

The Unruly Revolution

– Sakina M. Hughes

The Unknown American Revolution

The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America

by Gary B. Nash

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GARY NASH'S THE Unknown American Revolution fully discloses its aims to propagate both historical and social lessons. Nash retells the story of the American Revolution, complicating and radicalizing its core narrative as "a people's revolution, an upheaval among the most heterogeneous people to be found anywhere along the Atlantic littoral in the eighteenth century."

The characters in The Unknown American Revolution "looked toward a redistribution of political, social, and religious power; the discarding of old institutions and the creation of new ones; the overthrowing of ingrained patterns of conservative, elitist thought; the leveling of society so that top and bottom were not widely separated; the end of the nightmare of slavery and genocidal intentions of land-crazed frontiersmen; the hope of women of achieving a public voice." (xvii)

Through highlighting the lives of these revolutionaries, Nash first reminds readers of the Revolution's heterogeneous nature and sets out to cure the historical amnesia that plagues America. In doing this, Nash opens a second, simultaneous conversation, alive and interactive with the reader in a way that some textbook writers might well fear and loathe.

Through telling the stories of so many disenfranchised, so many poor, enslaved and so many ordinary people turned revolutionaries, Nash teaches that ordinary people do make history and in fact, do make revolutions. While the interests of the emerging ruling class, represented by George Washington, John Adams and the other familiar founders, determined the immediate outcomes of the American Revolution, common people played crucial roles in the spirit of the era and the continuation of the social revolution.

Common people throughout history have been a powerful force once activated by hunger for food, liberty and justice, and their stories must be told. Innate in this lesson is that the rich and famous do not have the monopoly on history making, though as Aldous Huxley asserted, "liberties are not given, they are taken." Nash seems to say, however quietly in the pages of this history, that the disenfranchised majority can and must stop waiting to be given liberties and must start taking them.

Privilege or Justice?

The big problem with the revolution, as Abigail Adams saw it, was that its leaders sought only to maintain their privilege rather than fight for liberty and justice for all. Of the slave trade she stated, "It always appeared a most iniquitous scheme to me - fight ourselves for what we are daily robbing and plundering from those who have as good a right to freedom as we have." (158) After doubting how sincere the passion for liberty could be among those who would own slaves, Adams wrote to her husband, "...you insist upon retaining an absolute power over wives..." (205-206) Seeking to oust British aristocratic privilege, Abigail Adams' husband and his peers desired to secure a place for another dominant class: their class. They aimed to dominate the same masses that the British had kept under control. John Adams consistently revealed that he had no interest in a more "equitable equality," rather, he was concerned that his class remained at the top in the new America.

Adams defended his position against giving men without property the vote, writing to judge James Sullivan, "'There will be no end to it...Women will demand a vote.' Young lads would be next. 'It tends to confound and destroy all distinctions and prostrate all ranks to one common level.'" (206) In effect, John Adams gave a thumb's up to a system that disenfranchised women, Blacks, Natives and landless just as long as he and his class were the executors of that deprivation and oppression.

Rather than bash the founding fathers for owning slaves, oppressing women or carrying out genocide on the native population, Nash focuses on the "middle and lower ranks of American society..." where the heroes did not always "have pale complexions." These stories remind readers that, as Haitian historian, Michel-Rolph Trouillot wrote, "Lived inequalities yield unequal historical power," but also that where there is oppression, there will be people fighting it passionately. (xvii-xviii) Though few of those lower-class heroes "have emerged to enter the national pantheon" where they could laud their own performance, these men and women "counted greatly at the time." (xviii)

Contested Historiography

This brings up an important issue in American historiography. It remains in the crisis that began with the Revolution. While the framers of the Constitution criticized each other, historians and the general public often canonized the founding fathers, raising them to the status of saints and holy men.

Charles Thomson, a secretary to the Continental Congress, had set out to write a memoir of the American Revolution, but burned his thousand-page account. He felt it would "contradict all the histories of the great events of the Revolution." He wrote, "I could not tell the truth without giving great offense...Let the world admire our patriots and heroes." (xxi)

Historians buried Native and African American voices; they silenced women's demands and dismissed white workers' demands. They continue to neglect a more equitable equality by teaching only a modicum of what was a revolutionary and truly inspiring moment in world history.

Other contemporaries, such as Continental Congress delegate David Ramsay, hoped to instruct future generations and became forerunners of the people's histories by acknowledging the lower classes' important contributions to the war's outcome. Ramsay wrote *The History of the American Revolution* around the key notion that "The great bulk of those, who were the active instruments of carrying on the revolution, were self-made, industrious men. These who by their own exertions, had establish or laid a foundation for establishing personal independence, were most generally trusted, and most successfully employed in establishing that of their country." Ramsay also urged America to "...let the hapless African sleep undisturbed on his native shore and give over wishing for the extermination of the ancient proprietors of this land." (xxi)

Maintaining Ramsey's pedagogical model, Mercy Otis Warren sought to "dwell on the bitters as well as the sweets" and gave credence to women's and lower class contributions to the Revolution. She wrote that it was "one of the most extraordinary eras in the history of man...[that] led to that most alarming experiment of leveling of all ranks and destroying all subordination." (xxii)

Nash highlights the radicalism inherent in the American Revolution, giving readers a heterogeneous cast of characters. The American Revolution was much more than the story of the homogenous, freedom-loving patriots versus the evil Brits.

Nash reveals Native Americans, African Americans, women, the poor and landless whites and immigrants as contributors in the revolution equal to the likes of Washington, Adams and Jefferson. Landowning, slave-holding patriots made up a small percentage of the people and interests in the colonies. All, white or Black, poor or wealthy, had their own ideas of how they should attain the life they desired.

Thomas Paine's Revolution

Nash gives an answer to all those who ignore the counter-revolutionary tendencies of the founding fathers: Thomas Paine. Throughout *The Unknown Revolution*, Paine provides a model of radicalism, adamantly calling for the ending of slavery, better relations with the Native nations and real justice for yeomen, workers and the landless.

A true revolutionary, Paine fueled the sentiment for revolution through his writing.

He wrote: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand." (209)

Paine arrived in Philadelphia in November, 1774 and quickly came to symbolize the power of artisan and farmer radicalism. Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* saw unheard of sales and distribution in a largely illiterate society. "Written so it could be understood at the artisans' benches, on the docks, in the taverns, and in the fields

and barns, Common Sense sold 100,000 copies in its first year of publication and thousands after that. If the crack of a rifle at Concord Bridge was the first shot heard round the world in April 1775, Paine's Common Sense was the second shot heard round the world in January 1776." (189)

In this pamphlet, Paine presented the case for the revolution. Going further, Paine fought fiercely for the most radical ideals of his time and in the process berated the founding fathers for being counter-revolutionary.

Later, hoping to teach a younger generation of the Revolution, Paine wrote, "The independence of America...was the opportunity of beginning the world anew...and bringing forth a new system of government in which the rights of all men should be preserved that gave value to independence."

As Paine saw it, however, the American Revolution was never fully realized. Says Nash: "The rights of all men had never been fully acknowledged, and in the years he had been away the accomplishments of the radical revolutionists to begin the world anew had been sullied." (423)

In an open letter to President Washington, whom he called "...a hypocrite in public life...," Paine wrote that "...the world will be puzzled to decide whether you are an apostate or imposter...whether you have abandoned good principles, or whether you ever had any." (xx)

The Real Soldiers

One of the favorites of the Revolution's historiography is the hallowed story of the minutemen. The minutemen were the archetype of the citizen-soldier, men of all walks of life, all occupations, and all classes. They joined the revolution for short periods to do their part in the effort, and then returned home to tend to their own family, farm and community.

The idea of the minuteman gained respect and glory during the revolution and still enjoys a special place in the heart of every patriotic American. Nash demystifies this archetype and along the way brings the worshipped General Washington back down to earth.

Continuing to talk the talk of the masses but walk the path of the privileged, John Adams said, "We must all be soldiers for God and country." (216) All, meaning rich and poor, land holder and landless? Nash documents that "Within months of the signing of the Declaration of Independence - certainly by the end of 1776 - the cross-class character of American fighting forces changed sharply." This was because "...fewer and fewer people wanted to have anything to do with Continental service." (218)

As the war went on, troops were disproportionately taken from lower layers of society. Many of them were society's most desperate: poor Irish and German immigrants, those recently released from jail.

Only a small number of white Americans, those who could truly be lauded as the citizen-soldier, actually fought. Instead, maintaining social and class distinction, "the men who fought in the Continental army had shallow roots in any community. They were overwhelmingly from the lower layers of society and were mainly enlisted to bear arms so that the mythic citizen soldier could avoid military service and stay at home." (216-217)

One fighter whom Nash holds up as typical is a man named "Long Bill" Scott. For Scott, chances at bettering his financial position were "the only motives for...entering into the service." He said, "As to the dispute between Great Britain and the colonies, I knew nothing of it; neither am I capable of judging whether it is right or wrong." (219)

Nash additionally reveals as myth the image of the mid-Atlantic yeoman farmer, bidding farewell to his family to fight the patriotic cause. Landless, unskilled laborers or lower artisans were drawn into service by bounties provided by those wanting to avoid continental service. These men, unlike the New Englanders, were mostly foreign-born and had only recently arrived in America.

One hundred twenty-seven thousand immigrants had poured into the colonies between 1760 and 1775, mostly from Scotland, Ireland, England and Germany. Maryland's continental soldiers who died at Valley Forge were mostly young, poor, landless, voteless and about half were immigrants. Those considered vagrants could be court-ordered to serve up to nine months in the Continental Army.

Prisoners who had been sent from England to America were conscripted and stood a good chance of fighting countrymen from their own impoverished villages in Ireland or Scotland. Though starved and naked by the end of the war, the Continental army could not have defeated British forces without these clueless conscripts because "(t)he people celebrated as citizen-soldiers 'got tired of serving, and they got tired of contributing.'" (218)

Women in the Revolution

After forgetting them for centuries, historians are finally recognizing revolutionary women around the globe for their vital work in their movements' successes. Women played large roles in the war and the dissemination of revolutionary ideas in the America. Black women, pining for freedom, joined Black men in fighting for it. They supported troops and in some cases fought on the battlefield.

White, farming and lower class women focused on bread and butter issues. Some of the most militant women led food riots. These began when rich merchants began

artificial price spikes of essentials such as grain, sugar and coffee. In Boston, the stores of the "perfectly patriotic" merchant Thomas Boylston were raided because of his miserly and stingy practice, according to Abigail Adams.

Boylston, like other merchants of his wealth, withheld coffee and sugar from the market to make quick profits. When he refused to sell the coffee at a reasonable price, as Abigail Adams reports "a number of females, some say a hundred, some say more ...assembled with a cart and trucks, marched down to the warehouse...demanded the keys ...hoisted out the coffee themselves, put it into trucks and drove off." (232)

Women led demands for "taxation popularie," the seizure and sale of goods at fair prices. This was in direct response to those merchants who withheld goods and necessities in order to hike prices. Nash counts 14 food riots between December 1776 and December 1778 alone, mostly led by women. (232-233) The twist in this story is that the very exploiters whose behavior incited the bread riots were the freedom-loving patriots - those fighting the British for such noble causes as "no taxation without representation."

Few histories reflect militant Black leaders during the Revolutionary era. Before Ira Berlin, many traditional histories told the story of how Africans were kidnapped from their homelands, went to work in the new world, and then waited for the whites in charge to grant them freedom. Blacks were patient by-standers in their own fates. Nash teaches a different history. Again, he reminds us that where there is oppression, there is also the struggle against the oppressor. So, while Nash's narrative of Blacks in America begins with kidnappings, every step along the way reveals mutinies, uprisings, organizing and massive action. Nash's use of terms such as "enslaved Bostonians" or "enslaved Virginians" gives a sense of a real mixing pot - that America was a land of many people, many dynamics, and many ideas of independence. Nash chronicles how slaves fought to affect their own freedom. W. E. B. Du Bois, while widely admired, is often forgotten for his real contribution to American history. Anyone reading his Black Reconstruction would have the pleasure of learning the struggles of the Black slave to effect his and her own freedom.

However, America is now at the point of rediscovering, again, that African Americans haven't been waiting patiently for their oppressors to grant liberation. Slave owners were very careful not to allow too much news about their slaves' mutinous actions out to the public - especially other slaves. In a letter to her husband, Abigail Adams wrote, "there has been in town a conspiracy of the Negroes....At present it is kept pretty private and was discovered by one who endeavored to dissuade them from it..." African Americans, disinterested in the "freedom" they would look forward to after the American Revolution in the form of continued slavery, looked forward to a British victory. The young James Madison

pleaded with his local printer to censor the news of the enslaved joining the loyalists for fear of other slave uprisings. (158-159; see also 223-226)

Nash also uses this complex reality to reflect upon his profession. Historians too often reflect their values on race, class and other social issues rather than reflect objectively or even factually. One instance is the work of the historian William C. Nell, the first African American historian of the Black revolutionary experience writing in the 1850s. To further the Abolitionists' cause, Nell wrote about the courageous Black men and boys who joined Revolutionary forces to help win the war. The reality was that Blacks were the most enthusiastic in joining the war effort, proportionately more likely to join than white Americans - however, Black men and women joined in large numbers against the side that proclaimed all men were "born free, equal, and endowed with certain unalienable rights."

History from the Bottom

Culminating over four decades of Nash's research, *The Unknown Revolution* emerges from a lineage of "bottom up" histories by writers such as Howard Zinn, Staughton Lynd and Ira Berlin. Nash succeeds at synthesizing the work of his predecessors whose pioneering research during the 1960s and 1970s unearthed forgotten characters and dimensions of the Revolution.

Staughton Lynd and Jesse Lemisch, representing the New Left school, "blazed the way with studies of farmers, artisans, and blue water mariners, thus opening up the neglected world of plebian people." (457) John Shy contributed social histories of military affairs in the Revolution.

Nash also draws from the research that emerged on African-American and Women's Studies. Ira Berlin and Peter Wood "showed the importance of African Americans in how the revolution unfolded." (458) Mary Beth Norton and Linda Kerber, contributing potent women's histories, also helped to create a new dynamic of history of the Revolutionary era.

People's histories need to be more than interesting facts for trivia. People's histories need to be constructed in a way that reflects and incites the working class. We need to make the solid connections between our past accomplishments, our present demands and our future victories.

Replace the lie that all whites are equal, that all Blacks were passive and that all women waited patiently. The traditional histories rely on racism and sexism to sell their points by not pointing out the places where women did fight and attain the vote; where Blacks did actively fight for liberation; where working whites and Blacks worked together; where blacks voted and elected their own leaders: the list goes on. The repercussions result in the stifling of working people.

The result of traditional history is the belief that racism is inherent, when it is actually a tool of imperialism. The result is an ignorance and internalization of racist views of Black people in their own communities. The ruling class has effectively sponsored an American history that responds to their needs. It has erased the memory of struggles and victories, with a result of apathy and hopelessness and assimilation. Luckily we have books like *The Unknown American Revolution* to help cure some of our historical amnesia.

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