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Source: *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Jan., 1960, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Jan., 1960), pp. 51-77

Published by: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/1943479

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David Ramsay and the Causes of the American Revolution

Page Smith*

MUCH attention has been given recently to the changes that have taken place since the late eighteenth century in historians' interpretations of the causes of the American Revolution.[1] In the same spirit, the causes of the Civil War, the character of Jacksonianism, Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom, and the origins of World War I have all been re-examined. If "revisionism" may be taken as reinterpretation of the generally accepted causes, or significance, or both, of a historical event, the new preoccupation of the historical profession seems to be with the history of successive revisions and is characterized by an effort to relate changing interpretations to the changing times.

Re-examination of the attitudes of successive generations of historians toward the causes of the American Revolution poses most explicitly the problem of historical method. For the thesis of this essay is that the best interpretation of the causes of the Revolution was made in the decade following the treaty of peace in 1783 and that thereafter, as we moved further in time from the dramatic events of the Revolution and brought to bear on the problem all the vast resources of modern scholarship, we moved further and further from the truth about our Revolutionary beginnings.

Among the generation of historians who themselves lived through the era of the American Revolution, David Ramsay is pre-eminent, though by no means atypical. Ramsay (1749-1815) was born in Pennsylvania of Scottish Presbyterian parents and attended the College of New Jersey where his friend Benjamin Rush said of him that he was "far superior to any person we ever graduated at our college . . . I can promise more for him, in every thing, than I could for myself."[2] After graduating from Princeton, Ramsay moved to Charleston, South Carolina, where he began

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[1] Edmund S. Morgan, "The American Revolution: Revisions in Need of Revising," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XIV (1957), 3-15.

[2] *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, ed. Lyman Butterfield (Princeton, 1951), I, 220.

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the practice of medicine. He was a prominent patriot, serving in the Continental Congress and taking an active part in the political life of his state.

By all reasonable standards Ramsay, as an actor in those violent times, should have written in an extreme and partisan spirit: caught up in the excitement and emotionalism of the Revolutionary crisis in which England appeared as tyrant and oppressor, he had none of that perspective in time supposedly requisite for an objective and impartial treatment; he had no training as a historian and made no boast of impartiality; the passions which the war aroused had had little time to cool when he began his work; his *History of the American Revolution,* moreover, had a frankly didactic purpose—completed just as the delegates to the Federal Convention finished their work on the Federal Constitution, it was designed to awaken Americans to their responsibilities as citizens under the new government. Finally, he, like many of his fellow eighteenth-century historians, drew heavily and without specific citation from the *Annual Register*. Yet, with all these handicaps (from the viewpoint of orthodox historiography), Ramsay's history is a remarkable achievement. In his analysis and interpretation of the events culminating in the Revolution he showed unusual insight and a keen sense of proportion.

In considering the causes of the conflict between Great Britain and the colonists, Ramsay went back to examine the Puritan attitudes toward church and state, finding in Puritan theology a tradition of opposition to tyranny, which was considered to be contrary "to nature, reason, and revelation."[3] More important in nourishing a spirit of independence in the American colonies, however, was the fact that "the prerogatives of royalty and dependence on the Mother Country, were but feebly impressed on the colonial forms of government." In charter and proprietary colonies the Crown delegated broad powers, and even in the royal provinces the King exercised no more control over the colonists "than over their fellow subjects in England." Thus, "from the acquiescence of the parent state [in the growth of self-government], the spirit of her constitution, and daily experience, the Colonists grew up in a belief, that their local assemblies stood in the same relation to them, as the Parliament of Great Britain to the inhabitants of that island. The benefits of legislation were conferred on both, only through these constitutional channels." In this situation, the colonists claimed as part of their birthright all the benefits

[3] David Ramsay, *History of the American Revolution,* 1st ed. (Philadelphia, 1789), (London, 1793), I, 8-9. The latter edition is cited throughout this essay.

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of the British constitution, chief among which was that "the people could not be compelled to pay any taxes, nor be bound by any laws, but such as had been granted or enacted by the consent of themselves, or of their representatives."[4]

England had not markedly interfered with the colonists' economic welfare either. Indeed, "the wise and liberal policy of England towards her Colonies, during the first century and a half after their settlement" had exalted them to the pre-eminence they enjoyed at the beginning of the crisis with the Mother Country. England had given the Americans "full liberty to govern themselves by such laws as the local legislatures thought necessary, and left their trade open to every individual in her dominions. She also gave them the amplest permission to pursue their respective interests in such manner as they thought proper, and reserved little for herself, but the benefit of their trade, and that of political union under the same head."[5] Great Britain, Ramsay added, "without charging herself with the care of their internal police, or seeking a revenue from [the colonies], . . . contented herself with a monopoly of their trade. She treated them as a judicious mother does her dutiful children. They shared in every privilege belonging to her native sons, and but slightly felt the inconveniences of subordination. Small was the catalogue of grievances, with which even democratical jealousy charged the Parent State" prior to the Revolutionary crisis. It was Ramsay's conviction that "The good resulting to the Colonies, from their connection with Great Britain, infinitely outweighed the evil."[6]

Among the causes contributing to the breach with Great Britain were such subtle factors such as "the distance of America from Great-Britain [which] generated ideas in the minds of the Colonists favourable to liberty." Moreover, the religion of the great majority of the colonists "nurtured a love for liberty. They were chiefly Protestants, and all Protestantism is founded on a strong claim to natural liberty, and the right of private judgement." There were, in addition, intellectual currents in the age which encouraged libertarian ideals. "The reading of those Colonists who were inclined to books, generally favoured the cause of liberty . . . . Their books were generally small in size, and few in number: a great part of them consisted of those fashionable authors, who have defended

[4] *Ibid.*, I, 20.
[5] *Ibid.*, I, 17-18.
[6] *Ibid.*, I, 42, 43.

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the cause of liberty. Cato's letters, the Independent Whig, and such productions, were common in one extreme of the Colonies, while in the other, histories of the Puritans kept alive the remembrance of the sufferings of their forefathers, and inspired a warm attachment, both to the civil and the religious rights of human nature."[7]

The social development of the colonies was likewise, in Ramsay's view, congenial to "a spirit of liberty and independence. Their inhabitants were all of one rank. . . . from their first settlements, the English Provinces received impressions favourable to democratic forms of government. . . . A sameness of circumstances and occupations created a great sense of equality, and disposed them to union in any common cause from the success of which, they might expect to partake of equal advantages."[8] The vast majority of the colonists were farmers. "The merchants, mechanics, and manufacturers, taken collectively, did not amount to one fifteenth of the whole number of inhabitants," Ramsay pointed out, adding in characteristically Jeffersonian terms that while "the cultivators of the soil depend on nothing but Heaven and their own industry, other classes of men contract more or less of servility, from depending on the caprice of their customers."[9]

Against this background of maturing colonies, constitutional usage, libertarian ideas, and social equality, the British ministers undertook to tighten the lead strings by which the colonists had heretofore been so loosely guided. The decision of Parliament and the ministers of the Crown to attempt to raise a revenue in the American colonies destroyed at one blow "the guards which the constitution had placed round property, and the fences, which the ancestors of both countries had erected against arbitrary power."[10]

The reaction of the colonists to the Stamp Act was prompt, if unexpected. While the tax worked no considerable hardship on the colonists, public resistance was widespread and apparently spontaneous. The issue was not primarily an economic one, but one of principle—the principle of no taxation without representation for which the Revolution would eventually be fought. The Stamp Act aroused the sentiment for liberty among the Americans as no other pre-Revolutionary issue, and, in Ram-

[7] *Ibid.*, I, 29, 30.
[8] *Ibid.*, I, 31, 32-33.
[9] *Ibid.*, I, 33.
[10] *Ibid.*, I, 47.

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say's words, it became "evident, from the determined opposition of the Colonies, that it could not be enforced without a civil war . . . ."[11]

With the repeal of the Stamp Act, the colonies, "instead of feeling themselves dependent on Great Britain, . . . conceived that, in respect to commerce, she was dependent on them." They were thus "inspired with such high ideas of the importance of their trade, that they considered the Mother Country to be brought under greater obligations to them, for purchasing her manufactures, than they were to her for protection and the administration of civil government." The upshot of repeal was that "the freemen of British America, . . . conceived it to be within their power, by future combinations, at any time to convulse, if not to bankrupt, the nation from which they sprung."[12]

In America, the Revolutionary stage was set. What of England after the Stamp Act? In Ramsay we do not find what we have every reason to expect—a devil theory of the Revolution in which George III and his ministers appear as the malevolent instruments of tyranny and oppression. Pride and inflexibility were the principal shortcomings of the British. "'What,' said they, 'shall we, who have so lately humbled France and Spain, be dictated to by our own Colonists? Shall our subjects, educated by our care, and defended by our arms, presume to question the rights of Parliament, to which we are obliged to submit?' . . . The love of power and of property on the one side of the Atlantic were opposed to the same powerful passions on the other."[13]

The British task was, at best, not an easy one. "Great and flourishing Colonies . . . already grown to the magnitude of a nation, planted at an immense distance, and governed by constitutions resembling that of the country from which they sprung, were novelties in the history of the world," Ramsay pointed out. "To combine Colonies, so circumstanced, in one uniform system of government with the Parent State, required a great knowledge of mankind, and an extensive comprehension of things. It was an arduous business, far beyond the grasp of ordinary state[smen], whose minds were narrowed by the formalities of laws, or the trammels of office. An original genius, unfettered with precedents, and exalted with just ideas of the rights of human nature, and the obligations of universal benevolence, might have struck out a middle line, which would have se-

[11] *Ibid.*, I, 71.
[12] *Ibid.*, I, 74-75.
[13] *Ibid.*, I, 52-53.

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cured as much liberty to the Colonies, and as great a degree of supremacy to the Parent State, as their common good required: But the helm of Great Britain was not in such hands."[14]

Ramsay here offers us no evil George III, no tyrannical ministers, no demons and oppressors, but simply well-meaning men caught in a situation too complex and demanding for their very average talents. His wise and temperate assessment of the British failure has not been improved on. Ramsay here demonstrated not vast research labors but an unusual sense of proportion and capacity for analysis.

Remarkably sensitive to all currents in the tide of Revolutionary agitation, Ramsay paid due attention to the economic motif. Many Americans, he pointed out, especially among the merchant class, found it profitable to oppose British measures. The reaction of the merchants to the threatened importation of East India tea was, in his view, motivated by their fear of losing a profitable trade in smuggled tea. "They doubtless conceived themselves to be supporting the rights of their country, by refusing to purchase tea from Britain," Ramsay wrote, "but they also reflected that if they could bring the same commodity to market, free from duty, their profits would be proportionately greater." Hence the merchants took the lead in denouncing the dutied tea. But "though the opposition originated in the selfishness of the merchants, it did not end there." When the Tea Act of 1773 was passed, the majority of colonists opposed Great Britain on the ground of "principle." They saw it as a scheme "calculated to seduce them into an acquiescence with the views of Parliament for raising an American revenue."[15] In accepting the cheaper tea, they would be accepting the tea tax.

The South Carolina doctor knew likewise that the motives of the patriots, like the motives of all men, were mixed. He offered no picture of a united country rushing to arms in defense of its liberties. "The inhabitants of the Colonies . . . with regard to political opinions," he wrote, "might be divided into three classes; of these, one was for rushing precipitately into extremities. They were for immediately stopping all trade, and could not even brook the delay of waiting till the proposed Continental Congress should meet. Another party, equally respectable, both as to character, property, and patriotism, was more moderate, but not less firm. These were averse to the adoption of any violent resolutions till all

[14] *Ibid.*, I, 54-55.
[15] *Ibid.*, I, 95, 97.

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others were ineffectually tried. They wished that a clear statement of their rights, claims, and grievances, should precede every other measure. A third class disapproved of what was generally going on. A few from principle, and a persuasion that they ought to submit to the Mother Country; some from the love of ease, others from self-interest, but the bulk from fear of the mischievous consequences likely to follow. All these latter classes, for the most part, lay still, while the friends of liberty acted with spirit. If they, or any of them, ventured to oppose popular measures, they were not supported, and therefore declined farther efforts. The resentment of the people was so strong against them, that they sought for peace by remaining quiet . . . . The spirited part of the community being on the side of liberty, the patriots had the appearance of unanimity . . . ."[16]

To his summary analysis of the temper of these three classes, Ramsay added a detailed accounting on the basis of section and interest. That three million loyal subjects "should break through all former attachments, and unanimously adopt new ones, could not reasonably be expected. The revolution had its enemies, as well as its friends, in every period of the war. Country, religion, local policy, as well as private views, operated in disposing the inhabitants to take different sides. The New-England provinces being mostly settled by one sort of people, were nearly of one sentiment. The influence of placemen in Boston, together with the connections which they had formed by marriages, had attached sundry influential characters in that capital to the British interest, but these were but as the dust in the balance, when compared with the numerous independent Whig yeomanry of the country."[17] The Quakers of Pennsylvania and the Tory farmers of the Carolina frontier were treated by Ramsay with as much sympathy and understanding as the independent yeoman of New England or the gentlemen planters of the Southern colonies.[18]

"The age and temperament of individuals [Ramsay continued] had often an influence in fixing their political character. Old men were seldom warm Whigs; they could not relish the changes which were daily taking place; attached to ancient forms and habits, they could not readily accommodate themselves to new systems. Few of the very rich were active in forwarding the revolution. This was remarkably the case in the eastern and middle States; but the reverse took place in the southern extreme of the

[16] *Ibid.*, I, 125-126.
[17] *Ibid.*, II, 310.
[18] *Ibid.*, II, 312-313.

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confederacy. There were in no part of America more determined Whigs than the opulent slaveholders in Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. The active and spirited part of the community, who felt themselves possessed of talents that would raise them to eminence in a free government, longed for the establishment of independent constitutions: but those who were in possession or expectation of royal favour, or of promotion from Great Britain, wished that the connection between the Parent State and the Colonies might be preserved. The young, the ardent, the ambitious, and the enterprising, were mostly Whigs; but the phlegmatic, the timid, the interested, and those who wanted decision were, in general, favourers of Great Britain, or at least only the lukewarm, inactive friends of independence."[19]

Again economic factors exerted a strong influence: "The Whigs received a great reinforcement from the operation of continental money. In the years 1775, 1776, and in the first months of 1777, while the bills of Congress were in good credit, the effects of them were the same as if a foreign power had made the United States a present of twenty million of silver dollars. The circulation of so large a sum of money, and the employment given to great numbers in providing for the American army, increased the numbers and invigorated the zeal of the friends to the revolution."[20]

Even after Lexington, Ramsay pointed out, the colonial leaders, like the great mass of people everywhere, showed the greatest reluctance to take the decisive step toward independence. It was Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* which, more than anything else, nerved the colonies to declare themselves independent of the Mother Country. In an excellent analysis of Paine's pamphlet as propaganda, Ramsay concluded that "in union with the feelings and sentiments of the people, it produced surprising effects. Many thousands were convinced, and were led to approve and long for a separation from the Mother Country. Though that measure, a few months before, was not only foreign from their wishes, but the object of their abhorrence, a current suddenly became so strong in its favour, that it bore down all opposition."[21]

Despite his sensitivity to the more subtle problems of colonial psychology, to self-interest, chance, and the inflexibility of the British govern-

[19] *Ibid.*, II, 314.
[20] *Ibid.*
[21] *Ibid.*, I, 336-337.

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ment as elements in the Revolutionary crisis, Ramsay grasped firmly, as lying at the heart of the conflict, the constitutional principle. "This was the very hinge of the controversy. The absolute unlimited supremacy of the British Parliament, both in legislation and taxation, was contended for on one side; while on the other, no farther authority was conceded than such a limited legislation, with regard to external commerce, as would combine the interests of the whole empire." "In government," Ramsay added, "as well as in religion, there are mysteries from the close investigation of which little advantage can be expected. From the unity of empire it was necessary, that some acts should extend over the whole. From the local situation of the Colonies it was equally reasonable that their legislatures should at least in some matters be independent. Where the supremacy of the first ended and the independency of the last began, was to the best informed a puzzling question."[22]

David Ramsay's *History of the American Revolution* has been treated at some length in order to provide a base point of interpretation against which the views of later historians may be measured. In addition, Ramsay can be considered an excellent representative of the first generation of Revolutionary War historians. If he outstrips his contemporaries in the depth and perception of his analyses, he stands with them in the main outlines of his interpretation.

The absence of rancor against Great Britain that characterized the histories of Ramsay and William Gordon was apparent in most first generation histories of the Revolution. Many were journeymen jobs, but the authors, almost without exception, presented fair and balanced narratives of the events leading to the Revolution. One looks in vain for mention of the "long train of abuses and usurpations," or the dark designs "to reduce [the colonies] under absolute despotism" referred to in the Declaration of Independence.[23]

[22] *Ibid.*, I, 136; see also I, 48: "As the claim of taxation on one side, and the refusal of it on the other, was the very hinge on which the revolution turned, it merits a particular discussion."

[23] Some of Ramsay's contemporaries who, like the Carolinian, wrote Revolutionary history of unusual breadth and balance are William Gordon, *History of the Rise, Progress and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America . . .* (London, 1788); Charles Stedman, *History of the American War* (London, 1794); John Marshall, *Life of George Washington*, 5 vols. (Philadelphia, 1804-07). At the end of the nineteenth century, Orin Grant Libby attacked Gordon and Ramsay as plagiarists, discrediting them as reliable sources on the Revolution: "A Critical Examination of William Gordon's History of the American Revolution," American His-

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The ablest representative of the second generation of American historians who dealt with the Revolution was George Bancroft. Bancroft allowed his Jacksonian principles to color his interpretation. In him, we find an openly polemical tone. To Bancroft the era of the Revolution was the golden age, the time of giants, the opening act of the extraordinary drama of American democracy. There is thus in his mammoth history much of what appears to modern eyes as rhetorical embellishment. Where his predecessors had been content to describe the events they had observed, Bancroft was an unconscious myth-maker. At the same time he was the first American historian to bring to a study of the Revolution the research techniques of modern scholarship. He was an insatiable collector of source materials, combing European as well as American archives, and, although he wove such materials into a narrative tapestry of vivid colors, he subscribed wholeheartedly to the ideal of scholarly objectivity. "The chronicler of manners and events," he wrote, "can alone measure his own fairness, for no one else knows so well what he throws aside. Indiscriminate praise neither paints to the life, nor teaches by example, nor advances social science . . . . The historian, even more than philosophers and naturalists, must bring to his pursuit the freedom of an unbiased mind."[24]

Yet Bancroft's characters emerge somewhat larger than life and often, one feels, without those human flaws that would make them readily identifiable as real people. The compulsion to create myths was stronger than the good resolutions of the scholar. By the time that Bancroft wrote, the War of 1812 and England's growing power, coupled with her air of arrogant superiority, had exacerbated American feelings. (Bancroft spoke of the "haughty feeling" of the Englishman for his American cousin which had outlasted the "period of revolutionary strife," and which, to Bancroft's own day, hung "as a heavy bias on the judgment . . . of Englishmen.")[25] In addition, the United States had grown further from Great Britain, and the sense of Englishness that had softened the animosities generated by the Revolution had been largely dissipated by the 1830's.

History, for Bancroft, was the working of Divine Wisdom, and God's

torical Association, *Annual Report, 1899* (Washington, 1900), I, 367-388; and "Ramsay as a Plagiarist," *American Historical Review,* VII (1901-02), 697-703. See also William A. Foran, "John Marshall as a Historian," *ibid.,* XLIII (1937-38), 51-64; R. Kent Newmyer, "Charles Stedman's *History of the American War,*" *ibid.,* LXIII (1957-58), 924-934.

[24] George Bancroft, *History of the United States* (Boston, 1876), V, 69-70.

[25] *Ibid.,* V, 73.

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eternal principles were discoverable through its study. History traced "the vestiges of moral law through the practice of the nations in every age . . . and confirms by induction the intuitions of reason."[26] Seen in this light, the Revolution appeared as part of God's plan: it was intended for the edification of man and the improvement of society; it ushered in a new and brighter age of human progress.

What in earlier histories had been presented as essentially a misunderstanding between two power systems became, by Bancroft's interpretation, a conscious plan to subvert liberty. George III, in the perspective of a triumphant Whig tradition, was a relentless authoritarian with a "hatred of reform, and an antipathy to philosophical freedom and to popular power."[27] Under his leadership, "Great Britain, allured by a phantom of absolute authority over the colonies, made war on human freedom." If the British Parliament had succeeded "in establishing by force of arms its 'boundless' authority over America," where would "humanity find an asylum?"[28] The struggle was thus a contest between progress and reaction for the soul of man. The Revolution sounded the death knell of "the ages of servitude and inequality," and rang in "those of equality and brotherhood." America's feet were, thereby, set on a "never-ending career of reform and progress."[29]

If Bancroft fixed the image of a wicked King that was to have a long life in American historiography, his political ideals led him into what became in time another classic error. His own free-trade sentiments induced him to count the Acts of Trade and Navigation, some of which dated from the middle of the seventeenth century, as one of the principal causes of the Revolutionary crisis. As a good Democrat and a low-tariff man, he concluded that mercantilism, as expressed in Parliamentary statutes, must have been a bitter grievance to the American colonists. This interpretation became, in the years that followed, one of the most persistently stated "causes" of the Revolution.

We see in Bancroft's history the optimism and self-confidence of Jacksonian democracy allied with the eighteenth-century conception of an orderly universe governed by natural law. His history was drawn from wide sources, scrupulously researched, written with passion and insight;

[26] *Ibid.*, V, 70.
[27] *Ibid.*, IV, 197-198.
[28] *Ibid.*, IV, 308.
[29] *Ibid.*, IV, 311, 308.

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yet it was transformed by a mythos too strong for Bancroft to resist and already moving away from the realistic appraisal of the first generation of historians, already serving the social needs and aspirations of an explosively expanding nation. The image of America's past fixed by Bancroft was a polestar during the tumultuous middle decades of the nineteenth century.

If Bancroft had vices, they were the counterpart of those virtues which won him thousands of readers. His love of the colorful and dramatic, his devotion to democracy and progress, his fine, if to modern tastes overelaborate, prose style entitle him to a continued hearing by students of American history.

By the turn of the century the ideals of "scientific" history had penetrated the historical profession. Nurtured in the German seminars of Leopold von Ranke and Barthold Niebuhr, the champions of the new history cast a cold eye on the patriotic effusions of a Bancroft. The task of the historian was to recount with dispassionate objectivity "what had happened," ruthlessly suppressing personal prejudices and loyalties wherever possible, leaving the facts to speak for themselves.

Sydney George Fisher's *The Struggle for American Independence* (1908) was the first detailed treatment of the Revolution since Bancroft's history and the first, as Fisher was at some pains to make clear, written under the new scholarly dispensation. Previous historians, he wrote, had never made "any attempt to describe, from the original records, England's exact position with regard to ourselves at the outbreak of the Revolution, except the usual assumption that the Tory statesmen who were in power were either ignorantly stupid, and blind to their own interests, or desperately corrupt and wicked, and that the Whig minority were angels of light who would have saved the colonies for the British empire."[30] Fisher directed his fire primarily at Bancroft and John Fiske, but such a Rhadamanthine judgment was certainly not fair to Bancroft and missed the mark entirely with the first generation of Revolutionary historians.

In attempting to correct what he considered the anti-British prejudices of his predecessors, Fisher stressed the "mildness" of Great Britain and her "spirit of conciliation." "Modern readers of history," he wrote, knew nothing of "the conciliatory measures Great Britain adopted" or "her

[30] Sydney George Fisher, *The Struggle for American Independence* (Philadelphia, 1908), I, vii.

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gentle and mild efforts to persuade us to remain in the empire."[31] The Revolution was "not a contest between a dragon and a fairy," not "a mere accidental mistake on the part of England" resulting in a war brought on "by the king alone against the wishes of the English people." It was, on the contrary, a path "entered upon by the English nation as deliberately and intelligently as any other imperial expansion they have undertaken and upon principles which for them are still unchangeable."[32]

In explaining the Revolution, Fisher's emphasis was primarily on the character of colonial life which had shaped the New World settlers and in so doing had made independence inevitable. He thus shifted his focus from the immediate causes, such as the Stamp Act, to underlying changes in outlook and ideology. If England was to be exonerated, it was necessary to neutralize the moral and political conflict and to stress, in place of the traditionally offered explanations of the Revolutionary crisis, the "*characterological* divergence" that had developed between England and her colonies. Forces thus take the place of issues. The action of individuals is of little significance, except as a response to these forces, and it is obviously pointless to try to apportion praise or blame for events which move onward, ineluctable and impersonal as the slow passage of a glacier.[33]

While the story of the Revolution lost, by such treatment, much of the drama with which Bancroft had invested it, and perhaps more important, lost its didactic quality—its ability to teach patriotism to the young by inspiring examples—it gained a greater breadth, a wider tolerance, and an insight into the fact that "forces" did indeed exert great influence upon the behavior of individuals and the course of history. If the individual thereby lost in dignity and significance, the recapturing of a deeper awareness of the complexity of historical events was partial compensation.

That Fisher took such a position was, at least in part, a result of the increasing complexity of American society. The sense of exercising control over the course of history, which had been a by-product of the Enlightenment and which during the years of America's buoyant expansion had seemed to find confirmation in our experience as a nation, had declined sharply as the cruel inconsistencies of American capitalism became more apparent. As the American dream at times appeared more of a nightmare than an idyl, historians like Fisher began to see the individual

[31] *Ibid.*
[32] *Ibid.*, I, xiii.
[33] *Ibid.*, I, 104.

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in a diminished role because the individual himself began to feel his role diminished, began to be aware of the harsh shadow of reality that fell across the classic dream.

The strongly pro-British inclinations of Fisher, which wore the mask of dispassionate objectivity, appeared even more strongly in the work of many of his contemporaries. There is no question that these Anglophile sentiments were stimulated by the growing world crisis. In the rivalry between Germany and Great Britain for power and empire, the sympathies of many Americans and virtually all historians were with the British. The enthusiasm of Americans of German ancestry for the cause of a nation to which they still looked with pride and affection only served to increase the ardor of the Anglophiles.

Of course, it would be wrong to label all American historians who wrote on the American Revolution in the early decades of the twentieth century as pro-British. Yet it is unquestionably true that such sympathies crept into the "scientific" investigations of the Revolution that were made in these years. We have already seen that Fisher explicitly rejected any devil theory, being determined to exculpate George III as well as his ministers and the English people themselves.

What had been implicit in Fisher—that the underlying causes of the Revolution were primarily economic—was boldly stated by a young historian who had been a student of Frederick Jackson Turner. Arthur M. Schlesinger, in *The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution, 1763-1776,* spelled out in impressive detail his thesis that the colonial merchants brought on the Revolutionary crisis, albeit unwittingly. Two rival systems of capitalist enterprise, England's and America's, developed inevitable conflicts of interest which precipitated the war for independence. Schlesinger stated this thesis boldly in 1919 in an article summarizing his views on the causes of the Revolution. "In the first years of the republic," he noted, "the tendency of the popular histories and text-books was to dwell almost exclusively upon the spectacular developments of the struggle and to dramatize the heroism of the patriots."[34] The real explanation for

[34] Arthur M. Schlesinger, "The American Revolution Reconsidered," *Political Science Quarterly,* XXXIV (1919), 61. Schlesinger's *The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution, 1763-1776* (New York, 1917), like Charles A. Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York, 1913),

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independence, however, was to be found in "the clashing of economic interests and the interplay of mutual prejudices, opposing ideals and personal antagonisms—whether in England or America." These "made inevitable in 1776 what was unthinkable in 1760."[35]

Schlesinger lost no time in presenting his credentials as an historian of the new school. "The shock of American entrance into the Great War," he wrote, brought the American people "to seek a new orientation for the revolutionary struggle," to view "the conflict from the standpoint of scientific detachment."[36] (It apparently did not occur to the writer that this formula might contain a paradox. He offered no explanation of how, in logic, the intense emotions aroused by our participation in World War I could be expected to result in "scientific detachment.") He showed even more of his own particular orientation when he wrote: "At the same time that publicists were questioning the foundations and practices of our modern economic system, a band of devoted research students . . . were employing the ruthless methods of modern scholarship in an effort to make possible a reappraisement" of the Revolution.[37]

If, in the view of American liberal reformers, industrial capitalism had gone sour, all the presuppositions upon which it claimed to be based must be re-examined. The ideals parroted by exploiting entrepreneurs and vulpine politicians must be subjected to the disinterested scrutiny of modern scholarship. That this reappraisal might itself be influenced by the reformist zeal of the reappraisers seems not to have occurred to them. They were secure in the methods and techniques of scientific research which, they seemed to feel, must carry them inevitably to conclusions untainted by personal prejudice or by the liberal temper of their own times.

Against this background, Schlesinger advanced his own highly influential analysis of the Revolutionary crisis. His conclusions were that the merchants, hit in the pocketbook by the tightening of England's imperial policy, promoted the early agitation against Great Britain. It was they who encouraged the radicals' leaders to whip up mobs of angry patriots. Their purpose was to exert, thereby, countervailing pressure against their English rivals and thus win relief from measures which placed their trade

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made historians aware of the importance of economic factors in the Revolutionary era.

[35] Schlesinger, "The Revolution Reconsidered," p. 63.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

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under crippling inhibitions. "As a class they [the merchants] entertained neither earlier nor later the idea of independence, for withdrawal from the British empire meant for them the loss of vital business advantages . . . ."[38]

At each stage of the colonial resistance, the merchants stood in the background manipulating the Sons of Liberty. The rhetoric of the radical leaders meant nothing to them; their concern was with profits not principles. But they had calculated without the ambitions of patriot champions and the ardor of the people. The agitation against Great Britain gathered a momentum that swept it onward with a force of its own. Too late the merchants realized that they had summoned up a whirlwind they could not ride. They found it impossible "to reassert their earlier control and to stop a movement that had lost all significance for hard-headed men of business."[39]

The talk of "no taxation without representation," the appeals to Magna Charta, the heated debate over the authority of Parliament—all this was simply flotsam which showed where deeper currents were flowing. "The popular view of the Revolution as a great forensic controversy over abstract governmental rights," Schlesinger wrote, "will not bear close scrutiny."[40]

In a historiography which disclaimed heroes and villains in the name of scientific objectivity, heroes and villains nonetheless crept in. To Schlesinger, as a liberal idealist, those without ideals, that is, the colonial merchants, were the villains. It was not coincidence that the colonial merchants appeared in Schlesinger's book as narrow, self-seeking men, who, in their blind devotion to pounds and shillings, rent the fabric of the British Empire, at the same time that modern-day American captains of industry were testifying before Congressional committees as to their ruthless repression of labor and their callous exploitation of the public. Even George III appears in his familiar role of wicked tyrant. With all his professions of scientific objectivity, Schlesinger, like Bancroft, charges the King with trying to convert the British government to "a personal autocracy."

Having identified the villains, we do not need to look far for the heroes. They are the "proletarian element," the workers in the colonial towns, who were "for the most part unenfranchised," and the sturdy frontiersmen, who "brought to the controversy a moral conviction and bold

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 66.
[39] *Ibid.*, p. 71.
[40] *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

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philosophy which gave great impetus to the agitation for independence"—presumably more moral conviction than could be found among the self-interested elite of the seacoast towns. In Schlesinger's work, tidewater radicals and back-country farmers march side by side toward independence. Exploited by the cunning merchants, they finally seize control and the revolutionary initiative passes "into the hands of the democratic mechanic class," in other words—the workers.

In this formula of Schlesinger's we have a significant union between Turner's frontier thesis, which credited the frontier with all that was liberal, progressive, and uniquely American, and the twentieth-century liberals' idealization of the industrial worker whose spiritual ancestor they perceived in the mechanic class of colonial towns. Here was a "modern" analysis of the causes of the Revolution which for the first time stated the case explicitly for an "economic interpretation," which swept away the argument from "principle," which freed Great Britain from any taint, and which, above all, carried the imprimatur of "scientific" history, self-stamped to be sure, but hardly the less impressive for that.

Arthur Schlesinger's liberal formulary was carried further by Claude Van Tyne in his book, *The Causes of the War of Independence,* published in 1922. Like Schlesinger, Van Tyne saw himself as one of a company of courageous historians, guided by scientific principles and bent on presenting the facts about the Revolution to a people long misled by the distorted accounts of men who put patriotism ahead of the search for objective truth. "For nearly one hundred years after the awakening of the 'spirit of '76' [Van Tyne wrote], the story of the Revolution was told much as the contemporaries had told it, bitterly, with no effort to be impartial or judicial, and no emphasis upon the fundamentals. Men like Bancroft conducted amazing researches in the archives, but rose out of heaps of musty records only to write again of the cunning, malevolent King George and his wicked minister, Lord North, enemies of the human race, oppressors of America."

Finally, "here and there a scholar, an investigator" appeared, and "it was these trained investigators who began to get at the truth as to the Revolution. With no aim but to understand, with no desire but to know the truth they worked for forty years—as long as the Chosen People searched for the Promised Land—rewriting the story of the founding of the American Republic. New records, new points of view, new principles

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of research made new generations of investigators see the Revolution in a new way."[41]

Van Tyne's history is the fruit of all this enlightened industry. In it we find a strong emphasis on the frontier thesis adapted from Turner. For on the frontier "the English race" experienced "a rebirth, the first of these destined to occur perennially as the race marched westward toward the setting sun."[42] In the raw environment of a new continent, "town-bred men became denizens of the wilds." Van Tyne accepted without question Schlesinger's picture of the merchants guiding the early stages of colonial resistance and then dropping out, as "radicals everywhere, from Samuel Adams at the North to Christopher Gadsden in the South, seized the moment of high feeling to carry America beyond the point where there could be any going back." The conflict became a class struggle. In Massachusetts as in Pennsylvania "the masses [were] pitted against the great merchants." "Thus, in 1776, came the climax in the struggle between rich and poor, East and West, those with a vote and those who were voteless, between privilege and the welfare of the common man."[43]

The terms have shifted but we find, nonetheless, familiar echoes of Bancroft in Van Tyne's insistence that the Revolution was "one of the glories of British history," since the colonists, as heirs of all the political accomplishments of England, were simply carrying forward the fight for democracy and political liberty which "England had fostered beyond any other country of the world."[44] And, as in Bancroft, we find an unscrupulous George III drawing on "an inexhaustible treasure of corruption" to obliterate the liberties of the colonists, despite the warnings of Burke, Pitt, Fox, and Camden. The cast has changed somewhat but the final curtain rings down on the same stirring patriotic note.

Two years after Van Tyne's book appeared, Charles McLean Andrews surveyed *The Colonial Background of the American Revolution* in a notable collection of essays. Andrews accepted what had by now become the general view of the Revolutionary crisis: that the basis of the dispute lay in a conflict of interests. The question of colonial rights was "a subject of more or less legal and metaphysical speculation . . . . There is nothing

[41] Claude Van Tyne, *England and America: Rivals in the American Revolution* (New York, 1927), pp. 3-6.

[42] Van Tyne, *The Causes of the War of Independence* (Boston, 1922), p. 15.

[43] *Ibid.*, pp. 416, 421, 425.

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 478.

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to show," he wrote, "that the somewhat precise and finely spun reasoning of these intellectual leaders had any marked influence on the popular mind."[45] Andrews, like Van Tyne, emphasized the role of the frontier which encouraged individualism and independence, but the conflict remained in its broader outlines a struggle over trade and commerce. We find in Andrews, it must be said, in addition to the residues of many earlier interpretations, a tentativeness and absence of the doctrinaire.

Under the surface of historical investigation the economic interpretation of history had been moving like a subterranean current, influencing individuals in many areas of American history. It was discernible in Arthur Schlesinger's study of the colonial merchants, and in the works of a number of his contemporaries. As applied to the Revolution, however, it was persistently modified in the works we have been concerned with by the naturalistic and romantic gloss of the frontier thesis, and by the fact that even skeptical historians of the scientific school found it extremely difficult to disengage themselves from the mythic elements of the Revolution. However resolutely they started out demolishing, as they boasted, the biased and partisan accounts of earlier historians, they all ended up sounding remarkably like George Bancroft.

In 1954, Lawrence Henry Gipson's *The Coming of the Revolution, 1763-1775,* was published in the *New American Nation Series.* In their introduction, the editors of this series wrote: "During the past half a century the lapse of time and the uncovering of much new evidence have made it possible for scholars to pursue their investigations into the causes of the American Revolution in an atmosphere far less partisan than had prevailed in earlier generations. As a result of this more objective handling of the period of mounting tension that preceded the War of Independence, the rights on both sides of the controversy are more generally conceded." It is Gipson's argument "that the causes of the Revolution stem first from the effort of the British government, faced with vast territorial acquisitions in North America at the end of the Great War for Empire, along with an unprecedented war debt, to organize a more efficient administration on that continent and to make the colonies contribute directly to the support of the enlarged Empire . . . . Secondly, the causes of the breach can be traced to the radically altered situation of the colonies after 1760, by which date they were at long last relieved of the intense

[45] Charles McLean Andrews, *Colonial Background of the American Revolution* (New Haven, 1924), p. 135.

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pressure previously exerted along their borders by hostile nations."[46] The heart of the issue was a clash of "interests."

From the time of Sydney George Fisher to that of Lawrence Gipson an interpretation of the causes of the American Revolution had slowly taken form. By the early 1950's its outlines seemed, generally speaking, clear and stable and satisfyingly impersonal. The Revolution was the outcome of forces rather than "the result of the actions of wicked men—neither of the King or Lord North, on the one hand, nor of American radicals on the other." The forces were primarily economic and social—the clash between rival systems of mercantilism and the differentiation of the colonists from citizens of the Mother Country through the influence of an agricultural frontier. The problem of dealing with human motivations, decisions, aspirations, and illusions was thus solved by submerging them in the larger currents of history.[47]

On to this settled and orderly scene burst Edmund and Helen Morgan's *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution*.[48] Their argument, like that of David Ramsay 165 years earlier, hinged on the decisive character of the Stamp Act and threatened at once to undermine the whole painstaking, if jerry-built, structure of interpretation that had been erected by a dozen twentieth-century historians. The Morgans reminded their readers that the Stamp Act aroused an instant and entirely unexpected wave of protest and of determined resistance in the colonies—resistance which could have led to revolution. Never again were the colonists to be so united in opposition to a British measure. The actual cost of the stamp

[46] Lawrence Henry Gipson, *The Coming of the Revolution, 1763-1775*, in *The New American Nation Series*, ed. Henry Steele Commager and Richard B. Morris (New York, 1954), pp. ix, xii.

[47] Nineteenth-century historians who dealt with the Revolution such as George Washington Greene, *Historical View of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1876), and John Fiske, *The American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1896), wrote in the tradition of George Bancroft. For the twentieth century, no mention has been made of John C. Miller's excellent narrative history, *The Origins of the American Revolution* (Boston, 1943), because it failed to cast new light on the causes of the Revolution. Max Savelle's *Seeds of Liberty: The Genesis of the American Mind* (New York, 1948), in my view, simply applies a cultural-social veneer to older interpretations. Limitations of space have also compelled me to omit consideration of the influence of Sir Lewis Namier and his revisionist school. The Namierists, by rehabilitating George III, reinforced the view of the Revolution as a clash of "forces" or "interests." See Morgan, "American Revolution" for an excellent discussion of the Namier position and some effective counterarguments.

[48] Edmund S. Morgan and Helen M. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1953).

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tax to the colonists would have been relatively light. In most places it was never even put into effect so that the colonists had no opportunity to experience it as a material hardship. The opposition was thus almost entirely on the grounds of abstract principle—the constitutional principle of no taxation without representation.

Moreover, the leaders who came forward at the time of the act to direct colonial resistance were the individuals who in most instances carried through to the Revolution and beyond. Of the twenty-six members of the Stamp Act Congress, "only two . . . are known to have become loyalists in 1776 . . . . Others who took no part in the congress but led the resistance to the Stamp Act within their own colonies were likewise conspicuous in the revolutionary movement. It seems particularly significant that the parties which brought on the revolution in the two leading colonies, Massachusetts and Virginia, gained their ascendancy at the time of the Stamp Act."[49]

But even more important than the appearance, at the very outset of the controversy, of able and aggressive leaders who continued to lead was "the emergence . . . of well-defined constitutional principles." The colonial assemblies in 1765 "laid down the line on which Americans stood until they cut their connections with England. Consistently from 1765 to 1776 they denied the authority of Parliament to tax them externally or internally; consistently they affirmed their willingness to submit to whatever legislation Parliament should enact for the supervision of the empire as a whole."[50]

In the Morgans' view far too much had been made of the shifts in the colonial position in regard to the powers of Parliament. Historians of the Schlesinger school had pointed to these shifts—from no power to impose internal taxes, to no external taxes for revenue, to no internal or external taxes of any kind, to no right to legislate for the colonies in any case whatever—as an indication that material self-interest rather than principle motivated the colonial actions. On the contrary, the Morgans argued, the colonists did not advance from one position to another under the pressure of Parliamentary enactments. In actual fact the Stamp Act brought at once a denial of the right of Parliament to tax the colonies "without representation." All official statements such as the resolves of the Stamp Act Congress asserted this principle, conceding nothing but a willingness to

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 293.
[50] *Ibid.*, p. 295.

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acquiesce in the Acts of Trade and Navigation in force in 1763. Moreover, a number of colonial leaders at the time of the Stamp Act crisis or soon afterwards came to the conclusion that Parliament had no constitutional authority to legislate for the colonies. But understanding that to press such a view would rouse the deepest suspicions of Parliament and its supporters and alarm all colonial moderates, they kept their peace.

Like Ramsay, the Morgans express the conviction that the growing conflict "was not irretrievable, but that to retrieve it would have required an understanding on each side of the exact limits of the other's claims." While "the English thought that they saw the Americans inching their way toward independence, the Americans thought that they saw a sinister pary in England seeking by gradual degree to enslave them."[51] So the crisis moved to its denouement.

If the Morgans' argument in its main outlines is granted, it of course modifies those interpretations which see the Revolution as the more or less inevitable result of a slow process of economic, social, cultural, and political differentiation between the colonies and the Mother Country. The Schlesinger thesis that the merchants used the radical leaders and the mobs simply to gain redress of specific grievances becomes likewise untenable, and the frontier thesis loses much of its force. The Morgans' position, in addition, diminishes the importance of class conflict as an element in the Revolutionary crisis. While class and sectional frictions undoubtedly existed in some of the colonies, they did not become sharply defined until the later years of the war and the postwar period, and they were, in no sense, determinants in the development of the Revolutionary crisis.

In the Morgans' book we have come, in full circle, back to the position of Ramsay and the historians of the first generation. After a century and a half of progress in historical scholarship, in research techniques, in tools and methods, we have found our way to the interpretation held, substantially, by those historians who themselves participated in, or lived through the era of, the Revolution. If it is undoubtedly true that, as Morgan suggests, "George Bancroft may not have been so far from the mark as we have often assumed," it is equally true that Ramsay was closer still.

Once we have picked our way through the bewildering variety of interpretations that successive generations of historians have offered us, we would do well to go back and reread David Ramsay. We cannot fail,

[51] *Ibid.*, pp. 291, 290.

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I think, to be both puzzled and impressed. How can we account for the remarkable insight, the proportion, and the "objectivity" of this historian who was himself a Revolutionary politician? The historical profession is so deeply committed to the belief that objectivity or perspective is a product of the viewer's distance in time from the events with which he is dealing, that we find it hard to accept the fact that Ramsay offered us a wiser and better balanced interpretation than the most expert and "scientific" of his successors. Nor can we write off Ramsay as a sport, an exception, or an oddity. If he is the best of his generation, he is by no means exceptional in his general attitude toward the events of the Revolution or in his interpretation of those events. It seems to me that we must accept the proposition that, generally speaking, the first generation of historians gave us a more "objective" view of the Revolution than historians have managed to do since.

In justice to later historians, it should, of course, be pointed out that the historian's task in interpreting the American Revolution has been more than ordinarily difficult. The America that emerged from the War of Independence was a nation without prehistory in the traditional sense. Having won their independence, the rather loosely knit United States had to find myths and symbols to reinforce and give substance to that national unity which for the first eighty years was so precariously maintained. Myths had, perforce, to be created around the moment of birth. What Homer and the siege of Troy had been to the Greek states of the Periclean Age, George Washington and the campaigns of the Revolution were to nineteenth-century Americans. What Romulus and Remus and the Twelve Tables of the Law had been for Imperial Rome, the Founding Fathers and the Federal Constitution were for a United States searching in the midst of extraordinary social and economic transformations for unifying symbols.

The American Revolution has, thus, been encrusted with mythic elements and residues which have vastly complicated the task of the historian who wishes to state the truth of the events that took place in that era. The historian, being human and ineluctably partaking of the ideals and values of his own day, has been under the strongest pressure to make the events of the Revolution conform to the particular time spirit of which he himself has been a self-conscious and articulate representative. He has been, therefore, not simply the enemy of the myths, as he would like to see himself, but quite as often the victim, in the sense that he has seldom

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escaped the temptation to make the Revolution prove something about his own society or about the society which he wishes to see evolve in the future.

It is only fair to add that the aims and aspirations of the generation of historians of which Ramsay was a member were ideally suited to the writing of balanced and judicious history. Federalists, or at least deeply imbued with Federalist doctrines, they were friends of the new Federal Constitution. As enemies of factionalism and party rancor, they sought to write history that would draw the states together. It was thus Ramsay's wish that each state might have "an ingenious learned and philosophical history" so that knowledge of sister states might be widely diffused and the union correspondingly strengthened. As reconcilers, it was the particular responsibility of first generation historians to write accounts so broad and generous that Patriot and Tory, planter and merchant, Northerner and Southerner, could find therein common ground and, joining forces, move forward to the bright future that awaited the new nation. "We are too widely disseminated over an extensive country and too much diversified by different customs and forms of government to feel as one people which we really are," Ramsay wrote his friend, John Eliot. "Had we Belknaps in every state we might become acquainted with each other in that intimate familiar manner which would wear away prejudices, rub off asperities & mold us into an homogeneous people loving esteeming and rightly appreciating each other."[52] Approaching their task in this missionary spirit, Ramsay and his fellows were under the strongest compulsions to write fair and unbiased history. Disunity was the sharpest danger which faced the country, unitary history its best remedy.

In addition, and perhaps most important of all, the historians of the eighteenth century made no distinction between fact and interpretation. Unaware of, or unconcerned with, such divisions, they had not succumbed to the illusion that facts and interpretation were different orders of reality—that if the facts were diligently searched for and assembled the proper interpretation would somehow follow from them. That Ramsay and a number of his contemporaries drew largely from the *Annual Register* suggests a good deal about their attitude toward facts. These, if generally reliable (and there was no better source in the eighteenth century than the *Annual Register*), were of secondary importance; by far

[52] Ramsay to John Eliot, Charleston, Aug. 11, 1792, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass.

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the most significant part of the process of writing history was the application of principles of interpretation, or, perhaps better, moral judgment, to the events with which the historian was dealing. The position that the historian took in regard to the treatment of his material did not rest upon "facts" but rather upon an awareness of his responsibility to do justice to the rival groups and conflicting aspirations involved in his story. Ramsay's generation would have spoken of this as a concern with "first principles." If first principles were wrong all subsequent steps, however rational, systematic, or scientific, would simply compound error. It would not have occurred to an eighteenth-century historian to sanctify the facts under the illusion that they contained some measure of saving grace.

Whatever imperfections there may be in Ramsay's facts (and his detractors have not indeed argued that they were at fault but that, in a number of instances, they were taken from the *Annual Register*), it was a poor bargain to get in the place of his work histories which were factually impeccable but which lost their grip on the essential meaning of the Revolutionary experience.

On the basis of this brief survey of interpretations of the Revolution it would be very difficult to demonstrate clear and consistent progress in the interpretation of historical events primarily as the result of the longer time-perspectives of successive historians dealing with them. Nor, again, will we find that the opening up of new archives and the discovery of new documents (beyond a certain point, of course), result in notably improved or more acceptable (in any final sense) interpretations.[53]

Indeed, in regard to the Revolution, the most extreme distortions appeared in the work of those historians who made the loudest claims to be "scientific" in their approach. Perhaps these men, believing implicitly in the authority of the data, the "facts" as disclosed by their researches, have been less sensitive to the nature and extent of their own prejudices. The older "prescientific" historians realized that there was no way of evading judgments and were thus quite conscious of the distortion produced by their own personal loyalties and allegiances. The scientific historian, comforted by the illusion of a vast amount of supporting data, might (and

[53] Herbert Butterfield in an essay entitled, "The Reconstruction of an Historical Episode; the History of an Inquiry into the Origins of the Seven Years War," *Man on His Past* (Cambridge, Eng., 1955), pp. 143-167, has shown how Leopold von Ranke, writing not many years after that war, gave a better analysis of its causes than those made with a longer perspective in time and far greater access to documentary materials.

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obviously in many instances did) have his own predispositions come upon him disguised as the objective results of research.

Beyond all this it must be said that an intelligent contemporary has one advantage over all later investigators. He was there. He saw it happen, felt it, experienced it on many levels. It was part of the complex fabric of his life. Like a seismograph he recorded through the channels of his nervous system and stored in his brain (rather than in a filing cabinet or archive) the emotions, ideas, the realities of his era. And he recorded these, if he was a person of sensitivity and judgment, in roughly the proportion in which they were present in his environment. He could, in addition, push his environment out as widely as the breadth of his mind and his ability to extrapolate from his own immediate experience would carry it. Furthermore, he did not have to mythologize the events or view them through the lens of a later generation with its very different needs and aspirations.

The story of successive interpretations of the American Revolution seems then to bear this moral: There is, or has been so far, no panacea (like scientific method) which can perform for the historian the functions of judgment and analysis. Whatever the historian gains in time-perspective or new materials or specialized monographs, he may well lose through distortions that are the result of his own *Zeitgeist.* He thus fails to approach in any orderly, systematic way the truth in the form of some final, or often, some better interpretation or understanding of the events he is concerned with. We would do well, therefore, to show more respect for the best contemporary history and abandon some of those professional pieties with which we have solaced ourselves in the past. In the struggle for historical understanding there are no final triumphs. Insights once gained will not automatically sustain themselves but must be rediscovered time and again. We cannot solve problems of historical interpretation and then, having reduced the solutions to formulas, pass on to new problems, for the "solved" problems are remarkably full of life, tenacious and enduring.

This being the case, the responsibility is clearly placed where it belongs —on the individual historian. He cannot take refuge from judgments in techniques. His judgments, on the other hand, will be no better than his own capacity for wise insight and human understanding.

Which brings us, properly enough, once more to David Ramsay.

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Ramsay had certain advantages through his involvement in the events of which he wrote which were denied later historians. Yet, had he not been an individual of far more than ordinary wisdom, he could not have availed himself so successfully of his opportunity. The generosity of mind and spirit which mark his pages, his critical sense, his balanced judgment and compassion are gifts that were uniquely his own and that clearly entitle him to an honorable position in the front rank of American historians.

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