

A Burriana Bevy,
A Prestidigitation Primer, and
A Newspaper Nest

WILLIAM BUTTS

HARDISON, Brian Davon. *Burriana: A Catalogue of Rare Books, Pamphlets, Letters, Manuscripts, Documents, & Objects By, About, or Relating to Aaron Burr and His Contemporaries.* New York: The Grolier Club, 2012. Small 4to. Blue cloth. xxiii, 306pp. Illustrations. **\$75.00.**

JOHNSON, Michael E. *Playing Cards Autographed by Magicians: A Collector's Guide.* San Marcos, CA: Michael E. Johnson, 2012. 4to. Softbound. 82pp. Illustrations. **\$19.99**

ANDRLIK, Todd. *Reporting the Revolutionary War: Before It Was History, It Was News.* Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2012. Small 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. xv, 384pp. Illustrations. **\$39.99.**

Few reputations in this country other than Benedict Arnold are as muddled as that of third vice president Aaron Burr (1756–1836), and Brian Hardison's exceptional *Burriana* goes a long way toward correcting our collective misconceptions. If

you really want to become well versed on a historical figure, not only biographies and traditional sources but also documentary references such as bibliographies (in this case, Tompkins' *Burr Bibliography*), collected papers (Kline and Wood's *Political Correspondence and Public Papers of Aaron Burr*) and exhibition catalogues such as this should be an integral part of that long process.

Brian Hardison's wonderfully titled *Burriana* and its aptly antiquated subtitle *A Catalogue of Rare Books, Pamphlets, Letters, Manuscripts, Documents, & Objects By, About, or Relating to Aaron Burr and His Contemporaries* describes 524 items in this collector's thorough collection and occasionally (not often enough) illustrates them. One always wonders how such a large and sharply-focused collection comes into being, and Hardison addresses that in his preface:

For the past twenty years I have had the good fortune of being able to collect rare books, manuscripts, autograph letters, original documents, and possessions of early Americans. My collecting began in a common way with Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis and their contemporaries during the War Between the States. Lincoln's hero was Henry Clay, which led me to collect the great triumvirate of Calhoun, Clay, and Webster. It was during my study of Clay and his defense of Aaron Burr in Kentucky that my interest in Burr began. It did not take long before Burr became the central focus of my attention and collecting.

Hardison also points out that he is not an ancestor of Burr ("I have no skin in the game"), but comes to the aid of the much-maligned statesman for the simple reason that "it is my opinion that history has treated Burr poorly. Because of the early death of his only grandchild in 1812 followed by the tragic loss of his only child, there was no one left to defend Burr's honor. He became an easy mark for those looking for a black sheep among the founding fathers. Unfortunately for our country, the talents of a great man were lost as a result of nothing more than the human frailties of envy and revenge."

Hardison's introduction is a superb, concise synopsis of the career of this incredibly misunderstood figure and a defense

BURRIANA:

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AARON BURR
AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

From the collection of
BRIAN DAVON HARDISON



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that attempts to untangle all the misconceptions, half truths and lies that have sullied Burr's reputation in the American mind. "In spite of his very public life," he writes,

most of what we know about Burr comes from the written word of his political opponents and enemies. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Burr was not particularly concerned with leaving a written legacy of his life or deeds. This lack of concern for his

place in history has left him one of the most maligned figures of the founding era.... The picture that people have of Burr is one of a villain, despite there being no record of him having uttered a negative word about anyone.... But a careful look through the rare books, pamphlets, documents, and letters of his time reveals a different image of Burr, an image simultaneously less villainous and more interesting.

Hardison reviews Burr's brilliant career as a young man fighting in the American Revolution, heroically trying to carry the body of his dead commander off a battlefield in Quebec and soon afterward saving the day for General Israel Putnam in the Battle of New York when he figured out an escape route for 5,000 troops and their cannons—"Putnam's army comprised half of the Continental Army, and British capture might have meant the end of the war, and would certainly have meant the end of Washington's command." He also surveys Burr's equally brilliant legal career, his meteoric rise in politics to the U.S. Senate, the 1800 presidential election in which he and Jefferson each received the same number of electoral votes but the House of Representatives finally chose Jefferson.

Hardison argues that Burr's fall from grace came from his belief "that answering a political opponent's charges or falsehoods signaled to his constituents that the accusations were valid.... Burr's reluctance to speak negatively about others kept him from responding to the public accusations." He devotes surprisingly little space to Burr's famous duel with Alexander Hamilton. I agree with his conclusion that "A study over time of the events that took place during the duel has placed Burr in a more favorable light.... Today it is generally accepted that Burr did nothing but follow the code duello." He devotes far more space to the "Burr Conspiracy," a complex affair in which the former vice president and associates plotted to take Spanish America (Florida and Louisiana) but were charged with treason for attempting to wrest U.S. territory from the U.S. government. Burr was ultimately acquitted in the most controversial trial of its day.

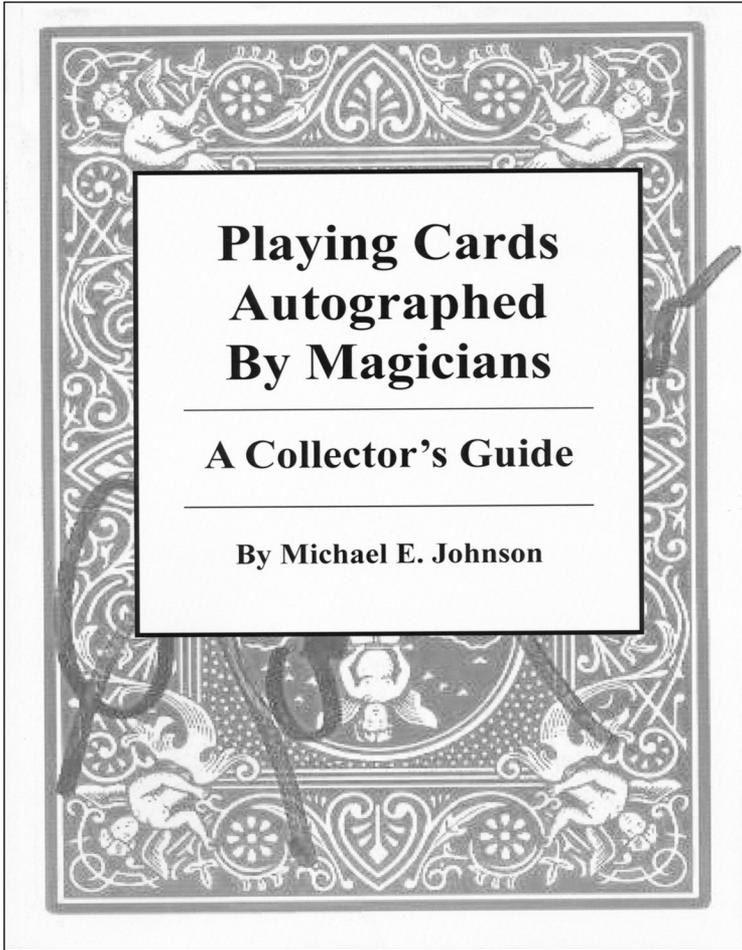
But it's the autograph material that draws collectors to *Burriana*, and Hardison does not disappoint. Exhibits are all arranged chronologically from Burr's childhood through his last years in New York—opening with the 1757 pamphlet printing of Rever-

end Caleb Smith's *Sermon, Occasioned by the Much-Lamented Death of the Reverend Mr. Aaron Burr* (when little Aaron was a baby) to a second-generation death mask of the statesman (not illustrated, alas). Autograph material—and not just of Burr himself, but of family members, friends and colleagues—is far more plentiful than I anticipated. Pamphlets and books also abound. Each entry is detailed, letters are often quoted at length and all are illuminated with Hardison's interesting research and background information.

Illustrations are handsomely accomplished entirely in color, and while not overly abundant represent a good cross-section of Hardison's well-rounded collection. One would wish for more illustrations, to be sure—there can never be too many for my liking—but those that appear are superbly done.

Though not autograph material, it's particularly thrilling to behold Aaron Burr's pocket watch, an extraordinary artifact upon whose dial is painted "The earliest known likeness of Theodosia Burr" and "so far as I know, the only likeness extant of Burr's first wife." There's also portraitist John Wesley Jarvis's 1802 miniature ink and watercolor portraits of Burr and his daughter Theodosia—his portrait also doubling as the book's frontispiece. Of personal interest (since I write this from Jo Daviess County) is a severely dog-eared 1807 pamphlet by our county's namesake, a Kentucky legislator killed in the Battle of Tippecanoe: *A View of the President's Conduct, Concerning the Conspiracy of 1806* by Joseph Hamilton Daveiss—apparently only places named after him (such as Jo Daviess County) spelled his name differently, presumably for the sake of pronunciation. And near the close of *Burriana* a color oil painting of an unnamed gentleman ("probably Aaron Burr at an advanced age") by an unknown artist depicts a haunting head-and-shoulders portrait of an elderly male with an intense gaze.

Like all Grolier Club exhibition catalogues, *Burriana* is a beaut'—handsomely designed and elegantly typeset with generous margins. Collectors with a focus on Burr or on figures of his era would be well advised to add this to their libraries. Few works illustrate this many Burr handwriting samples from different periods of his life, and you would be hard pressed to find other exemplars of some of the other lesser-known figures whose letters are illustrated here. Once more, the Grolier Club has shown



itself a prime source for works of lasting merit on historical autographs and documents.

Playing Cards

Like many young boys, I went through a period of fascination with prestidigitation—reading how-to books on magic, constructing seemingly-intricate cardboard devices that never worked, etc. Today, as a historical autograph dealer, my familiarity with magic extends mainly to the big names of old, whose autograph material is highly collectible—Harry Houdini, Harry

Blackstone Sr., Howard Thurston. As for mainstream magicians today, I'm familiar with the same big names with which most Americans are familiar. There's the late, large-mustachioed Canadian Doug Henning, the Vegas glitz-and-glamour guys (David Copperfield, Siegfried and Roy, Penn and Teller), the "magician's magicians" such as Ricky Jay and James Randi, the hip edginess of Criss Angel and the early David Blaine.

So Michael Johnson's *Playing Cards Autographed by Magicians* comes as a pleasant, off-the-wall foray into a field about which I know next to nothing. But isn't that one of the great joys of autographs—the chance to head off into new territory? "Some people collect playing cards," writes Johnson. "Some people collect autographs. And some people collect magic. But when the three hobbies merge, you have the specialized field of collecting playing cards signed by magicians.... Playing cards are the most quintessential items for magicians to sign, just as baseballs are ideal for pitchers, and sheet music is best for musicians."

Johnson briefly covers all the expected how-tos of this field: Basics such as which card to have signed (aces, twos, threes and fours are preferred for their "abundant white space" and red cards are preferred for their "nice contrast to the traditional black autograph"), the best brands of cards, which magicians to collect, where to find them, how to write them. There's a short section on forgeries, just a few basics for the absolute neophyte. Elsewhere he cautions about forged Doug Henning, Bill Bixby (television's *The Magician*) and Criss Angel autographs on the market, though unfortunately he doesn't illustrate any of these forgeries.

Given that signed playing cards are usually quite inexpensive and the fact that 99% of the magicians illustrated in this volume are still alive, I'm baffled that Johnson often touts eBay as a venue for purchasing signed cards. Strangely, he even notes the seller name and long item numbers when referring to specific acquisitions—why, I can't imagine. Personally, I think this troubling venue would take most of the fun out of it. Collecting these cards can easily and likely quite successfully be pursued without resorting to a venue that this reviewer and the majority of dealers and serious collectors consider the single largest source of bad material on the market today. True, autograph material of most of these magicians isn't valuable enough to interest forgers.

But if a collector can acquire them from the magician by mail and perhaps also end up with an accompanying letter or signed photograph in the process—something personal and meaningful—why buy these in an impersonal online auction? Call me cheap, but I find that an unsatisfying way to collect material from living persons.

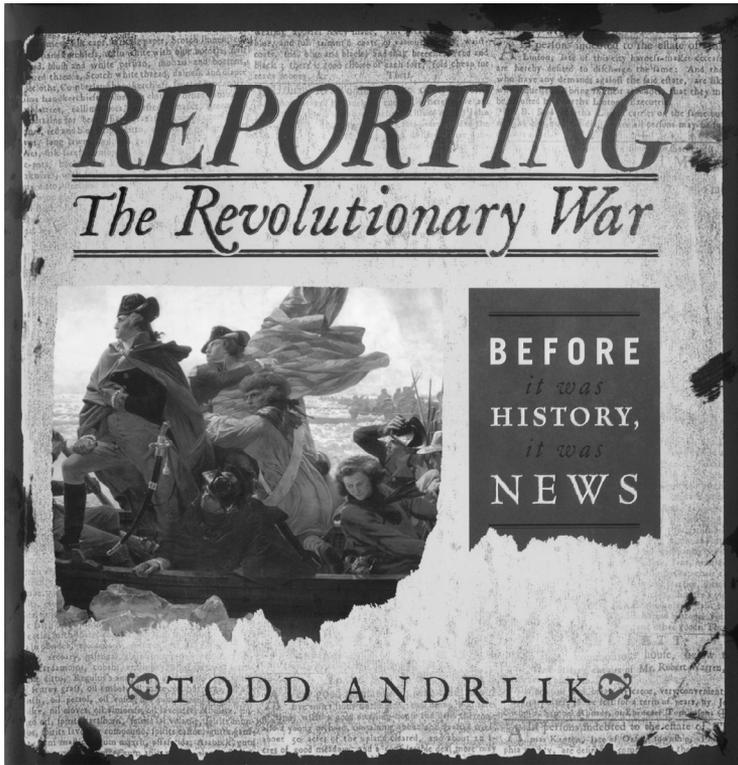
The bulk of *Playing Cards Autographed by Magicians* consists of A to Z (by first name, oddly) color illustrations of 192 signed playing cards representing about 150 magicians. I admit to having never heard of most of these magicians, but it's great fun to peruse these color images of flashy cards signed by the likes of (to cite some of the more unusual stage names) Ickle Pickle, De-vo vom Schattenreich, Chef Anton, Goldfinger and Dove, Slydini, Silly Billy, Amazing Johnathan, Fantasio, and Sylvester the Jester.

Playing Cards Autographed by Magicians makes an enjoyable jaunt into a niche collecting field that never even crossed my mind—a welcome shift from the more serious historical fare that fills our reference shelves. It's well illustrated and it's priced right. For anyone wishing to immerse himself in the world of contemporary magicians and their autographs, Johnson makes a fine introduction.

Revolutionary War “News”

Little did I suspect that the young man who purchased a Lincoln assassination newspaper in my shop some years ago—his very first historical newspaper acquisition—would become so enamored with old newspapers that the result would be a book: *Reporting the Revolutionary War: Before It Was History, It Was News*. Not only has Todd Andrlik formed a collection large and important enough that this sturdy coffee table volume came out of it, but he created a website (RagLinen.com), “an online museum of historically significant newspapers dating back to the sixteenth century.”

Historical newspapers often interest historical autograph collectors. Both are, after all, historical *paper*, and both lend an on-the-spot immediacy that books can't quite capture. Newspapers make natural companion pieces to documents—or vice versa—and collectors of one frequently become collectors of the other. “Newspapers are the closest thing we have to photos of



the Revolution,” writes Andrlik. “They transport readers back in time, providing unmatched insight about common life and life-altering events. Despite their small size and lack of headlines, eighteenth-century newspapers pack an intense, concentrated punch and demonstrate the incredible power of the printed word.”

Reporting the Revolutionary War represents a whole new type of history text—at least a type that this bookshop owner has never encountered. The extensive full-page color illustrations don’t elaborate the text—the texts elaborate the illustrations. Sure, one finds collections of *New York Times* significant issues and collections of Civil War newspapers in book form, but there’s no attempt to explain and educate based on them. Andrlik enlisted a horde of noted historian and Revolutionary War experts (Thomas Fleming and Bruce Chadwick among them) to elucidate the specific events

reported in the newspapers depicted, which hail from across New England and even England. Thirteen chapters lead the reader chronologically through the war, via newspapers dated between 1763 and 1783. This is preceded by a useful essay on the process of printing newspapers by hand using muscle-cranked presses.

Andrlik's "Revolutionary Newspaper Reading Tips" should be studied by anyone unaccustomed to reading these thrilling relics. He warns, "many still show scars such as tears, holes, stains, and tape mends. Even in the best condition, these newspapers reflect centuries-old communication obstacles and writing styles, making them an entirely different reading experience compared to today's news." Who doesn't know how to read a newspaper, you say? You'd be surprised. Faced with no headlines and a sea of miniscule (and I mean get-out-the-magnifying-glass tiny) type, most people clinch and get hung up on the use of the long s (or descending s or medial s), in which a letter resembling a lowercase "f" is often used for a lowercase "s"—making words such as "lefs," "paft," "theft" and so on. Andrlik's fifteen points are an excellent tutorial to help put the newspaper novice at ease and put speed up the learning curve.

Reporting the Revolutionary War can of course simply be read start to finish. Its thirteen chapters, each broken down into anywhere between two and ten parts, cover all of the major events of the war. But it's also ideal for piecemeal reading. Start with the opening "The Cursed Stamp Act" chapter, viewing a handful of different newspapers and reading the suggested areas of each (more on that later), accompanied by Andrlik's brief essay on the Sugar Act, the Stamp Act and the repeal of the Stamp Act. The Boston Tea Party still resonates in the American imagination, so perhaps you'll want to "read all about it" in "The Detestable Tea" chapter (Chapter 4), along with Benjamin L. Carp's concise background essay. Or perhaps George Rogers Clark's exploits have always intrigued you... or the Battle of Bunker Hill... or the first Continental Congress... or the Yorktown campaign... or the Declaration of Independence.... It's all here, as originally reported in a broad spread of newspapers of the period.

The down side of reading historical newspapers is that the type size can be obscenely small—even though the illustrations represent enlargement of most of these newspapers! This miniscule print, combined with the natural age toning of paper two and a

half centuries old, can be hard on the eyes. More than once I found myself reaching for a magnifying glass while reading *Reporting the Revolutionary War*. Also, when looking at these plentiful illustrations, you are steered toward the relevant paragraph or paragraphs you are intended to read by those areas having been lightened. Unfortunately, sometimes those whitened areas are too subtle and not easily discerned—leaving the reader gazing at a large page chock full of fine print and wondering: What am I supposed to be reading here? Perhaps the publisher should have further highlighted the paragraphs to be read by also outlining them in an eye-catching color or otherwise setting them apart more clearly.

Aside from this occasional technical distraction, I found *Reporting the Revolutionary War* an engaging and unusual approach to making a war that never caught the public's fancy as does the Civil War more accessible and approachable. Photographs bring the Civil War to life for Americans today, make it real and personal, but the American Revolution has no such advantage. The woodcuts and steel engraved portraits and battle scenes just appear stiff and unnatural. But once you get past the archaic quality of old newspapers, those newspapers can do for the Revolutionary War what photographs do for the Civil War—bring history to life, make it feel as if were happening now. *Reporting the Revolutionary War* demonstrates just how compelling those historical newspapers can be.

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