



The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America

Gary B. Nash

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In this audacious recasting of the American Revolution, distinguished historian Gary Nash offers a profound new way of thinking about the struggle to create this country, introducing readers to a coalition of patriots from all classes and races of American society. From millennialist preachers to enslaved Africans, disgruntled women to aggrieved Indians, the people so vividly portrayed in this book did not all agree or succeed, but during the exhilarating and messy years of this country's birth, they laid down ideas that have become part of our inheritance and ideals toward which we still strive today.

The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America Details

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Ed Allen says

This book helps bring to life the complexity and strife of the colonies , patriots and founding fathers. Behind the myth of united front of the founding fathers, there were the familiar currents of conflict, greed, multi-factionalism, real estate scams, and pettiness that we commonly see today.

Those so inclined will see the "tea party" fighting back against an oppressive hi tax regime, and others will see the common man "leveling" the mansions of the greedy oligarch and "occupying" their misgotten lands.

Leon Uis says

Definately a good educational read because there author include all the people that contributed to the revolution and not just the fouunding father.

Jonathan says

Incoherent and tiresome. *The Unknown American Revolution* is a jumble of vignettes designed to illustrate a paper-thin thesis that couples a cliché (most of the people caught up in the American Revolution were not elite white men) with an anachronism (these non-elite-white-men wanted radical democratic change). Nash culls stories of women, nonwhites, farmers, and workers from secondary sources -- a worthwhile endeavor, I suppose -- but simply piles them in narrative fragments instead of conducting a thorough examination of their ideas or their relationships to each other.

Laurie says

If you read only one book on the American Revolution (I'd go so far as to say 'only one book on American history') make it this one.

I borrowed this from the library to take on vacation because my family history searches made me curious to know more about this period than I did. Much of the history we were taught about this period was "great men" and "great battles", accompanied by examining hagiographic paintings made either at the time (Benjamin Rush) or later, in the 19th Century. In a way, none of it made real sense. Was the Stamp Act the only thing the American colonists got excited about? Or quartering troops? What did it really mean to say 'no taxation without representation'? Why could Jefferson write the preamble to the Declaration of Independence yet continue to hold slaves?

There's no straight answer. The 35 years leading up to the outbreak of the Revolution were times of great

change, upheaval and complexity. The 'people' weren't even 'a people' but a diverse lot of different groups: wealthier and poorer, newer immigrants and old settlers, farmers and countrymen and city-dwellers, merchants, artisans, workers, land-owners and tenants, slaves, a few free blacks and Indians, men and women, scattered over different colonies with different settlement patterns, religious orientations, and different histories. When some people said: 'no taxation without representation' they weren't talking about representation in the British Parliament, but about the narrow franchise that limited voting rights, including locally, to landholders with estates valued at at least £40, and about local taxes and local impositions, though these were exacerbated by fiscal policies emanating from the British crown and Parliament. At the outset of the crisis, there were no cries for abolition, but these quickly began, first from religious conviction and then because many found themselves in the quandary of advocating 'freedom' from British oppression when they themselves were oppressors of black Africans forcibly taken from their homeland to live in perpetual and inheritable servitude forever. And Native Americans were faced with the difficulties of living with encroaching white settlers.

Nash does a great service for the reader in bringing to one work all these (and other) disparate influences: class, location, economic woes, slavery, a distant government with local support (the Loyalists), women who began to believe that they too should have the rights to a say in their own government, Native Americans seeing their lands and livelihoods (and often their lives) snatched away.

My only niggle was that there are a few annoying editorial slips here and there.

Since originally posting this review I have found that those of my ancestors who fought in the Revolutionary War weren't as overjoyed with what they were left with after 1789 as the standard histories would have us believe. A sheaf of over 50 pages of letters has come into my hands, and the writers (farmers and artisans all) all, clearly, believed themselves let down in the long run. I thank Gary Nash's book for prompting me to look further, in primary sources.

Lindy says

Nash examines often-overlooked parts of the American Revolution to reconstruct a "democratic" history that avoids the grand narrative styles of other historians such as Gordon Wood, and presents an every man's story of the Revolution. The introduction, wherein Nash reacts to a number of historical myths that have cropped up over the roughly two centuries since the Revolution, presents a new and enlightening aspect of the Revolution that Nash feels gets lost under the gloss of the Founding Fathers. In the end, the Revolution itself was much less of an earth-shattering event for the majority of individuals who hoped to cash in on the promises of rights and happiness but found themselves excluded from participating in the new republic (notably the Native Americans in the Northwest hinterlands and enslaved Africans in the south). Nash's history is less the triumphant progress of the American nation, but the dark side of liberty.

Josh Maddox says

Gary Nash's 2006 book "The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America" might have been better titled "Short Stories of the Oppressed Proletariat." Nash sets out to overturn the traditional narrative of the American Revolution, in which elite white males led, guided, and directed the lower class politically, philosophically, and governmentally. In some ways, Nash

accomplishes his goal. By showing the actions of blacks, lower classes, Indians, and women, he demonstrates that there was more to the war than taxation without representation and the Stamp Act. He tells stories that deserve telling, not only for their overlooked historical value but for their entertainment value as well. Unfortunately, instead of choosing to tell their stories as they are, Nash often adds considerable commentary to them and superimposes his own neo-Marxist ideas onto Revolution-era Americans, attempting to make them pre-Marx Marxists. This, in addition to a presentation which is confusing at times and neglect in certain areas, makes the book less than it is promised to be. Though it is not presented this way, for discussion the work can most easily be broken down into four sections: blacks, the lower class, Indians, and women. Each of these sections contains its own positives and foibles, some more so and others less so.

By far, Nash's coverage of blacks, both slave and free, is the best part of his work. He tells their stories in a way which is clear, simple, and emotionally resonant. Free from the glamorization that taints some of his other portions, Nash's work here appears more honest than anything else. Some of his work here is incisive and insightful; a prime example of this is his discussion of prejudices held by the founding fathers themselves. Instead of brushing over the founding fathers' arguments for their own freedom while suppressing their slaves, he points out the irony of arguing for freedom based on principle while denying freedom to others without any principle whatsoever.

Nash's best tale about an African American is the story of Venture Smith. Nash is able to convey the synopsis of Smith's life in only a scant three pages, but he is a powerful enough storyteller that the story feels complete, even though it clearly cannot be because of its restricted length. In this story, Smith was captured off the coast of Africa in 1736 and brought to America shortly afterwards. Upon arrival, he was sold to a farmer for whom he worked until he was abused so badly that, to defend himself, he beat his master's son with his fists. Throughout his life and with many owners, this sort of event happened again and again; Smith would arrive at a farm, work peaceably, get attacked, and battered his assailants. There is more to this story than a slave who overpowered his masters though. Over time, through his strength and cleverness, Smith saves to purchase his family's freedom. Besides its obvious allure as an interesting story, this piece demonstrates Nash's ability as a storyteller and the power of his material when he chooses to let it explain itself. In this story, which is representative of most of his stories about slavery, he refrains from vilifying the owners or glorifying the slaves themselves. Later in the book, he covers multiple slave uprisings and does not shy away from the brutality in which they resulted.

Thus, Nash's work on blacks is his best. Admirably, he gives many entertaining stories about a people group which was mostly illiterate and entirely looked down upon. Not only does he bring out a less told side of history, he does it in a manner which convinces a reader most; he lets the facts speak for themselves. Instead of superimposing his own ideas onto the people of the time, he relays their actions and allows the reader to think through the meaning and consequences of those actions.

Although Nash's research on the lower classes is broader than his research on African-Americans (reasonably so since there were more of them to leave behind documents and more of them capable of doing so), his presentation of it flatters his heroes to the point of indulgence. Most of his stories about the lower class have them pitted against the upper class in some sort of semi-Marxist class struggle, into which Nash interjects his own political viewpoint heavily. None of these presents his own viewpoint more strongly than his discussion of military pay.

In 1783, after the American Revolution had been dragging slowly along for several years, military pay was badly in arrears. As a result, on more than one occasion, the military threatened to, or actually did, mutiny against its top commanders. This is a tale certainly worth telling, especially in light of the traditional

narrative in which soldiers bravely followed Washington wherever he led them; always fighting for freedom, but the way in which Nash tells this story adds an unnecessary class struggle narrative. For example, when the enlisted men demand their back wages, it is because “Years of broken promises and shabby treatment brought [their] tempers to a boil.” Yet, when their officers revolt for the exact same reasons they were “mostly tending to their own interests.”

It is exactly this sort of disparity of treatment which makes “The Unknown American Revolution” a far lesser piece than it could have been. While the story of the lower classes has gone untold and been neglected, Nash makes the opposite mistake by choosing to denigrate the upper classes when they behave in the same manner as the lower class which he so greatly glorifies. Nash’s research, ability as a storyteller, and willingness to tell uncommon stories are all superb, but his endless interjection of his own political opinion adds little value and is distracting at best.

In his stories about Native Americans, Nash exhibits slightly different tendencies. Though he still glorifies Indians as much as the lower classes and justifies their actions, most of the problems in these stories come from the methodology of his story telling, not the stories themselves. The book as a whole is semi-chronological, which, combined with the fact that it is a collection of short stories and brief biographies, can be slightly confusing. Of no parts is this truer than in Nash’s discussion of Indians. Instead of breaking the stories up by person either person or event, he uses a jumble of several methodologies, sometimes separating his stories by time, sometimes by person, sometimes by event. Due to this, the stories seem to run together, and instead of creating memorable characters, he creates memorable story arcs. On a better note, the story that he tells is an often forgotten one. Nash’s discussion of the Native American’s plight reveals that the American Revolution did not bring freedom to all people, and to many it brought bondage. In this he succeeds in going beyond the popular narrative and into neglected history.

Although he ostensibly wishes to “view the American Revolution through the eyes of those not in positions of power and privilege,” Nash’s work on women reveals little information about anyone outside of Abigail Adams, who most certainly was in a position of privilege. Since women did play an important role in the revolution, did leave behind sources, and are, other than legendary figures such as Molly Pitcher and Phyllis Wheatley, often unmentioned in popular history, it is disappointing that Nash mostly writes of Abigail Adams. Seemingly, this would be one of the simplest places to include stories of many common people, but Nash neglects to do so, though in a few of his common-people stories main actors happen to be women. On the whole, Nash neglects to mention women as key figures, and though he provides flowery lip service to their role, he backs it up with little evidence.

Overall, though Nash’s attempt is noble, his resulting piece leaves much desired. In the individual stories, he demonstrates his ability as a writer, but in his commentary and presentation, he often falls short of excellence. Given the subject material, this is most disappointing. Nash is entirely correct in his assertion that all too often our understanding of the American Revolution is only knowledge of its leaders coupled with a vague knowledge of a few other characters. Nash succeeds in telling, and often in telling quite well, the stories of forgotten people, but his presentation and profuse commentary overshadow his characters.

Nathan says

In this boldly revisionist history, Nash recasts the American Revolution as a populist movement born of private citizens, working-class people and popular sentiment. As a corrective to the elite image of the affair

as the business of aristocratic founding philosophers, this notion is a necessary piece of the puzzle and illuminating counter-perspective to history as usual. As a cohesive thesis to a substantive study, I found it a bit lacking. That the Revolution was a broadly populist affair is proven thoroughly and quickly; the implications of this fact are not followed through to much insight. Nash, having handily made his major point, seems content to then sit back and merely relate facts, a weird and jarring shift, given the contrariness of his thesis. It's not that the following evidence contradicts his original thesis, but it fails to develop it beyond a more than obvious and superficial level.

That's a shame, because the impact of this new perspective carries the book, which admittedly needs a little help with its bulky and ponderous narrative. Nash is enthusiastic enough, but he is enthusiastic more about the ideas behind the events, rather than the people behind the events. That means the writing lacks a little humanity and tends to the coldly academic. Not a fatal error to be sure, but one that keeps the story from becoming the epic adventure it could have been.

Still, worth a read for the new angle; an interesting companion read would be Gordon S. Wood's *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*.

Carmela Ortiz says

Insightful history from the eyes of the people. Unfortunately does not carry through with this POV into his conclusion and can be hard to follow due to his lengthy points. All in all, a great history that could have been more concise.

Craig Huddleston says

This book by Gary Nash wonderfully tells the story of the American Revolution. He doesn't tell it from the perspectives of elites like Washington or Jefferson, but from the perspectives of the everyday person (e.g. Poor whites, women, African Americans, and Natives) Nash shows that this revolution was fought from the bottom up, not the top down.

After reading this book, I believe that we need to teach our children about THIS revolution. The revolution OF the people.

Michael Hattem says

As a collection of stories about marginalized groups during the American Revolution, Nash's book is informative and could be even enlightening to a general reader. For the more academic reader, Nash's book includes no new research. Nash obviously aims the book for the general audience as he writes in the preface that he hopes the book will prove an "antidote to historical amnesia." Yet, all the things Nash discusses are drawn from the work of other historians over the last 30+ years. Indians, women, slaves, and other minorities have hardly been ignored. In fact, they have dominated the field of early American history for the past 35 years. When a preeminent scholar puts together a book like this, which brings together different strands of

recent scholarship, one expects some kind of synthesis. However, Nash never really ties any of his groups or stories together in any coherent way. Nash is forced to give each group its own chapter and self-contained narrative. Because of this, the book reads more like a compendium than a synthesis. Overall, the book could be good for a general reader of books on the period seeking to break away from all the biographies of the founders to get a more rounded view of the time, but students of the period will find nothing new in either fact or insight.

Mathew Powers says

I do not hate this book nor do I denounce Nash's thesis (that the American Revolution arose from the "bottom up" and was as much about home rule as who might rule at home). I am fine with his central premise, although I do not totally agree. Clearly, Nash appears adamant about reminding the reader that the Founding Fathers were not "all that". That's ok -- but he swings so far on the pendulum that they almost come across as unwilling agents within the story and serve as nothing but reactionary aristocrats that hoped to hold on to power. In some sense, I agree with this premise, but it's not THAT black and white. Much of the source material from that era denote a people inspired by enlightenment and with ideals of radical republicanism, as well as a notion inspired by the Glorious Revolution of 1688, that has nothing to do with the "bottom up" mentality. At times, it even appears his book is Marxist in nature. Again, that's fine, even if I don't share that view. But, that's a bit much for 18th century colonial America. Hints of that, maybe, but he goes too far at times.

More importantly, the endless vignettes (often a risky method to write books -- can be sink or swim) come across as one trying to argue until he is red in the face, beating one down with anecdotes as to sway one to his view. This book could have easily been 75 pages shorter, at least. 450+ pages is fine, if more points are to be made, but story after story after story to make the same point is tedious, imo. A 325pp book would have been perfect for this study (give or take).

He does a great job of shedding light on class, race, gender, and mentioning several names forgotten in history and that is something that I find noble. He also does a great job of humanizing the revolution -- a fluid situation that involved many variables. I think it's important to read works such as this, I just wish Nash had used a little more discernment and not been so quick to beat us over the head with his point of view.

All in all, I'd recommend this book, but I'd recommend one skim quite a bit of it.

For those that dismiss this as revisionist history, I'd scoff at that. While one can quibble over the nature of his argument, it is entirely wrong to refuse to accept that our Founding Fathers were, in fact, human beings. Humans doing amazing things in history is far more impressive than "god-like" figures, imo. So, even if you enjoy stories more patriotic in nature, don't be afraid to read works like this! At the same time, skim some parts of it :)

Lois Plale says

Great book for history buffs. Tells how it was actually the "little people" who fought the Revolutionary War - the farmers, Indians, African-americans, women, the poor - and how each one believed that the result of the war would help their own plight.

Diogenes says

For those who may not know, New Historicism is a field of research that bloomed in the 1980s, hot on the heels of feminism, ethnic studies, social psychology, and other “new” academic fields that sought to overturn the old standards of scholarship. There’s a nice description here: <http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/virtu...>

I was first introduced to Dr. Nash in a graduate-level history course on slavery in the Americas, and with a Master’s in English Studies, New Historicism fit nicely with my moral and ethical core. Instead of the revered top-down approach to history most of us grew up with, Nash and many others look at historic events from the bottom up. Instead of Queens and Presidents, Generals and Popes, New Historicism excavates the lives of the commoners—foot soldiers, farmers, women, slaves, and native populations. It throws History on its ear, showing how complex, fragile, and explosive life events are for the majority, the marginalized, the impoverished, the enslaved, the voiceless, and the vilified.

Nash highlights the true bedlam of the Revolutionary Age, the fratricidal war interwoven with genocidal episodes towards native Americans, the blatant hypocrisy of the fight for “freedom” undergirded by institutionalized slavery and political misogyny, the pawn-playing of Africans by both sides of the conflict, the elitist-based consolidation of power, the ravenous greed of capitalism and war profiteering, and a general screwing-over of the enlisted soldiers that shed blood and tears (never mind endured starvation, frostbite, and bone-breaking musket balls) on the front lines, as well as their widows and families in the aftermath. The sweet lies our teachers taught us so long ago about heroism and nobility, virtues and freedom are nothing short of a rose-colored chimera that still vainly lives on today for some (<http://www.businessweek.com/articles/...>).

I do not believe that history repeats itself, but I know human behavior does. This, to me, is why it’s important to understand historic events so that we may try to derail the train of consequences so deeply entrenched in societies near and far.

Nash ends the book on poignant point: “Revolutions are always incomplete. Almost every social and political convulsion that has gone beyond the first disruptions of the [i]ancien régime[/i] depended on mass involvement; and that in itself, in every recorded case of revolutionary insurgency, raised expectations that could not be completely satisfied. In this sense, there has never been such a thing as a completed revolution. So it was with the American Revolution.”

Brad Hart says

One of the best books on the American Revolution in recent years. Gary Nash has always been one of my favorite historians. You can almost guarantee that any book he writes will be groundbreaking. In this book, Nash takes a look at the American Revolution from the perspective of those that are often forgotten (Blacks, women, Native Americans, etc). It is an excellent view of the American Revolution from a perspective other than the traditional Founding Fathers. A must read for any fan of early American history.

David says

This history of the American Revolution is written from an egalitarian perspective. It focuses less upon the Founding Fathers and more upon poor farmers and artisans, slaves, and Indians, all embroiled in the political ferment and the war. I learned a lot from this book, especially how violent a struggle and upheaval it was. It's a bit long, but there is lots of storytelling as well as analysis. I'm no egalitarian or SJW, but these are stories worth telling.
