

Aaron Burr

No man sprang from better stock than did Aaron Burr, grandson of Jonathan Edwards, and son of the Burr who was President of Princeton College. Few had enjoyed greater educational advantages than he, not one could exceed him in personal magnetism, that power of attraction which is so-called for want of a better name and which, like electricity, while not comprehended is acknowledged and utilized. With all his gifts there was one great thing which he lacked. He knew not to be true. It was this defect that caused all the failures and disappointments of his career. Dr. McCaleb* seems to think that in Burr's early days this blemish was not manifest, for in speaking of his military life he says that "Burr's rise was rapid; his integrity, bravery, intelligence and withal his knowledge of military science, recommended him to his superiors." If the word integrity had been omitted here, as the quality was omitted from Burr's mental make-up, the above quoted statement would have been correct. In fact this serious defect in Burr's character was very early recognized by those who knew him intimately. His brother-in-law, Judge Tapping Reeve (not Tappan, as misprinted in Dr. McCaleb's book) wrote of Burr when the latter was but about seventeen years of age, in a letter hitherto unpublished:

"My wife's brother Aaron is a youth of extraordinary powers of mind. He will accomplish great things if he lives and *if he shall*

* **THE AARON BURR CONSPIRACY: A History Largely from Original and Hitherto Unused Sources.** By Walter Flavius McCaleb. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. \$2.50 net.

not prove that he has the fatal defect of *some of his lamented father's maternal ancestors* of being unable to see *wrong* in anything which he *desires* to do. This is a source of much anxiety to his sister, whose affection for him is intense, and, indeed, his for her seems to be equally so. It is impossible to avoid loving him. May God grant that our forebodings prove false, for he is capable of doing great and good things."

Unfortunately Judge Reeve's forebodings were not without foundation. The brilliant Burr betrayed both friend and foe in turn, and sometimes both at once.

Dr. McCaleb has done a good work in searching carefully among long neglected documents in Mexico, as well as in our own State records, and has fully proved that it was not "on technical grounds alone," as asserted by Jefferson, and not "owing to the malignity of the Tory-Federalists against our greatest President," as stated in one of the administration papers of the day, that the famous trial of an ex-Vice-President of the United States for a treasonable conspiracy resulted in a verdict of acquittal.

The enterprise which Burr had attempted was one that offered many attractions, both to his ambition and his ardently imaginative temperament. The Spanish tyranny in Mexico was naturally hateful to him. He was sanguine, and radiant dreams floated before him; dreams in which he saw himself at once a liberator and a king of a happy people. He had no scruples to interfere with the use of whatever means of prosecuting any desirable adventure might present themselves. He needed money, and he hesitated at nothing that might enable him to secure it. But he was not insane enough to think it practicable to break up the Union. He merely wished to escape with credit from a country in which he had once hoped to fill the foremost place, but where he had come to be despised and hated.

Dr. McCaleb has cleared Burr's memory of having contemplated the crime of treason, and, what is of greater importance, has cleared the Southern and Western States of that day from suspicion of a readiness to be seduced into treasonable action, but in so doing he has established one more fact of damaging import to the memory of Jefferson.