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Revolutionary America: The Historiography

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 8, No. 4, Life in Revolutionary America (Summer, 1994), pp. 5-8

Published by: [Organization of American Historians](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25162978>

Accessed: 12/12/2012 10:51

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# Revolutionary America: The Historiography

John E. Selby

An old cliché in historiography is that each generation writes its own history. Certainly the history of the American Revolution conforms to this pattern. New perspectives, new interests, and new methodologies have led successive generations to ask new questions and seek new answers. Each time some earlier descriptions have been discarded, but the overall effect has been cumulative as historians have become more sensitive to the complexity of an event that involved about two million people scattered over two thousand miles of the North American coast and some six million others on an island three thousand miles away.

With the emotions of the Revolution reverberating through most of the nineteenth century, the mother country and its former colonies frequently found themselves on opposite sides diplomatically. Americans, whether historians or not, found little reason not to take at face value the claim of the Whigs, as the revolutionaries called themselves, that they fought the War of Independence for constitutional principles to protect freedom from tyranny. But after the turn of the twentieth century, world events brought a rapprochement between Great Britain and the United States, culminating in alliances

during two world wars. As Americans in general became more cognizant of the complexity and frustrations of world affairs, historians of early America better appreciated the problems of administering a far-flung empire. Charles M. Andrews (*The Colonial Background of the American Revolution: Four Essays in American*

tection of the royal navy and army in an era of almost continuous imperial war. The colonies, comparable in modern terms to “developing” or “third world” countries in their dependence upon extractive industry, also thrived economically from access to one of the largest capital markets and distribution systems in the world.

During much of the period, too, the British led Europe into the industrial revolution and afforded cheaper and more desirable products for the American market than any potential competitor.

A less vindictive attitude toward those colonists who backed the crown in the Revolution served as an early barometer of the changing estimate of British rule. Most nineteenth-century writers accepted the Whigs’ designation of their native opponents as “Tories,” a pejorative appellation in the eighteenth century that connoted slavish subservience to the crown, religious intolerance, hostility to representative government, and suspicion of science and the Enlightenment in general. With the development of a more benign attitude toward British governance, commentators began to favor the imperial supporters’ own term for themselves, “loyalists,” as a more accurate description of their role. Lawrence H. Gipson’s *Jared*

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*Colonial History* [New Haven, Conn., 1931]) and Lawrence H. Gipson (*The Coming of the American Revolution, 1763-1775* [New York, 1954]) were only the most famous and most prolific of those who crossed the ocean to search British archives for another side to the tale. These historians found that although the British unquestionably administered the empire for their own profit, the colonies greatly benefitted, most obviously, from the pro-

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*Ingersoll: A Study of American Loyalism* (New Haven, 1920) early set a tone that continues to prevail in more recent scholarly biographies such as Bernard Bailyn's *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974) and Carol Berkin's *Jonathan Sewall: Odyssey of an American Loyalist* (New York, 1974). Undoubtedly, though, Kenneth Robert's historical novel *Oliver Wiswell* (New York, 1940) spread the revised image most widely. Such works uncovered the anguish many colonists suffered as they made decisions that frequently meant the loss of family, friends, home, and fortune. Especially poignant became the realization that loyalists often espoused whiggish ideologies almost identical to the rebels' but balked at the illogicality of declaring independence to preserve the "rights of Englishmen" or of tarring and feathering opponents in the name of protecting individual freedom.

The notion that there might be two sides to the story caused some historians to wonder whether only constitutional issues were at stake. The Progressive campaigns for constitutional and economic reform in the early twentieth century taught many that behind the patriotic posturing of politicians often lurked ulterior motives and domestic struggle: producers against consumers, debtors against creditors, farmers against middlemen, management against labor. Carl Becker put it best with his often-quoted remark that "who should rule at home" loomed as important for the revolutionaries as "home rule" from Great Britain. Rather than worrying about which side had the better constitutional brief, scholars like J. Franklin Jameson in *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (Princeton, N.J., 1926) investigated land speculation, paper currency and rag money laws, suffrage limitations and inequality of representation, religious oppression and other restraints on personal freedom, and any other signs of internal strife that in their minds offered more realistic reasons why a people would go to war.

Coincidentally, research in Great Britain cast the archvillain of the war, King George III, in a softer light. Whereas

American rebels and Whig historians accused him of corrupting Parliament and unconstitutionally expanding executive power to tax the colonies, Lewis B. Namier in *England in the Age of the American Revolution* (2nd ed., New York, 1961) among others revealed that the eighteenth-century constitution had not evolved to the point of requiring the monarch to be a figurehead and stay out of politics. Drawing on the experience of modern party politics, Namier observed that someone had to organize Parliament if government were to function in the eighteenth century and the legislative parties of the time were not up to the task, only the crown. While some contemporaries considered the influence-peddling and log-rolling by which the crown built a consensus in Parliament little more than graft, many others regarded it as patronage, a necessary lubricant for the wheels of politics. Although this historiographic revision has remade few of Britain's late eighteenth-century political leaders into statesmen, the generation is now perceived as more bumbling than diabolical. As far as the American Revolution is concerned, the more sophisticated understanding of the contemporary British political scene seemed to jibe with a question Progressive historians had raised: if the revolutionaries' main concern was to block parliamentary taxes—indeed, they had repeatedly petitioned the monarch for help against the legislature—why did the Declaration of Independence completely ignore Parliament and blame everything on the king? Were Thomas Jefferson's ringing words mere camouflage for another purpose?

By the mid-twentieth century, the elements of a less romantic, less heroic, and markedly less vengeful, view of the American Revolution were in place: life under British rule had not been so bad during most of the colonial period; George III did not look much like a tyrant; and the patriotic hyperbole of the revolutionaries may not have been as met the eye. Then historians began to point out inconsistencies. In a perceptive article in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, "The American Revolution: Revisions in Need of Revising"

(3rd ser., XIV [1957], 3-15), Edmund S. Morgan wondered whether the evidence that the king legitimately played an active role in politics did not lend substance to the revolutionaries' allegation that he bore a great deal of the responsibility. In *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1953), Morgan and his wife, Helen, joined other writers who became known as "neo-Whigs" in arguing for a kind of due process when evaluating the reasons historical figures gave for their actions. Contemporaries' explanations ought not to be preemptorily dismissed, they argued, only on the basis of contradictory evidence.

Once again scholars turned their attention to the study of eighteenth-century constitutional theory. They did not challenge the reevaluation of British rule, but asked how the revolutionaries could castigate the government in the terms they did when there is little evidence as far as moderns can discern that the British were plotting the kind of oppression the resisters alleged. The answer is that the cultural framework within which the debate occurred in the eighteenth century differed massively from today, even though much of the terminology—concepts such as individual liberty, the commonwealth, public virtue, balanced government, republicanism, and democracy—remains in vogue. Bernard Bailyn's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), arguably the most important work in this century on the coming of the war, applied an anthropological model to delineate a premodern intellectual framework harking back to the ancient Greeks and Romans and revived and elaborated from the Renaissance through the seventeenth-century English revolutions. Bailyn elucidated how American resisters drew from the eighteenth-century understanding of history a warning that they had to be ever vigilant lest corrupt and ambitious rulers subvert liberty. He also explained that as the debate over taxation waxed, many American colonists perceived evidence of conspiracy in ministerial actions even though researchers do not today.

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Denoted “classical republicanism” because of its origin and to distinguish it from the modern variety, the ideological framework Bailyn and others unpacked predicated the inclusion of some element of popular self-rule in government as ideal but assumed that the whole must remain more elitist than is usually the goal of republicans today. Received wisdom on the eve of the Revolution held that every form of government, even the most popular, could readily become oppressive. Popular self-government could as easily degenerate into tyranny of the mob as monarchy and aristocracy into exploitation by the few. Virtually every American and British philosopher, and many on the European continent, accepted the conclusion of the baron de Montesquieu in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) that only Great Britain had found the solution: never let the government become entirely popular, always keep some part elitist by nature, but assure freedom by subdividing sovereignty so that government required the consent of each part. According to favorite metaphors of the day, the British constitution produced the requisite balance either by mixing the three basic forms of government—monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy—or by segregating the three basic functions of government—executive, legislative, and judicial—in separate branches. Modern students of politics realize that in a system with so many members—in the British case 558 in the House of Commons alone—someone, either the crown or a political party, had to organize a meeting of minds to accomplish anything. Politics, in other words, is the art of the possible. American revolutionaries, however, along with a small radical opposition in the mother country, expected members of each branch to make up their minds independently with the power of reason the only glue. Here lay the revolutionaries’ case against the king. His ministers sat in the legislature seeking support, unbalancing the constitution and merging the powers.

Gordon Wood followed up in *The*

*Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1978) to detail how Americans after independence gradually weaned themselves from their prewar acquiescence in the inevitability of elite rule. While not abandoning the principle of balanced government, by the time Americans adopted the federal constitution they conceived of the people as sovereign in control of each branch. Wood expanded on the democratic implications of this view for the early republic in his Pulitzer-Prize-winning *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1992).

The ideological interpretation has

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sparked a continuing controversy over the nature of the Revolutionary era. In *Capitalism and a New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s* (New York, 1984) and *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992) Joyce Appleby raised the principal opposing voice with numerous others joining in. The issue broadly stated is how and when between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries a premodern culture that placed the good of the whole ahead of unfettered individualism metamorphosed into a modern capitalistic culture with nearly opposite priorities.

As might have been expected, the social and political unrest of the 1960s and the Vietnam War era left some scholars not entirely satisfied with an interpretation that exalted the establishment. Writers such as Jesse Lemisch in “The American Revolution Seen From the Bottom Up,” in

*Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, edited by Barton J. Bernstein (New York, 1967) and Alfred Young, who edited *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, Ill., 1976), began to ask what the “inarticulate,” the ordinary folk who have left few historical traces outside of vital statistics and other cryptic official records, were doing while the elites were thinking great thoughts. For the colonial period, generally a renewed interest in social history led to a proliferation of town and community studies. Many of these paid little attention to political events, but one of the best that bore directly on the Revolution is Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York, 1976).

The twentieth-century civil rights and feminist movements helped to dramatize that despite all the rhetoric about liberty, the American Revolution had not dispensed it equally to all elements of the population. Winthrop D. Jordan’s monumental *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1968) underscored the indifference of most revolutionaries toward the fate of African-Americans. A shorter exposition of the same interpretation is provided by Duncan J. MacLeod, *Slavery, Race, and the American Revolution* (New York, 1974). Jefferson’s reputation in particular has suffered in publications such as J. C. Miller, *The Wolf By the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (New York, 1977), because his brave words against slavery had little follow-up. Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1961); James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leon* (New York, 1976); and Ellen Gibson Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks* (New York, 1976) revealed the extent of direct black participation on both sides of the conflict. Sylvia R. Frey’s *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, N.J., 1991) has shown that many African Americans took all the talk

about freedom as a call to action of their own.

Similarly, Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women 1750-1800* (Boston, 1980) and Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1980) demonstrated that in the end the overall impact of the war on white women, let alone African-American, was relatively small. While women contributed importantly in rallying support for the cause and often filling in for absent soldiers in normally male pursuits, the war brought few changes in the legal status of women or in the general attitude of society consigning their place to the home. On the other hand, a few elite women like the author Mercy Otis Warren gained some visibility, and war rhetoric supplied ammunition for subsequent discussions of women's place. After the war, a concern to rear the next generation as good republicans aided establishment of the first formal education for females—again largely among the northeast elite.

For Native Americans in the northern and mid-Atlantic states, the war continued the decline that set in when the end of the Seven Years' War eliminated the French and thus the ability of the Iroquois to play them off against the British. The Revolution again temporarily divided whites and allowed tribes to ally with the British against Continental forces as Barbara Graymont described in *The Iroquois in the American Revolution* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1972). James H. O'Donnell III, *Southern Indians in the American Revolution* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1973) outlined the similar strategy of the Cherokees in the South, except that, despite heavy defeats, they continued to resist white settlement for another generation after the war. Bernard W. Sheehan, *Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1975) demonstrated how natives suffered as much from their friends as their enemies.

Surprisingly, the new social history rescued military history, which significantly suffered in professional stature as

patriotic interpretations declined in vogue. John Shy's *Toward Lexington: The Role of the British Army in the Coming of the American Revolution* (Princeton, N.J., 1965) and *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence* (New York, 1976) led the new military historians in pointing out that war often profoundly influenced society and culture as well as politics. Military history titles such as *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* by Charles Royster (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1979) began to list double topics suggesting the war's role, or, like Steven Rosswurm, *Arms, Country, and Class: The Philadelphia Militia and the "Lower Sort" During the American Revolution* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1987), to focus on overtly social questions. Two more traditional comprehensive works that incorporate the newer insights are: Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789* (New York, 1971; revised Boston, 1983) and Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (New York, 1982). Jack M. Sosin studied the western theater in *The Revolutionary Frontier, 1763-1783* (New York, 1967).

Closely related to the military history of the Revolution is the diplomatic. The most recent overall survey is by Jonathan R. Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution* (New Haven, Conn., 1985). Two assessments of the impact of individuals on foreign affairs are: James H. Hutson, *John Adams and the Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (Lexington, Ky., 1980), and Gerald Stourzh, *Benjamin Franklin and American Foreign Policy* (Chicago, 1954).

Concern for the common people has appeared in cultural and intellectual history as well. Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982), and Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven, Conn., 1977) have explored the connection be-

tween the Great Awakening and the Revolutionary War. Recently, literary scholars have become interested in the Revolution as a catalyst for the creation of a new national culture. Kenneth Silverman, *A Cultural History of the American Revolution: Painting, Music, Literature, and the Theatre in the Colonies and the United States from the Treaty of Paris to the Inauguration of George Washington, 1763-1789* (New York, 1976) provided a comprehensive view, while Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York, 1986) and Emory Elliott, *Revolutionary Writers: Literature and Authority in the New Republic, 1725-1820* (New York, 1982) assessed the war's effect on literature. In *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800* (Cambridge, 1982), Jay Fliegelman hypothesized a cultural upheaval against more than the British, and in *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, Calif., 1993) investigated the relationship between eighteenth-century rhetorical theory and the salient political act of the Revolution. A number of studies such as Larzer Ziff's *Writing in the New Nation: Prose, Print and Politics in the Early United States* (New Haven, Conn., 1991) have explored the significance of the transformation of an oral to a print culture during the age of the Revolution.

Finally, a handy one-volume reference work that surveys the most recent scholarship on not only traditional military and political aspects of the American Revolution, but also the latest cultural interpretations, and includes excellent short biographies of both famous and obscure participants, is *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of the American Revolution*, edited by Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole (Cambridge, Mass., 1991). □

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