Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story

Russell K. Osgood

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BOOK REVIEW


Joseph Story is one of those historical figures who stand astride a nation or a period, whose energy exhausts and amazes but who ultimately cannot be said to be as significant as their lives initially suggest. Cotton Mather, Richard Hooker, the English theologian, and Roscoe Pound are similar figures. Nevertheless, the life of a figure, like Joseph Story, fascinates because it provides a vantage point on the history of his particular epoch. Because of this, it is surprising that we have had to wait until now for the first major biography of Joseph Story.1

Kent Newmyer has crafted a tightly organized biography of sensible length that examines Story's life and epoch very well. He integrates well the complexities of the early republican period with Story's life. Legal cases and materials are dealt with carefully and accurately; the discussion of Swift v. Tyson3 is the best available.4

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2 The indices to this volume are excellent. The topical index is thorough and well laid out, particularly in its functional subheadings under the entry for Story himself. The case index is very helpful. The gathering of the footnotes at the end did not bother me because few of them were textual and because I moved a book mark along to consult them as I read.


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Newmyer’s discussion (pp. 370-75) of Story’s opinion in _Prigg v. Pennsylvania_ effectively refutes Robert Cover’s argument that the opinion reflected the peculiar strain on antislavery jurisprudence and judges in 1841 and suggests instead that _Prigg_ is consistent with Story’s view of the inescapable aspects of the Constitution’s slavery compromise. Every United States constitutional law professor, legal historian, and general historian should read this solid work carefully.

Unlike much recent United States legal history, this is a gentle book. Newmyer is deferential to other scholars even when he disagrees with them, for instance, with Robert Cover and Morton Horwitz. Conclusions are not overstated; the book does not go farther than the carefully marshalled evidence. Perhaps this gentleness will give rise to criticism from others, but this reviewer finds it a particular attraction of the book, one that will make the book more durable than other more argumentative historical works. The rest of this review is, therefore, not offered as criticism but rather as thoughts or speculations engendered by reading Kent Newmyer’s fine book.

I

**The Status of Story’s Family**

Kent Newmyer describes Story and his family as part of the “Marblehead aristocracy” (p. 7). He points out, however, that Story’s physician father, Elisha, begat at least eighteen children by his two wives and that Story’s mother, the second wife, took care of the household chores without any servants until after the Revolution (p. 10). Although Elisha Story was a physician, this by no means implies the high economic or social status that characterizes twentieth century medical practice. Elisha Story’s brother, Isaac, was the

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also in the context of Perry Miller’s view that the first part of the nineteenth century was a conflict between Mind and Heart. Note, Swift v. Tyson _Exhumed_, 79 YALE L.J. 284 (1969).

5 41 U.S. (16 Pet.) 539 (1842).
7 For instance, he cites Robert Cover’s comments when he finds himself in agreement with Cover, e.g., NEWMYER, _supra_ note 1, at 349-50, but when he disagrees, as in his exegesis of _Prigg_, he does not set out and confront the disagreement. In the _Prigg_ discussion the main reference to Cover that I have found is in footnote 102, supporting page 373 of the text. In the text Newmyer states, “Possibly _Prigg_ was like _Amistad_ or the _Creole_ mutiny affair, in which the law permitted judges to discover what they wanted to find (in Story’s case a loophole for freedom) . . . .” _Id._ at 373. This is fundamentally at variance with Cover’s version of that case, and yet in footnote 102 Newmyer states, “This is the theme of Cover, _Justice Accused_, which treats Story’s decisions on slavery with insight.” _Id._ at 447 n.102.

Calvinist minister of the Second Church in Marblehead, and both of his fathers-in-law were substantial figures in Marblehead.

Kent Newmyer's data is accurate, but I think it misses a crucial point. Story saw himself, largely because of his origins, as a nonaristocrat in Massachusetts society. His isolation at Harvard College (p. 23) and his life-long unctuousness and toadying to people of higher social status make no sense unless one understands that Joseph Story felt very deeply that he was not of high social status. Even granting that nineteenth century discourse was fawning in tone, Story's pronouncements were more than normally self-abasing.

I think Story viewed himself as coming from a solid family that was modest in social attainments, dwelling in a small, provincial town, Marblehead. His striving for wealth and respectability during the rest of his life becomes inexplicable if one accepts without some further elaboration Kent Newmyer's explanation of his social origins. Undoubtedly, Story's sense of his social status affected his political and intellectual views, as discussed below.

II

STORY'S PERSONALITY

Kent Newmyer adds little to our understanding of Story's personality, a subject of interest to many who have dealt with aspects of his life. I am not suggesting that Newmyer should have engaged in psychohistory, but I had hoped that he would shed new light on Story's persona.

For instance, Newmyer points out that Story tended to push ideas to extremes (p. 350). This contrasts with John Marshall who, as Newmyer suggests, could recognize "brick-walls" and knew how to avoid them. Similarly, Story's fingers were in many pies; he taught law, he was the president of a bank (p. 326), he rode circuit, he did more than his share of the Supreme Court's work, he advised Daniel Webster on cases (pp. 175-77) and conservative Massachusetts politicians on tactics (pp. 162-63).

Story also switched his political affiliation from Republican to proto-Whig. Newmyer ties this evolution to Story's enduring affiliation to the ideas of the "old republic," the conservative, Burkean ideals of the revolutionary epoch. Although this rationale seems

9 See I LIFE AND LETTERS OF JOSEPH STORY 30-34 (W.W. Story ed. 1851).
10 I am aware that this is a well-developed theme in general American historiography, e.g., that there was a group of ideas called "republicanism" which were in conflict with the democratic thrusts represented for the most part by Andrew Jackson. See M. HOLT, THE POLITICAL CRISIS OF THE 1850s (1978); L. KERBER, FEDERALISTS IN DISSENT (1970). I remain unsure that this label is very helpful in understanding anything more than a generational and sectional tendency against Jacksonianism.
certain and is particularly well demonstrated by Story’s willingness to abide by the constitutional settlement of the slavery issue, it is hard to square with Story’s ability to adapt in other areas, such as his evolving sense of what the commercial classes needed.

Is there some explanation for Story’s intellectual compulsiveness, his desire to work constantly, and his political change? Newmyer is surely correct that Story was a man of the old republic; by the end of his tenure on the Supreme Court Story felt that he was the beleaguered defender of the Constitution. But beyond this, one has to believe that other things were at work in Story’s life. Was the mid-life career change of his son, William, from lawyer to sculptor an indication that Story’s activities as a jurist never satisfied his poetic or romantic side (p. 197), which he pushed aside after an initial critical rejection? Deep questions about the personality of a famous person can rarely be answered satisfactorily, but a major biography should confront them. The questions become at least a framework from which to look at the professional aspects of the person’s life.

Perhaps the explanation for why so little of what Story did has born further professional fruit is that his work reflected a deep personality ambivalence or schism. Newmyer tantalizes with some hints. “Shades of Cotton Mather!” he notes of Story at one point (p. 186). The personality resemblances are indeed strong. On the other hand, Story’s humane side, unlike Mather’s, comes through in his family life which, even though it was not an everyday aspect of his existence because of his frequent travels and his wife’s invalidism, was happy (p. 221). If Story was a pedant, Mather was a pedant’s pedant. Story’s second wife, Sarah Wetmore, found Mather “incorrigibly dull & credulous” (p. 178).

In contrast to Kent Newmyer’s cautiousness, I want to advance the thesis that Story’s personality quirks, political views, and combination of scholarly productivity and lack of coherence, discussed below, resulted from his sense of social inferiority. It is hard to make sense of his revulsion at Jacksonianism, his flirtation with and later rejection of Republicanism, and his lifelong dedication to the facilitation of commerce by the law without understanding him and his ambitions in the context of the Massachusetts social order.

III

STORY THE THEORIST

It is difficult to embark on a major inquiry into Story’s theory of law because he did not view himself as a theorist. Story was interested in practical, scientific law. But he did write a fair amount of what we might call jurisprudence. He believed in natural law (p. 170). He thought law could and should be scientific (pp. 277, 285,
He believed in the wisdom and relevance of the common law residuum, at least as a starting point, for developing American law. Although he thought very highly of John Marshall, Lord Mansfield, the great common law judge, was his hero (p. 246). He thought that the law was and should be moral (p. 211). He cited, not as authority, but as sources of wisdom and insight, the works available to him by the civilians (p. 287).

What did Story mean by natural law? What made law scientific? Was the use of such terms merely a ruse, designed to emphasize that society needed lawyers at its very center to guide it and Joseph Story at the center of the center to train and guide the lawyers? What of the relationship of religion to law, which Story occasionally stressed (pp. 183, 184, & 244)?

Kent Newmyer deftly reveals that the foregoing are issues. He also makes an effort to place Story in the intellectual milieu of his age. Story was an active Unitarian (p. 180), and intellectually he resembled his Harvard classmate, William Ellery Channing, the great pre-transcendentalist, Unitarian divine. For Story and for Channing, if the latter ever used the concept, natural law was a set of possible legal choices that was consistent with their views as to the perfectability of mankind. The world was an imperfect creation, but it lacked the active, evil force that the New Lights and their predecessors, the Puritans, saw. So defined, Story's natural law provided few specific answers to particular questions but was rather an affirmation of a framework of rationality for answering those questions.

Story was not above using the words "natural law" to suggest their ancient meaning, i.e., a set of derivable and unchangeable moral truths revealed to man but perhaps not rationally deducible. Story vigorously affirmed the proposition that slavery was a moral wrong. That it was not consistent with natural law is another proposition he probably accepted. But Story, like most modern legal theorists, did not feel that law which failed to intersect with morality ceased to be law. Slavery could be maintained as a matter of municipal law.

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For Story the most important concept was his belief that law had to be scientific. This statement, no doubt, meant a number of things, even to Story. It conveyed his belief that law was a precise science and provided specific answers to questions. Law was exact and exacting. It also meant that scientists, experts, were needed. A sick patient required a physician; an unpaid creditor required an intelligent attorney who, in turn, required the authority and procedures of the law. Finally, law was scientific in that it was rational, it made logical sense, at least it did to Joseph Story once he had figured it out.

It would, however, be a mistake to portray Joseph Story as a pure rationalist, a cold Aristotelian without a cosmology. He was a man of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and in those eras the language of the past obfuscated changing perceptions. His unflagging zeal for the entire common law system, including its sister branch, equity, demonstrates that he carried with him a tremendous amount of historical baggage. But, as Newmyer lucidly shows, even Story was willing to contemplate limited codification and other changes and evolution in the common law (p. 279).

IV

STORY THE LEGAL FIGURE

Story loved the action associated with the law. He loved sitting as a circuit judge. Kent Newmyer makes the reader feel how excited Story was to breeze into Providence or Wiscasset, as the circuit judge, impatiently imparting knowledge to the far corners of the New England legal community. Newmyer also conveys, as no one else has done before, the extent of Story's devotion to teaching and to Harvard. Teaching was no minor corner of his career. It was a source of immense satisfaction to him to teach, even if he was gassy, as some jealous colleagues and a few students asserted.

But what to make of Story's intellectual contribution to the law? He wrote a large, but not immense, corpus of federal decisions. His treatises covered a good shelf in a library and dealt competently with most of commercial law, plus constitutional law, conflicts, pleading, and equity. Kent Newmyer succinctly evaluates these treatises (pp. 281-89). Conflict of Laws was the most original. Equity Jurisprudence probably has had the greatest impact. His Commentaries on the Constitution, although it continues to draw attention, is perhaps the

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14 The author of the most recent discussion of the constitutional law treatise does not disagree in any substantial way with what Newmyer has to say, although neither seems to have read the other's manuscript. See Powell, Joseph Story's Commentaries on the Constitution: A Belated Review, 94 YALE L.J. 1285 (1985).
most argumentative. But it is hard to find a theme that runs through these treatises.

Story's opinions also present a series of pictures that do not seem to reflect any single motif. There is the securing and protection of the Marshallian legacy in Martin v. Hunter's Lessee.\textsuperscript{15} One finds a continuing advancement of general, knowable commercial rules; Swift v. Tyson\textsuperscript{16} is the most famous opinion. Conversely, he conceived of property rights in fairly static terms, as shown in his dissent in Charles River Bridge v. Warren Bridge.\textsuperscript{17}

Lest anyone think that Story was the spokesman merely of his region and time, a number of his decisions cut against both. At great risk he opposed sectional sentiment on the War of 1812 and the embargo of 1807 (pp. 58-60, 83-90). He resisted abolitionist demands (pp. 307, 365-78). He favored balancing the interests of seamen, masters and shipowners in admiralty (pp. 151-53). But even these contrarities have no theme. For in most matters Story reflected the aspirations and interests of the dominant culture of New England.

Perhaps the answer to the questions implicitly posed here, what motivated and explains Joseph Story, is that there are for many humans, with their complexities, no simple ideologies that they hold on to or that unlock the mystery of their lives. Rather, they meld the passions and interests of their ideals, their society, their social situation and ambitions, and the peculiar twists and turns of their own lives' paths. It is also possible that such intellectual diffuseness is desirable. How could an adherent of a more rigid and authoritarian legal system, like the civil law, ever have elaborated, as Story did in his treatise, the notion of dual sovereignty in which the states and federal government not only end up with less power than a unitary state but as contenders for the favor of the people?

\textit{Russell K. Osgood*}

\textsuperscript{15} 14 U.S. (1 Wheat.) 304 (1816).
\textsuperscript{16} 41 U.S. (16 Pet.) 1 (1842).
\textsuperscript{17} 36 U.S. (11 Pet.) 420 (1837).
* Professor of Law, Cornell University, and Editor, \textit{Law and History Review}. The author wishes to thank Gregory Alexander, Dennis J. Hutchinson, and Mark J. Solomon for reading drafts of this review.