
BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Time remains to wind up the Bicentennial year with a good look at the American Revolution. What to choose to read is, however, a question of some difficulty.

Over the years, American and British historians writing on aspects of the Revolution have created a body of work overwhelming in its variety and scope. No entirely satisfactory single study exists, whether it be George Bancroft's pioneering 10-volume **A HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES, from the Discovery of the American Continent** (Little, Brown, 1834-75; abridged edition edited by Russel B. Nye, Univ. of Chicago, 1966, cloth & paper) or the latest, two-volume exercise, **A NEW AGE NOW BEGINS: A People's History of the American Revolution** by Page Smith (McGraw-Hill, 1976).

These sweeping narratives are surprisingly alike in some ways. But where Bancroft, the founding father of American history, writes stirring of battles in "drum and bugle" style, Smith, equally fascinated by war, is down-to-earth modern. Example: "The most pressing issue before the [second Continental] Congress was the appointment of a commander in chief for the army at Boston. Artemas Ward was too fat, Israel Putnam too old, William Heath too inexperienced."

A determined reader can probably do best by going first to primary sources and following up with several books that examine segments of the story or concentrate on particular interpretations of events in America and Britain.

Contemporary diaries and letters from ordinary citizens and soldiers of the revolutionary era can be sampled in

the nearly 200 volumes of **EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION** and **THE FIRST AMERICAN FRONTIER** (Arno, 1968-71). Other books offer telling selections of such correspondence along with the major public documents from the pens of the eighteenth century Americans who wrote—and wrote well—even as they charted a course for their new country.

COLONIES TO NATION 1763-1789: A Documentary History of the American Revolution edited by Jack P. Greene (Norton, 1975, cloth & paper) reflects changes in historical research and analysis missing from Henry Steele Commager's **DOCUMENTS OF AMERICAN HISTORY** (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 9th ed., 1974, cloth & paper). But to own either is to have a rich private archive.

As a setting for the contemporary papers, no better brief chronological introduction to the period can be found than Edmund S. Morgan's **THE BIRTH OF THE REPUBLIC: 1763-1789** (Univ. of Chicago, 1956, cloth & paper). More detailed but not unwieldy are John Richard Alden's narrative, **A HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION** (Knopf, 1969, cloth & paper), and his **THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION, 1775-1783** (Harper & Row, 1954, cloth & paper); the latter, limited specifically to the war years, follows the ebb and flow of the military campaigns of Washington and his foes.

The conflicting currents of political belief in colonial America are described in several books. One, Hannah Arendt's rigorous **ON REVOLUTION** (Viking, 1963, cloth & paper), considers the character of the American Revolution as

part of the larger phenomenon of revolution in modern history and stresses its continuing relevance to the world.

THE COLONIAL BACKGROUND OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: Four Essays in American Colonial History by Charles McLean Andrews (Yale, 1924, cloth & paper), a short volume by the father of modern scholarship on early America, portrays the changing, increasingly awkward relationships between Britain and the colonists during the century and a half before the rebellion. **THE IDEOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION** by Bernard Bailyn (Harvard, 1967, cloth & paper) tells how expectations brought from Britain by the colonists shaped their responses to such measures as the Stamp Act and were in turn altered by subsequent events.

Works that stress the world political climate before and during the American Revolution are **THE STRUCTURE OF POLITICS AT THE ACCESSION OF GEORGE III** by Sir Lewis Namier (London: Macmillan, 1960, cloth; St. Martin's, 1961, paper), in two volumes for the reader with ample time and strong interest, and **THE AGE OF DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800** edited by R. R. Palmer (Princeton, 1959), also in two volumes. Vol. I seeks to place the American Revolution in the context of contemporary reformist impulses in Europe.

BRITISH POLITICS AND THE STAMP ACT CRISIS: The First Phase of the American Revolution, 1763-1767 by P. D. G. Thomas (London: Clarendon Press, 1975) is an English author's exhaustive chronicle of British behavior during the early years of strain. **THE STAMP ACT CRISIS: Prologue to Revolution** by Edmund S. and Helen M. Morgan (Univ. of N. C., 1953, cloth; Macmillan, 1963, rev. ed., paper) briskly

analyzes from the American point of view the setting, antecedents, and repercussions of this first serious rupture in Anglo-American relations.

Another book that, like the Morgans', treats the background of the Revolution more broadly than its title suggests is **THE BOSTON TEA PARTY** by Benjamin Woods Labaree (Oxford, 1964, cloth & paper). It provides a full account of the tea trade and American resistance to imposition of the Townshend Acts, as well as those "three short hours on a cold December night in 1773" when a small band of men in Boston Harbor "precipitated a reaction that led with little pause to the Declaration of Independence."

How that great document was drafted is described in Carl Lotus Becker's book, first published in 1922, **THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE: A Study in the History of Political Ideas** (Knopf, 1942, cloth; Random House/Vintage, 1958, paper). It discusses the Declaration's antecedents in the eighteenth century's prevailing philosophy of "natural rights" and provides close textual analysis of the Declaration itself. Becker's critique of the document's literary qualities—he speaks of "the high seriousness, a kind of lofty pathos" of Jefferson's sentences—has yet to be matched.

The reader who wants to know more about American society at the time the nation was evolving would do well to begin with Jackson Turner Main's **THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA, 1760-1781** (Princeton, 1965, cloth & paper). Main uses tax rolls and other data to show sharp economic differences among the colonists and describes early American class distinctions and styles of living. A next step might be the bulky **AMERICAN EDUCATION: The Colonial Experience** by Lawrence A. Cremin (Harper & Row, 1970, cloth & paper). It encompasses

the era's entire cultural and social development—in households, churches, business, politics, but most of all in schools and colleges, from 1607 to 1783.

THE LOYALISTS IN REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA, 1760-1781 by Robert McCluer Calhoun (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973) is useful for understanding the war's backyard opponents. **THE PROBLEM OF SLAVERY IN THE AGE OF REVOLUTION, 1770-1823** by David Brion Davis (Cornell, 1975, cloth & paper) deals with the apathy or antipathy encountered by abolitionists of the time.

Merrill Jensen's **THE ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION: An Interpretation of the Social-Constitutional History of the American Revolution, 1774-1781** (Univ. of Wis., 1940) is fairly difficult reading for the nonspecialist. It is, however, the definitive work on the establishment of the United States' first, shaky national government. Easier to read is the follow-up narrative of the postwar Confederation period by Andrew C. McLaughlin, **THE CONFEDERATION AND THE CONSTITUTION, 1783-1789** (Harper, 1905, cloth; Macmillan, 1962, paper).

The economic forces at play throughout the revolutionary era figure to some degree in the work of most historians; the first to focus mainly on those forces was the controversial Charles A. Beard. In **AN ECONOMIC INTERPRETATION OF THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES** (Macmillan, 1935, cloth; Free Press, 1965, paper), he argues that the Constitution was the product of conservative interests, "principally . . . four groups of personalty interests which had been adversely affected under

the Articles of Confederation: money, public securities, manufacturers, and trade and shipping." His interpretation is today considered at best oversimplified. A revisionist view—rather hard reading—can be had in Forrest McDonald's **WE THE PEOPLE: The Economic Origins of the Constitution** (Univ. of Chicago, 1958, cloth & paper), a close examination of the complexity of economic interests at work in the hammering out of the nation's enduring charter.

Finally, there is **ESSAYS ON THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION**, a collection of original articles edited by Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson (Univ. of N.C., 1973, cloth; Norton, 1973, paper). Bernard Bailyn, Rowland Berthoff, Richard Maxwell Brown, H. James Henderson, Jack P. Greene, William G. McLoughlin, Edmund S. Morgan, John Murrin, and John Shy were asked to summarize "for educated readers the results of their studies in aspects of the Revolution best understood by them and for which they have gained the respect of their professional colleagues."

Taking up such themes as violence in the 1760s and '70s, the effects of the war on the civilian population, voting blocs in the Continental Congress, and the role of religion, they fulfill the hope expressed in the opening chapter that "when all the [Bicentennial] medallions have been struck, the pageantry performed, the commercial gimmicks exploited, and the market-tested hackwork published," these essays might help to explain "what, in the context of the knowledge now available, the American Revolution was all about and what bearing it should have on our lives."

EDITOR'S NOTE. *Jack P. Greene, professor of history at the Johns Hopkins University and a 1974-75 Fellow, and Forrest C. Pogue, director of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Institute for Historical Research of the Smithsonian Institution, gave advice on this bibliography.*

MEN OF THE REVOLUTION

Their Lives:

GEORGE WASHINGTON: A BIOGRAPHY. Douglas Southall Freeman. 7 vols. (Scribners, 1948-57; Kelley, 1975). **GEORGE WASHINGTON.** James T. Flexner, 4 vols. (Little, Brown, 1965-72)

JEFFERSON AND HIS TIME. Dumas Malone. 5 vols. (Little, Brown, 1948, 1970, cloth & paper)

JOHN ADAMS AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION. Catherine Drinker Bowen. (Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1950, cloth; Grosset & Dunlap, 1957, paper)

SAMUEL ADAMS, PROMOTER OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: A Study in Psychology and Politics. Ralph V. Harlow. (Holt, 1923; Octagon, 1972)

JOHN PAUL JONES, A SAILOR'S BIOGRAPHY. Samuel Eliot Morison. (Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1959, cloth & paper)

ROCHAMBEAU: America's Neglected Founding Father. Arnold Whitridge. (Macmillan, 1965, cloth, 1974, paper)

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN. This work, translated from the French in which diplomat Franklin wrote it, was first published in London in 1793. The Library of Congress now has 135 cards in its catalog for editions published since—including one edited by Leonard W. Labaree (Yale, 1964).

Their Letters:

THE ADAMS-JEFFERSON LETTERS: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams. Edited by Lester J. Cappon. 2 vols. (Univ. of N. C., 1950)

THE BOOK OF ABIGAIL AND JOHN: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784. Edited by L. H. Butterfield, Marc Friedlander, & Mary-Jo Kline. (Harvard, 1975)

THE DIARIES OF GEORGE WASHINGTON, 1748-1799. Edited by J. C. Fitzpatrick. 4 vols. (Houghton, Mifflin, 1925)

THE PAPERS OF JOHN MARSHALL, Vol. I: Correspondence and Papers, November 10, 1775-June 23, 1788: Account Book, September 1783-June 1788. Edited by Herbert A. Johnson, Charles T. Cullen, & Nancy G. Harris. (Univ. of N. C., 1974)

THE PAPERS OF JAMES MADISON. 9 vols. Vols. 1-7 edited by William T. Hutchinson & William M. E. Rachal, Vols. 8-9 by Robert A. Rutland, et al. (Univ. of Chicago, 1962-75)*

THE PAPERS OF ALEXANDER HAMILTON. Edited by Harold C. Syrett & Jacob E. Cooke. 22 vols. to date. (Columbia, 1961-76)*

THE PAPERS OF THOMAS JEFFERSON. Edited by Julian P. Boyd. 19 vols. to date. (Princeton, 1950)*

* These and a number of other collections of writings by famous and lesser-known revolutionary figures are being edited and published under the sponsorship of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.