

# Historical Insights

by Daria Sockey

*Mathew Carey: Pamphleteer for Freedom* (by Jane F. Hindman)

The story of Mathew Carey opens up many avenues of history for the reader. It makes one curious to learn more about the Irish penal laws, the arguments surrounding ratification of the U. S. Constitution, the history of banking in America, the War of 1812, the issues surrounding free trade vs. protective tariffs, and the trusteeship disputes between lay Catholics and their bishops. (To name just a few.)

Mathew Carey's early years are an inspirational story all by themselves: a shy, physically handicapped child, bullied by peers, thought by his family to be unworthy of formal schooling, who educates himself, then endures parental disapproval and terrible living conditions to train for the career of his choice. If his story had gone no further than this, it would have been worth reading as an object lesson in perseverance.

But this is just the beginning. The same passionate determination and courage that brought Mathew this far continue to lead him into both trouble and adventure, and ultimately to his place in American history as a journalist, publisher, and advocate for any and all causes that he believed in.

In Mathew Carey we have a different kind of patriot. Not a gifted political leader nor a dashing military hero. Instead, we have an immigrant who loves his adopted country, and exercises to the fullest a right that he was denied in his native land—the right to free speech. Carey seemed to have an opinion about everything—this book only touches on a few of the subjects he wrote about. He seemed to combine reasoned argument with provocative rhetoric that most of us would nowadays find “over the top.” But this was the style of the time. Dueling pundits—both figurative and literal—were the order of the day. Emotional language and colorful traded insults were expected by the public—and sold lots of newspapers.

Many of the topics Carey and his contemporaries argued about are still contested today. Today, many lament that American factory jobs have been outsourced to China, while others respond that without low cost foreign labor, only the rich would be able to afford many luxuries that are now enjoyed by all. This is the exact argument that Carey and his son were having in chapter 11. Likewise, arguments about rights of individual states against the actions of federal agencies and/or the Supreme Court will undoubtedly go on for generations to come.

At least, we hope they will. In recent years, free speech, particularly that of conservatives and Christians, has been threatened and in some cases, restricted. We could use a few Mathew Careys not only willing to risk creating an uproar, but perhaps reveling in it.

In regard to freedom and the reality of slavery practiced in Mathew's time, it is worthy of note that in Pennsylvania, where he lived, a gradual abolition law had been passed in 1780. But it

was very gradual indeed, since there were still some slaves listed in Pennsylvania census records in the 1830s.

Before closing, a note on Mathew Carey and faith. Unlike two other books in this series (*Charles Carroll* and *John Carroll*), this one does not refer much to anti-Catholic bigotry and persecution in America. True, compared to what he experienced under the penal laws in Ireland, Carey must have found America a huge improvement for religious freedom. But it was far from perfect, and he was well aware of it. His dueling pen, always at war for or against something, took on the anti-Catholic bigots of his day on several occasions. His decision to publish the Catholic (Douay translation) Bible was a daring undertaking—not only were American Catholics few and poor (hence unlikely to bring in big sales), but the very act of publishing it might well have lost him many non-Catholic customers. He also, with characteristic good sense and broad-mindedness, made an edition of the King James Version of the Bible available through his press. As we see from his many friendships and business dealings, Carey was a man who adapted easily and gratefully to living in a free, non-sectarian society, yet without compromising a deeply held faith. In that sense, he is a pertinent role model.