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THE EVOLUTION OF THE REVOLUTION IN THE CENTENNIAL AND BICENTENNIAL ERAS:

**“THE INEVITABLE PROGRESS
OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT?”**

Anna Doremus

The early years of the United States are often shrouded in a heroic mythology—the names of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and King George III populate a story that is collectively considered to be one of a hearty and ideological people rising up in unison against a merciless, tyrannical empire. Redcoats, flags, and cannons are envisioned in this romantic ideal of our nation’s birth. This heroic American pageant was deliberately fashioned by Centennial historians like George Bancroft. At the time of the 1876 Centennial, American values of patriotism and national pride were being cemented, and the historians of that era played their part in defending the honor of the American people. A century later, at the Bicentennial of the nation’s founding, there were fewer grand notions of patriotism. Criticism and internationalism began to play a larger role in the historiography; these later historians realized that, perhaps, there had been fewer fireworks, greater injustices, and a greater dependence on Europe than traditional historians preferred to remember. Centennial historians wrote glorious patriotic tales of war, great men, and the American indomitable spirit; Bicentennial historians preferred more discussion of social history, constitutional ideology, and international factors.¹

¹ Histories being considered as Centennial history or Bicentennial history for this paper were published within 15 years surrounding

Furman Humanities Review

A study of key movements and specific historians in the field of American history can show the interesting transition from nationalist glorification to scrutinizing analysis. Particularly influential in the Centennial era was the immense narrative of George Bancroft, his *History of the United States*, emerged as the definitive and patriotic account of the early American years. Magazines such as *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* followed the thematic path forged by Bancroft in patriotic works that used histories to create an estimation for certain smaller communities or people. These authors and their works propagated a progressive and Whiggish understanding of the United States and are therefore worthy of further study. By the time of the Bicentennial, a new crop of prominent authors were focusing on dramatically different themes—there was an “air of detachment, a sense of balance, in which conventional nationalism is less in evidence than was the case in a centennial observance.”² Historians such as Richard B. Morris and Lawrence S. Kaplan showed the changing role of American history as their works were characterized by national criticism, sharp analysis, and a disappearing sense of the divine providence of the American people. The study of authors from both periods reflects how changing popular thought affects historiography.

Historiography around the time of the American Centennial was marked by an intense desire to preserve honor. George Bancroft sought to cement every detail of the Revolution in ten definitive tomes on the battles, the nature of the Patriots, and the character of the nation as a whole. His work was in fact laden with nationalist and Whiggish rhetoric that

either date— there are obvious exceptions, the contributions of which must be studied due to their effect on the thought of that era, even if their dates of publication are not strictly within the general parameters.

² Lawrence S. Kaplan, “The American Revolution in an International Perspective: Views from Bicentennial Symposia,” *The International History Review*, Vol. 1, no.3 (July, 1979), 426.

would continue to appear in subsequent histories of this era. Historians also wanted to declare the accomplishments of their town, state, family, or ethnic community. These years when the standard history of the American Revolution was being established were critical, and it was very important to establish one's connections to the heroism of the patriot cause. More than any other common thread, the histories published in the late nineteenth century were characterized by a profound wish to glorify patriotism and reinforce a nationalist ideal of the American people and their revolution.

Inaugurating the early tradition of narrative history, Bancroft's *History of the United States* "helped to establish the framework within which we see our early history."³ Ten volumes published in the years surrounding the Centennial study the history of the American colonies from the mid-1500s through the 1780s. He wrote with the intention of telling a story of progress and fomenting the idea that "some exalted destiny awaited America at the end."⁴ The idea of a complete narrative history coupled neatly with Bancroft's Whiggish notions of America's divinely ordained linear progress and of the American man as the most perfect man. Bancroft believed that the "American experience demonstrated the inevitable progress of the human spirit" which he conveyed through the construction of "a narrative action, a plot with a beginning, middle, and end."⁵ This style glibly praised the positive aspects of the American Revolution and glossed over some more controversial aspects to better reinforce the idea of the singular American narrative.

More notable than his narrative style was his patriotic tone—it was this combination that made him the historical standard for Centennial-era historiography. Writing with an

³ Robert H. Canary, *George Bancroft*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc.), i.

⁴ Canary, *George Bancroft*, 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

Furman Humanities Review

unreserved love of country, Bancroft cemented ideas of American exceptionalism and glory. At the commencement of his romantic and somewhat poetic tale, he wrote

The hour of the American Revolution was come. The people of the continent with irresistible energy obeyed one general impulse, as the earth in spring listens to the command of nature, and without the appearance of effort bursts forth in life in perfect harmony.⁶

This idea of an ideological current pushing the people towards the Revolution was a favorable one as it supported the early conceptualization of “manifest destiny.” Even choosing to deemphasize American diplomacy, he wrote that the colonies’ European allies became such as a result of “the movement of intellectual freedom.”⁷ Bancroft’s overwhelming love of country detracted from the credibility of his work. However, his *History*, was still an incredibly influential work which bolstered the idea of American Centennial historiography as a fundamentally patriotic field.

Following logically from the idea of the great American story was the idea of history replete with patriotic and admiring tones in order to better encourage a sense of national pride. This was exhibited in the staunch defense of the American colonies and their proud stock in an 1889 piece by Charles Stillé, refuting the idea of American colonies as penal settlements. Australia, a fellow British colony, had been populated largely by criminal exiles, and naturally rumors began to circulate about the character of the American colonists as well. The notion that the American colonies were influenced by the

⁶ George Bancroft, *History of the United States of America, from the discovery of the American continent*. Vol. 7, 1875. (Reprint: University of Michigan: Making of America Digital Library, 2007), 21.

⁷ Bancroft, *History of the United States of America*, Vol. 9, 499.

number of criminals among them was repugnant to Stillé. He rejected any argument that the American identity was one shaped by lawless exiles. Obviously affronted, Stillé remarked that it was “strange and novel to a student of American history” to hear writers claim that “the race which people the American colonies was infected with the same ineradicable taint of crime and villany [sic]” as the criminal population in Australia, a true penal settlement. Essentially crying out against defamation of the American character, Stillé defended the idea of the noble American spirit—the spirit that was responsible for their victory in the Revolution. This spirit was a common cord among a disparate American people, and historians of this era actively sought to emphasize this particular cord. He declared the claim utterly nonsensical and found the unnamed English writers’ “ignorance on this subject as great and as invincible as ever.”⁸

There was a sense of local and not just national honor as well, and, because of the Quaker religious beliefs, many Americans outside of Pennsylvania did not consider Pennsylvanians to be true patriots. As a result, a plethora of works emerged defending their participation in the Revolution. During the period leading to and at the time “when the Declaration of Independence was adopted, there was a large party in Pennsylvania, led by some of its most distinguished public men, who thought the time decided upon for that purpose premature.”⁹ However, this 1890 publication in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* went on to detail the importance and truly American nature of dissension. Men of considerable influence such as John Dickinson, James Wilson, and Robert Morris were to be hailed as patriotic even in their

⁸ Charles Stillé, “American Colonies as Penal Settlements,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 12, no. 4, (1889), 458.

⁹ Charles J. Stillé, “Pennsylvania and the Declaration of Independence,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 12, no.4 (1890), 385.

Furman Humanities Review

objection to separation in July of 1776 because they held their country's best interests in their hearts. Charles Stillé wrote that, lamentably, "approval of the Declaration of Independence nowadays is the sole test of patriotism, and very little heed is given to the earnestness of their opinions or the energy of their conduct during the war, either before or after that event."¹⁰ Ostentatious and conventional patriotism was of the utmost importance to the reputations of states and men, so the nuanced position of many prominent Pennsylvanians during the founding was heavily discussed. Men like Dickinson were defended at length.¹¹ Ultimately, Stillé wanted recognition that

America has produced no class of citizens whose career during the Revolution was more constant in its loyalty or more full of devoted service of all kinds to the country than those much-abused men who defended to the last the chartered rights of Pennsylvania.¹²

Here it was readily apparent that there was a desire to defend the honor of one's fellow countrymen by ensuring that they were in fact patriotic if unique in their opinions. Patriotism was an essential quality of good and honorable men in America in 1876.

Continuing in the trend of histories preserving local honor and memory, Duffield Osborne's 1887 article on Irish participation in the war provides a rather incendiary argument against the Irish. Osborne's piece was used to attack a small, locally-known group instead of promoting one—he believed that the Irish in Boston gave themselves far too much credit

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 390.

¹¹ Charles Thomson, "Early Days of the Revolution in Philadelphia," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 2, no. 4 (1878), 411.

¹² Stillé, "Pennsylvania," 429.

for Ireland's efforts in the war. He cited a wide cultural "misapprehension that the Irish were of any great and special service to this republic of ours, in the days of the Revolution."¹³ Although anti-Irish undertones were apparent in his piece, his claim was that undue gratitude to the Irish was impeding upon the gratitude reserved for the true American allies, the French.¹⁴

This interest in a topic of a specialized and detailed nature was replicated in George Inman's 1883 firsthand account of his experiences in the Revolution—which was essentially the unedited publication of a diary kept by Inman during the war years. The content of this diary contained no groundbreaking historiographic text—its relevance instead came from the mere fact of its publication. This diary, published in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, demonstrated the historical and societal interest in firsthand narratives of the war. His work was peppered with patriotic sentiments and closed with "God's name be praised," reflecting the patriotic and religious sentiment in which many academic works were immersed.¹⁵ These smaller accounts showed an interest in the histories of certain towns, men, and ancestries—this tradition is present in historical works of today but often with more analytical tones and broader references to supplement the narratives.

Works of history published at the time of the Centennial were fewer in number but not smaller in power than later works. Historians, especially Bancroft, used their relatively early appearance in the field of American history to inundate our field with notions of progress, patriotism, and honor. The existence of both personal histories and grand narratives came

¹³ Duffield Osborne, "Irish Aid in the American Revolution," *The North American Review*, Vol. 145, no. 386 (1887), 97.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁵ George Inman, "George Inman's Narrative of the American Revolution," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 7, no. 3 (1883), 248.

Furman Humanities Review

from a singular desire to protect the honor of a people and of a nation. Centennial histories lacked a depth of analysis that later became critical at the time of the Bicentennial. This was due in part to History in 1876 being a comparatively unsophisticated field and to the then-limited access to primary documents and others' work. The need to tell an engaging and patriotic story of their honorable American ancestors usurped any desire to examine the colonies' cause with criticism or skepticism.

The flurry of publications at the time of the Bicentennial was more critical and of a decidedly different nature than the comparatively primitive efforts of Centennial historians. Historians like Richard B. Morris, Joan Hoff-Wilson, Jonathan Dull, and Lawrence S. Kaplan produced histories with more specialized and analytical natures—examining aspects of the Revolution such as social history and women's rights, the legal nature of the Constitution, and international diplomacy. No longer was history of the all-encompassing narrative sort popular; historians delved into lesser-studied elements and themes during the Bicentennial era. Characterized by a shift from patriotic intentions to motives of curiosity and then by a more confident desire for self-examination, these historians produced more social and political histories discussing the Revolutionary period not simply as a line of dates, documents, and men. Bicentennial historians showed an interest in histories of marginalized people, constitutional and legal histories, and diplomatic histories. These new themes reflected the changing era and the changing needs of the American people.

Historians of the twentieth century began to study the Revolution through the lens of social history—a field which would never have entered the minds of more traditional historians like George Bancroft. Historian Richard B. Morris brought this study succinctly to the attention of the academic world in 1977 with his work emphasizing the war as a People's Revolution—a movement primarily propelled forward by the

Everyman. Morris examined the small towns and communities of the colonies and found evidence of extralegal bodies seeking to participate politically before such republicanism was widely instituted. Though the colonies had disparate peoples, they “did unite in a common cause. What unified the discordant elements of the Patriot populace was the conviction that only through independence could they build a free society.”¹⁶ The Revolution was painted as a thoroughly grassroots movement, and Morris perhaps considered the strategic decisions made by the Founding Fathers too lightly. He reflected harshly on the historiography of the Revolutionary laity, saying “If we have lost sight of the people who waged the war, it is partly the fault of the pompous or trivial portraits of the leadership with which biographers have beguiled us.”¹⁷ In his many works on the American Revolutionary War, Morris sought to uncover what Revolutionary life was like and what ideologies and motives pushed the Revolution forward. This interest in plain people and disdain for our founders was a departure from the grand and starkly nationalist histories of the Centennial. Morris, while patriotic, elected not to wax poetic about the mythological and divinely-ordained beginnings of America and its founders.

Expanding historical criticism to include not just previous historians, but historical actors themselves, Joan Hoff-Wilson examined the American Revolution with a focus on women’s rights. Unsurprisingly, women were initially allocated very few constitutional rights, and their power in society ebbed and flowed as a result. Their most significant charge in

¹⁶ Richard B. Morris, “‘We the People of the United States’: The Bicentennial of a People’s Revolution,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 82, no. 1 (Feb., 1977), 15.

¹⁷ Richard B. Morris, *The American Revolution Reconsidered*, (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967), 14.

Furman Humanities Review

the Revolutionary era was “the privately virtuous task of raising patriotic children.”¹⁸ Domestic roles gave women a sense of private citizenship, but not of public citizenship, a disparity which Hoff-Wilson disdained. In fact, the legal treatment of women in this era is deserving of the phrase “constitutional neglect.” At this point in Hoff-Wilson argument, her social history research of early American women transformed into type of legal research, as she outlined the broader progress of American women.¹⁹ Her brief history of women in the Revolutionary era was important, particularly because it was a relatively new idea to be considering a group of early American figures who were not traditionally powerful or enfranchised, but who had to seek legal power later. Issues of women’s rights were more hotly newsworthy during the Bicentennial period than the Centennial, so the introduction of these histories analyzing less popular themes from a national perspective logically follows from the social developments of the twentieth century. Understanding the experiences of the previously disenfranchised and overlooked had become more important by 1976.

Evolving from entertaining Centennial narratives replete with anecdotes and a full cast of characters, constitutional and legal history emerged in the late-twentieth century as politicians began to reference the founding legal document and the “original intent” of the Founding Fathers. What was the ideology of their republicanism? Were they conservatives or liberals? The struggle to effectively combine these ideological studies with the modes of history characterized much of the historiography of the era, and in fact, it continues to be a point of contention today. In the early stages of these efforts,

¹⁸ Joan Hoff-Wilson, “Women in American Constitutional History at the Bicentennial,” *The History Teacher*, Vol. 22, no. 2 (Feb., 1989), 147.

¹⁹ Hoff-Wilson, “Women in American Constitutional History,” 152.

Peter S. Onuf, in a study of Bicentennial historiography, commented that “Until recently, however, the founders *as political actors* have been lost to view. From a structuralist perspective, the story of how and why the constitutional reformers created a ‘more perfect union’ simply does not seem very important.” As increasing Bicentennial scholarship developed, however, it became more problematic for constitutional historians that “the story of the founding is so difficult to disentangle from patriotic mythology.” Onuf called for a pure narrative free of these patriotic undertones—“no narrative is more important for the subsequent course of American history than the drafting and ratification of the federal Constitution and the successful inauguration of the new national government.”²⁰ The analytic emphasis on the political views of the Founding Fathers, their exact intentions, and the repercussions of those intentions was a popular subject in Bicentennial historiography. The combination of this legal concept of history with the ideas of social history produces “a new history of ideas that seeks to give meanings to the structures uncovered by social historians.”²¹ The addition of constitutional history and ideological study to the body of early American scholarship was an important contribution of Bicentennial historians, as it reflects the popular debate of the period regarding our modern understanding of the Constitution and of the intentions of its framers.

Jonathan Dull, a prominent diplomatic historian of the Bicentennial era, considers American foreign policy with a decidedly critical and realist eye. He studied the American Revolution from a more Euro-centric perspective than American historians of the past, choosing to emphasize primarily the colonies’ role in European balance-of-power politics. His perceived anti-American tones made him controversial to some,

²⁰ Peter S Onuf, “Reflections on the Founding: Constitutional Historiography in Bicentennial Perspective,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 46, no. 2 (Apr., 1989), 346.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 349.

Furman Humanities Review

particularly in his claim that “victory in the war for independence depended on a heavy dose of foreign help and abundant good luck.”²² Eschewing the traditional notions of American greatness and patriotic destiny, Dull redefined a major American moment of success as merely a theatre of the grander war between Great Britain and France. In evaluating Dull, Lawrence S. Kaplan found his conclusions rather narrow, identifying his major flaw in “the treatment of the United States, revolutionary diplomacy, and American diplomatic historians. The American position is denigrated partly by its absence at critical times, partly by pejorative comments.”²³ Writing with themes clearly contrary to those of Bancroft, Dull reflected a transition in thinking that no longer relied on patriotism and American nationalism as the sole ideological actor of the Revolutionary era.

Kaplan sought to present the American Revolution in its broader global context. Writing to analyze the Bicentennial-era surge of research in this field, he readily introduced his article as a product of Bicentennial feeling. In reviewing a deep analysis of the effects of the war on the British Empire and King George III, Kaplan challenged “the simplistic American view of the king as a classical villain” and noted that “the tone appropriately in a bicentennial theme conveys tolerance, some sadness, and an understanding of both sides in 1976 that was impossible in 1776.”²⁴ He also encouraged psychological analysis of the diplomatic relationships of the period—a revolutionary undertaking. Perhaps most importantly, he soundly debunked the idea of Franco-American good feeling and

²² Jonathan R. Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University, 1985), 163.

²³ Lawrence S. Kaplan, “The Diplomacy of the American Revolution: The Perspective from France,” review of *The French Navy and American Independence: A Study of Arms and Diplomacy, 1774-1787*, by Jonathan R. Dull. *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 4, no. 3 (September, 1976), 389.

²⁴ Kaplan, “International Perspective,” 412.

shared ideals, citing a marked “minimum of sentimentality” in recent scholarship devoted to Franco-American relations. Having no Bancroftian ideals of brotherhood, Kaplan made clear that “France entered the American alliance in pursuit of its own interests, and Americans’ detachment from that alliance less than a generation later was equally a product of national interest.”²⁵ In closing, he also noted the rise of scholarship of the American impact on Russian and Latin American bids for liberty as an example of how, in fact, the American people were not so different from other people desiring freedom and republicanism—the direct opposite of the Centennial construction of the uniquely American spirit. His discussion of how other nations experienced the war enhanced the history from one of a uniquely patriotic, American event to one of international importance.

The Bicentennial historiography of the American Revolution was diverse and inclusive of analyses that took a more critical view of the period, pointing out failures and successes rather than creating a solid narrative of American greatness. After two world wars and with an intensely globalizing economy, it is no wonder that this period demonstrated a new understanding of the American Revolution in an international, diplomatic perspective. The desire to understand the war and independence movement through the lenses of modern trends of critical study was a difference between the Centennial and Bicentennial—twentieth-century historians promoted a fluctuating and developing idea of history, not a definitive timeline of unquestionably patriotic events and men.

The historiography of the Centennial era demonstrated a cultural need to shape the American past as a glorious, honorable, and indisputable march of progress; the Bicentennial historiography showed a preference for a history complete with the negative and positive, emphasizing international themes as well as a discussion of ideological victories and failures. Studies of Bancroft, Stillé, and other contributors

²⁵ Kaplan, “International Perspective,” 421.

Furman Humanities Review

to the Revolutionary histories of the late nineteenth century showed an unmatched patriotism and desire to protect the founders' reputations. Centennial historians were undoubtedly guided by the desire to heroize the early American years and thus create a common sense of admirable ancestry and ideological unity during an otherwise divided period of post-Civil War Reconstruction. Histories rife with notions of a glorious nation rising, in its desire for freedom and republican government, reinforced the greatness of a single American Union and attempted to discourage the divisive rhetoric which had abounded during the Civil War. These works did not, generally, discuss slavery—which seems at odds with the view of Unionist academic liberals, but perhaps this was an attempt to avoid the controversy of America's noble and laudable Founding Fathers owning slaves themselves. Bicentennial histories shied away from some controversies while bringing to light others. In an era tense from the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Bicentennial histories did not tend to emphasize African-American and slave narratives. This can perhaps be contributed to the heavy sociopolitical climate of the Vietnam War and post-war periods. American pride was low, and there was a certain desire to encourage community and unity during this period that perhaps made studies of African-American narratives less popular. Late-twentieth century works did, however, discuss the constitution's initial failure to enfranchise women, the ongoing debate of the "original intent" of the Constitution and its amendments, and American dependence on foreign powers. In a modern era vastly different from that of the Founding Fathers, the Constitution and the thoughts of the Founding Fathers were and still are being examined and theorized upon in an effort to improve the nation.

Such diverse interpretations and points of emphasis regarding American history may seem daunting or questionable, especially when they so clearly reflect the environment in which they were written, but

Anna Doremus

There would be no point in dismissing works that reflect current preoccupations of society. They are inevitable. They are also frequently useful. They reveal how each generation looks afresh at the past and comes up with insights another or earlier generation may not have seen or understood.²⁶

Historiography of the American Revolution is a medium through which one can see academic trends, societal forces, political debates, and ideological developments. Perhaps the Revolution is not as glorious as was once taught, but there is still much to be learned about the American character through the study of it.

²⁶ Kaplan, "International Perspective," 409.

Furman Humanities Review

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Anna Doremus

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Furman Humanities Review