

The Debate on the American Revolution

Review Number:

676

Publish date:

Monday, 30 June, 2008

Author:

Gwenda Morgan

ISBN:

9780719052415

Date of Publication:

2007

Price:

£50.00

Pages:

331pp.

Publisher:

Manchester University Press

Place of Publication:

Manchester

Reviewer:

Gary Nash

Gwenda Morgan's *The Debate on the American Revolution* adds a valuable volume to Manchester University Press's series on Issues in History. Stretching the American Revolution forward to the construction and ratification of the American federal constitution, she surveys and sifts through a vast literature that has grown exponentially over the last several decades. The organising structure of the book gives a glimpse of this massive outpouring of scholarship, where several new vectors of inquiry stand out. Three of the seven chapters - on African-Americans, women and Native Americans - would have merited only a few paragraphs in a historiographical volume on the American revolutionary era written a half-century ago. This has led not only to an antidote to historical amnesia, where broad swaths of the social fabric were largely ignored, but to larger and more complex conceptualisations of the American revolutionary era.

One of the virtues of this carefully constructed book is the close attention given to late 18th- and 19th-century historians, rescuing them from the inattention of most modern historians. Morgan may be one of the few historians today who have read in full the earliest histories of the revolution by William Gordon, David Ramsay, Mercy Otis Warren, Abiel Holmes, Jeremy Belknap, Samuel Williams, Joseph Galloway, John Lendrum and others. It is equally rare today for graduate seminar leaders to assign the work of 19th-century historians, who wrote in the grand narrative style, such as Timothy Pitkin, George Bancroft, John Fiske, Justin Winsor and Richard Hildreth. Morgan shows why this is a mistake. In chapter one on 'The Pioneers', she provides admirable historiographical depth while showing, through revisiting these long forgotten historians, how extensively modern historians have opened up new avenues of scholarship, especially in what can be loosely called social history. To press home the point, in all subsequent chapters, Morgan takes the reader back to the earliest annalists of American revolutionary-era history

Another virtue of this book is the insightful discussion in chapter two of the vigorous debates between this generation's neo-Whig conservative historians, who have trafficked mostly in the ideological origins and elite-driven course of the American Revolution, and social historians, usually labeled neo-Progressives or 'New Left' historians, who have stressed the importance of the ordinary people 'out of doors' and the internal struggle to remake America that accompanied the war for independence. This argument has been percolating for many more decades and shows no sign of abating. Morgan's book reached the publisher just before a new wave of studies (including those by Woody Holton, Terry Bouton, Michael McConnell and this writer) that add depth to the neo-Progressive side of the debate and move toward a comprehensive and hopefully coherent analysis that at least partially answers the neo-Whig complaint that their opponents have fragmented the past and found no way of satisfying the demand for a synthetic, all-embracing portrayal of the revolutionary era. (It bears remembering that the vaunted coherence of the grand revolutionary narrative of olden days owes much to its exclusion of the majority of the population; if coherent, the grand narrative was decidedly partial and incomplete).

Morgan continues her recounting of the tug of war between neo-Whig and neo-Progressive historians in chapter three on the making of the federal constitution. Although her detailed review of 19th- and early 20th-century historians (up to Charles Beard) is useful, the new work since 1950 gets short shrift in a much shorter discussion. Missing from her analysis is *The Transforming Hand of Revolution: Reconsidering the American Revolution as a Social Movement* (1995), which has a probing historiographical essay by Alfred F. Young that is nearly half the length of the book under review.

The last three chapters of the book deal, sequentially, with African-Americans, women and Native Americans. Each of these internally diverse components of American society has commanded the attention of dozens of scholars in the last several decades. This is largely because the predominantly white male history profession up to the 1960s has become far more diverse as the rise of the civil rights and women's movements drew young recruits to the profession. Often inspired by radical historians such as Alfred Young, Staughton Lynd and Jesse Lemisch, they raised new questions, explored understudied sources, and constructed forgotten chapters of American revolutionary history.

The chapter on women thoughtfully pursues the question most forcefully raised by Joan Hoff Wilson three decades ago - that the revolution was 'a step backward for women,' while a 'step forward for men'. Although Morgan omits mention of important contributors to this burgeoning sub-field (such as Karin Wulf and Mary Lynn Salmon), the chapter sparkles with a discussion of the various roles that women played in the efforts 'to start the world anew'. New work recently published or underway will continue to add texture and refinement to this vibrant dimension of the revolutionary era.

The chapters on African-Americans and Native Americans also testify to the contagious popularity of studying people on the margins of revolutionary society who, before the 1960s, warranted only casual - and sometimes disparaging - mention. As she makes clear, the revolution, as experienced and influenced by American Indians and blacks - both free and enslaved - was anything but incidental. Her command of this literature up to the time of publication is commendable, though any historiographical assessment such as

Morgan's runs the risk of quickly falling behind the torrent of new scholarly work. If revised, a new edition of this book will have many recently published books to consider, including those - to mention only a few - by Richard Newman, Cassandra Pybus, Christopher Brown, Henry Wiencek, Lucia Stanton, and Douglas Egerton.

For all of its breadth, Morgan's book omits the growing literature on important dimensions of the revolutionary era. Chief among them is military history - both the conventional history of battle tactics, strategy and generalship, and also the newer social history of the continental army and the state militias, where social composition, political agendas, and civil-military relations are part of the story. Thus readers are deprived of a discussion of the vigorous scholarship of scholars such as John Shy, Steven Rosswurm, Charles Royster, James Kirby Martin, Wayne Bodle, Mark Lender, George Billias, Ira Gruber, Richard Kohn, and Don Higginbotham. If this was a conscious decision, it also obliged Morgan to leave out of her survey interesting new work on overseas 'Friends of Liberty', such as the Marquis de Lafayette, Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, Le Begue de Presle Duportail, and Tadeuz Kościuszko. This lacunae is unfortunate because military history is wildly popular among the history-hungry general public and is the cornerstone of National Park Service ranger talks at the many revolutionary war historic sites. This being the case, the deep research and new interpretive sophistication brought to bear on such questions as the social composition of the men who did most of the fighting, bleeding and dying during a long war, has earned appreciation and applause for the present generation of military historians. Curiously, the only light that Morgan shines on military history is on the female camp followers, whose historians she discusses in the chapter on 'A new era in female history'. Also puzzling is the omission of the vibrant literature produced over the last several decades on the Loyalists. To be sure, Morgan treats the handful of Loyalists who wrote early histories of the revolution, sometimes even before the ink was dry on the Peace Treaty of Paris in 1783. These include Thomas Hutchinson, Peter Oliver, Jonathan Boucher, Alexander Hewat and Joseph Galloway. However, Morgan discusses these Loyalists only as pioneering historians of the revolution, rather than as exemplars of Loyalist thought and sensibility. Only in the chapters on African-Americans and Native Americans will the reader find Loyalists making their appearance as large, though diversely composed, groups. This deprives the reader of Morgan's keen insights on a spate of books on loyalism by such historians as Wallace Brown, Robert Calhoun, Catherine Crary, Anne M. Ousterhout, William Nelson, Janice Potter and many others who have provided a complex and nuanced understanding of the Loyalists. Seen in the pre-Second World War era mostly as the faint-hearted or purse-proud anti-heroes, the Loyalists have now come out of the wings of the stage to occupy a legitimate place in the drama of the revolution. Even the members of the Society of Friends, who followed pacifist principle rather than unalloyed patriotism, have been rediscovered as noteworthy actors in the revolutionary drama.

Morgan also largely excludes biography from her discussion of the scholarly debates on the American Revolution. Perhaps this was necessary to remain within a book length specified by the publisher, though in the introduction she candidly declares that it was personal choice that explains why 'vast swathes of material and areas of history' have been excluded (p. 4). Nonetheless, biography, along with military history, is a staple of revolutionary studies. It is popular not only among the reading public but among teachers of history at the undergraduate and graduate levels for good reason. Today, historians with gifted pens have drawn readers in unprecedented numbers, through 'life and times' studies, into an era of American history that was once nearly moribund. Books such as David Fischer's *Paul Revere's Ride* (2004), Alfred F. Young's *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier* (2004) and *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* (2000) on the impecunious cobbler, George Robert Twelves Hewes, and Fawn Brodie's *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* (1974) have made the cash registers ring in bookstores across the country. I can sympathise with Morgan when confronted with the task of discussing biographies of even the most famous of the Founding Fathers - Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton - for hardly a year goes by without a new book on one or another of them. Indeed studies of Jefferson spring up every year like Flanders red poppies. But biography plays a key role in the understanding of the revolutionary era, both in academe and in the public arena.

Morgan's study deserves a place on the shelves of all major libraries and should stand as basic reading for

anyone entering the arena of American revolutionary studies.

Other reviews:

Americansc

<http://www.americansc.org.uk/Reviews/Revolution.html> [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/676>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3650>

[2] <http://www.americansc.org.uk/Reviews/Revolution.html>