

Book Review of

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

Nash states in his Introduction the purpose of this book is to both provide "an antidote for historical amnesia" (p xiv) and a "complicat[ion of] the well-established core narrative" (p xv) for the way the American Revolution has been taught for generations in American classrooms. Too often the focus is only upon the great founding fathers, philosophers, and generals who gave of themselves to defeat the British and create America. This focus is overly sanitized and the average people are missing from that story. John Adams is worried about this version of the American Revolution being passed on just a few years after the Constitutional Convention. He writes, "The history of our Revolution, will be one continued lie from one end to the other." Gary Nash allows us to hear from the slaves, the natives, the women, the common farmers, and the militiamen whom were fighting heroically for their own independence.

In the Olathe School District our American History textbook is *The Americans: Reconstruction to the 21st Century* published by McDougal Littell. Granted the American Revolution is not the text's main focus but it does have a review unit, starting with early American societies and ending in 1877, comprised of four chapters and roughly 200 pages. The second chapter deals with the American Revolution and mentions African Americans or abolitionists three times: Crispus Attucks, five thousand African Americans fighting with the Continental Army, and an image of an anti-slavery cameo. The text only refers to women twice: a painting of Molly Pitcher, and a reference to female frugality/patriotism by participating in boycotts. Native Americans are said to have stayed on the fringes of the Revolution despite a chart listing them as a strength of the British. The only common person specified in the textbook by name is Daniel Shays. On the contrary, Nash provides a greater depth of knowledge by

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making it clear how commonly unknown revolutionaries like Venture Smith, Benjamin Lay, Abigail Adams, Dragging Canoe, and many others added to the radicalism of the American Revolution.

Venture Smith struggled mightily to purchase freedom for himself after twenty eight years of slavery. He then worked for nine more years to purchase his children and wife from their bondage. Many slaves rebelled against their masters and sided with the British. The diminutive and eccentric Benjamin Lay, a Quaker from Philadelphia, said slavery was, "the mother of all sins" (p 41) and aggressively illustrated his point in a variety of ways including plunging a sword into a fake Bible filled with red pokeberry juice at an annual meeting of Quaker leadership. Nash asserts, by including both in his narrative, that they serve as an example of radicals exposing a set of ideals that our founding fathers would've preferred to ignore.

Abigail Adams, wife of founding father John Adams, is given life by Nash while looking at her correspondence with her husband. Abigail pushes her husband to "...remember the ladies" (p 203) in her letter on March 31, 1776. The fervor that had been stirred up in order to rebel against the English crown also caused women like Abigail to think of their own situations and see, "... that they too were badly treated 'subjects' ". (p 204) Despite her insistence, John brushed her ideals aside causing her to remark much later in life that, "I will never consent to have our sex considered in an inferior point of light." (p 206)

Native Americans in general had a much different set of issues than Abigail Adams. They were dealing with colonists encroaching on their lands. Causing many to side with the British who offered trade and assurances. Per Nash other natives fought in their own "revolutionary wars" that ran parallel to the American Revolution. Dragging Canoe was incensed that his father and the old chiefs would sign away the Cherokee's prime hunting land, which made up a large part of what is now Kentucky, to settlers in the Sycamore Shoals Treaty in 1775. Dragging Canoe promised to turn the lands the settlers

took "dark and bloody" (p 258). In 1776 South Carolina and Virginia sent six thousand militiamen to wage genocidal warfare against the Cherokee. Dragging Canoe also cut himself off from most of British support and trade by refusing to relocate Florida. His resistance to settler's expansion became known as the Chickamauga wars which lasted until 1794.

Some readers may find it difficult to follow Nash's organization of this book. Each chapter is laid out in chronological order with categorical subgroups such as abolitionists, women, common farmers, slaves, and natives interwoven throughout each chapter. It may have been more effective for Nash to dedicate a chapter for each of the subgroups. Each chapter would then follow the timeline of the revolutionary spiral.

A separate critique can focus on Nash's reliance upon John Adams, a conservative revolutionary, and Thomas Paine, a radical revolutionary. Both are certainly known players in the American Revolution. Throughout the book, as shown in the Index, Adams is referred to thirty-one times and Paine garners twenty-three citations. It is odd that in an book entitled *The Unknown American Revolution* much of the interpretation is driven through these two famous men.

Nash's book is a well known and respected component of the Neo-Progressive view of the formation of the Constitution. Its integral theme revolves around ordinary people as historical actors that are in conflict with the "elite". I would recommend this book to any person who suspects that the story of the American Revolution they have always known is too neat and clean to be entirely accurate. Teachers could derive a series of lessons from this book centering around the ideas all of the revolutionary dreams which were deferred to some degree. "Every unfulfilled element of the Revolution- ... -reemerged in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some of these planks in the radical platform, such as strict limits for legislators or gender equality, are still agenda items today." (p 454).