

## Bailyn's Crucial Breakthrough

The crucial breakout from the miasma of American historiography of the Revolution came from one man. He was able by sheer force of scholarship to overthrow the Consensus and Progressive views and to establish a new interpretation of the causes of the American Revolution. This was Harvard Professor Bernard Bailyn, who, breaking through the hermetic separation of European and American historians, found his inspiration in the great work of Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman*. For Bailyn realized that Professor Robbins had discovered the "missing link" in the transmission of radical libertarian thought after John Locke. She had found it in a group of dedicated writers, inspired by the English Revolution of the seventeenth century, who continued to reject the centrist Whig settlement of the eighteenth century. These writers carried forward the ideals of natural rights and individual liberty. In the course of editing a volume of Revolutionary pamphlets, Bailyn discovered that Americans were indeed influenced, on a massive scale, by these libertarian articles and pamphlets. Many of these publications were reprinted widely in the American colonies, and clearly influenced the revolutionary leaders. The most important shaper of this libertarian viewpoint was *Cato's Letters*, a series of newspaper articles in England in the early 1720s written by John Trenchard and his young disciple Thomas Gordon. The collected *Cato's Letters* were republished many times in eighteenth century England and America.

Trenchard and Gordon, and the other libertarian writers, transmuted John Locke's abstract and often guarded political philosophy into a trenchant, hard-hitting, and radical libertarian creed. Not only did men have natural rights of life, liberty, and property, which governments must not invade, but "Cato" and the other writers declared that government — power — was always and ever the great enemy of liberty, and stood ready to aggress against it. Hence, power must always be diminished as far as possible. Men must watch it continually with utmost hostility and vigilance, lest it break its bonds, and destroy the rights of the individual. "Cato" particularly denounced the propensity for tyranny of the British government of the day. This message found an eager reception in the American colonies.

Thus, Bernard Bailyn established the American Revolution as at one and the same time genuinely radical and revolutionary. He showed that it was motivated largely by firmly and passionately held libertarian ideology, summed up in the phrase "the transforming libertarian radicalism" of the American Revolution. Bailyn's findings were first presented in

the "General Introduction" to his edition of *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750–1776, Vol. 1, 1750–1765*. The only volume of pamphlets yet published in the series, it included the works of such revolutionary leaders as the Rev. Jonathan Mayhew, Thomas Fitch, James Otis, Oxenbridge Thacher, Daniel Dulany, and John Dickinson.

An expanded version was published as Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. Also see the companion volume by Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics*, which offered an excellent explanation for the British royal governors being weak in the eighteenth century at the same time that the King was dominant at home. A useful summary of the Bailyn thesis is provided by Bailyn's "The Central Themes of the American Revolution: An Interpretation" in S. Kurtz and J. Hutson, eds., *Essays on the American Revolution*. The scintillating writings of "Cato" have been collected in an excellently edited volume by David L. Jacobson, *The English Libertarian Heritage*.

One problem with the generally correct Bailyn thesis is its exclusive emphasis on ideology, as it affected the minds and hearts of the Americans. Historians find it easy to slip into the view that the deep ideologically motivated hostility to Britain, while genuinely felt, was merely an expression of "paranoia." Indeed, Bailyn himself almost fell into this trap in his recent overly sympathetic biography of the leading Massachusetts Tory, *Thomas Hutchinson*. One of the best historians of this period, Edmund Morgan, in the *New York Review of Books* duly noted and warned against the trap in his review of this work.

An excellent corrective to this exclusive concentration on the subjective is the work of the most important political (as contrasted to ideological) historians of the pre-Revolutionary period. In the definitive history of the Stamp Act crisis of 1765–1766, Edmund and Helen Morgan demonstrated the majority nature of the revolutionary movement. They attacked, as well, the actual depredations of Great Britain on American political and economic rights. Edmund and Helen Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution*. Also see the companion source book of documents, Edmund S. Morgan, ed., *Prologue to Revolution: Sources and Documents on the Stamp Act Crisis, 1764–1766*. Particularly important is the monumental and definitive, though densely written, two volume political history of the coming of the American Revolution by Bernhard Knollenberg, *Origins of the American Revolution: 1759–1765*; and *Growth of the American Revolution, 1766–1775*. By examining British archives, Knollenberg shows that the supposed paranoia and "conspiracy theories" of the American colonists were all too accurate. The British officials were indeed conspiring

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