The Unknown American Revolution

ALSO BY GARY B. NASH

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THE UNKNOWN AMERICAN REVOLUTION

The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America

GARY B. NASH

Viking

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INTRODUCTION

Salus populi suprema lex ("the welfare of the people is the supreme law")

—Cicero, *The Laws,* Book 3:8

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Truth always makes sad havoc with the frost-work of the imagination and sternly demands the homage of the historian's pen.

—Benson Lossing, *Pictorial Field-Book of the American Revolution* (1850)

"WHO SHALL WRITE THE HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION?"

Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?" Thus wrote John Adams in 1815 to Thomas Jefferson, his old enemy but by this time his septuagenarian friend. "Nobody," Jefferson replied from Monticello, "except merely its external facts . . . The life and soul of history must be forever unknown."[1]

Not so. For more than two centuries historians have written about the American Revolution, striving to capture the "life and soul" of which Jefferson spoke. We now possess a rich and multistranded tapestry of the Revolution, filled with engaging biographies, local narratives, weighty explorations of America's greatest explosion of political thinking, annals of military tactics and strategies, discussions of religious, economic, and diplomatic aspects of what was then called the "glorious cause," and more. Indeed we now have possession of far more than the "external facts."

Yet the great men—the founding fathers—of the revolutionary era dominate the reigning master narrative. Notwithstanding generations of prodigious

scholarship, we have not appreciated the lives and labors, the sacrifices and struggles, the glorious messiness, the hopes and fears of diverse groups that fought in the longest and most disruptive war in our history with visions of launching a new age filling their heads. Little is known, for example, of Thomas Peters, an African-born slave who made his personal declaration of independence in early 1776, fought for the freedom of African Americans, led former slaves to Nova Scotia after the war, and completed a pilgrimage for unalienable rights by shepherding them back to Africa to participate in the founding of Sierra Leone. Why are the history books virtually silent on Dragging Canoe, the Cherokee warrior who made the American Revolution into a two-decade life-sapping fight for his people's life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness? We cannot capture the "life and soul" of the Revolution without paying close attention to the wartime experiences and agendas for change that engrossed backcountry farmers, urban craftsmen, deep-blue mariners, female camp followers and food rioters—those ordinary people who did most of the protesting, most of the fighting, most of the dying, and most of the dreaming about how a victorious America might satisfy the yearnings of all its peoples.

In this book the reader will find, I hope, an antidote for historical amnesia. To this day, the public remembers the Revolution mostly in its enshrined, mythic form. This is peculiar in a democratic society because the sacralized story of the founding fathers, the men of marble, mostly concerns the uppermost slice of American revolutionary society. That is what has lodged in our minds, and this is the fable that millions of people in other countries know about the American Revolution.

I ask readers to expand their conception of revolutionary American society and to consider the multiple agendas—the stuff of ideas, dreams, and aspirations—that sprang from its highly diverse and fragmented character. It is not hard today to understand that American people in all their diversity entertain a variety of ideas about what they want their nation to be and what sort of America they want for their children. Much the same was true two centuries ago. But from a distance of more than two centuries we don't think about our nation's birth that way. It is more comforting to think about united colonists rising up as a unified body to get the British lion's paw off the backs of their necks. That is a noble and inspiring David and Goliath story, but it is not what actually happened. It is assuredly not the story of radical democracy's work during the Revolution.

This book presents a people's revolution, an upheaval among the most heterogeneous people to be found anywhere along the Atlantic littoral in the eighteenth century. The book's thrust is to complicate the well-established core narrative by putting before the reader bold figures, ideas, and movements, highlighting the true radicalism of the American Revolution that was indispensable to the origins, conduct, character, and outcome of the world-shaking event.

By "radicalism" I mean advocating wholesale change and sharp transformation rooted in a kind of dream life of a better future imagined by those who felt most dissatisfied with the conditions they experienced as the quarrel with Great Britain unfolded. For a reformed America they 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 the genocidal intentions of land-crazed frontiersmen; the hope of women of achieving a public voice. This radicalism directed itself at destabilizing a society where the white male elite prized stability because it upheld their close grip on political, economic, religious, sexual, and social power. This radicalism, therefore, was usually connected to a multifaceted campaign to democratize society, to recast the social system, to achieve dreams with deep biblical and historical roots, to put "power in the people," as the first articles of government in Quaker New Jersey expressed it a century before the American Revolution.

The pages that follow mostly view the American Revolution through the eyes of those *not* in positions of power and privilege, though the iconic founding fathers are assuredly part of the story. In reality, those in the nether strata of colonial society and those outside "respectable" society were *most* of the people of revolutionary America. Without their ideas, dreams, and blood sacrifices, the American Revolution would never have occurred, would never have followed the course that we can now comprehend, and would never have reverberated around the world among oppressed people down to the present day. Disinterring these long-forgotten figures from history's cemetery, along with their aspirations and demands, along with the events and dramatic moments in which they figured so importantly, is offered as an antidote to the art of forgetting.

Many of the figures we will encounter were from the middle and lower

ranks of American society, and many of them did not have pale complexions. From these ranks, few heroes have emerged to enter the national pantheon. For the most part, they remain anonymous. Partly this is because they faded in and out of the picture, rarely achieving the tenure and status of men such as John Adams and John Hancock of Boston, Robert Morris and Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay of New York, or Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and George Washington of Virginia, all of whom remained on the scene from the Revolution's beginning to the very end. But, although they never rose to the top of society, where they could trumpet their own achievements and claim their place in the pages of history, many other men and women counted greatly at the time. "Lived inequalities," writes the Haitian philosopher-historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "yield unequal historical power."[2] The shortness of their lives also explains the anonymity of ordinary people. It is safer to conduct a revolution from the legislative chamber than fight for it on the battlefield, healthier to be free than enslaved, and one is more likely to reach old age with money than with crumbs.

Even a casual reading of the reflections of those who occupy our national pantheon shows that these founders were far from reverent in their views of one another, and far from agreed on how to tell the story of the nation's birth. They thought the story would be messy, ambiguous, and complicated because they had experienced the Revolution in just these ways—as a seismic eruption from the hands of an internally divided people, two decades of problems that sometimes seemed insoluble, a gnawing fear that the course of the Revolution was contradicting its bedrock principles, and firsthand knowledge of the shameful behavior that was interlaced with heroic self-sacrifice during the long travail. "The history of our Revolution," fretted John Adams, "will be one continued lie from one end to the other. The essence of the whole will be that Dr. Franklin's electric rod smote the earth and out sprang George Washington." Adams complained endlessly about how Franklin was overrated and underhanded, and it pained him immensely to think that the story would go on "that Franklin electrified [Washington] with his rod, and henceforward these two conducted all the policy negotiations, legislatures, and war." Adams couldn't decide who would be best remembered in history—Franklin or Washington—but he knew for a certainty that both deserved less credit than he. "I never knew but one man who pretended to be wholly free from [vanity]," Adams wrote of Franklin, "and him I know to be in his heart

Shortly after his death in 1799, portraits of Washington ascending to heaven with mothers, children, and one Indian maiden (at lower right) were done, representing the nation's grief. Yale's president addressed students: "O Washington! How I do love thy name! How have I adored and blessed thy God for creating and forming thee, the great ornament of human kind! . . . Thy fame is of sweeter perfume than Arabian spices. Listening angels shall catch the odour, waft it to heaven, and perfume the universe."

the vainest man, and the falsest character I have ever met with in life." Washington wasn't much better. Adams grumbled about "the superstitious veneration that is sometimes paid to General Washington," because "I feel myself his superior." Growing gray, he told his friend Jedidiah Morse, who had applied to Adams "to assist you in writing history, [that] I know not whether I

ought to laugh or cry." Retired as the nation's second president, Adams confessed that history would never give him his due. "I read it [history] as I do romance, believing what is probable and rejecting what I must."[3]

The author of the Declaration of Independence also took his lumps, and administered a few, as he and his band of brothers tried to assess the American Revolution after the smoke had cleared and the ink on the peace treaty had dried. Jefferson found Adams impossible: "He hates Franklin, he hates Jay, he hates the French, he hates the English," wrote the Monticello patriarch in 1783. Adams returned the favor. At one point he assured a friend in Philadelphia that Jefferson was not "a true figure" of the Revolution and that drafting the Declaration of Independence was a "theatrical show" in which the man from Monticello had "run away with all the stage effect . . . and all the glory of it." After losing the presidency to Jefferson in 1800, Adams called his rival so "warped by prejudice and so blinded by ignorance as to be unfit for the office he holds." Many of Adams's Congregational minister friends agreed. One predicted that Americans would "rue the day and detest the folly, delusion, and intrigue which raised him to the head of the United States." Other clergymen bombarded their parishioners with descriptions of Jefferson as an adulterous atheist and a toadying lover of the hopelessly corrupt French, whose revolution was as attractive as a plague.[4]

Washington quickly became the avatar of revolutionary achievement because the nation could hardly do without a conquering hero. But privately—and sometimes very publicly—many of his closest associates thought differently. Charles Lee, who became Washington's third-ranking general and had a low opinion of his commander's generalship, sneered at what he called the "infallible divinity" of the commander in chief and called him "a bladder of emptiness and pride." Tom Paine, even after Washington had virtually been sanctified, told the public that had honored him for the crucial essay *Common Sense* that Washington was "treacherous in private friendship . . . and a hypocrite in public life." In an open letter to the retiring president he capped his denunciation: "As to you, Sir . . . , the world will be puzzled to decide whether you are an apostate or an impostor; whether you have abandoned good principles, or whether you ever had any."[5]

Some of the revolutionary leaders were so convinced that the men being eulogized as the war ended had feet of clay that they decided not to tell what they knew about the conduct of the Revolution. Charles Thomson, for example, had a rare opportunity to pass on to history an insider's view. An immi-

grant from Ulster who had run away from his indenture to a blacksmith at age ten, he rose to become secretary to the Continental Congress, where he sat in the catbird's seat observing the entire wartime proceedings. Many fellow leaders urged him "to write secret memoirs of the American Revolution," as Benjamin Rush remembered. But after writing a thousand-page account packed with "notes of the intrigues and severe altercations or quarrels in the Congress," Thomson buried and later burned his account, along with all his notes and documents. "I could not tell the truth without giving great offense," Thomson told a confidant. "Let the world admire our patriots and heroes." If he published his memoirs, it would "contradict all the histories of the great events of the Revolution." Better that the American people embrace a mythic version of the revolution; ignorance and misrepresentation would serve the nation better because the boasted "talents and virtues" of the founding fathers would "command imitation" and thus "serve the cause of patriotism and of our country."[6]

While those atop the social pyramid couldn't agree on how to parcel out credit for the outcome of the American Revolution, or even to tell the story honestly, a few of them industriously published histories they hoped would serve to instruct the generations to come. In this effort, they were forerunners of a true people's history of the Revolution because they understood how crucial the rank and file of American society were to the outcome. For example, David Ramsay, transplanted from Pennsylvania to South Carolina, where he served as a delegate to the Continental Congress, organized his *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 established or laid a foundation for establishing *personal independence,* were most generally trusted, and most successfully employed in establishing that of their country." Ramsay also appreciated, even if in muted tones, the centrality of black and Native Americans to the Revolution. Publishing his account just a year after the ratification of the Constitution, Ramsay implored the new American generation—in two pages of advice at the end of his book—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."[7]

Massachusetts clergyman William Gordon, publishing his *History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of Independence* in the same year, also wanted young Americans to learn of both the ignoble and heroic aspects of the

nation's birth. "I am in search of genuine truth and not a fairy tale," Gordon wrote Washington in requesting private papers that would enable him to present a multifaceted revolution.[8]

Mercy Otis Warren, wife and sister of two important Massachusetts patriots, also hoped that the readers of her *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution* (published in 1805) would find moral lessons in her three-volume account; and she harbored no doubts that this obliged her to dwell on the bitter as well as the sweet, the ordinary as well as the great. Giving considerable play to women's importance in the Revolution, she wrote in detail about how ordinary Massachusetts plowmen and leather-apron men rose up in 1774 in "one of the most extraordinary eras in the history of man"—one that "led to that most alarming experiment of leveling of all ranks and destroying all subordination."[9] Indeed, Warren gave *too much* importance to lesser people and not nearly enough to John Adams, husband of her good friend Abigail—or so John told her. Adams was furious at her history. Putting the writing of his autobiography aside, he wrote ten long letters telling her why. Yet Warren's was one of the accounts that, in paying attention to common people, anticipated Ralph Waldo Emerson's plea four decades later in his famous essay entitled "The American Scholar," where he urged those who would truly know their history to understand "the near, the low, the common."

After the last of the revolutionary generation was in their graves, some began to worry that forward-looking Americans, many of them plunging west, were losing all memory of the American Revolution. Philadelphia's John Fanning Watson in 1825 urged the newborn Historical Society of Pennsylvania "to rescue from oblivion the facts of personal prowess, achievements, or sufferings by officers and soldiers of the Revolutionary war" and to record "the recitals of many brave men now going down to the tomb." Watson was passionately interested in the "great" men of the Revolution but also the "many privates 'unknown to fame' peculiarly distinguished by their actions," for example, Zenas Macumber, a private in Washington's bodyguard who had served through the entire war and survived seventeen wounds.[10]

Watson's fellow amateur historian Benson Lossing, orphaned at eleven and apprenticed to a watchmaker at fourteen in Poughkeepsie, New York, walked eight thousand miles in his midthirties to commune "with men of every social and intellectual grade" and sketch every part of the American landscape involved in the Revolutionary War for a hefty two-volume *Pictorial Field-Book of the American Revolution* (1850, 1852). While detailing every major battle of the Revolution, Lossing sprinkled his military history with vignettes about ordinary people: the poor shoemaker George Robert Twelves Hewes, who participated in the Boston Tea Party; the hardscrabble North Carolina farmers living in a region barren of printing presses, newspapers, and schools, who assembled to elect representatives from their militia companies who passed the Mecklenburg Resolutions that all but announced independence in May 1775, far ahead of the rest of the country; a frontier woman who beat off an Indian attack; and Pompey, the slave in the Hudson River valley who led General Anthony Wayne and his men "through the narrow defiles, over rough crags, and across deep morasses in single file" to storm the British fortress at Stony Point in July 1779.[11]

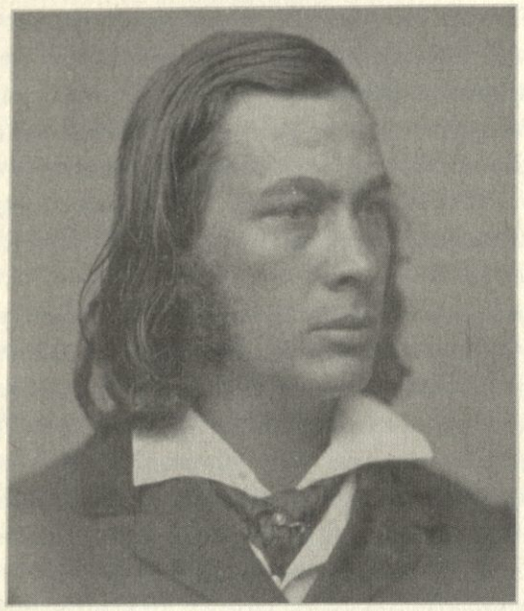
Two years before the public saw Lossing's first volume of the *Pictorial Field-Book*, the granddaughter of a revolutionary soldier, Elizabeth Ellet, published *The Women of the American Revolution*, two volumes that sketched the lives of sixty women "who bore their part in the Revolution." In 1850, she followed with *The Domestic History of the American Revolution.* Prominent women had their place—Abigail Adams, Martha Washington, and Mercy Otis Warren, for example. But most vignettes related the "actions and sufferings" of unheralded women such as sixteen-year-old Dicey Langston, who in the dead of night stealthily moved through woods, forded unbridged creeks, and slogged through marshes to deliver news of Loyalist troops on the march to her brother's patriot camp in backcountry South Carolina.[12] Many of the stories passed down from her remain unknown today.

Contemporaneous with these scribes of revolutionary heroes large and small were radical activists not only interested in ordinary people as agents of revolutionary change but worried about the conservative, reverent, tragedy-free core narrative being peddled in schoolbooks and popular histories by a genteel band of white male writers. Among the first to deplore this was a man remembered by virtually no American today. Born of obscure parents in 1822 near Philadelphia, George Lippard in his early twenties flashed across the literary sky like a meteor. A callow, crusading journalist, he took up labor's cause during the latter stages of the severe depression of 1837–1844. Sharpening his skills as a writer for the penny newspaper *Spirit of the Times*, whose motto was "Democratic and Fearless," Lippard turned into a "literary volcano constantly erupting with hot rage against America's ruling class." His *Quaker City, or, the Monks of Monk Hall* became a best seller in 1844. A muckraker

before the term was coined, Lippard described Philadelphia as a stomach-turning subversion of American democracy and an insult to the old ideal of the City of Brotherly Love. Philadelphia's venerated leaders, charged Lippard, displayed a "callow indifference to the poor" that was "equaled only by their private venality and licentiousness." The book made him the most widely read author in the nation. His sales far exceeded those of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, or Washington Irving; in fact, Lippard's books sold more than those of all the authors of the transcendentalist school put together.[13]

In 1846, Lippard began churning out legends of the American Revolution, and this is where he becomes relevant to the concerns of this book. Writing at a frantic pace, he freshened the public's memory of local battles at Germantown and Brandywine, British victories that paved the way for the enemy occupation of Philadelphia in September 1777. Mixing hair-raising descriptions of the terrors of war with florid portraits of American battlefield heroism, Lippard presented the Revolution as a poor man's war, one that he hoped would provide inspiration for mid-nineteenth century labor reformers whom he admired and promoted. His stories in *Washington and His Generals; or Legends of the American Revolution* (1847) and *Washington and His Men* (1849) gave Washington his due, but it was the common man on the battlefield who was the true hero. "Let me make a frank confession," Lippard told the City Institute in 1852, after millions had read his books. "I have been led astray. I have looked upon effigies and . . . bowed down to uniforms and done reverence to epaulettes. . . . Gilt and paint and spangles have for ages commanded reverence, while men made in the image of God have died in the ditch." Lippard got more particular: "The General who receives all the glory of the battles said to have been fought under his eye, who is worshiped in poetry and history, received in every city which he may enter by hundreds of thousands, who makes the heavens ring with his name; this General then is not *the* hero. No; the hero is the private soldier, who stands upon the battle field; . . . the poor soldier . . . whose skull bleaches in the sands, while the general whose glory the volunteer helped to win is warm and comfortable upon his mimic throne." Lippard cautioned his audience to "worship the hero . . . [and] reverence the heroic; but have a care that you are not swindled by a bastard heroism; be very careful of the sham hero."[14]

Lippard gave polite history a bad name; but the public loved him. He became their cultural arbiter and provided their understanding of the American



George Lippard was a muckraking journalist half a century before Theodore Roosevelt invented the term. Lippard's attempts to revive Tom Paine's reputation had some success in the mid-nineteenth century, but years of effort to erect a monument to Paine in Washington have been recurrently stalled and now failed.

Revolution. In a separate book, *Thomas Paine, Author-Soldier* (1852), Lippard helped restore Paine's reputation, which had gone into deep eclipse after Paine's attack on Christianity in *The Age of Reason*, written in the heat of the French Revolution. *The Age of Reason* left Paine an unattractive figure in polite circles and deeply offended churchgoing people. Yet Lippard's interest in Paine led to new editions of the revolutionary radical's many works, because Lippard rescued him as the unswerving herald of democracy who had more to say to the struggling mid-nineteenth century urban masses than all the revolutionary generals and statesmen. A year after Lippard's death in 1854, at age thirty-two, the Friends of Universal Liberty and Freedom, Emancipation and General Ruction celebrated "St. Thomas" Paine's birthday in Philadelphia.

Lippard's stories about Paine extended his lesson about heroes and heroism. "You may depend upon it," he wrote, "John Smith, the rent payer, is a

greater man, a truer hero than Bloodhound the general, or Pumfrog the politician. True," Lippard continued, "when John is dead there is only another grave added to the graves of the forgotten poor, while your general and your politician have piles of white marble over their fleshen skulls. But judging a hero by the rule that he who suffers most, endures most, works most, is the true hero . . . When you read the praises of Great Statesmen, in the papers, don't be fooled from the truth by these sugar-tits of panegyric. These statesmen are not heroes."[15]

Lippard often dissolved the line between fiction and history in his revolutionary tales. Having Paine convert to Christianity on his deathbed or having the traitor Benedict Arnold don his old Continental army uniform and recant in his dying moments were examples of the liberties he took. The story of the muscular Black Sampson of the "Oath-Bound Five," who avenged the British murder of his white mistress by plunging into the Battle of Brandywine against the redcoats with Debbil, his ferocious dog, was pure fiction. So were other tales he told, though the historical events of which these vignettes were a part were accurate. Philadelphia's *Saturday Evening Post* charged that Lippard had "taken the liberty to palter with and corrupt the pages of history." Lippard retreated not an inch. He countered that in the hands of genteel historians, "The thing which generally passes for History is the most impudent, swaggering bully, the most graceless braggart, the most reckless equivocator that ever staggered forth on the great stage of the world." He embellished, he admitted. But a legend from his hand, he explained, was "one of those heart-warm stories, which, quivering in rude, earnest language from the lips of a spectator of a battle, or the survivor of some event of olden time, fill up the cold outlines of history, and clothe the skeleton with flesh and blood, give it eyes and tongue, force it at once to look into our eyes and talk with us!"[16]

Even as Lippard was publishing his first stories about the poor man's American Revolution, radical abolitionists were taking up the same cause. But they were particularly concerned about how the contributions of free black people, and some slaves, were fading away. John Greenleaf Whittier, poet laureate of the abolitionist movement, took up his pen in dismay and anger after hearing July 4 orations in the nation's capital. Writing in 1847 in Washington, D.C.'s *National Era*, an antislavery newspaper, he expostulated on how "the return of the Festival of our National Independence has called our attention to a matter which has been very carefully kept out of sight by orators and toast-drinkers." Why, asked Whittier, does "a whole nation [do]

honor to the memories of one class of its defenders, to the total neglect of another class, who had the misfortune to be of darker complexion?" For a half century, Whittier charged, "certain historical facts . . . have been quietly elbowed aside," that are of "the services and sufferings of the colored soldiers of the Revolution." "They have no historian," he continued. "With here and there an exception, they all passed away, and only some faint tradition of their campaigns under Washington and Greene and Lafayette, and of their cruisings under Decatur and Barry, lingers among their descendants."[17]

On the eve of the Civil War, with the nation torn by sectional tension, Frederick Law Olmsted, later the creator of America's urban parks, tried to administer another cure for historical amnesia by reminding his country that history is with the people and that the people who *made* America were not putty in the hands of the great white men: "Men of literary taste . . . are always apt to overlook the working classes, and to confine the records they make of their own times, in a great degree, to the habits and fortunes of their own associates or to those of people of superior rank to themselves," he wrote as he was traveling through the southern states. "The dumb masses have often been so lost in this shadow of egotism, that, in later days, it has been impossible to discern the very real influence their character and condition has had on the fortune and fate of nations."[18]

Periodically, in the modern period, historians have dug deeper into the social strata to show the underside of the American Revolution. But in schools, historical theme parks, popular culture, film, and television, Olmsted's message about the indispensability of masses of ordinary people in all important social movements has barely been mentioned. The more intensely democratic, the more radical and visionary the idea, the more likely it has been excised from the textbook accounts of the American Revolution. The ideals and ideas that motivate those who want to complete the Revolution's radical agenda today are the very ones that have been leached out of the nation's history, replaced in the core narrative by a partially mythic and incomplete version of the Revolution.

The current generation of historians—a diverse group that looks more truly American than any preceding one—has scoured the records and posed new questions to take to the sources. In the last few decades a remarkable flowering of an American history sensitive to gender, race, religion, and class, which is to say a democratized history, is giving us an alternative, long-forgotten American Revolution. "Each generation," the English historian

Christopher Hill told us several decades ago, "rescues a new area from what its predecessors arrogantly and snobbishly dismissed as 'the lunatic fringe.'" But "it is no longer necessary to apologize profusely for taking the common people of the past on their own terms and trying to understand them," Hill advises.[19] This book responds to this advice.

The aim of this book is to capture the revolutionary involvement of *all* the component parts of some three million wildly diverse people living east of the Mississippi River. I could not have attempted such a study without changes in the historical profession over the past few decades—something akin to a tectonic plate shift. Clio, the muse of history, is hardly recognizable today in comparison to her visage of 1960. The emergence of a profession of historians of widely different backgrounds has redistributed historical property, and the American Revolution is now becoming the property of the many rather than the few. Even the best-remembered heroes are now seen with all their ambiguities, contradictions, and flaws. For example, it is no longer unpatriotic to read of Washington and Jefferson's tortured relationship to slavery, always mentioned in past biographies but usually soft-pedaled and marginalized. Now one can choose from a stack of books with enticing titles on the founding fathers and slavery such as William Wiencek's *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America*; Lucia C. Stanton's *Free Some Day: The African American Families of Monticello*; or David Waldstreicher's *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution.*

When historians fix their gaze downward or write a warts-and-all American history, they often offend people who cherish what they remember as a more coherent, worshipful, and supposedly annealing rendition of the past. In the history wars of the 1990s, many conservative-culture warriors called historians offering new interpretations of the American Revolution—or any other part of American history—"history bandits," "history pirates," or, sneeringly, "revisionists" intent on kidnapping history with no respect for a dignified rendition of the past. Yet the explosion of historical knowledge has invigorated history and increased its popularity. People who discover in accounts of the past figures like themselves—in color or class, religion, sex, or social situation—naturally find history more satisfying than when it is organized around a triumphalist version of the past in which the occupants of the national pantheon, representing a very narrow slice of society, get most of the play. Narratives of glory will always have a market, and some people will always prefer an uncomplicated, single-message history. But empathy with less

than oversized figures, as much in history as in literature, has a market as well.

Unsurprisingly, those of the old school do not like to hear the question "whose history?" It is unsettling for them to see the intellectual property of the American Revolution, once firmly in the hands of a smaller and more homogeneous historians' guild, taken out of their safe boxes, put on the table, and redivided. Yet what could be more democratic than to reopen questions about the Revolution's sources, conduct, and results? And what is the lasting value of a "coherent" history if coherence is obtained by eliminating the jagged edges, where much of the vitality of the people is to be found? How can we expect people to think of the American Revolution as their own when they see no trace of their forebears in it? Historian Roger Wilkins writes: "Tales of the republic's founding—mythic national memories used to bind us together—are often told in ways that exclude and diminish all of us" (and thus, it might be added, keep us divided). In propagating this kind of simplified history "we ensure that our future will be rent along the same jagged seams that wound us so grievously today. There is much pain and loss in our national history, which contains powerful echoes of the pain and loss many of us feel in our daily lives."[20]

A history of inclusion has another claim to make. Only a history that gives play to all the constituent parts of society can overcome the defeatist notion that the past was inevitably determined. Historical inevitability is a winner's story, excusing mistakes of the past and relegating the loser's story to a footnote. Is it not fitting in an open and generally optimistic society that we should portray to a wide range of individuals those who did not see themselves as puppets dancing on the strings of the supposed leaders? If the history we are making today is subject to human will, or what historians call human agency, then yesterday's history must have been fluid and unpredictable rather than moving along some predetermined course. If history did not unfold inevitably in the American Revolution, then surely a great many people must have been significant actors in its unfolding. Conscious of a complex past, readers today can embrace the idea that they, too, can contribute to a different future. Honest history can impart a sense of how the lone individual counts, how the possibilities of choice are infinite, how human capacity for both good and evil is ever present, and how dreams of a better society are in the hands of the dispossessed as much as in the possession of the putative brokers of our society's future.