

The Road to Independence: Interpretations

Jesús Fernández-Villaverde¹

September 14, 2023

¹University of Pennsylvania



A wonderful summary

Carl L. Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776*

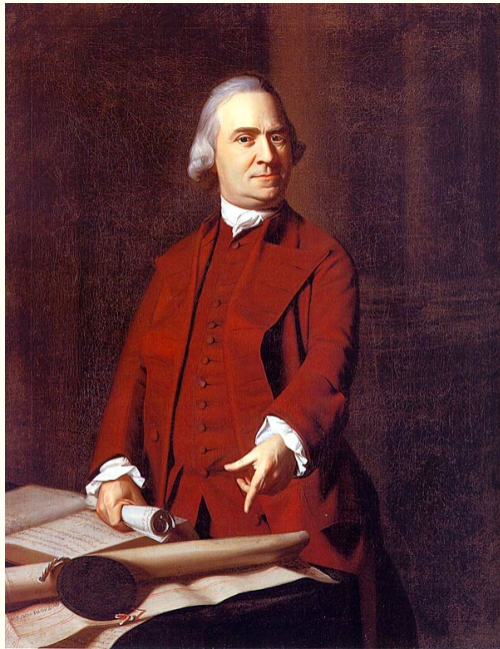
“The first was the question of home rule; the second was the question . . . of who should rule at home.”

Going back to the basic questions

- Recall the three tightly-linked questions that early Americans asked:
 1. How responsive to popular majorities should governments be?
 2. How government power should be distributed among different territorial levels?
 3. To what extent and in what ways should government promote economic growth?
- These three questions become central to life in the colonies after 1763.
- The constitutional crisis spins out of control and ends up with a war, which few had foreseen, and with an independent federal republic.
- You should not underestimate how novel this political structure was.
- Or the global impact of the revolution.

Players

- Attempts at reforms of the British Empire are met by increasingly fierce resistance by colonial elites.
- British actions are followed by American reactions, with minor revolutionary threads.
- There is an exception: Massachusetts, with the toxic combination of Samuels Adams and Thomas Hutchinson.
- Boston, in particular, had always been a problematic city for the Empire.
- Indeed, the conflict in Massachusetts ends up engulfing most of the rest of the colonies.
- In fact, the reaction to the Tea Party in the rest of the colonies (and even outside Boston in Massachusetts) is largely negative..
- American Revolution is, therefore, fundamentally about constitutional questions created by imperial reform.





Bernard Bailyn
THE ORDEAL OF
Thomas Hutchinson



WINNER OF THE
NATIONAL BOOK AWARD
IN HISTORY

"A remarkable achievement." —GORDON S. WOOD, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian

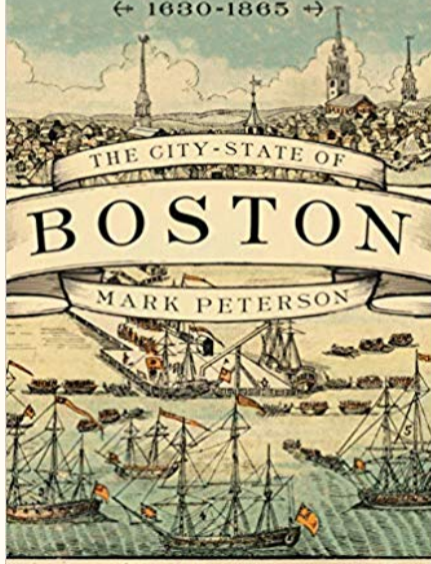
THE RISE AND FALL OF AN ATLANTIC POWER.

← 1630-1865 →

THE CITY-STATE OF

BOSTON

MARK PETERSON



- Political-economic considerations are at the very center of the events.
- However, the fact that political-economic considerations are the center of the discussion does not mean we do not have alternative interpretations of the revolution.
- In particular, why did different players care so much about constitutional issues?
- We need to spend some time thinking about the historiography of the revolution.
- Historiography: study of how historians have thought, researched, and written about history.



WHAT IS HISTORY

?

EDWARD HALLETT CARR

"... a work of rare distinction which nobody can afford to miss."—Hans Meyerhoff, *New York Times Book Review*



A sound advice

What is History? (1961)

"...if, as Collingwood says, the historian must re-enact in thought what has gone on in the mind of his *dramatis personae*, so the reader in his turn must re-enact what goes on in the mind of the historian. Study the historian before you begin to study the facts. This is, after all, not very abstruse. It is what is already done by the intelligent undergraduate who, when recommended to read a work by that great scholar Jones of St. Jude's, goes round to a friend at St. Jude's to ask what sort of chap Jones is, and what bees he has in his bonnet. When you read a work of history, always listen out for the buzzing. If you can detect none, either you are tone deaf or your historian is a dull dog.

The facts are really not at all like fish on the fishmonger's slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use – these two factors being, of course, determined by what kind of fish he wants to catch. By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants."

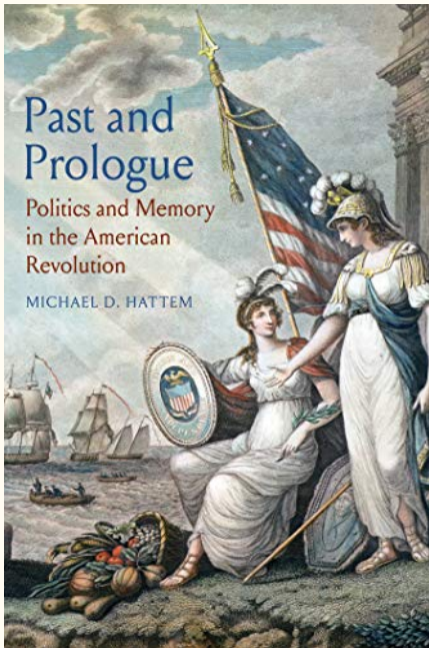
Interpretations of the revolution

- Being a central aspect of American life, there have been debates about the meaning of the revolution since 1776: David Ramsay, Mercy Otis Warren, Thomas Hutchinson, Joseph Galloway, George Bancroft, George L. Beer, Charles Andrews, and Lawrence Gipson.
- We cannot review all of them.
- Two important traditions:
 1. Neo-Whig interpretation.
 2. Neo-Progressive interpretation.
- Notice that nearly all authors recognize caveats and nuances to their interpretations (we will revisit this point later on). Many historians plainly dislike the idea of traditions or “schools.”

Past and Prologue

Politics and Memory
in the American
Revolution

MICHAEL D. HATTEM



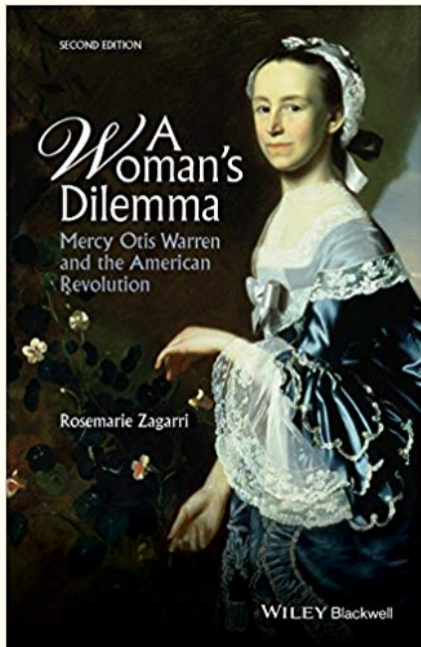
SECOND EDITION

W A Woman's Dilemma

Mercy Otis Warren
and the American
Revolution

Rosemarie Zagarri

WILEY Blackwell



HISTORY
OF THE
RISE, PROGRESS AND TERMINATION
OF THE
AMERICAN REVOLUTION.

INTERSPERSED WITH
Biographical, Political and Moral Observations.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY MRS. MERCY WARREN,
OF PLYMOUTH, (MASS.)

.....Trampled on every side.....
persecuted, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken;
cast down, but not destroyed. ST. PAUL.

O God! thy will was done.....
And not to us, but to thy own glory,
Assuage our ill. SHAKESPEARE.

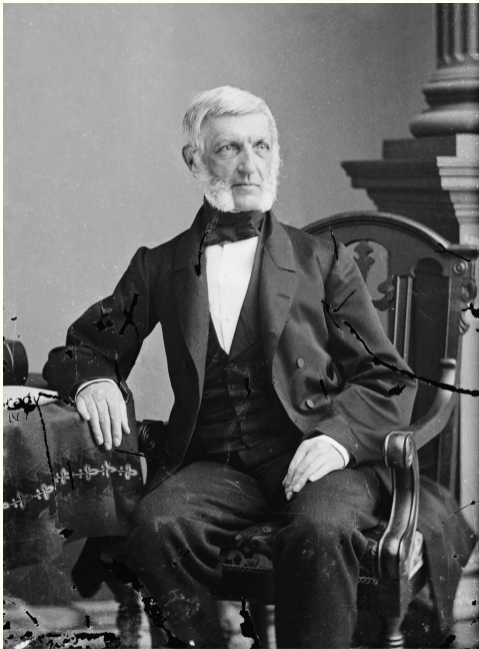
VOL. I.

BOSTON:
PRINTED BY MANNING AND LORING,
For E. LARKIN, No. 47, CORNHILL.

1805.

New York: 1805.





Neo-Whig interpretation I

- Ideas about constitutional issues are not only the proximate cause of conflict, but also essential to understand what happened.
- Highlights colonials' emphasis on liberty and constitutional rights.
- These ideas were built on the Whig radical tradition and the “country” opposition literature in England (Algernon Sidney, John Locke, Cato's Letters).
- Baylin called this process the “contagion of liberty.”
- That does not necessarily imply that actors were not rational or did not pursue self-interest.
- Similarly, the neo-Whig interpretation does not deny the “radical” aspect of the revolution (importance of republican component against traditional patriarchal societies).

Algerenon Sydney

Bn. 1622



1622





C A T O'S
LETTERS.

VOL. I.

*Est lex Justorum Injustorumque distinctio, ad
illam antiquissimam, & rerum omnium
principem, expressa, Naturam; ad quam
leges hominum diriguntur, quæ supplicio
improbos afficiunt, & tuentur bonos.*

Cicero de Legibus.

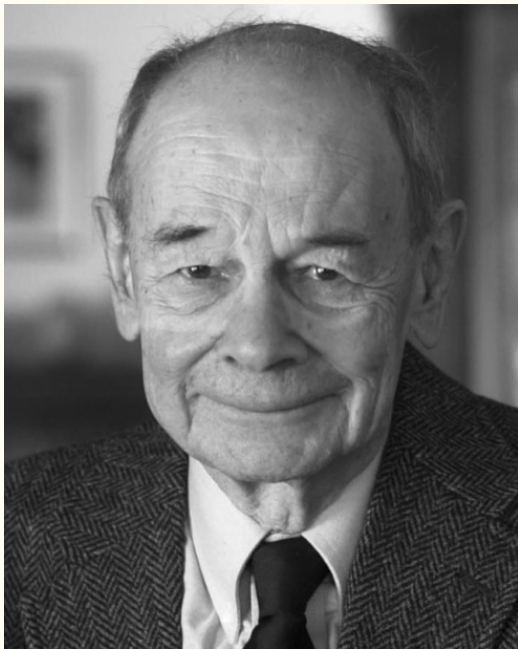
L O N D O N :

Printed for W. WILKINS, T. WOOD-
WARD, J. WALTHOE, and J. PEELE.

M D C C X X I V .

- Main contributions:

1. **The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution** by Edmund Morgan (1953).
2. **The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution** by Bernard Bailyn (1967).
3. **The Radicalism of the American Revolution** by Gordon S. Wood (1991).



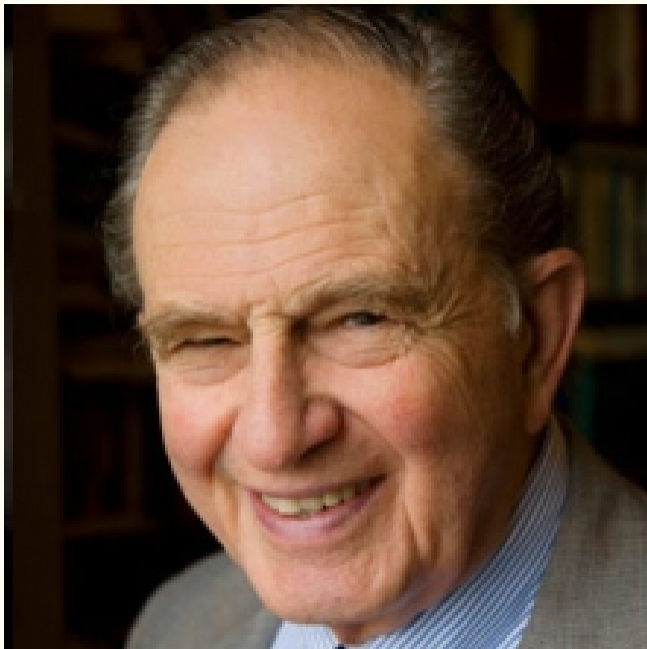
^{the}
Stamp
Act

CRISIS

PROLOGUE TO REVOLUTION

EDMUND S. MORGAN
& HELEN M. MORGAN

WITH A NEW PREFACE BY EDMUND S. MORGAN



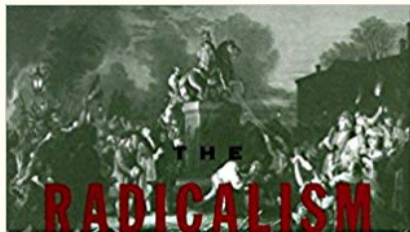
Winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the Bancroft Prize

The
**IDEOLOGICAL
ORIGINS**
of the
**AMERICAN
REVOLUTION**

FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

BERNARD BAILYN





THE
RADICALISM

OF THE
**AMERICAN
REVOLUTION**

WINNER OF
THE PULITZER PRIZE

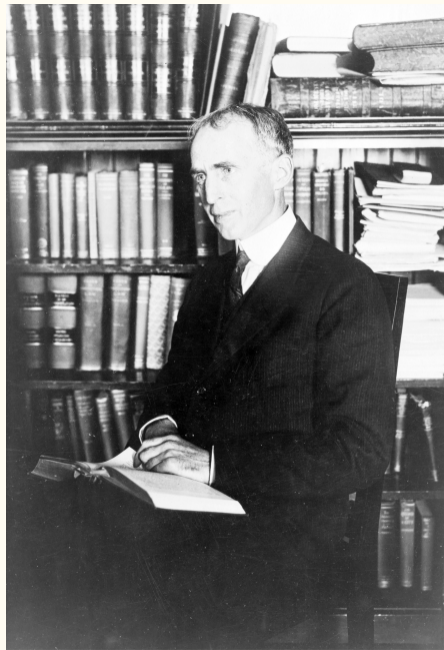


GORDON S. WOOD

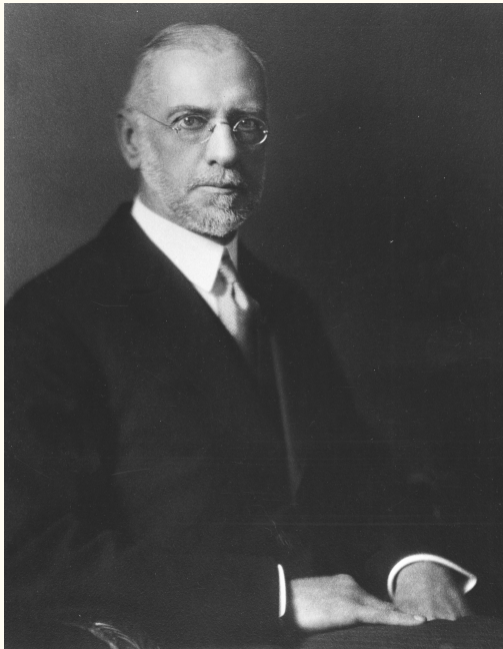
"The most important study of the American Revolution to appear in over twenty years...a landmark book." —Pauline Maier, *The New York Times Book Review*

Neo-Progressive interpretation I

- Ideas about constitutional issues are epiphenomena hiding more important economic struggles.
- Related, but not equal to the Marxist tradition of historical materialism (base vs. superstructure).
- Also, details of those struggles vary across authors (i.e., elite-guided vs. elite-reacted).
- Very influenced by the interpretation of the French Revolution.
- Founders of the tradition (“classical” progressives):
 1. **The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776** by Carl Becker (1909).
 2. **An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States** by Charles A. Beard (1913).
 3. **The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution** by Arthur M. Schlesinger Sr. (1918).
 4. **The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement** by J. Franklin Jameson (1926).







Neo-Progressive interpretation II

- More recently: Gary Nash, Edward Countryman, and Woody Holton (among many others).
- Influenced by the “New Social History.”
- Emphasis on the tensions created by fast social change and growing inequalities.
- Mixed with many different themes, including the role of groups outside the elite.

REVISED EDITION

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION



*"Fine concise history . . . Better than any comparable treatment."
—Sean Wilentz, in *These Times**

EDWARD COUNTRYMAN



"Illuminating... gives us a strong sense of the lives of the unnamed and unremembered." —*San Jose Mercury News*

The Unknown
AMERICAN
REVOLUTION



*The Unruly Birth of Democracy
and the Struggle to Create America*

GARY B. NASH

Caveats I

- Despite their names, the “political leaning” of each interpretation is ambiguous.
- Also, discussions within each interpretation: Republican view of Bernard Bailyn vs. liberalism view of Joyce Appleby.
- Related but separate debates regarding:
 1. The degree of radicalism of the revolution.
 2. The relation between the revolution and the constitution.
- “Founders Chic.” Also, half-jokingly, “Federalist Chic.” My own view of this movement is more positive.



A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

GORDON S. WOOD

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

Revolutionary Characters

WHAT MADE
THE FOUNDERS
DIFFERENT



"Elegant . . . stimulating . . . absorbing essays from one of our
leading scholars of the American Revolution . . . splendid."

—ROBERT MIDDLEKAUFF, *The Washington Post Book World*

- Scope of studies have extended dramatically over the last few decades:
 1. Social groups.
 2. With-in groups.
 3. Geographically.
- You probably want to spend more time reading and thinking about those interpretations.

Mary Beth Norton

**LIBERTY'S
DAUGHTERS**

*The
Revolutionary Experience
of American Women,
1750-1800*

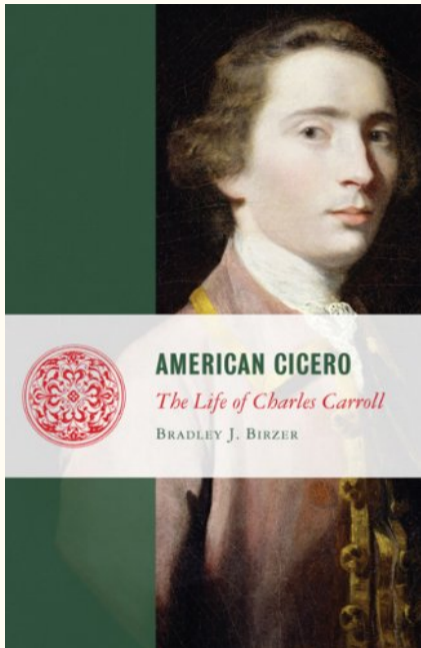


ENJOY THE
SAME LIBERTY



Black Americans and the Revolutionary Era

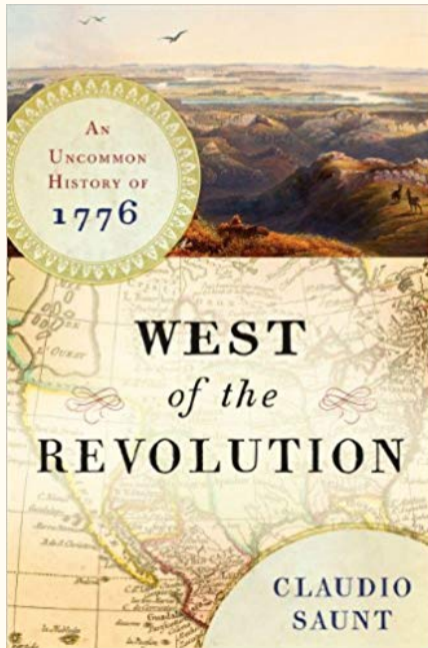
EDWARD COUNTRYMAN



AMERICAN CICERO

The Life of Charles Carroll

BRADLEY J. BIRZER



WHOSE AMERICAN REVOLUTION WAS IT?



*Historians
Interpret the
Founding*

ALFRED F. YOUNG &
GREGORY H. NOBLES



Understanding the
FOUNDING
THE CRUCIAL QUESTIONS

Alan Gibson

SECOND EDITION,
REVISED AND EXPANDED

- If we had more time, I would assign some primary documents.
- Pamphlets play an extraordinarily important role in the Revolution.
- Structural reasons: widespread literacy+high disposable income.

VOLUME I

Exploring the Bounds of

LIBERTY

*Political Writings of Colonial British
America from the Glorious Revolution
to the American Revolution*



EDITED BY JACK P. GREENE AND CRAIG B. YIRUSH

