

BURR, by Gore Vidal

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Historical novels are what I enjoy most about history. Once you start reading, you're caught up in another time and another world which seems hauntingly familiar because you meet people face-to-face who you've heard so much about. Burr, by Gore Vidal (Random House: 1973) is an excellent example of a well-written historical novel. The book is about the infamous Aaron Burr, the man who killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel. He was also the man who served as Jefferson's vice-president and who was later charged with treason by Jefferson for trying to build his own empire in the West.

In addition, Aaron Burr was intimately involved with the endless struggles that created our country. He knew all the founding fathers as contemporaries and friends. Vidal, through extensive research, creates Burr in this book, and through his eyes, we get to know other familiar faces as well. George Washington, the man who "ultimately...must be judged as an excellent politician who had no gift for warfare. History, as usual, has got it all backward." General Lee, "brilliant, vain, fascinating"; Hamilton, "impertinent"; Jefferson, "the most charming man...as well as the most deceitful"; James Madison, a "great little man". We also see a lot of Burr's feelings about the revolution and the constitutional arguments. "The rich tended to be pro-British while the poor were not interested in whether or not American merchants paid taxes to a far away island. The truth is that except for a handful of ambitious lawyers, there were very few 'patriots' in 1775. By the time the long deadly war came to an end, there were hardly any to be found. The best died; the rest grew weary."

Vidal uses a fictional journalist--Charlie Schuyler--to narrate the story in the role of an aspiring young lawyer who becomes Burr's friend and confidant (even though he is on an assignment to discover some proof that Burr fathered Martin Van Buren). Interspersed are Burr's memoirs, written in a believable style which tells the experiences of a fascinating man as well as showing events in our history at close hand. Burr takes us to Valley Forge and Quebec and destroys any illusions of romantic glory or even successful military organization. We see his eccentric second marriage to a wealthy widow, late in life, amid accusations of embezzling her fortune, and ending in divorce. These are just parts of a much larger collection of reminiscences of Burr's, which make up this very readable novel.