

Primary Source

# A Description of Andrew Jackson by James Parton

*In 1860, less than fifteen years after the death of Andrew Jackson, the journalist James Parton wrote the first scholarly biography of the seventh president. In the preface to his book, Parton notes the difficulties that attended the research he conducted on Jackson. Parton found that the different accounts of Jackson that he read did not agree with one another. Jackson, apparently, was a man of many faces, some of which contradicted each other. In the following excerpt, Parton explains how, after years of study, instead of discovering the real Andrew Jackson he found an enigma.*

For many months I was immersed in this unique, bewildering collection, reading endless newspapers, pamphlets, books, without arriving at any conclusion whatever. If any one, at the end of a year even, had asked what I had yet discovered respecting General Jackson, I might have answered thus: “Andrew Jackson, I am given to understand, was a patriot and a traitor. He was one of the greatest of generals, and wholly ignorant of the art of war. A writer brilliant, elegant, eloquent, without being able to compose a correct sentence, or spell words of four syllables. The first of statesmen, he never devised, he never framed a measure. He was the most candid of men, and was capable of the profoundest dissimulation. A most law-defying, law-obeying citizen. A stickler for discipline, he never hesitated to disobey his superior. A democratic autocrat. An urbane savage. An atrocious saint.” So difficult is it to attain information respecting a man whom two thirds of his fellow citizens deified, and the other third vilified, for space of twelve years or more.

**Source:** James Parton, *The Life of Andrew Jackson. In Three Volumes* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1860), vol. 1, pp. vii-viii.