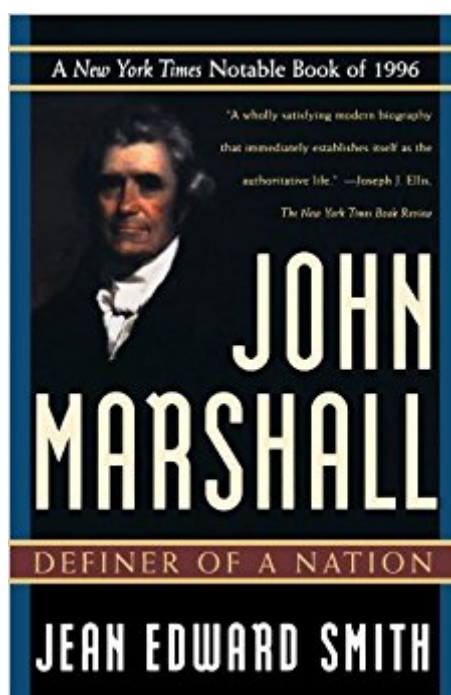


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John Marshall: Definer Of A Nation



Synopsis

A New York Times Notable Book of 1996 It was in tolling the death of Chief Justice John Marshall in 1835 that the Liberty Bell cracked, never to ring again. An apt symbol of the man who shaped both court and country, whose life "reads like an early history of the United States," as the Wall Street Journal noted, adding: Jean Edward Smith "does an excellent job of recounting the details of Marshall's life without missing the dramatic sweep of the history it encompassed." Working from primary sources, Jean Edward Smith has drawn an elegant portrait of a remarkable man. Lawyer, jurist, scholar; soldier, comrade, friend; and, most especially, lover of fine Madeira, good food, and animated table talk: the Marshall who emerges from these pages is noteworthy for his very human qualities as for his piercing intellect, and, perhaps most extraordinary, for his talents as a leader of men and a molder of consensus. A man of many parts, a true son of the Enlightenment, John Marshall did much for his country, and John Marshall: Definer of a Nation demonstrates this on every page.

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Customer Reviews

What a book and what a topic for a non-lawyer, early American history buff. I actually feel smarter now! Seriously, Jean Edward Smith does a great job of pulling a tremendous amount of primary source material into a seamlessly integrated biography on US Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall. In large part, because of all the primary source quotes, the book reads slowly, but without videos, photographs, and voice recordings, that's the best way to learn about historical figures from

that era. Smith's own writing, research, and overall understanding of the material and ability to convey that to the reader is excellent. I was not aware that John Marshall was so involved in Virginia politics after the War and was asked multiple times by fellow Virginian George Washington to take on major positions, only to be rebuffed. He was so highly admired even before he entered the Supreme Court. So, the first 300 pages cover Marshall's career leading up to his nomination. The next 200+ pages cover his tenure on the Supreme Court. What is really nice, though, about the way Smith handles the biography, is that he constantly brings back recurring themes in Marshall's life, whether it is Marshall's ability to get along with people from either side of the aisle and his remarkable affability and love of Madeira wine, or his plain old good judgment and belief in the supremacy of the Union, or his dedication to his job and the country and his ability to strengthen the Supreme Court by striving for unanimous decisions and collegiality among the individual Supreme Court justices. And obviously, Smith does a good job of putting the importance of Marshall's decisions in perspective in his time and today.

I don't think that there are any major monuments to John Marshall in the United States. He is nowhere to be found on the Mall in Washington, his face isn't carved into any mountains, and his image doesn't grace any form of national currency. Yet, if one were challenged to make a short list of individual Americans who had the greatest influence on the structure of our government and whose actions have reverberated down to our every day life, John Marshall would have to be on it. For all intents and purposes, John Marshall defined the role of the Supreme Court in American government. As biographer Jean Edward Smith notes, when Marshall was suddenly appointed by John Adams to replace Oliver Ellsworth as Chief Justice in 1800, "he assumed leadership of a court that enjoyed little prestige and even less authority." When he died 36 years later he left a Court that was a bastion of stability, unity and respect in government and whose reputation was the highest in the land. Although the majority of the book focuses quite naturally on Marshall's storied career as Chief Justice, Smith does highlight the long and varied service he gave to his country before joining the Court in 1801. Marshall was a valiant officer in the American Revolution, present at the battles of Brandywine, Germantown and Yorktown, and suffered the privations of Valley Forge (where he bunked with James Monroe). He became a celebrity when his tough stance against Talleyrand in the XYZ Affair became public knowledge in America in 1798 and he served in Congress and then briefly as Secretary of State in the administration of John Adams, where Marshall was a rare friend and political soul mate to the tortured Yankee president.

Although a long-time Jefferson fan, I could not put this book down about his "nemesis". Marshall turns out to have been every bit as patriotic, anti-party and fair minded as Jefferson is reputed to have been. As the author points out, it is hard to believe how two men that were so alike could dislike each other so much. Rather than ascertain the cause of their dislike, the author was very honest in stating that there doesn't seem to be any one particular instance to give reason to such enmity. As a matter of fact, the two men were related and Jefferson, as president, had appointed Marshall's father to an important surveyor's post. The author goes to great length to give Jefferson his due and to not be vindictive. While the author obviously likes Marshall, he does not play favorites or make excuses for his subject. He explains both men's actions and motivations and stresses that both were generally after the same goals for America. As he has in recent works, Jefferson did come across as a bit petulant and vindictive in some of his actions and reactions. I couldn't help many times agreeing with Marshall's points of view when looked at from a practical or legal point (independence of the courts, commerce clause protection, laws of contracts, strong national government and anti-nullification). He was also anti-slavery in a mild, southern way. Mr. Marshall comes across as a very bright, unpretentious, extremely likable man to friend and foe alike. He was able to prevent political differences from damaging friendships and always displayed a big heart (including leading local efforts to raise money to help the estate of the deceased Jefferson).

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