

The American Revolution: Some Thoughts on Recent Bicentennial Scholarship

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The American Revolution: Some Thoughts on Recent Bicentennial Scholarship*

In the early years of this century, Carl Becker, reacting against the prevalent academic trends of his time, emphasized that the American Revolution was not simply a movement of political independence from Great Britain, but had internal implications as well. Becker's famous phrase to describe the twin thrusts of the Revolution, "Home rule and who shall rule at home", has become something of a bromide. Nevertheless, much of what is being written about the Revolution at the time of the Bicentennial celebrations still fits into Becker's categories, although the discussion has become more subtle and sophisticated. The movement for political independence remains recognized as having been mainly the concern of the ruling elites in Britain and America, while in the colonies the forces which the elite unleashed by challenging Britain often got out of its control. Some of the internal struggles were between various factions of the elite, but others involved groups in colonial society — particularly small farmers and urban artisans — opposed to the conservative values and assumptions of the traditional leadership. The planters, professional men (especially lawyers), and urban merchants who had pretty much controlled colonial American politics, thus found they had to contend simultaneously with Britain and with new and more "popular" leaders attempting to put into practice the egalitarian rhetoric used to oppose British rule.

What is new about some of the recent scholarship is the discovery of yet another layer of conflict, aspiration, and activity to add to the old formulation. The nineteenth century thought the elite leaders spoke for the people. Historians of the first half of the twentieth century found public opinion more complex, but still confined their analyses to the politically enfranchised. Now it is being recognized that the so-called "popular" leadership of the rising middle class itself spoke only for a very limited percentage of the American population, uninterested as it was in the aspirations of women, Negro slaves and freedmen, recent immigrants, many frontier farmers, religious minorities, Amerindians, and an urban proletariat. A new generation of scholarship is trying to explain the relationship to the revolutionary movement of the foregoing disparate group which has — perhaps unfortunately — come to be labelled "the inarticulate", and which constituted as much as 80% of the

* This essay was solicited as a special tribute to the American Bicentennial. — Editor's note.

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population of America at the time of the Declaration of Independence.

Despite the new revisionism, the mainstream of writing about the American Revolution continues to concentrate on the conflict with Britain and the creation of an independent United States.¹ This aspect of the Revolution is plainly the most attractive one to those who seek, consciously or unconsciously, to find something positive and affirmative in the American experience. For most historians working the independence vein, American society was the most virtuous in the western world, having progressed further along the road of political and economic equality than any other, particularly mother Britain herself. For many scholars, America embodied an overseas extension of Britain purged of the worst features of political and social injustice built into British life in the mid-eighteenth century. In short, the American colonies represented the best of British ideals, and political independence was an essentially conservative movement, seeking not so much to produce something radically different as to preserve something rather unique and good from British blundering and injustice.

Such a thoroughly affirmative view of American society and the Revolution is well illustrated in the Bicentennial contributions of two of America's most distinguished senior historians, Bernhard Knollenberg and Carl Bridenbaugh. Knollenberg's *Growth of the American Revolution 1766-1775* (New York and London, The Free Press, 1975), published posthumously, seems almost to come from another century. Like his highly praised *Origin of the American Revolution 1759-1765* (New York and London, The Free Press, 1960), this sequel is both brilliant and exasperating. A lawyer by training and profession, Knollenberg in his work offers the reader a thoroughly-documented legal brief for American opposition to Great Britain. He never wavers in his assumption that the leaders of colonial protest to British policies spoke for the vast majority of Americans. The case for that protest has seldom been better made. The British Parliament was, on Knollenberg's account, ill-informed, stupid, acting illegally and unconstitutionally some of the time and provocatively all of the time. From a reader's perspective, this new book suffers painfully from its author's approach, containing as it does only 196 pages of text, 70 pages of appendices, and nearly 250 pages of notes (including notes to the appendices). One can get overwhelmed in the scholarly apparatus, and the end result more resembles the report of a royal commission than an evening's light reading. Its relative inaccessibility to the casual reader is unfortunate since the work is indispensable for the matters it considers. Conscious of his proclivities,

1 It must be emphasized that the literature discussed in this essay represents a personal selection from an enormous outpouring. I have tried to choose representative works for consideration, but have not attempted to present an exhaustive and all-inclusive listing of Bicentennial publications.

Knollenberg himself playfully suggests visualizing the book as an eighteenth-century production subtitled "Being an Account of a Majority of the People of the Thirteen Colonies Who Rebelled against Great Britain in 1775, together with a description of the Provocative Conduct of the British Parliament and Government Accounting for this Change and the Colonists' Responses to the said Conduct". In the face of such candour, it is hard to be overly critical.

At first glance, Carl Bridenbaugh's *The Spirit of '76: The Growth of American Patriotism Before Independence 1607-1776* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1975) seems quite a different matter. Bridenbaugh is a master essayist, and his little book is well-written and thoroughly entertaining. It is an evening's good read. But like Knollenberg, Bridenbaugh seems to speak from another age, when poor folks knew their place and stayed in it. He paints American culture with a broad brush, using the apt quotation from often obscure sources to telling advantage. The finished canvas certainly offers a charming view of a relatively unified and thoroughly *American* population on the Eve of Independence.

Equally affirmative glimpses of the revolutionary era can be found in many of the papers published by the Library of Congress, representing the annual contributions to a series of symposia held at the Library beginning in 1972. The themes chosen by the organizers of the symposia were hardly very adventurous, and did not encourage straying from the trite and true. In *Fundamental Testaments of the American Revolution* (Washington, Library of Congress, 1973), for example, four of the most respected names in American academia offer their views on subjects about which they have written elsewhere at length. Bernard Bailyn, whose work on the pamphlet literature of the Revolution has established him as the leading authority on its ideological and political origins, considers Paine's *Common Sense*. Not surprisingly, Bailyn finds "something unique in the intellectual idiom of the pamphlet", although he does not really attempt to explain why "the dominant tone of *Common Sense* is that of rage" rather than the more common legalistic self-justification. Cecilia Kenyon, discussing the Declaration of Independence, notes but does not explore the ironical fact that "slavery should have sharpened Jefferson's perceptions about the mutual relationships of morality, consensus, economic status, freedom, and republican government". Merrill Jensen, whose graduate students at the University of Wisconsin have long been in the vanguard of revisionism about the rhetorical inconsistencies and practical repressions of the revolutionary era, manages to make the Articles of Confederation a logical triumph of consensus politics. And finally, Richard B. Morris sees the Treaty of Paris as a victory for American diplomacy, drawing modern parallels by explicitly comparing the American position with that of the Algerian nationalists negotiating their independence from the French government.

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The parallels of Morris point up one of the most poignant problems of the American Bicentennial, shared to some degree by all the participants in this particular symposium held in 1973 and by all those writing about the Revolution. How can the eighteenth-century American experience be related to the world in the twentieth century?² If, as Bailyn asserts here and elsewhere, the American Revolution was not “a result of intolerable social or economic conditions”, was not “deliberately undertaken to recast the social order”, what is its relationship to modern revolutions which are? How can it be viewed except in isolation? Bailyn, it must be added, is not afraid of the implications of his arguments, and has consistently maintained that the Revolution was, as it were, *sui generis*.³ But even he has occasionally felt obliged to defend the Founders from the charge of unenlightened self-interest.⁴ It remains difficult not to be conscious of the present, and even more difficult to reconcile both the American past and modern American policy with the revolutionary impulses of the people of Algeria or North Vietnam, not to mention the blacks in Rhodesia, South Africa, or the United States. Bailyn's position is less fraught with danger than that of Morris, for surely a large share of the problems of American foreign policy results from the inability of the United States to jettison its so-called revolutionary heritage. It might be salutary for Americans to remember that the white government of Rhodesia sees itself as the legitimate heir of the American revolutionaries. It might be equally salutary, though probably impossible, for Americans to admit to themselves that their formative experiences were both unique and essentially elitist.

Some scholars have unabashedly concentrated on the elites of the revolutionary period, often in combination with modern techniques of quantitative analysis. The most ambitious of these studies, James Kirby Martin's *Men in Rebellion: Higher Governmental Leaders and the Coming of the American Revolution* (paperback edition, New York and London, The Free Press, 1976), is based on computer analysis of the biographical profiles of some 487 colonial and revolutionary officials in the provinces, divided into three subgroups: the late colonial executives, the loyalist executives, and the revolutionary executives. Computerized collective biography is a fashionable

- 2 See, for example, the comments in *The Impact of the American Revolution Abroad* (Washington, Library of Congress, 1975), particularly those of R. R. Palmer, p. 7; Erich Angermann, p. 162; and Nagayo Homma, pp. 164-6.
- 3 Bernard Bailyn, “Lines of Force in Recent Writings on the American Revolution”, paper presented at the XIV International Congress of Historical Sciences, San Francisco, 1975. Another paper at the same session of Congress by E. J. Hobsbawm, entitled “Revolution”, discussed the general topic without once mentioning America.
- 4 Bernard Bailyn, “The Central Themes of the American Revolution: An Interpretation”, in S. G. Kurtz and J. H. Hutson, eds., *Essays on the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, the University of North Carolina Press, 1973), pp. 3-31.

technique these days, and this book is symptomatic of its limitations. Most of Martin's work documents in statistical percentages what we have always known about the small group of officeholders in the late colonial/revolutionary period.

While many executives held their power from the provincial assemblies and their communities, others held it from the Crown. The former were more likely to be revolutionaries, the latter more likely to be loyalists. Fewer officials were replaced by the Revolution in colonies which had electoral systems. Loyalists tended to be involved in the imperial orbit, patriots in the local. All officials were above average in wealth, loyalists being slightly better off. Loyalists were less likely to have deep family roots in the colony of their office (because so many were placemen appointed from without), and less likely to belong to the dominant local church. Revolutionary executives (those after 1775) were slightly less wealthy, of less distinguished parentage, less inter-related by family, and less frequently college-educated. But only slightly. Although Martin prefers to stress the differences, the fact remains that the Revolution brought little change in leadership patterns to the independent state governments. The Revolution may have, as the author asserts, opened state offices to more men of community-level leadership, but they hardly constituted a new class of colonial society.

Not surprisingly, since he has focussed on a familiar elite, Martin also concludes that the crux of the Revolution was the need of some of its members for "room at the top". His assumption is that when men's career ambitions are frustrated, they feel forced to break the system by rebellion. But why co-ordinate activities, and why turn against Britain? A series of provincial power struggles within the framework of professed loyalty to the Empire, such as occurred in British North America in the first half of the nineteenth century, seems equally likely in terms of elite career ambitions, and does not run the risk of treason. Curiously, Martin does not test his hypotheses by including a control group of executives from Quebec, Nova Scotia, and the West Indies, those colonies which did not rebel. What were patterns like there? Finally, *Men in Rebellion* is not redeemed by graceful writing, and is almost a classic of the new social science approach to history in its abysmal literary style. Too much energy probably went into the charts and graphs, which few readers ever examine.

A more successful, perhaps because more modest, elite study is Richard D. Brown's "The Founding Fathers of 1776 and 1787: A Collective View".⁵ The ages of marriage and size of families of these elites were closer to British peerage norms than to the profiles of average Americans, suggesting some of the ways in which such men were moving in a European direction at the same time they were "Americanizing". As Brown admits, during the

5 *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., XXXIII (1976), pp. 465-80.

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revolutionary period “national leaders were already a group set apart”, though he prefers to emphasize their heterogeneity rather than their ruling class homogeneity. His data could certainly be employed to support the conclusion that the revolutionary elites came from a remarkably narrow and essentially untypical segment of colonial society, though to do so would require some concept of social stratification which American colonialists have always been reluctant to employ.

Related to the elite study is what we can call the “elite narrative”, describing what this small group was doing. An excellent example is David Ammerman’s *In the Common Cause: American Response to the Coercive Acts of 1774* (Charlottesville, Va., University of Virginia Press, 1974). In his preface, Ammerman protests that “It is not my intention to swell the ranks of the so-called consensus historians”. He acknowledges that “Large numbers of Americans were unrepresented at the meetings of the First Continental Congress”, but insists that “little is known about their attitudes”. According to Ammerman, the men of the First Congress were “surprisingly unified” (why surprisingly, given their similar backgrounds?), and the Revolution “was successful precisely because the sympathy of so large a percentage of the colonists was wedded to the cause of resistance in the initial phases” (how to reconcile this with the absence of knowledge of the attitudes of the many unrepresented at the Congress?). One suspects that Ammerman’s unrepresented are not the politically unenfranchised population, but those voters who lived in colonies which did not send delegates.

If Ammerman’s study is not consensus-oriented, it is certainly American-oriented. In a scholarly book published in 1974 which seeks to deal with the Coercive Acts, it is discouraging to find the Quebec Act lumped in with the Massachusetts Acts virtually without discrimination. Ammerman notes that the Quebec Act had “been under preparation for some time”, and allows that it “owed its inclusion among the Coercive Acts more to chances of timing than to events in Massachusetts Bay”. But he then proceeds to discuss the provisions of the Quebec Act as Americans perceived them without the faintest recognition of two generations of Canadian scholarship which have attempted to show that the Act was not intended to put down the Americans but to resolve problems in Quebec.

The Quebec Act may have been another illustration of Ammerman’s assertion that the British “seem to have done almost everything wrong”, but it also illustrates that by 1774 it was extremely difficult for Britain to govern her North American Empire and do anything right. There may have been nothing inevitable about the Revolution, and scholars may well be guilty of Ammerman’s charge of confusing general conditions of unrest with the specific development of events which precipitated the war, but his treatment of the Quebec Act well demonstrates the problem of keeping the general and the specific neatly compartmentalized. The specific American misunderstand-

ing of the motivations and intentions of the government regarding Quebec was rooted in the general conditions of hostility to the British Parliament which had been building up for years. This work is like a narrative of a marital breakup which begins when the couple start throwing dishes at one another, and is written from the perspective of only one of the estranged parties.

An American perspective like Knollenberg's or Ammerman's can best be corrected by reading the work of British historians. The Bicentennial has had its spill-over across the water, and eighteenth-century British political history, in something of the doldrums in recent years, has sprung back to life. The British have always been unabashedly and perhaps necessarily elitist in their political analysis of the revolutionary era, anchored by the seminal work of Sir Lewis Namier on the structure of eighteenth-century British politics. Namier, although using the term "American Revolution" in the title of one of his major works, was not really interested in either North America or its grievances, but in the British political institutions which had to cope with them.⁶ There have been some recent attempts to break down the Namier paradigm, particularly John Brewer's *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1976), which argues that there was a public opinion in early Georgian England. Namier, of course, was not concerned with ideology; he did not bother much about public opinion of any sort outside the narrow corridors of power. *Party Ideology* is a well-informed and important work, although its author is hard-pressed to demonstrate that the ideas of the considerable political pamphleteering he so fully and carefully details had much impact on public policy. The work is perhaps better seen as explaining the origins of British politics during the French Revolution (when these ideas did matter) than its popular dimensions during the beginnings of the American.

More traditionally, P. D. G. Thomas has provided a careful assessment of *British Politics and the Stamp Act Crisis: The First Phase of the American Revolution, 1763-1767* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975). For those reading regularly the specialist monographs in this field, there are few surprises. But Thomas is in superb control of the primary and secondary literature, and his synthesis is a must for any reader who would seek to understand the British position. As Thomas emphasizes, there was precious little division in political Britain on the main American issues of the 1760s, particularly the supremacy of Parliament. The British saw their colonial policy as reasonable, flexible, generous, and enlightened. Americans were misled into believing they had real friends among the political leadership by decisions resulting from internal factionalizing and accident, and the "American lobby" in Britain was used by the politicians largely to legitimize actions taken for other

6 See *England in the Age of the American Revolution* (London, 1930) and *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (2 vol., London, 1929).

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reasons. The Americans could — and did — work themselves up to a rebellion, while the British government's essential position about the colonies remained unchanged from 1763 onwards. When Thomas's unified leaders met Ammerman's, an explosion was almost inevitable.

A wide gap between American and British attitudes toward colonies and their place in the Empire existed and was never bridged in the period from the Peace of Paris in 1763 to the Declaration of Independence, and it has not in some senses ever been bridged in the subsequent two centuries of historical debate. In an attempt to promote better understanding, the British scholar Ian Christie and the American Benjamin Woods Labaree have produced *Empire or Independence, 1760-1776: A British-American Dialogue on the Coming of the American Revolution* (Oxford, Phaidon Press, 1976). The title is more than a bit misleading, for the authors have not let us into their studies to view their disagreements with one another. Indeed, there are none. We have not a dialogue, but a collaboration, each scholar in turn treating his side of the water. Not surprisingly, the authors spend more time in Britain at the beginning, more time in America at the end, and observe that the British side has only one perspective — Whitehall — while the American side is far more disparate. Had Woods and Labaree been in charge, there would have been no Revolution, for they simply agreed to disagree.

In real life disagreement led ultimately to war. Remarkably little good military history has come out of the Bicentennial, in marked contrast to the Civil War anniversary of a few years back, which produced detailed analyses of every major and not a few minor battles, generals, and regiments. One possible explanation is the American reaction to Vietnam; “drum and trumpet” history is not very fashionable in the United States today. But as John Shy points out in one of the articles in his collection of reprinted pieces, *A People Numerous and Armed; Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1976), the war was “a political education conducted by military means”. Of all the many wrong decisions the British government took, the one to settle the dispute with the colonies on the battlefield was the most dangerous, the most futile, and the most final.

Excellent evidence for the futility of the British decision of 1775 comes from R. Arthur Bowler's *Logistics and the Failure of the British Army in America 1775-1783* (Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press, 1975), one of the most important works of the recent literature on the Revolution. Bowler is not concerned with armies fighting but with armies eating, a subject which at first glance seems dull and prosaic. But his book is a gem of insight and careful writing. What he shows is that the British quickly realized that they could not supply their armies from American sources, and indeed never did so. Much British military caution — so heavily criticized then and since — was legitimate prudence given logistical inadequacies and the assump-

tion that British armies could not live off the countryside. The latter assumption, observes Bowler, was both principled and pragmatic. A marauding army made enemies of the populace in its wake, however previously disposed those people were toward it and the authority it represented, a problem the Americans faced in Quebec, when they attempted to take the offensive. While, on the whole, the British success in supplying at times over 40,000 people — including civilian dependents — was, given eighteenth-century standards, very impressive indeed, it was not enough. Serious offensives were impossible, and without them the British position could only deteriorate despite constant improvement in the supply situation.

Like Bowler's book, Jonathan Gregory Rossie's *The Politics of Command in the American Revolution* (Syracuse, N. Y., Syracuse University Press, 1975) is a military study in which few shots are fired (except at one obscure colonel in an unsuccessful assassination attempt and in several private duels). As his title suggests, Rossie is concerned with the political dimension of military leadership in the Continental Army, well demonstrating that the American generals owed their positions to civilian politicians operating in political rather than military terms. Rossie argues that civilian interference diffused the army's command structure — generals had to keep looking back over their shoulders at Congress and the state legislatures. Since the only generals springing readily to mind who did not have to look over their shoulders were those of the Russian tsars and the American presidents of the past ten years, neither terribly successful militarily, insecurity was probably a good thing. The Americans did not need to win the war, merely not to lose it, and successful politics was more important than great victories. Eventually, in frustration the generals began to conspire against one another, a Congressional triumph of no small proportions.

Welcome also is George F. G. Stanley's *Canada Invaded 1775-1776* (Toronto, Hakkert, 1973). Too much of the story of the Quebec campaigns has been told from the American perspective, usually not conceptually different than Justin Smith's *Our Struggle for the Fourteenth Colony* (New York, 1907), the title of which is self-explanatory. As Stanley himself admits, his book is really only an introductory sketch. But it is worth recalling that the Americans were engaged in territorial expansion (in the name of "liberation") before they had declared themselves independent from Britain, and that they were not very successful, partly because the *habitants* of Quebec did not co-operate.

If the military dimension has received less attention than anticipated from the Bicentennial, so too has the economic. Perhaps the most interesting book on the subject to appear on the American side of the Atlantic is J. E. Crowley's *This Sheba Self: The Conceptualization of Economic Life in Eighteenth-Century America* (Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974). Crowley is less concerned with economic policies than with public

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perceptions of economic matters, relying heavily on the literary evidence of pamphlets, sermons, and newspapers. His conclusions obviously extend no further than the self-conscious producers and consumers of this literature, mainly the commercialized upper layers of colonial society who made the Revolution. This elite was certainly ambivalent about its relationship to the economic world, particularly since that world was rapidly changing. But Crowley's tensions and ambivalences often sound too much like those of the typical twentieth-century intellectual, guiltily concerned about the dichotomy between material progress and the loss of virtue through self-indulgence. One wonders whether all colonials really agonized over such matters, whether subsistence farmers (by implication) were more virtuous and happier, and what the exploited thought. Nevertheless, Crowley quite rightly points out that the self-denial of colonial economic opposition to Britain — such as non-importation — made good sense to the elites in psychological as well as political terms, and that the period of the Revolution saw little separation of the moral from the economic dimension. In terms of the way men saw their economic selves, the Industrial Revolution was far more potent than the American.

On the British side, T. M. Devine's *The Tobacco Lords: A Study of the Tobacco Merchants of Glasgow and Their Trading Activities c. 1740-1790* (Edinburgh, John Donald, 1975) brings a breath of fresh air and common sense into the tangled tale of the overseas commercial implications of the Revolution. Devine finds that the Glasgow tobacco merchants suffered very little from American Independence, in either the short or the long run, despite the continually perplexing problem of Southern planter indebtedness. His arguments are the more convincing because he is not primarily involved in Revolution historical debates but in the question of the formation of capital in Scotland, and hence has no particular axe to grind. The merchants were accustomed to colonial instability, and built it into their considerations. Perhaps the significant point to be gained from Devine's study is that the American planters had a quite inflated notion of their own importance in the imperial commercial economy. With full warehouses and a burgeoning domestic market, the Scottish tobacco magnates were not very sensitive to American pressure in the critical last months before the opening of actual hostilities. The importance of commercial pressure upon the British government (and the need for it) has been vastly overemphasized in recent years, and this book helps to provide a healthy corrective.

Like military and economic history, individual biography has not been particularly prominent in the Bicentennial literature, to some extent because many major projects were already well in hand. While the papers of most of the founding fathers have been appearing in carefully edited multi-volume editions over the past twenty-five years, a product of American affluence and academic entrepreneurialism rather than special occasions, Richard B.

Morris's edition of *John Jay: The Making of a Revolutionary: Unpublished Papers 1745-1780* (New York, Harper and Row, 1975) was published to coincide with the Bicentennial. One can hardly hope to review in a paragraph an 800 page collection of primary documents, and perhaps it would suffice to emphasize the nature of the enterprise, so characteristic of one facet of American scholarship in recent years. Jay is an important figure, though hardly in the same league as Jefferson, Washington, Franklin, and John Adams. His papers, like most of those of the early American statesmen, were not preserved intact in family muniment rooms and have had to be collected from all over the world at great effort and expense. The result is a collection at Columbia University of 5000 manuscript Jay items (all with xeroxed copies) and 10,000 photocopied items. This project of considerable magnitude and substantial funding here presents new Jay material for the early years, carefully annotated by Morris, an associate editor, and two assistant editors. It is difficult to think of a comparable project for a Canadian statesman of equal (or greater) stature.

By far the most interesting study of a major patriot to emerge from the Bicentennial lists is Peter Shaw's *The Character of John Adams* (Chapel Hill, N.C., University of North Carolina Press, 1976). Adams, of course, had already been served by an edition of his writings, several major biographies, and a judicious (and scrupulously overannotated) edition of unpublished papers, the last helping to move him from secondary to primary status in the pantheon of revolutionary leaders. This latest study, therefore, can build on considerable past scholarship, and is less concerned with what Adams did than with how and why he did it. In its emphasis on the inner Adams, Shaw's work is very much a product of our own times, and, while the author tries to be unobtrusive and free from psychoanalytical jargon in his analysis, the result is a very modern John Adams, trapped between a compulsion for self-sacrifice and a desperate ambition for success and fame. The pattern for Adams, says Shaw, was to work hard, diligently, and relatively unflamboyantly at his task, consciously eschewing personal ambition, and then to complain querulously afterwards because those who were less compulsive and more self-advertising had all the fun and got most of the credit. Occasionally Shaw's tendency to "spot the Freudian slip" is annoying — Adams cannot be allowed to correct or cross out or misdate his manuscripts without the action being seen of great psychological significance — but on the whole this is a measured and likeable performance.

While the traditional emphasis on political independence and the ruling elites which brought it about remains not only visible but even dominant in the literature of the Bicentennial, Carl Becker's "who shall rule at home?" theme has persisted, badly fragmented. Only a handful of scholars have pursued it in its familiar formulation, while many have been sliding over into studies not of those politically active but of those exploited by the politically

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active. The nature of the internal conflict has changed from political factionalism to general repression, reflecting the accelerating alienation of many intellectuals with American society.

One of the few books which deals in the old “progressive” categories of Becker and Charles Beard is Charles S. Olton’s *Artisans for Independence: Philadelphia Mechanics and the American Revolution* (Syracuse, N. Y., Syracuse University Press, 1975). As Olton admits, Philadelphia was not typically American, being the nation’s most populous and sophisticated city. In Philadelphia, most artisans were independent craftsmen, for entrepreneurship was easy and normal, while wages for journeymen and costs of apprentices were high. Olton’s men in leather aprons were “a bourgeoisie, not a proletariat”, and the main thrust of the book is to insist that such men were part of the American Revolution too. Never excluded from government, the artisans were able to seize their opportunities and by the 1770s push more “radically” for independence than the merchant elite which had begun the protests. As small manufacturers the artisans needed protection from British finished goods. Ultimately, these men realized that their economic interests were fundamentally in agreement with the merchant elite and opposed to those of the western farmers who ran Pennsylvania during the revolutionary years. Both artisans and merchants wanted a protective tariff, a national bank, and expanded trade, and both backed the Constitution of 1787 wholeheartedly.

The great spokesman for the Philadelphia artisans was, of course, Tom Paine, the subject of several recent studies. Paine was bound to be fashionable in 1975, for he was the only influential “working class” revolutionary figure, and one of the few links between the American Revolution and popular movements of discontent on the European continent. Moreover, Paine poses some fascinating questions for biographers. How did this obscure corset-maker come to spring, full-blown, as the greatest pamphleteer of the eighteenth century? What was the nature of his popular appeal? How to explain the two unconsumed marriages, the alcoholism, the dissipation and indolence between spurts of journalistic genius, the restless wanderings? Given his attractions, it is little surprise that Paine keeps being rediscovered.

Audrey Williamson’s *Thomas Paine: his life, work and times* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1973) can be quickly dismissed. First to appear of the new studies, it is badly-written, thinly researched, and fatally marred by its author’s continual comparisons of Paine with others whose biographies she has written. Williamson’s intentions are good; she seeks to rehabilitate Paine from the contemporary revelations about his private life, but is not very convincing. More satisfactory is David Freeman Hawke’s *Thomas Paine* (New York, Harper and Row, 1974), a full-scale biography, although Hawke’s obvious impatience with Paine’s inconsistencies (he accepts and is not bothered by the revelations of dissipation) make the book occasionally

sound more hostile to its subject than is intended. Nevertheless, Hawke nicely balances Paine's activities on three stages: America, France, and Britain; he is particularly good on the American (chiefly Pennsylvanian) side of the story.

Eric Foner's *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1976) is not a biography, but an intellectual study which attempts to relate Paine to his American audiences. At times Paine disappears for pages, for Foner is more interested in the Philadelphia *milieu* than in the pamphleteer who operated within it. Tom Paine came to Philadelphia in 1774 after years of personal failure and total disenchantment with English life. His angry hostility to Britain and its hereditary ruling classes, his exhilaration at the seeming openness and egalitarianism of America, and his non-academic brilliance at cutting through cant with a fresh approach and a telling phrase, made *Common Sense* and most of Paine's subsequent journalism particularly effective. Paine was angry, less at British repression of all people than of the lack of opportunity afforded for independent artisans and farmers. These individuals, rather than the lower orders whose irrational moblike behaviour he did not at all admire, were his disinherited. He was a *neuvo homo*, a self-made cosmopolitan figure quite uncommon among artisans, and his quick and skeptical mind had no time for arguments based upon the past. He spoke for the best instincts of Anglo-American independent labourers and craftsmen, men who sought to equate personal virtue with productive individual enterprise (at least until *The Age of Reason* put him beyond the comprehension of most of them). Like the Philadelphia artisans, Paine supported the Constitution of 1787 because it promised economic prosperity.

Despite all his personal failings and intellectual inconsistencies, Paine remains a far more attractive figure than his counterpart in Boston as spokesman for the middling sort, Samuel Adams. Pauline Maier — and others — have made a valiant effort at refurbishing Adams' image, and it is certainly true — as she insists — that he was a man of personal asceticism and personal rectitude, qualities not unusual among revolutionaries.⁷ But Paine wrote in the abstract, and Adams (far too much) in the heat of daily battle. Maier glosses over the main charge against Adams, which is that he was a manipulator of men and events, justifying lies in the interests of the larger cause. Nevertheless, the appeal and audience of Adams and Paine was remarkably similar.

From Boston and Philadelphia we move to a different world of farms and plantations. Maryland's internal conflicts are well described in Ronald

7 Pauline Maier, "Coming to Terms with Sam Adams", *American Historical Review*, 81 (1976), pp. 12-37; see also Charles W. Akers, "Sam Adams — And Much More", *The New England Quarterly*, XLVII (1974), pp. 120-31, and James M. O'Toole, "The Historical Interpretations of Sam Adams", *The New England Quarterly*, XLIX (1976), pp. 82-96.

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Hoffman's *A Spirit of Dissension: Economics, Politics, and the Revolution in Maryland* (Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). Hoffman emphasizes that the leaders of the Revolution in Maryland were essentially conservative, but imaginative and innovative at the same time. They ultimately consolidated the power of the ruling elite of merchants and planters in the state by co-opting the more "popular" leaders, and by producing a legislative programme designed to appeal to the average voter, anchored by a more equitable system of taxation (which did not spare the rich) and an inflationary currency policy which favoured the debtor. Hoffman's arguments go a fair way to explaining how the American elites were able to retain their power in the swirling uncertainties of the revolutionary period. They made concessions and remained open to the demands of those who elected them.

Edmund S. Morgan's *American Slavery—American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1975) adds substantially to the story of the leadership's maintenance of power, and introduces into it the problem of Negro slavery, which was not only Virginia's ordeal but that of the American republic which emerged from the Revolution. The preservation of the institution of slavery has always been one of the blackest marks against the founding fathers, since it so clearly makes a mockery of the rhetoric of independence. There is some danger of moral relativism here, for it is plain that most contemporaries accepted the institution without question (as they did the inferior position of other segments of American society, such as women). If the fathers are to be condemned for their attitudes toward blacks which we know to be morally reprehensible, can we stop short of condemning them for all the "injustices" laid bare by rapidly changing modern attitudes? Some historians are prepared to take the argument to its logical conclusion, but most are not.

In any event, Morgan takes up Cecilia Kenyon's previously mentioned throw-away lines about the irony of Jefferson's position, and converts them into a major theme of a fascinating book, perhaps the more exciting because its author is not an angry young radical but an established scholar of considerable seniority and reputation. His book tells the story of how the wealthy Virginia planters clawed their way to success, and how they remained on top. It is not a very pretty picture. Morgan is not persuaded that racism (as opposed to bondage) has such deep historical roots as others have argued. His point is that enslaving the African because of his race was a very neat way of providing the needed labour force for the tobacco fields and forming a working understanding between the colony's wealthy planter leaders and its less well-off white inhabitants. Negro slavery enabled Virginia to set its poor apart, and racism, by absorbing in Virginia "the fear and contempt that men in England . . . felt for the inarticulate lower classes . . . made it possible for White Virginians to develop a devotion to the equality

that English republicans had declared to be the soul of liberty". Equality among men was a reality in Virginia because slaves were not men, a nice piece of sleight-of-mind. Virginia had few free poor, and its planter leaders were thus enabled to produce the documents which composed the revolutionary vision of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness".

The recent literature on slavery would require a separate essay to produce any coherence,⁸ but particularly significant is David Brion Davis's magisterial *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770-1823* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1975), a continuation of his work begun in *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1967). From the international perspective of Davis, the significant feature about slavery was that this period did see the disintegration of the automatic acceptance of slavery as a legitimate institution, although down to 1823 the proponents of slavery fought a fierce rear-guard action which in the short-run was remarkably successful. Davis is particularly good at dissecting the factors which allowed the slaveholders to survive, though he points out that only in the United States did a slave-based society have much real geopolitical coherence. Not much concerned with the pathology of reform, Davis is fascinated by the pathology of slaveholding, arguing that racism was a cover for "more fundamental issues of ideology and power". The fundamental issue was exploitation, and the problem was that the question of slavery could be — and was — separated from other forms of barbarity and oppression because it was so obviously intolerable and untenable.

On a much more limited front is Gerald Mullin's *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972), in many respects a companion-piece to the study by Morgan. This impressive work seeks to isolate, identify, and explain the nature of black culture in the age of revolution. Mullin emphasizes the paradox that the black Africans became both more comprehensible to whites and more dangerous as they became assimilated into Virginia society. He outlines the subtle effects which the owning of slaves had upon their masters; like Davis, he is captivated with the curious ways in which power corrupts and exploitation brings dependence to the exploiter. But mostly, Mullin is concerned to show that the Virginia slave culture had its own dimensions and rules which simply could not be comprehended by white society. Most obviously, those actions by slaves which contemporaries saw as evidence of their inferiority or non-humanity — lack of discipline, childish disobedience, indolence — were really acts of rebellion against their situation, sometimes spontaneous,

8 See Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross* (2 vol., Boston, Little, Brown, 1974), and Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (London, Andre Deutsch, 1975).

increasingly socialized, and eventually even calculated. Mullin's insight represents the dawning perception of a new history. It is in part an awareness of those people which history has traditionally neglected, but it also recognizes that such people cannot always be explained in terms of the categories of the dominant historical society. The problem is to comprehend the operative rules of the neglected segments, and the techniques are often more anthropological than historical.

Perhaps the most significant work which attempts to grapple with such complex epistemological problems is a collection of essays by younger scholars edited by Alfred F. Young and entitled *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, Illinois, Northern Illinois Press, 1976). The title is a bit deceptive. As Young points out in his Foreword, the authors of the pieces included here are not united by a common political ideology, and the title, which is clearly Young's, probably suggests that he rather hoped they would be. What these articles do have in common is an acknowledged debt to the writings of four modern British scholars — E. P. Thompson, George Rudé, Eric Hobsbawm, and Christopher Hill — all pioneers in attempting to comprehend historically the aspirations of the lower orders of European (mainly English) society.⁹ The historical study of the culture and ideology of the people is still very much in its infancy, and has in my judgment been limited by the inclination of most practitioners to extend the assumptions of traditional history (turned upside-down) to a new segment of the population of the past. Much of the emphasis, therefore, has been on the development of a political consciousness, and much of the approach one of radical dialectic.

Thompson, Rudé, and Hobsbawm have all stressed that the "mobs" of eighteenth-century England (and for Rudé, France) were not the disorganized mindless collections of the discontented which the ruling classes saw, but had a purpose of their own. In Thompson's phrase, echoed in many of the essays in the Young volume, the mobs had their own "moral economy", a coherent set of assumptions and objectives which gave them form. Far too much attention is given to the American mob — urban and rural — in the essays of this splendid collection, and too much attempt is made to find a positive political direction. Several of the essays, however, are less concerned to document the tiny seedlings of American radicalism at the time of

9 See particularly E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), and "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century", *Past and Present*, L (1971), pp. 76-136; George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1959), and *Paris and London in the Eighteenth Century: Studies in Popular Protest* (London, 1970); Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Manchester, 1959); Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London, 1969); Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (London, 1964).

the Revolution than to explore other dimensions of popular feeling at the time, attempting to get beyond engaging in an unconscious collaboration with the more traditional elite historians in seeing political consciousness as the heart of the American Revolution. This is clearly an important and probably prophetic book, anticipating a major direction in future American studies in its efforts to come to grips with the neglected 80% of the population. One regrets it has not had wider distribution through a commercial publisher.

We all know John Adams' famous dictum that one-third of the colonists supported the Revolution, one-third opposed it, and the remainder did not care. Adams clearly intended to criticize the apathetic third. How could they *not* become involved? The answer may be that the "apathetic" were marching to entirely different drummers, for the political issues of the revolutionary elite had no real meaning for their lives. On the whole, the apolitical by their lack of commitment tacitly supported the status quo. They were galvanized into action only when invading armies forced them to make a decision, and then their involvement was both unwilling and shortlived.

Such a pattern can be observed for women in the revolutionary period. The history of women is yet another expanding field of study, though most of the literature remains in journal articles, and we do not yet have anything approaching a synthesis. It would require a separate essay to discuss the many studies cited in Joan Hoff Wilson's contribution to the Young volume already noted, but significantly, she begins by observing that "by themselves women seldom fit into the power and prestige categories that characterize standard textbook accounts of this nation's development". The "powerless" in American society simply were not equipped to use the revolution to improve their own situation even had they recognized the opportunity. Wilson's essay is devoted largely to demonstrating women's lack of power and the reasons for it, and makes a good job of it. In the process she quite deliberately emphasizes that most women could not be revolutionaries, simply because their position in society was not sufficiently integrated with the cultural assumptions of the politicized groups. A similar conclusion can be drawn from Mary Beth Norton's study of Loyalist women, based upon the records of the Loyalist Claims Commission.¹⁰ In Wilson's word, they were not "modernized".

Interestingly, in the course of the uncovering of new layers of American society, recent scholarship has had to come to terms with the Loyalists. One main trend in Loyalist study of recent vintage has been to humanize the Loyalist leadership, the other to attempt to understand the aspirations of the rank-and-file. The first approach, largely through the medium of biography, has tended to reduce the disparity of thought between patriot and Loyalist leaders. This is very nearly self-evident, since, as James Kirby Martin has

10 Mary Beth Norton, "Eighteenth Century American Women in Peace and War: The Case of the Loyalists", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., XXXIII (1976), pp. 386-409.

demonstrated, Loyalist leaders came from essentially the same class of elite as the rebel ones, although the former were perhaps more cosmopolitan in their interests. In one sense, the Loyalism of the elite is almost accidental, a product of their pattern of officeholding after 1763. Because they were “ins”, they found themselves on the wrong side of the growing movement of opposition to Britain, however much they had in common with the rebels. Thomas Hutchinson and Jonathan Sewall of Massachusetts, both subjects of recent biographies, were American Whigs who found themselves on the wrong side and ended up unhappily exiled in Britain, conscious of their irrelevance to British society and very homesick.

Bernard Bailyn’s *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1974) is a brilliant and sympathetic study of the villain of Massachusetts. It is curious that both Edmund S. Morgan and Bailyn (contemporaries of equal scholarly stature teaching at Yale and Harvard respectively) have chosen to grace the Bicentennial with books which have the word “Ordeal” in their titles. Morgan’s ordeal refers to a society which trapped itself in inconsistency, while Bailyn’s is to an individual who could not stop a movement he could not understand. Bailyn’s Hutchinson is intelligent, sensitive, cultured, and out of step with the escalating events around him. His enemies are all lesser men. Hutchinson’s tragedy was not so much to lose as to fail to comprehend why he had lost.

Hutchinson remained in exile in the mother country, but Jonathan Sewall and his family came to British North America after the peace. Carol Berkin’s *Jonathan Sewall: Odyssey of an American Loyalist* (New York and London, Columbia University Press, 1975) attempts to explain why. Sewall was far more hostile to the aspirations of the “people” than was Hutchinson, and his exile was even more bitter and poignant. He ultimately decided, probably quite correctly, that the sons of a colonial lawyer and ex-official would be much better off as big fish in the small pond of Canada. Like most other Loyalist leaders who sought office for themselves or their sons in British North America, Sewall’s actions were simply a continuation of his previous climb to success through official preferment, although now the quest was marked by an angry conviction that Britain owed him something for his loyalty. Berkin’s is a good solid biography of an interesting man, although we probably could have benefitted from more extensive quotations from Sewall’s writings.

It is on the basis of the evidence of people like Sewall, his family, and circle of friends (which included Ward Chipman and Edward Winslow) that most generalizations about the Loyalist mentality in British North America are based. We have only scattered hints of the sentiments of the vast majority of Loyalists, although the second trend in Loyalist studies — to investigate the powerless segments — has offered some new material. The Blacks, for example, have been the subjects of two recently published studies, James W.

St. G. Walker's *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone 1783-1870* (London and Halifax, Longman and Dalhousie University Press, 1976) and Ellen Gibson Wilson's *The Loyal Blacks* (New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1976). Wilson's work is stronger on the American background, and Walker's far more solid on the African experience. Walker notes the small percentage of field hands among the Black Loyalists; those blacks most likely to be motivated toward earning or extending their freedom through Loyalism were the more assimilated household servants and skilled artisans. This point throws into bold relief the poignant paradox of the Sierra Leone venture — those transported from Nova Scotia to Africa were the most highly Americanized blacks — and of the Nova Scotia experience as well, for these skilled workers were unable to find employment in a province desperately short of skills. As both books demonstrate, however Americanized were the Black Loyalists, by no stretch of the imagination were they either eighteenth-century Whigs who had consciously chosen to remain in the Empire or ideological Tories. Their commitment to the British cause was understandably narrow and self-interested. As Walker emphasizes, they could not obtain in Nova Scotia what they really wanted: land and work to become eighteenth-century Americans.

We could well use similar studies of the Indian Loyalists, the Highlander Loyalists, the white farmer Loyalists. The Highlanders were recent emigrants from a collapsing semi-feudal society, not yet Americanized, and like the Black Loyalists and the Indian Loyalists and the "Late" Loyalists, they wanted land and a chance to be left alone. None of these groups brought to British North America the political and cultural values which had made a Revolution possible. They may have had a developing collective consciousness, but it was limited to their own kind and did not yet extend in politicized directions. There is a tendency to derogate Loyalists who lacked political pretensions, who simply wanted land and a chance to prosper, but Loyalism appears to have had a particularly strong popular appeal among the pre-modern segments of American society with just such simple ambitions.¹¹ Such people joined the French-Canadian *habitants*, who by rejecting American liberation were also, in some senses, Loyalists. Many of the cultural differences usually attributed to the Loyalists were not a product of political ideology, but of their lack of integration into revolutionary American society. What would be Canada was something clearly different from the United States as a result of their coming.

Are the Americans entitled to be pleased with their Revolution? On the

11 These remarks are only another way of reaffirming and reapproaching the insights of William Nelson's *The American Tory* (Oxford, 1961) and the too quickly rejected "fragment" thesis of Louis Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada and Australia* (New York, 1964).

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basis of current scholarship, the answer would be a highly-qualified "yes". Political independence was a major accomplishment which reflected the ambitions and needs of the majority of the society which brought it about. The qualification, of course, is that revolutionary American society did not include large segments of the population. There seems no escaping the facts that revolutionary leadership constituted a ruling class, that the politically active population (even including farmers and artisans) were an elite, and that most of the thirteen colonies' three million people were neither deliberate actors in nor immediate beneficiaries of the drama which unfolded. Whether Americans can or should be satisfied with such a limited achievement, is, of course, another question.