

The Best Books on the American Revolution

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Henry Lee. *Memoirs of the War in the Southern Department of the United States*. Philadelphia: Bradford and Inskeep, 1812. Revised version, Washington: P. Force, 1827; New edition, with a life of the author by Robert E. Lee, New York: University Publishing Company, 1869.

“Lighthorse Harry” Lee commanded an irregular group—Lee’s Legion—in New York and Pennsylvania, before Washington sent him to help Nathanael Greene wrest South Carolina and Georgia back from the British. A skilled military tactician, Lee also has a keen eye for detail and an ear for phrase (his 1799 eulogium on Washington, “first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen” lives on). Entering politics after Yorktown, Lee landed in jail for debt in 1808, and wrote this book to recoup his finances. He failed at that, but his memoir is considered one of the finest works of military history ever written. Though called a memoir, Lee is not its main character. He gives judicious attention to the points of view of other participants, friend and foe. One contemporary reviewer criticized the over-attention to detail—such

as the Falstaffian story of Dr. Skinner, whose horse got stuck when Skinner tried to turn it around in a ravine to avoid a battle at the other end. The rest of the cavalry had to dismount, pick up Skinner’s horse, and turn it around so they and the Doctor could go their separate ways. The reviewer regretted the story. We are fortunate that Lee, and not he, wrote the book. Lee visited Baltimore in 1812 to see about its publication, he and the printer Alexander Hanson were attacked by a mob angry about Hanson’s criticism of the Madison administration. Lee never fully recovered from the mob’s savage beating. Ten years after Lee’s death, his son Henry published an expanded edition. The younger Lee included letters from Thomas Jefferson justifying his conduct as Governor of Virginia when Benedict Arnold burnt and sacked Richmond. After the Civil War another son, Robert E. Lee, published a new edition, with a biographical sketch of the father he barely knew.

Sir George Otto Trevelyan, *The American Revolution*, 14 volumes, Longmans, Green, 1880-1914, volumes 1 and 2 republished as *The Early History of Charles James Fox*, 1 volume, Harper, 1880, volumes 5-10 republished as *The American Revolution*, 4 volumes, Longmans, Green, 1899-1912, volumes 13-14 republished as *George the Third and Charles Fox, the Concluding Part of the American Revolution*, 2 volumes, Longmans, Green, 1912, 1914.

Trevelyan was a Member of Parliament for thirty-two years, so it is not surprising that this monumental work focuses on Parliament’s role in the American Revolution. In fact, Trevelyan wrote the first three volumes on the Revolution because he was most interested in writing the last two, on the relationship between George III and Whig statesman Charles James Fox, and thought the latter could not be understood

without the former. The view is from London, from the perspective of English Whigs of the 1770s and 1780s, sympathetic to the Americans' struggle for liberty. There are worse perspectives to have. Horace Walpole's acerbic commentary and the political disputes between Lord North and the British opposition are all here in a well-written and engaging narrative. Here we have King George III, as he picks up a new dress for Queen Charlotte, trying to tell the tailor how not to vote in the next Parliamentary election, "No Keppel! No Keppel!" As with other of the King's actions, it did not work, and the Windsor borough re-elected the Whig Admiral Augustus Keppel.

Gary B. Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America*. New York: Viking, 2005.

This is not the sanitized Revolution of men in powdered wigs. Nash, one of the great social historians, gives the story from the bottom up—beginning with a Newark jail-break. Nash has written other books on the social origins of the Revolution, using tax records, wills, and court reports, to bring to life the forgotten and marginalized. He has also written about the relationship between slavery and the Revolution, and recovered the roles of African-Americans in the struggle. In this great narrative history he brings together the work of social historians since the 1960s to retell the story, giving a Revolution as complicated and messy as it was, and as American democracy is. Nash's achievement is not merely to show the "underside" or "history from the bottom up," but to show how the ideas of the Revolution motivated men and women across the economic spectrum, and to bring to life in vivid detail the previously unknown characters who created a complicated nation.

David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Fischer takes one of the Revolution's best-known mythical representations—Emanuel Leutze's 1851 painting of Washington crossing the Delaware—and shows us how rooted in history that December night image is. In the process, we learn about how the war had gone since the British evacuated Boston, about the character of the two armies facing each other across the Delaware, and about the small contingencies that went into the American victory. Fischer is a master of prose, and of historical research—his appendices will provide material for articles, books, and dissertations for generations of scholars. His earlier book *Paul Revere's Ride* takes Longfellow's poem and uses it to tell the story of Revere and his connections to the various revolutionary groups in Boston. In this book Washington and his army are the central characters, though there are others, such as the beautiful young widow at Mount Holly, New Jersey, who entertained Colonel Carl von Donop over Christmas, and kept his men from returning to Trenton in time to help turn the battle toward the Hessians favor. It is tantalizing to think this beautiful young widow might have been Elizabeth ("Betsy") Ross, a talented seamstress. Two vivid scenes contrast each commander's council of war the night before the fateful second battle of Trenton and the battle of Princeton. Cornwallis's officers addressed him deferentially as "M'Lord," while each American officer told Washington why his plans would not work, and from this discussion he formed a plan that might not fail. "Victory or Death" was the code for the Delaware crossing, and Washington's favorite line was, "We cannot guarantee victory, but we can deserve it."

Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967.

For two centuries a set of pamphlets published in the 1760s had reposed unread in Harvard's libraries. Bernard Bailyn read through them and was surprised at the intellectual and ideological world they revealed. Liberty and power were the two obsessions of the Revolutionary generation. Bailyn wrote an introduction to a proposed multi-volume series of Pamphlets of the Revolution, but only one volume appeared. The introduction was then published separately, as this book, which received the Bancroft Prize, the Pulitzer Prize, and recast the way we thought about the Revolution. The writers drew inspiration from an earlier generation of English writers—such as John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, authors of *Cato's Letters* and publishers of *The Independent Whig*, and political theorist James Harrington—who were somewhat marginal to British political thought. In America, though, these ideas formed a baseline to understand power, and how to control it and constrain those who exercised it. Fear of centralized power and distrust of government motivated the Revolutionaries, which makes their real achievement not winning independence, but forming governments and a Constitution that would not crush human aspirations. This recasting of the Revolution makes it ever relevant to the world as it continues to change, a phenomenon the American Revolutionaries would have understood all too well. a