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The Other Founders

By Edmund S. Morgan

The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America by Gary B. Nash

Viking, 512 pp., \$27.95

For the past ten or twelve years we have been celebrating the well-known Founding Fathers of the American Revolution in the biographies of Washington, Adams, Hamilton, Jefferson, and Franklin that have graced the best-seller lists. Is there an element of self-gratification here, of self-congratulation, in a wishful identification with great Americans of the past, in default of any on the scene today? If so, *The Unknown American Revolution* offers an antidote, a bill of particulars of what the Founding Fathers failed to do, spelled out in the stories of people for most of whom the Revolution brought betrayal, disappointment, and misery. In one sense the book is an invitation to a guilt trip for our sins of the past. But that, I think, is not its intention. It is, rather, a celebration of a different cast of players with different heroes and heroines and different villains, fitting to sustain a left-wing opposition to injustice then and now. If any of us have been content with the appellation of "liberal" in opposition to the illiberal policies confronting us, Nash invites us to become heirs to a more vigorous radicalism. A bit of explanation is necessary.

The left in America has always been more successful academically than politically. Historians in the radical "New Left" movement of the past thirty or forty years have compensated for political isolation by identifying themselves with the dispossessed of earlier times. They have occupied themselves in a scholarly recasting of history "from the bottom up," studies of the tribulations of tenant farmers, merchant seamen, urban laborers, and others who suffered at the hands of the established authorities of their day. Untainted by the simplistic, doctrinaire interpretations of the old left, they have won for the people they study a new respect and understanding as well as a set of historical precedents for radicalism.

Their work has benefited from a coincidental academic movement away from political history toward social history. The movement was sparked not by a yearning for social revolution, but rather by the work of French historians like Fernand Braudel, who advocated *histoire totale*, history with nothing left out. Both European and American historians have done away with any conceptual limits on what in the past needs and deserves investigating. The result, among other things, has been a flood of works on gender history, black history, and ethnic history of all kinds. The widespread academic recognition of the New Left's history from the bottom up owes something to this larger academic movement, though it can scarcely be considered part of it.

Academic history itself, however, in whatever form, has seldom won recognition outside the academy. Historians have mainly themselves to blame for their narrow choice of subject matter and impenetrable writing. But even when the findings of the new social history have been made more accessible, the result is not necessarily a round of public applause. No one knows this better than Gary Nash. Recognized as a leader in the New Left historical movement and in the historical profession generally, Nash has had firsthand experience of the resistance that greets the new history, radical or otherwise, when it confronts an inflated popular mythology about the country's glorious past. It is hard to assess his new book without seeing it as in some measure a reflection of that experience.

A little over a dozen years ago Nash led a broadly based task force of historians in producing a guidebook for teachers, designed to give high school students a basic understanding of American history, incorporating the latest

findings of historical scholarship, and providing new perspectives. Sponsored by the United States Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities, the task force took its job seriously, consulted with high school teachers all over the country, and gave attention both to old-fashioned political history and to the social developments that have figured so largely in recent work. The book they produced, unfortunately named *National Standards for United States History*, was a sophisticated and stimulating guide to teaching American history at all levels. It did not prescribe a set of facts to be memorized. Instead, it asked questions, tough questions, about familiar episodes, and did not give answers. It challenged students to think about the American past without telling them what they ought to think. It gave them propositions to discuss that were worth discussing. Despite the title, it was intended not as a set of stringent requirements but as a set of suggestions for teachers.

The authors could scarcely have expected the culture wars that ensued, akin to the current flap about teaching evolution in the schools, but with the same sort of know-nothing opposition. Rush Limbaugh greeted it with his usual obscenities. Lynne Cheney, who had been director of the National Endowment for the Humanities when it funded the project, was outraged and said so. The *Standards*, it seems, were too politically correct, too multicultural. They gave too little attention to what Americans had famously achieved, too much to what they had not, too much to conflict and discord, too little to consensus. Right-wing columnists and pundits roasted the work in the press and on radio and television. Even the United States Senate, in a fit of foolishness, passed a resolution of condemnation.

Nash recognized himself as a major target. With two of his colleagues in the enterprise he wrote a surprisingly objective account of its reception.^[1] It is tempting to see his new book on the Revolution as a more acerbic answer to the continued unwillingness of seemingly sane people to examine historical fact. One of the suggested assignments for students in the section of the *Standards* on the American Revolution asked them to consider not only the political philosophy of the Declaration of Independence and the factors making for American victory in the Revolutionary War, but also the differing effects of independence on wealthy merchants, small farmers, women, slaves, ex-slaves, and Native Americans. The "but also" part of the assignment was the kind of thing that angered conservative critics, with its implication that the Revolution may not have been a great thing for everybody. In *The Unknown American Revolution* Nash has given the sort of answer his critics feared. With scarcely a glance at the Founding Fathers, except to show that they had feet of clay, the book is a careful, exhaustive account of the misfortunes of people who wanted something more from the Revolution than they got. Slaves, Indians, and women figure largely, but no group of tenant farmers, urban workers, or "plebeian loyalists" is neglected.

But if the book is a scholar's riposte to unthinking and uninformed critics, it is also a co-optation or appropriation by a no longer so new New Left of the whole social history movement, treating it as a revolt of the scholarly masses against an elitist "old school" guild that had formerly excluded them from discovering their roots. "I could not have attempted such a study," Nash says, "without changes in the historical profession over the past few decades—something akin to a tectonic plate shift." He sees the shift as the product not of changing intellectual interests or the expansion of inquiry begun by French historians, but as the overthrow of an elite. "The emergence of a profession of historians of widely different backgrounds," he says, "has redistributed historical property, and the American Revolution is now becoming the property of the many rather than the few." His opponents here are not the anti-intellectual crowd who derided the *Standards*, but an old school of historians who have found it "unsettling...to see the intellectual property of the American Revolution, once firmly in the hands of a smaller and more homogeneous historians' guild, taken out of their safe boxes, put on the table, and redivided."

The language, of course, is metaphorical, but it suggests a conspiracy of geezers thwarted by daring young rebels (though many of the rebels are not so young anymore). As one of the geezers, I find myself a little dismayed to discover that I have been hoarding the Revolution in a lock box, perhaps stored in the cellars of one of those upper-crust clubs of oldsters depicted so often in *New Yorker* cartoons. I have to ask what is being redivided. What does the unknown American Revolution have to do with the known Revolution in which the familiar Founders severed American connection to Britain? Nash has cast a wide net, to include virtually every group that expressed opposition in the 1760s, 1770s, and 1780s against those who exercised authority over them: not, it must be said, American colonists against British authority, but women against men, slaves against masters, tenants against landlords, soldiers against officers, poor against rich, Indians against whites, evangelical Christians against established

churches, Loyalists against Revolutionary governments. Each of them has a story worth telling, and Nash tells it well in an evenhanded narrative of facts, leaving righteous indignation to the reader.

The slaves' story is the saddest. For them the Revolution seemed like a golden opportunity, though not because of the principles enunciated in the Declaration of Independence. In Virginia the royal governor, Lord Dunmore, issued a proclamation in 1775 offering freedom to any who would join the force of Loyalists he was trying desperately to recruit. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, flocked to his colors. But he and they were both obliged to retreat to the seeming safety of ships on Virginia's rivers. There, below decks, most of them contracted smallpox and were put ashore to die. Four years later when the British mounted the southern campaign that ended at Yorktown, General Henry Clinton issued another proclamation that attracted an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 slaves to British lines. After the debacle at Yorktown ended British rule, some of these eventually made it to Florida or Nova Scotia, but again probably the majority succumbed to camp diseases or to another smallpox epidemic.

It may have been, as Nash says, "the greatest slave rebellion in American history," but for most of the rebels it ended like the others in death. Slaves who supported the American side fared better, but not much better. Only with great reluctance did Washington allow some to join his army. Other Virginians had another wartime use for them. In 1780 the state legislature offered slaves as a bounty for enlistment in the war against British tyranny. The Revolution did see enactment of measures for gradual emancipation in the northern states, but the number who benefited was small.

For American Indians the Revolution was equally a disaster, whether they took sides or remained neutral. In New York and Pennsylvania after the Iroquois joined Loyalists in raids on frontier settlements, General John Sullivan led a scorched-earth sweep that crippled Iroquois power forever. To the south, Indian-hating revolutionary militia from Virginia and the Carolinas carried out a "genocidal state policy" against the Creeks and the Cherokee. To the west George Rogers Clark, after capturing the British strongholds south of Detroit, devastated the villages of the Shawnees and burned their cornfields. Indian resistance was "almost suicidal in the face of huge odds—some 150,000 Native Americans were outnumbered sixteen to one by the end of the war."

The stories of other underclasses in the Revolution are less dramatic. A few women, like Abigail Adams, extended the arguments against political tyranny to the domestic tyranny of husbands over wives, and in New Jersey the Revolutionary government adopted a constitution in 1776 that gave women the vote. But their successors thought better of so novel a move when they amended the constitution in 1807 and deprived women of suffrage. As rebels, women figured most conspicuously in crowd actions against monopolizing merchants who took advantage of wartime scarcity to charge outrageous prices for flour and other foodstuffs. But women had acted in this way often before and could not long sustain the old "moral economy" against the "unrestrained capitalism" of the Revolutionary leaders.

Tenant farmers in New York had mounted an unsuccessful revolt against the land barons of the Hudson Valley in the 1760s. When the fighting began in the 1770s, they favored the British because "they saw no contradiction in pitting themselves against patriot landlords who professed political liberty as their goal." But they were no more successful than they had been before. Farmers in the Carolinas and on the eastern shore of Maryland picked the Loyalist side for similar reasons and lost heavily as a result. In New England it was indeed the "embattled farmers" who began the war at Lexington and Concord and made up the body of the Continental Army in its first year. But after 1776 they were replaced largely by men who, upon scholarly examination, "turn out to be those with pinched lives, often fresh from Ireland or Germany, recently released from jail, or downright desperate." These recruits enlisted for pay, fought well, and mutinied or deserted only when the irresponsible Continental Congress failed to feed, clothe, or pay them. What they got out of the Revolution during or after the war was much less than they deserved.

The case of the evangelicals against the established churches is a little different from the others. The Revolution did result in the disestablishment of the church in the states where there had been an establishment, and in Virginia the persecution of Baptist itinerants before and during the Revolution had something to do with the disestablishment. But connections between religious and political movements are always complex and elusive. The eighteenth century

in America was marked by a number of evangelical revivals. The biggest and best known was the "Great Awakening" of the 1740s. Its relation to the Revolution has long been a puzzle, one that historians, including Nash, have solved too easily by making it a dress rehearsal for democracy. The Great Awakening is supposed to have made people believe for the first time that their eternal salvation lay in their own hands, not in the church or ministry, thus preparing them to think that government too could be in their own hands.

For Nash this idea is particularly attractive, because the other groups he follows were trying, however unsuccessfully, to take power into their own hands. As he puts it,

By learning to oppose authority and challenge the values of those accustomed to lead them, ordinary Virginians attracted to the Baptist and Methodist gatherings were continuing the rehearsal for revolution that the Awakeners of the 1730s and 1740s had first initiated.

But the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century, with the exception of those led late in the century by Methodists, resulted from the preaching of a theology that paradoxically denied human beings any power at all over their own salvation, preaching in reaction against a creeping "Arminianism" that seemed to reward mere human endeavor with some small share of credit. Baptists had always been ardent against Arminianism. Methodists, on the other hand, preached an open and aggressive Arminianism, affirming that salvation depended entirely upon human effort. But the Methodists were also distinguished by their opposition to the Revolution, and the Baptists were at best lukewarm supporters. Religion and politics frequently make strange bedfellows, and anyone equating evangelical Christianity with political radicalism in any century would do well to consider what sort of political complexion it wears today.

2.

Still and all, the various movements that Nash describes—and he describes more than I can even list—evinced a readiness in their participants to challenge authority in some form, a belief that they deserved to share in making the rules that shaped their lives. The diversity of the groups may itself indicate a new popular rejection of the traditional deference attached to birth and wealth. When Jefferson wrote in the Declaration that all men are created equal and that government derives its authority from consent, was he expressing a view more literally believed and more widely applied than he realized? On Nash's evidence the belief was already there, growing spontaneously out of men's and women's confidence in themselves, but it was unrecognized and defeated by the likes of the Founding Fathers, including the author of the Declaration.

The Revolution was a time, he argues, when democratic participation in government and democratic equality in society might have come to America in a much greater degree than they did. In particular, it was a time when slavery might have been abolished, when sentiment against it was higher, even in the South, than it became later. Nash argues that the failure of the Founders to throw their weight behind abolition at this crucial time places the blame on their shoulders for the 600,000 lives lost in its abolition some eighty years later, a number roughly equal to that of all the slaves in the United States in 1785.

Without giving even passing attention to anything the Founders did, the book is an indictment of them for what they failed to do during the years from roughly 1761 to 1785. What they did do during those years was to establish the political independence of thirteen colonies and join them in a single union. In the ensuing years, without any marked change in the priorities that had dictated the failings cited here, they created the present government of the United States. Only after that did the views, or rather the attitudes, of the people Nash celebrates begin to find expression in the institutions of the new republic.

We have to ask, then, what did the movements he describes have to do with the revolution that established the independent United States? Most of them were not visibly a cause or an effect of that revolution. Would they have occurred without it? Since most of them did not succeed, do they deserve the name of a revolution? They excite sympathy today, but did they change anything at the time? Recurring to the earlier claim to a redistribution of the property of the American Revolution from the few to the many, have the many received a collection of lost causes?

To put the question another way, is Nash's devaluation of the Founding Fathers a reaction against the overvaluing of them that greeted his history *Standards*? The one thing that the groups he describes in *The Unknown American Revolution* have in common is the challenge they offered to established authority. But the most radical challenge offered at the time was the one he omits, the challenge offered by the Continental Congress to the King, who had hitherto commanded the allegiance of Americans. It was a much larger step to deny his authority than to resist it. From the first meeting of the Congress in September 1774 until July 1776, it was a larger step than the majority of the delegates were willing to take. Before 1776, while totally engaged in supplying and supporting the war, they would not even discuss independence. They issued continual affirmations of their loyalty to the King and took care to name their opponents in the war as "ministerial" troops, sent against them not by the King but by his government's wicked ministers.

When they finally took the plunge in the famous Declaration, directed entirely against the King, they were not merely resisting authority but destroying it, a step that rested government on a consent given here and now, not in the distant past in some imagined social contract. By taking that step they not only made the most radical possible denial of constituted authority, but implied a dissolution of every kind of subordination.

It has to be admitted that they resisted the implication. They knew that they were committing themselves, in the words of John Adams, to "a Revolution, the most compleat, unexpected, and remarkable of any in the History of Nations" and that "No Man living can foresee the consequences." Adams and the others hoped it would be accompanied by "a Decency and Respect, and Veneration [being] introduced for Persons in Authority, of every Rank." One way to introduce decency and respect was to have new governments ready in advance. Jefferson was already working on one for Virginia before he wrote the Declaration. Neither he nor his colleagues wanted the separation from kingly power to mean the total destruction of the bonds of society that might be inferred from the equality affirmed in the Declaration.

On the other hand, the governments they created, most of which Nash regards as counterrevolutionary, did allow the ultimate fulfillment of the egalitarian goals of his unknown revolutionaries. Although many of the new state constitutions reserved voting and office-holding to white men owning a specified amount of property, their authors believed, probably correctly, that property was more widely distributed in America than anywhere else in the world, and they rested republican government on that assumption. In the Articles of Confederation of 1781 and the Constitution of 1787 the leaders of the known Revolution agreed to forbid all titles of nobility in their new republic. What is more important, they not only guaranteed a republican government to every state that joined in the Revolution, they also created a national government committed to the equality that republican government implied.

Although they accepted the continuance of slavery, they recognized it as a violation of principle, a compromise that was the price of union. And they made no attempt to embody in the Constitution any manner of support for the traditional deference they apparently expected to see continued to men like themselves, well-to-do and well educated. They expected the national government they crafted in 1787 to be run by such people. Perhaps Jefferson and Madison expected their Republican Party of the 1790s to be conducted by the same kind of people, selected and respected by the right-minded masses. But they did not allow the disappointment of their expectations to alter their principles.

In resting American independence on a union committed to human equality, the Founders released popular energies they had probably not foreseen but did not disavow. They opened the door to many more movements of the kind Nash describes. And there is no evidence that they regretted what they had done. Jefferson liked to call the victory of his Republican Party in the election of 1800 "the Revolution of 1800," but it was the consequence of the Revolution of 1776. The Federalists who opposed him did not propose to change the ground rules that the Declaration bequeathed them. Conservatives in America from that day to this have had to cope with the axiom of human equality enshrined in the Declaration and in popular consciousness.

In the closing pages of his book Nash denies that his unknown Revolution was a failed revolution. Rather, he says, it was an incomplete one. His defeated slaves, Indians, women, and farmers passed the torch to later generations to

carry on what they had begun. Perhaps he is right. Perhaps the success of egalitarian, democratic movements after the launching of the new national government can be seen as a continuation of the disparate movements he describes. But they *were* disparate—isolated, disconnected, local, unknown to one another as well as to us. Despite Nash's scrupulous and comprehensive scholarship, he has not succeeded in making them a coherent whole, a revolution in themselves. The known Revolution was national, a successful joining of thirteen colonies into a "perpetual union," capable of effecting egalitarian reforms on a continental scale.

The Unknown American Revolution invites comparison with *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* by the historian Gordon Wood.^[2] Wood portrayed the Revolution as "the most radical and most far-reaching event in American history," because of the social changes that followed from it after the years that Nash covers. Wood attributes those changes primarily to a shared belief in equality, "the most powerful ideological force let loose in the Revolution." I think he would not deny the presence of the idea, or at least the attitude, among the groups of people examined by Nash, but he does not suggest that it was they who let it loose. Its force lay not in the demands of its possible beneficiaries but in the new republic's commitment to it. Slavery was not abolished by a greater slave rebellion but by the union created in the known Revolution. American Indians and women were only later beneficiaries, and after a great deal of strife and debate. It seems unlikely that the political, social, and cultural changes wrought in the name of equality since 1776 could have occurred under continued British rule. It was the Founders who made them possible by defying a king and creating a republic. The unknown Revolution deserves remembering for the symptoms it discloses of something larger, but not as a substitute for that known Revolution. Whatever the Founders did not do, what they did was what mattered—and still does.

Notes

^[1] Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (Knopf, 1997).

^[2] Knopf, 1992; see *The New York Review*, June 25, 1992.

The current system " The Founder Lottery. Yesterday's home runs don't win today's games. " Babe Ruth. As founders, we are essentially forced to play the lottery. But what happens to the other founders? Depending on how much the company has raised and the preference they've given to their investors, it will often take \$100M+ exits for the founders to see any significant money. Those exits are also rare. Approximately 57 out of 2,196 founders of startups will achieve those, or 2.6%. Read "The Other Founders Anti-Federalism and the Dissenting Tradition in America, 1788-1828" by Saul Cornell available from Rakuten Kobo. A new look at the Anti-Federalists is particularly timely given the recent revival of interest in this once neglected group, notes Cornell. Now widely reprinted, Anti-Federalist writings are increasingly quoted by legal scholars and cited in Supreme Court decisions--clear proof that their authors are now counted among the ranks of America's founders. Buy the eBook. List Price.