, they came to fear the consequences of national economic development for their southern plantation economy. Even Thomas Jefferson, famous for his role in writing the Declaration of Independence, would eventually align with his fellow southern slave-owners against his revolutionary colleagues, and oppose their nationalist economic development policies.

The history that Tony Chaitkin brings to life should be inspirational to anyone today involved in political activism to advance policies committed to the common good. It abso-

lutely is inspirational to this reviewer. It shows how committed individuals who have dedicated their lives to ideas and principles that elevate humanity can collaborate with like-minded thinkers to bring those ideas into being. At times the breakthroughs come fast; at times they take decades—but it is how progress happens.

One final comment: In the 75 years since the end of World War II, the global perception of the United States of America has gone from overwhelming admiration for the nation that won WWII and landed a man on the moon, to increasing global resentment at its increasingly shameful record on both the domestic and international stage: a domestic economy rigged in favour of financial predators on Wall Street and mega-billionaires, in which tens of millions of people are falling further and further behind in poverty and misery; and a recent history of disastrous and murderous wars, which have destroyed the lives of millions in both the targeted nations and in the USA itself among the demographic that enlists for military service, for no actual national benefit except an illusion of maintaining global strategic hegemony against invented threats. We may well ask, which is the real America? Was the greatness of the USA a myth, and should we be cynical that nations would ever act for the greater good of humanity (as, for instance, Americans and Australians are cynical of China's Belt and Road intentions today)? *Who We Are* lays a foundation to answer those questions—America was truly great, but that greatness was not perfection, nor was it ordained by heaven in some supernatural way; rather, its greatness was the commitment, vision, and accomplishments of the heroic human beings profiled in this book, and it's the insight Tony provides into the nationalist, but universal, ideology that motivated them that, if re-embraced today, can truly make America great again, and indeed make any country great.

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