

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION
AND THE POST-REVOLUTIONARY GENERATION
OF AMERICAN HISTORIANS

by

CHARLES W. COONEY, JR.

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School, Marquette University, in
Partial Fulfillment of the Re-
quirements for the Degree
of Master of Arts

Milwaukee, Wisconsin
July 10, 1967

PREFACE

How did Americans of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries think and feel about their young nation's struggle for independence? What were the thoughts of the Revolutionary generation on how the memory of the War for Independence was to be preserved in the history books? From what sources were the history of the heroic deeds and great events of America's national birth to be constructed? Where was a nation passing through the turmoil of birth and adolescence to find individuals with the scholarship, industry, and patience to undertake the writing of its history? Could the history of the Revolution be written so soon after its completion?

By means of a comparative analysis of four representative histories, the following study attempts to at least suggest answers to these and other questions concerning the early historiography of the American Revolution. The authors and their histories chosen for the study are the following: Jeremy Belknap, The History of New Hampshire, Comprehending the Events of One Complete Century from the Discovery of the River Pascataqua; William Gordon, The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America; Including an Account of the Late War; and of the Thirteen Colonies from Their Origin to That Period; David Ramsay, The History of the American Revolution; and Mercy Otis Warren, History of the

Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution,
Interspersed with Biographical, Political and Moral Observa-
tions.

Insofar as the study succeeds, credit is due to the many persons and institutions whose aid the author sought in its preparation. The writer's acknowledgements would not be complete, however, without a special note of thanks to Thomas O'Brien Hanley, S.J. For his corrections and suggestions, and for his patience in the course of an incessantly changing manuscript, the writer is most sincerely grateful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PREFACEii
Chapter	
I. THOUGHTS OF THE FOUNDING FATHERS ON THE HISTORY OF THE REVOLUTION	1
II. FOUR HISTORIANS	13
III. OBJECTIVITY IN THE HISTORIES OF WARREN, RAMSAY, GORDON AND BELKNAP	26
IV. NATIONALISM AND SECTIONALISM IN THE EARLY HISTORIES OF THE REVOLUTION	41
V. EFFECTS OF THE REVOLUTION AND THE PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE	53
CONCLUSION	68
BIBLIOGRAPHY	74

CHAPTER I

THOUGHTS OF THE FOUNDING FATHERS
ON THE HISTORY OF THE REVOLUTION

In the late eighteenth century history had not yet clearly emerged as an independent intellectual discipline. There were very few persons in Europe or America in that period who thought of themselves as professional historians. The study and writing of history, it was assumed, was best viewed as an interesting diversion. The doctrinaire Cartesian insistence on exact scientific methodology and mathematical measurement did little to encourage the aspiring historian.

This is not to say that there was no interest in history in the late eighteenth century. It is possible to be interested in history without having real historical-mindedness. In reality, historicism, or the appeal to experience in search of truth, rather than to established authority or abstract reason, was born in the eighteenth century. Another century was yet to pass, however, before the historian could feel reasonably secure in his profession. This was especially the case in the young American nation.

The confusion of the post-revolutionary period in America demanded that men's attention be directed to the immediate and serious problems of political and economic life. Given the

circumstances, it is surprising that the young nation's history was not wholly neglected. Nevertheless, the importance of preserving the memory of America's struggle for independence was recognized by a perceptive few shortly after the commencement of hostilities. Accurate histories of the Revolution would provide an essential basis for the development of a native literary tradition. This in turn would stimulate the growing sense of national self-awareness in the breasts of America's sons. There were those in America who realized that the durability of the young nation would be considerably enhanced by the cultivation of a native historical tradition.

Unfortunately, the chaos accompanying nation-making revolutions is signally uncongenial to the pursuit of patient and undisturbed historical research. The American Revolution was no exception. The Revolution's immediate effect on the writing of history was decidedly unfavorable. Little could be accomplished during the years of open hostilities. Of necessity, the attention of those most able to aid the historian's labors was focused on the pressing political, diplomatic, and military affairs of the moment. The cliché that the Revolutionary generation was too busy making history to write it, is especially true for the years from 1775 to 1782. It is difficult for the modern historian to appreciate the embarrassing circumstances surrounding the efforts of his eighteenth century colleague. The unflinching Ebenezer Hazard, one who labored in the period, had determined to compile a complete documentary history of America. On the verge of abandoning his project, he despondently wrote to

Jeremy Belknap in 1779 for consolation. The following lengthy excerpt from that letter provides a most pointed statement of the difficulties confronting Hazard and his colleagues:

In short, the war, and the numerous avocations consequent upon it, have thrown every man's mind into such an unsettled and confused state that but few can think steadily upon any subject. They hear of useful designs, they give you all the encouragement which can be derived from the warmest approbation of your plan, they will even promise you assistance. Politics intrude,--kick you and your designs out of their heads; and when you appear again, why they really forgot that the matter had been mentioned to them. I have been repeatedly served so with respect to my collection, and even public bodies act in the same manner with individuals. Though Congress have recommended it to them to furnish me with copies of such parts of their records as I might want, they have not yet done it in any one instance, except where they have had printed copies of them, . . . I feel at times, almost discouraged, and half resolve to drop the design, notwithstanding all that I have done. A conviction, of the utility of it alone prevents [this decision].¹

Hazard and the others might have consoled themselves with the thought that the situation would have to improve after the war. Substantial improvements, however, were slow in coming. The greatest obstacle to historical research, the absence of any central body of reference materials, was alleviated only in 1800 with the establishment of the Library of Congress. The first state historical society was not incorporated until 1794.² Not until the 1820's did Congress publish its early journals and distribute its debates to libraries and colleges.³ Each of the

¹Belknap Papers, Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston, 1877), Series V, XLII, 12. Hereafter cited as Belknap Papers.

²The Massachusetts State Historical Society.

³David D. Van Tassell, Recording America's Past: An interpretation of the Development of Historical Studies in America, 1607-1884 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 32.

Revolution's leaders kept his own correspondence, and these papers were consequently scattered through the country.

Their awareness of this confused state of affairs, combined with a sound understanding of historical methodology brought the leaders of the Revolution to despair for its history. Both their appreciation of the magnitude of the historian's task and their dismay for the history of the Revolution, are reflected in the letters of Jay, Jefferson, Washington, and John Adams. In 1797 John Jay referred Jedidiah Morse to the following sources for his proposed history of the Revolution: the public and private journals of Congress; the papers mentioned or alluded to in them, such as certain reports of committees; letters to and from civil and military officers, ministers, agents, state governors, etc.; the proceedings of the standing committees for marine, commercial, fiscal, political, and foreign affairs; the journals and papers of State conventions, and councils of safety, and of some of the standing and other committees; and certain diaries, memoirs, and private letters.⁴ In answer to a request by William Gordon for the use of his papers, Washington replied that it was impossible for any historian to write a "correct history" of the Revolution without free access to the archives of Congress, those of individual states, the papers of the Commander-in-Chief, and of the commanding officers of the

⁴Henry Phelps Johnston (ed.), John Jay: Correspondence and Public Papers (New York: C. P. Putnam's Sons, 1890-93), IV, 224-5. Hereafter cited as Jay Correspondence.

separate departments.⁵ John Adams, who gave more thought to the history of the Revolution than any of his contemporaries, wrote in 1815 that "the records of the British government, and the records of all the thirteen colonies, and the pamphlets, newspapers, and handbills of both parties must be examined, and the essence extracted, before a correct history can be written of the American Revolution".⁶

Their suggestions concerning sources indicate that the Revolution's leaders fully appreciated the immensity of the task confronting the historian of the Revolution. Adams' obsession with exhausting all the sources inevitably forced him to conclude that the history of the Revolution could not be written. This was an unpleasant thought for Adams, for with it went the conviction that the record of his achievements during the Revolution, a record of which he was justly proud, would die with him. It was a verdict which Adams was forced to accept step by step in the course of the voluminous correspondence which he conducted on the question of the Revolution's history.

In 1777 he impressed William Gordon with the thought that the latter's design of collecting materials for a history of the Revolution would prove a "laborious undertaking". Five years later, when the war was all but over, Adams was still convinced

⁵John C. Fitzpatrick (ed.), The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931-44), XXV, 288. Washington politely refused Gordon's request until it could be approved by Congress. But Gordon persisted, and Washington repeated the same advice. Ibid., XXVII, 52, 398.

⁶Charles Francis Adams (ed.), The Works of John Adams (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1850-56), X, 180. John Adams to Thomas McKean. Hereafter cited as Adams, Works.

that it was "yet too soon to undertake a complete history of that great event." He bluntly informed the ambitious Abbe de Mably that there was no man "either in America or Europe, at this day [1782], capable of performing it, or who is in possession of the materials requisite and necessary for that purpose." In 1790 he cynically confided to Benjamin Rush that the history of the American Revolution would be "one continued lye from one end to the other." By 1815 Adams was desperately asking Thomas Jefferson, "who shall write the history of the Revolution? Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?" He found no satisfactory answers to these questions in the course of his lifetime. In 1818 he wrote to Hezekiah Niles that "the true history of the American Revolution could not be recovered."⁷

Adams' anxiety for the history of the Revolution was based squarely on his profound insights on the entire Revolutionary struggle. One theme dominates his correspondence on the subject from the year 1815 on. This is that no simple account of events from 1775 to 1783, however accurate and detailed, could do justice to the Revolution. The real Revolution, Adams insisted, was in the minds and hearts of the people, and was effected before the commencement of hostilities. The war between England and America was merely an effect and consequence of the Revolution.⁸

⁷ Ibid., IX, 461-62, V, 492; L. A. Butterfield (ed.), Letters of Benjamin Rush (Published for the American Philosophical Society by Princeton University Press, 1951), 11, 1207. Hereafter cited as Rush Letters; Lester J. Cappon (ed.), The Adams-Jefferson Letters (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), II, 451; Adams, Works, X, 274.

⁸ This theme recurs constantly in his letters to Jefferson, Niles, Morse, McKean, and others from 1815 to 1818. For example see Adams, Works, X, 172-73, 180, 184, 282.

All records, newspapers, pamphlets, speeches and events, which directly or indirectly affected the gradual change in the attitude of Americans toward the mother country would have to be examined before the history of the Revolution could be written. Adams became infatuated with this insight. The more he reflected on it, the broader the area of the historian's investigation became.

In 1815 Adams recommended that the historian begin his study of the Revolution with the writs of assistance controversy in 1761. Three years later he told Hezekiah Niles that the gradual change in the principles and feelings of Americans "ought to be traced back two hundred years, and sought in the history of the country from the first plantations in America."⁹ As the field of inquiry expanded, the list of sources that had to be consulted naturally lengthened, until in the end the historian's task became truly overwhelming. Given his understanding of the word "revolution," there is little wonder that Adams finally yielded to despair on the question of recording its history.

In questioning exactly what was meant by the American Revolution, Adams introduced a whole new field of speculation to those interested in its history. While Adams was satisfied that the real Revolution was over before the war began, Benjamin Rush stated in 1786 that only the first act of the drama had been completed and that the true revolution was yet to come. The revolution in the "principles, opinion, and manners" was

⁹Ibid., 172-73, 184, 284.

just beginning.¹⁰ The dialogue was degenerating into a play on words until Jefferson ended the discussion in 1818 by commenting that it was as difficult to determine when the Revolution began as it was to fix the exact moment when the "embryo becomes an animal."¹¹

Jefferson thought less often but no less intently about the history of the American Revolution than Adams did. He was convinced that before a good general history of the Revolution could be written, the spadework would have to be done in the areas of regional and state histories. In congratulating David Ramsay for his study of the struggle in South Carolina, he observed that an equally well-executed study "published in the middle states and a third in the Eastern will complete the materials for a general history."¹²

¹⁰Rush Letters, I, 388. Benjamin Rush to Richard Price.

¹¹Paul Wilstach (ed.), The Correspondence of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, 1812-1826 (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1925), 161. Cited in Michael Krause, A History of American History (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, Inc., 1937), 167.

¹²Julian P. Boyd (ed.), The Papers of Thomas Jefferson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950-), VIII, 457. Hereafter cited as Papers of Jefferson. The conviction was shared by others. In the course of the correspondence between Elbridge Gerry and John Adams in 1813 respecting the history of the Revolution, Gerry apparently spoke of a proposal he had made in the Continental Congress with a view to laying the proper foundations for a general history of the Revolution. Though both his proposal and his letter have been lost, it is clear from Adams' reply that Gerry did make such a proposal. Adams wrote:
"Had your motion in Congress been adopted, and a Man of Sense and Letters appointed in each State to collect Memorials of the Rise and Progress and Termination of the Revolution: We should now Possess a Monument of more inestimable value than all the Histories and Orations that have been written . . ."

This evidence is cited in Letters of Members of the Continental Congress, ed. Edmund C. Burnett (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1963), IV, 527-28.

Despite his initial optimism on the subject in 1785, when he commended Ramsay, Jefferson in time endorsed Adams' dreary views on the history of the Revolution. The two reached perfect accord in 1815, when Jefferson wrote Adams that the most that could be expected was an accurate account of the Revolution's surface events. "All its councils, designs and discussions," Jefferson explained, "having been conducted by Congress with closed doors, and no members, as far as I know, having even made notes of them. These, which are the life and soul of history, must forever be unknown."¹³

The leaders of the Revolution naturally evaluated the early histories of the conflict on the basis of their firsthand knowledge of events during the struggle. The process often led them to reject not only American history, but the study of history in general. "My experience has very much diminished my faith in the veracity of history," John Adams wrote to Jeremy Belknap. Years later Adams told Jedidiah Morse that he read history as he did romance, believing what was probable and rejecting the rest. From what he had seen and read, Adams felt that there was no reason to expect that the historiography of the American Revolution would be any better than that which had preceded it. "Many of the most important facts are concealed," he explained, "some of the most important characters imperfectly known; many false facts imposed on the historians and the world; and many empty characters displayed in great pomp. All this, I am sure,

¹³The Writings of Thomas Jefferson (Washington, D.C.: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association of the United States, 1903), XIV, 343. Hereafter cited as Writings of Jefferson.

will happen in our American History."¹⁴

Adams' views of the deceptiveness in history were shared by John Jay who, in 1797, simply remarked that "except for the Bible, there is not a true history in the world". Regardless of the industry and honesty of the historian, Jay felt certain that truth and error, in varying degrees, would become imperceptibly mixed in his writing. He also concurred in Adams' disparaging remarks concerning the historian's analysis of characters. Many of the American revolutionaries, Jay insisted, passed for more than they were worth, and still more passed for less.¹⁵

Thomas Jefferson was certainly one of the most avid readers of history and philosophy among Americans of his era. For a time he had great faith in contemporary history. "An author who writes of his own times, or of times near his own," said Jefferson, "presents in his own ideas and manner the best picture of the moment of which he writes."¹⁶ After reading a few French histories of the American Revolution, however, he was forced to reflect on the wisdom of that statement. One short year after his tribute to the contemporary historian, he reluctantly asserted

¹⁴Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Series VI, LIV, 438; Adams, Works, X, 133-35.

¹⁵Jay Correspondence, IV, 225. Jay to Jedidiah Morse.

¹⁶Papers of Jefferson, X, 307. Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr., August 27, 1786. Given the lack of opportunities for orderly historical research in his era, Jefferson's view is not as strange as it might appear. Jefferson, at least, was not alone in his confidence in contemporary history. In discussing the history of the Revolution with the Reverent Dr. Morse in 1813, John Jay wrote: "I presume, . . . that a history (except as to great outlines) is the less to be depended upon, as its date is remote from the period of the transactions which it undertakes to narrate." Jay Correspondence, IV, 366-67.

that he had spent a lifetime nourishing his mind with "fables and falsehoods". To the editor of the Journal de Paris he explained that he had come to this disturbing conclusion by asking himself, "if contemporary histories are thus false, what will future compilations be? And what are all those of preceding times?"¹⁷ Time, he reasoned, would serve only to impair memory and obscure evidence, and the errors of the contemporary histories would be multiplied in those of the future. It was a depressing thought.

The tenor of the commentaries on the early histories of the Revolution was overwhelmingly pessimistic. This was only natural. It is the extremely rare history that satisfies those who have played major roles in the events it purports to record. The ease with which those who have made history can detect flaws in the written record of their achievements renders the work of the contemporary historian especially susceptible to censure. Nevertheless, there have always been those presumptuous enough to embark on the history of recent events. If their presumption is accompanied by industry and a scholarly regard to truth, their efforts must be given a fair hearing. A few such men were surely to be found among the Revolutionary generation of Americans. Replying to one of Adams' despondent letters, Thomas McKean suggested that although the United States did not have a Thucydides, a Hume, or a Gibbon, it did have "gentlemen of great

¹⁷ Writings of Jefferson, XVII, 148. Jefferson to the editor of the Journal de Paris, August 29, 1787. Jefferson was disgusted particularly with the histories of d'Auberteuil and Longchamps.

talents, . . . capable of writing the history of our Revolution with at least as much regard to truth as any one of them exhibited".¹⁸

America's Revolutionary leaders were understandably anxious that the record of their great achievements be preserved. But their awareness of the rapidity of events during the struggle and of the furtive atmosphere surrounding many of the key decisions led them, at times, to despair on the question of the Revolution's history. They were not at all certain that accurate histories of the War for Independence would or could be written. Those who assumed that the most accurate histories were contemporary histories were sorely disillusioned by the errors they detected in some of the earliest accounts of the Revolution. Some reconciled themselves to the thought that the history of the Revolution would not be written in their lifetime. Others insisted that the passage of time would serve only to obscure the memory of events. None provided much encouragement to those engaged in gathering materials for general histories of the Revolution. While they rarely refused to cooperate with the historian, they saw little promise that his efforts would come to much. Apparently, the most that the aspiring historian could expect was the assurance that what he was doing was important.

¹⁸Adams, Works, X, 177.

CHAPTER II

FOUR HISTORIANS

The environment and literary experience of the historian leaves its mark on any historian. So, too, his involvement in the society in which he lives, especially if he chooses to write of its history. The historians in question were no exception. As it was, these factors operated favorably to make them responsible historians of the American Revolution according to the scope they chose.

The despondence of John Adams, Jefferson, and Washington on the subject of the Revolution's history was based not on any unconsciousness of the Revolution's historical significance, but on a realistic appraisal of the impediments to sound historical research in post-Revolutionary America. Where to start the history of the Revolution; where to end it; where the best sources were to be found; how to acquire the documents when located; how to evaluate the documents once obtained; the cumulative effect of these and other obstacles was enough to frustrate the most determined would-be historian of the Revolution. All things considered, it is surprising that the era produced as many competent historians as it did.

An age which deemed a passing acquaintance with the three R's more than sufficient formal education for women was bound to

view a female historian with suspicion. Nevertheless, one of the earliest aspirants to the title of historian of the Revolution was a proud Massachusetts woman. Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1814) was the daughter of James Otis, colonial jurist and politician, the sister of James Otis, the Patriot, and the wife of James Warren, able and trusted leader in the most aggressive measures of the Revolution.¹ In childhood Mercy and her brother James were schooled in the works of Pope, Dryden, Milton, Shakespeare, and Raleigh by their stern but capable uncle, the Reverend Jonathan Russell.² The strong intellectual influence which her brother exerted on Mercy's life did not terminate, as did her formal education, with James' early departure for Harvard. It continued and was later enriched by the influence of her husband and that of her sometime friend, John Adams.

At a very early period in the struggle between colonies and mother country, the Plymouth home of James and Mercy Warren came to be recognized as the unofficial mustering place for the more radical of the New England revolutionaries. Numbered among the regular attendants at the Plymouth salon were John and Samuel Adams, John Hancock, James Otis, and, of course, Mr. and Mrs. Warren. In later years, when the Warren estate had been moved to Milton, the Marquis de Lafayette, Thomas Jefferson, Francisco de Miranda, Dr. William Gordon, the historian, and the celebrated Mrs. Macauley of England all added their distinguished

¹Moses Coit Tyler, The Literary History of the American Revolution, 1763-1783 (New York: Frederick Angara Publishing Co., 1958), II, 419-20.

²Katharine Anthony, First Lady of the Revolution (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1958), 31-32.

names to the Warren guest list. Mrs. Warren clearly possessed excellent opportunities to view at firsthand the main events and principal actors in the struggle for independence. In prefacing her history she admitted that it was a source of pride to her that she was connected by "nature, friendship, and every social tie, with many of the first patriots and most influential characters on the continent."³

Mercy Otis Warren was helped as an historian by her broad experience as a writer. She wrote many satirical plays and poems, in which British parliamentarians, generals, and royal officials were ridiculed. All of which sharpened her critical sense. The important role these pieces played in encouraging revolutionary sentiments is not negated by the fact that they now gather dust in the rare book rooms of public libraries.⁴ One of the main reasons for the serious decline of Mrs. Warren's reputation is that so much of her writing belongs to the medium of pamphlet literature, the appeal of which is necessarily limited by time and topic.⁵ Her "high station in the ranks of genius", was acknowledged by Thomas Jefferson, and she was

³Mercy Otis Warren, History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution, Interspersed with Biographical, Political, and Moral Observations (Boston: Manning, 1805), I, iii-iv. Hereafter cited as Warren, History of the American Revolution.

⁴The best account of these political satires is to be found in Katharine Anthony's First Lady of the Revolution.

⁵Maude Hutcheson, "Mercy Warren, 1728-1814", William and Mary Quarterly (July, 1953), 379.

memorialized in the mid-nineteenth century as "the most remarkable woman who lived at the Revolutionary period".⁶

Mrs. Warren read history and philosophy assiduously and cultivated an intimate association with the literature and politics of England. In preparation for the history, which exacted twenty-five of her later years, she conducted an extensive correspondence with Samuel and John Adams, Jefferson, Dickinson, Elbridge Gerry, the generals Knox and Lee, and others. Occasionally these men solicited and acknowledged her opinion on political matters.⁷

The year 1807 witnessed the commencement of a long and bitter correspondence between John Adams and Mrs. Warren on the subject of the latter's history. The correspondence throws light on Mercy Warren's competence as a historian. Adams, who suffered the lash of Mercy's pen for his monarchical views, charged that "it was presumption in a lady to write a history with so little information as Mrs. Warren has acquired".⁸ This accusation was only partially justified. Mrs. Warren did not make use of all the available sources. She did not travel extensively in search of the best materials. In fact, she never strayed from her own

⁶Writings of Jefferson, X, 231-32; Elizabeth Ellet, Women of the American Revolution (5th ed.; New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1852-1853), I, 91. The occasion for Jefferson's praise was his reply to a letter of congratulations from James Warren on his election to the presidency, March 21, 1801.

⁷Ellet, Women of the Revolution, I, 94.

⁸Correspondence Between John Adams and Mercy Warren Relating to Her "History of the American Revolution", July - August, 1807. Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston, 1878), XLVIV, 399. Warren to Adams, August 1, 1807. In this letter Mrs. Warren quotes Adams' accusation.

fireside while writing her history. Throughout the Federalist era she staunchly supported the views of the Jeffersonian Republicans and in her history she was quick to criticize all who opposed her views. Her party allegiance led her, for example, to dismiss Hamilton as a "foreign adventurer" with absurd financial schemes.⁹

But these were minor flaws. Warren's history retains its value as a special study. Relying on her close acquaintance and extensive correspondence with the Revolution's leading figures and borrowing heavily from the Annual Register for background material, Mrs. Warren produced a vivid and, on the whole, reliable record of America's struggle for independence. These are adequate sources. Few historians see all the minute sources.

The best known early history of the Revolution, apart from David Ramsay's, was William Gordon's History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America. William Gordon (1728-1807), a highly respected Roxbury clergyman and patriot, was the only one of the historians being considered who was not a native American. Born in Hertfordshire, England, and educated for the dissenting clergy, he held several ministries in the Independent Church before emigrating to America in 1770. Throughout his life Gordon was very much the "political parson," so it is reasonable to assume that his departure from England was motivated by his sympathy with unrest in the American colonies.¹⁰ However, this may be, he emerged as a forthright

⁹Warren, History of the American Revolution, III, 372.

¹⁰"William Gordon - Historian," Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston, 1930), LXIII, 303.

spokesman of the patriot cause shortly after his arrival in America. In 1775, three years after his appointment as pastor of the Third Congregational Church at Roxbury, Massachusetts, he was named chaplain to both houses of the Provincial Congress assembled at Watertown. His appointments while serving in that office indicate that Congress had considerable confidence in his ability and integrity.¹¹ In 1781 Samuel Adams recommended the parson to General Gates as one "well acquainted with the Internal State of this Commonwealth."¹² Such an introduction by Samuel Adams was recognition indeed of one's adherence to the patriot cause.

Early in 1776 Gordon determined to write an adequate history of the American Revolution. Of all the American historians of his era he came closest to the true method of historical research. He travelled tirelessly from New Hampshire to Georgia, collecting materials and conducting a vast correspondence. He interviewed generals and statesmen, consulted manuscript collections, and borrowed letters and memoranda.¹³ In the preface of his history Gordon indicated that he had been granted a liberal

¹¹Ibid., 304. Congress voted him provisions for a horse and access to the prisoners of war. In May, 1775, he was authorized to inspect a volume of Governor Hutchinson's intercepted letters. In July of the same year he was appointed by Congress as one of a committee of three to prepare a true statement of the Battle of Bunker Hill to be transmitted to England.

¹²Harry Alonzo Cushing (ed.), The Writings of Samuel Adams, 1764-1802 (New York: C. P. Putnam's Sons, 1908), IV, 264.

¹³Frank Monaghan, "William Gordon," Dictionary of American Biography, VII, 426.

examination of the papers of Generals Washington, Gates, Greene, Lincoln, and Otho Williams, "both of a public and more private nature".¹⁴ The triumph of his indefatigable quest for reliable sources was the privilege of a visit to Mount Vernon (June 2-9, 1784), during which time he went through thirty-three volumes of Washington's correspondence.¹⁵

Unfortunately, the ardor with which he conducted his research was often self-defeating. He was rash and devoid of discretion; quick to give advice on any topic, but reluctant to accept it.¹⁶ Many of the leading characters of the Revolution, no doubt, would have agreed with the following assessment of Gordon which John Adams confided to his diary:

He is an eternal talker, and somewhat vain, . . . very zealous in the cause, and a well-meaning man, but incautious, . . . fond of being thought a man of influence at headquarters, and with our Council and House, and with the general officers of the army, and also with gentlemen in this city [Philadelphia] and other Colonies. He is a good man, but wants a guide.¹⁷

¹⁴"Letters of the Revolution", Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston, 1929-1930), XXIII, 303-585. Herein are collected all of Gordon's numerous requests for access to the public and private letters of these individuals and also for those of John Adams.

¹⁵Ibid., LXIII, 304.

¹⁶His letter of December 19, 1776, to Washington, recommending a more rational disposition of Continental forces must surely have tried the General's patience. See Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society, XXIII, 331. Gordon was still offering unsolicited advice to Washington years after his return to England. In a letter of August 17, 1793, he recommended a drastic change in the federal constitution concerning the election of the President. To "prevent the gradual introduction of monarchy", he suggested that after Washington's retirement, the President be chosen alternately from each state for a single four-year term. See Jared Sparks (ed.), Correspondence of the American Revolution: Being Letters of Eminent Men to George Washington (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1853), IV, 437.

¹⁷Adams, Works, II, 423-24.

While gathering materials Gordon had thus alienated many of the leading patriots with whom he sympathized so intensely. The process of gradual alienation reached its climax in 1786 when the parson returned to England to complete and publish his history. His departure should have come as no surprise, since he decided on the move as early as 1782. In England he hoped to be more objective. On October 16 of that year Gordon wrote Horatio Gates that,

Should G Britain mend its constitution by the dangerous shock it has rec'd; . . . life, liberty, property, and character will be safer there [England] than on this side the Atlantic; and an Historian may use the impartial pen there with less danger than here [America].¹⁸

The disappointment of the patriot leaders on this occasion was over-shadowed by Gordon's own dismay upon discovering that the mood of England was no more receptive to an impartial history than was that of America. He was informed by friends in England that his history was not only too favorable to America, but also full of what English law would deem libels. He would most certainly be taken into court by numerous high-ranking Englishmen.¹⁹ His work consequently underwent a complete revision. Its plan, style, and spirit were recast to accommodate British tastes.

¹⁸Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society, XXIII, 475. Belknap apparently was informed of Gordon's plans also, for on September 2, 1782, he wrote to Ebenezer Hazard, "Is he going to England again? . . . and will he carry off all the papers he has collected towards an History of the Revolution?" See Belknap Papers, 147.

¹⁹Tyler, Literary History of the Revolution, II, 426; Monaghan, Dictionary of American Biography, VII, 426.

Numerous expressions were toned down and details of fact modified. Entire passages containing much original material were stricken out altogether.²⁰ In its final mutilated form the work appeared in four volumes in England in 1788. A three volume American edition was published the following year in New York. Gordon's original manuscript has never been recovered.

The prediction of one mid-nineteenth century American historian that Gordon's history would "be eagerly sought in every age" has proven unsound.²¹ The work, unjustifiably in terms of the present study, has long been discredited as little more than a plagiarism from the British Annual Register. The most recent study of the histories produced by the Revolutionary generation has, however, shed new light on Gordon's efforts. Emphasizing the author's access to a great mass of official papers, which he sometimes used, Edmund S. Morgan insists that Gordon's history, especially the first volume, is worth study for that reason.²²

David Ramsay's History of the American Revolution has been hailed by one recent scholar as perhaps the most thoughtful and

²⁰Evidence concerning the mutilation of Gordon's history may be found in Tyler's Literary History of the Revolution, II, 427-28; Kraus, History of American History, 126, cites passages from a letter of John Adams concerning what happened to Gordon's work.

²¹James S. Loring, "Our First Historian of the American Revolution", Historical Magazine, VI (February-March, 1862), 78.

²²Edmund S. Morgan (ed.), The American Revolution: Two Centuries of Interpretation (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), 180.

penetrating assessment of the Revolution by one of its participants.²³ Like the two foregoing historians, Ramsay (1749-1815) was a highly respected figure in his own day, even if he received scant attention since that time. A review of the more significant aspects of his life suggests that the reputation he once enjoyed was well founded. Though the son of an Irish immigrant farmer of the Pennsylvania back-country, Ramsay received degrees from the College of New Jersey and the Medical School of Philadelphia. On the eve of the Revolution he went to Charleston, South Carolina, where he remained for the rest of his life, making his living as a physician and a politician. Shortly after entering the State Assembly, he gained a seat on the Privy Council. He served two terms as the state's representative in the Continental Congress (1782-83, and 1785-86), and ended his political career as president of the State Senate in the late 1780's. His greatest political disappointment came in 1788 when he was defeated in the election for a seat in the new national House of Representatives. Ramsay wanted this post so that he could supervise the printing of his history of the Revolution while attending Congress.²⁴

A continually busy man, Ramsay wrote and spoke on many different topics. He delivered two Fourth of July orations

²³Ibid., 5.

²⁴Robert L. Brunhouse (ed.), David Ramsay, 1749-1815: Selections From His Writings, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society (Philadelphia, 1965), LV, 3, 20.

(in 1788 and 1794), eulogies to Washington, Benjamin Rush, and others; wrote numerous political and medical treatises, and a few short biographies.²⁵ His reputation, however, was based largely on his three major histories: History of the Revolution of South Carolina (1785), History of the American Revolution (1789), and the History of South Carolina (1809). In gathering materials for his histories, Ramsay relied heavily on firsthand observations and conversations with leading characters. In this regard he had excellent means of information, for all during the Revolution he served in some official station, either in the South Carolina Legislature or in the Congress of the United States. For a period during the war he served as a surgeon in the Charleston Battalion of Artillery, a local militia group. Although the great body of his correspondence has been lost and that which remains sheds little light on the sources he used for the general history of the Revolution, at least one of these letters indicates that Ramsay took advantage of his sessions in Congress to gather historical materials.²⁶ In several other letters Ramsay requested special information from those he

²⁵Ibid., 6-7. Contains a chronological table of his activities and publications.

²⁶Ibid., 101-02. David Ramsay to Benjamin Rush, May 3, 1786. "Mr. Thomson [Secretary of Congress, 1774-1789] has all General Washington's letters copied in books in the order of time and from my access to papers . . . & the regularity of records in the offices of Congress I have been able to do a great deal in a little time. For some months past I have spent from five to 8 hours a day at this work. The drudgery is nearly done."

thought capable of supplying it.²⁷

The reputation of Ramsay's history has followed a pattern identical with that of Gordon's history. It was highly praised throughout most of the nineteenth century, rejected as an outrageous plagiarism near the end of that century, and has, within the last decade, been very favorably re-evaluated. With Page Smith's insistence that Ramsay's analysis and interpretation of the causes of the Revolution entitle him to an "honorable position in the front ranks of American historians", the reputation of at least one Revolutionary historian has gone full cycle.²⁸ This study agrees with the more recent trend for the reasons developed on a comparative basis.

The name of Jeremy Belknap (1744-1798) needs less introduction than those of the preceding pages. Born in Boston and educated at Harvard for the Congregational ministry, Belknap was installed as pastor of the Congregational Church of Dover, New Hampshire, in 1767. After a twenty year pastorate in Dover, he returned to Boston to become minister of the church in Long Lane, which was originally a Presbyterian society, but

²⁷Ibid., 99-100. David Ramsay to Elias Boudinot [Commissary general of prisoners for the Continental Army, 1776-1779] and to Benjamin Rush. Both letters are dated April 13, 1786. Ramsay asked the former for information on the treatment of prisoners by the British, and the latter for anecdotes of some of the generals. Lists of very specific questions are added to each letter.

²⁸Page Smith, "David Ramsay and the Causes of the American Revolution", William and Mary Quarterly, Series III, Part 17 (1960), 77.

after the Revolution declared itself Congregational. While earning his living as a pastor, Belknap assumed a leading role in the social, educational, literary, and civic life of the community. He served a period on the Board of Overseers of Harvard College, and belonged to all the local learned and humanitarian societies of his generation.²⁹

Belknap's present-day reputation rests primarily on his History of New Hampshire (1784, 1791-92). This three volume work is remarkable for its research, penetrating analysis, and impartiality. This is especially true of the treatment of the Revolution in volume two. The study, which demanded twenty years of labor, entitles Belknap to a position at the front of the historians who wrote in the Revolutionary period.³⁰ Belknap's next great contribution to American history was his American Biography, containing sketches of the more famous early explorers and colonial leaders. Two volumes of the Biography were completed and published before Belknap's death in 1798. The greatest contribution Belknap made to the future of American historiography evolved from a plan he conceived in the summer of 1790 for an "Antiquarian Society". Under his competent leadership and the help of a few friends, this idea eventuated in the formation of the Massachusetts Historical Society, incorporated

²⁹Samuel A. Eliot, "Jeremy Belknap: A Paper in Recognition of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Massachusetts Historical Society", Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society, LXVI (October, 1936 - May, 1941), 98.

³⁰Michael Kraus, The Writing of American History (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), 73.

in 1794. Belknap served as Corresponding Secretary of the Society - the first of its kind in America - and became very active in promoting the formation of similar institutions in other states.

As a historian Belknap overcame the common limitations of his time. His professional obligations allowed him very little time for travel. He apparently crossed the boundaries of his native New England only twice, and then for a very short period. It might also be supposed his training and associations as a Puritan minister, as unclerical as he was, would have affected his way of looking at things. Relying on painstaking research and scrupulous accuracy, Belknap overcame all these difficulties. He is just beginning to be recognized as one of the very early pioneers in the writing of economic and social history.

In the light of the background and historiographical endeavors of the four historians, then, it appears that they came by essential traits for the studies they undertook. All wrote in terms of primary material. They used the reliable public records as well as the manuscripts in private hands, as, for example, the Register. A common sense awareness of the difficulty of dealing with their own patriotic bias and that of their environment forearmed them. To this they added critical minds, which came to bear on these matters and the events and personages involved in the Revolution. A consideration of their individual endeavors will elaborate their struggles as they effectively worked at their studies. The histories they produced are worthy of such an examination.

CHAPTER III

OBJECTIVITY IN THE HISTORIES OF WARREN,
RAMSAY, GORDON, AND BELKNAP

From the foregoing it is apparent that the four historians in question were qualified to write the history of the recent great events. An attempt to write a balanced and impartial account of the Revolution so soon after its completion was, nevertheless, a prodigious undertaking for anyone who had actually witnessed the struggle at firsthand. The prefaces to their works and their personal correspondence indicate that they were acutely aware of the problems confronting the historian of contemporary events. If their histories too often fall short of later standards of dispassionate narration, it is not due to any lack of determination on the part of the authors to view the Revolution impartially.

Warren, Ramsay, Gordon, and Belknap, along with the other historians and compilers of their era, began their studies with certain assumptions. They all agreed that the Revolutionary War was justified, that the colonists in the last resort were forced to fight, and that they fought for the rights of mankind and not simply for political independence.¹ It must be recognized that the avowals of impartiality by Warren, Gordon, Ramsay,

¹Van Tassell, 34.

and Belknap should be evaluated within the framework of these assumptions. By impartiality the authors did not mean personal neutrality. They naturally had their personal convictions on many topics, and these were incorporated in their histories. They did not feel that as historians they relinquished the right of expressing their own views. By including both sides of the argument on all controversial issues they fulfilled their obligation to historical objectivity. To do justice to conflicting views and thus present a balanced account was the expressed aim of each of the historians. It is seen here that they accomplished this standard of objectivity.

Mrs. Warren, of necessity, prefaced her history with a statement of her right to be heard. Writing in an age of female anonymity, she defiantly asserted her rejection of the belief that "all political attentions lay out of the road of female life". Although she did not intend to lay aside the tenderness of the sex, she insisted that on all occasions her heart would be governed by the "strictest veracity", and her pen guided by the "most exact impartiality".² John Adams, for one, did not think her history lived up to these promises. In a bitterly acrimonious exchange of letters with Mrs. Warren following the publication of her history, Adams accused her, among other things, of unjustly disparaging his character and his role in the revolutionary movement. Using little feminine charm, Mercy dismissed this charge with the statement that "from a

²Warren, I, p. iv, vi.

history so impartially and candidly written, . . . I believe you are the only man in the United States that would draw such an absurd conclusion".³

True to his background, the New England minister-historian, William Gordon, took what amounted to an oath to the truth of his history. Speaking in the third person, he assured his reading public that he had paid a "sacred regard to truth". His determination to do so was reinforced by the consciousness of "his being answerable to a more awful tribunal than that of the public". Gordon realized the impossibility of maintaining a completely detached attitude on all questions. He cautioned the reader not to condemn his occasional biases, for the reader too was subject to the like human failing.⁴ In his letters

³Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, XLIV, 364. Mercy Warren to John Adams, July 28, 1807. The publication of Mrs. Warren's history was the cause of a break in the old friendship between the Warren and Adams families. The Warren family generally leaned far more toward Republicanism than did John Adams and his clan. In her history Mrs. Warren did make certain insinuations about John Adams' monarchical leanings. It was not these insinuations, however, that upset Adams, but his belief that Mrs. Warren had minimized his role in the Revolution. In a letter of August 7, 1807, Mrs. Warren defended herself against this charge by remarking that the intention of her history was to make a "concise and just narrative of facts, . . . and not a labored, detail of characters". [Collections cited above, 424.] In justice to Mrs. Warren, it should be recognized that she did not spare her praise for Adams' role in negotiating the crucial Dutch loan, without which "it would have been impossible for the United States, under their complicated inconveniences and embarrassments, to have resisted so long the opulent and powerful nation of Britain". [History of . . . the American Revolution, III, 178-80.]

⁴William Gordon, The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America: Including an Account of the Late War; and of the Thirteen Colonies from Their Origin to That Period (New York: Hodge, Allen, and Campbell, 1789), preface to volume 1 [unnumbered].

preparatory to the writing of his history he professed his distaste for extravagant and florid language as an impediment to the achievement of strict historical truth. To General Gates he wrote that "in history truth is the diamond; fine composition is but the polish".⁵ Apparently, he had less confidence in his literary artistry than in the strength of his commitment to the truth. His finished work, though admirable in many respects, and perhaps a "diamond", is not a very well polished one.

The preface to David Ramsay's two-volume study of the Revolution is the most ingenious of the four. It consists, among other things, of a vague and incomplete listing of his sources and a strong statement of the truth of the author's narrative. Since the events he wrote of were known to thousands of his contemporaries, Ramsay explained, there was no need to supply extensive proofs for his text. He then logically appealed to the actors in the great events he recorded to witness the substantial truth of his narrative.⁶ It has been pointed out in a recent study of Ramsay that the physician-historian said a great deal in these few brief sentences. He generalized the statement of his sources, gave notice that he would not indicate his authorities - an accepted practice in the historiography of the era - and asked the reader to place full confidence

⁵Letters of the Revolution, 393. William Gordon to Horatio Gates, May 16, 1778.

⁶David Ramsay, The History of the American Revolution (Philadelphia: R. Aitken & Son, 1789), preface to volume I [unnumbered].

of candor".⁸ It was clear to even the most casual reader that Belknap intended to present an interpretation of the Revolution rather than a strict narrative account of its major events; and this is defensible as sound historiographical practice.

Warren, Ramsay, Gordon, and Belknap, then, began their histories with vigorous affirmations of their uncompromising attention to historical truth, and, as much as it was in their power, to professional impartiality. But it was one thing to make the pledge and another to honor it. Whether the four historians did so or not can best be seen by examining the treatment of a few of the more controversial issues of Revolutionary historiography in the works of each. The most basic of these is the question of the underlying causality of the revolt of the colonies.

Many major American historians of the era agreed that the War of Independence was justified and that it had been forced on the colonists. An important corollary of this is the conviction that had the British seen fit to abandon the design of taxing the colonies, and return to the pre-Stamp Act policy, all would have been peace and harmony. What is conspicuously missing in all four histories is any clear-cut notion that the revolt of the colonies was inevitable. Reconciliation, in the view of all four historians, was possible, and indeed, desirable

⁸Jeremy Belknap, The History of New Hampshire, Comprehending the Events of One Complete Century from the Discovery of the River Pascataqua (Philadelphia: Robert Aitken, Isaiah Thomas, & Ebenezer T. Andrews, 1784-1792), preface to volume 1 [unnumbered].

as late as the year 1775. This belief is stated explicitly by Gordon, Ramsay, and Belknap, and unmistakably implied in Warren's analysis of events from 1763 to 1775.⁹ While Warren differs from the other three in her vehement insistence that the British mercantile system was unnatural and oppressive from its very inception, she feels, however, that the colonists would have persevered under the oppression, had it not been for the additional affront of Parliament's unreasonable assertion of a right to tax the colonies, which was, after all, contrary to the spirit of the pre-Stamp Act policy.¹⁰

The Stamp Act of 1765, opening the whole critical question of colonial taxation, is the key issue in the estimation of all four historians. If some accommodation on this central constitutional issue could have been made, the rebellious tendencies of the colonists would have been checked in time and the dismemberment of the British Empire prevented. Their attempts to explain why such an accommodation was impossible reveal the true patriotic sentiments of the four historians. Ramsay, Gordon, and Belknap present penetrating and, on the whole, balanced expositions of the arguments on both sides of the controversy.¹¹

There is very little doubt in the mind of any of the three, however, that blame for the failure to arrive at a reconciliation

⁹Belknap, II, 318-19, 403; Gordon, I, 417; Ramsay, I, 309; Warren, I, 24-25.

¹⁰Warren, I, 23-24, II, 60-61.

¹¹Belknap, II, 332; Gordon, I, 123, 128; Ramsay, I, 44-46, 121, 151.

must be placed ultimately with the British ministry. To Ramsay the failure is due to the "pride and passion" of Parliament, the "lust for power and gain" on the part of Great Britain's rulers, and the inability of Parliament to distinguish the "opposition of freemen to unconstitutional innovations" from the turbulence of unprincipled mobs.¹² Gordon attributes it to "pernicious ministerial councils".¹³ Belknap stresses the "venality and corruption of" the British Parliament. He dismisses the British argument that a colonial revenue was needed to defray the expenses of protecting the North American frontiers as a pretense. The colonists perceived, he says, that the real intent of Parliament's insistence on its right to tax was "to extend the corrupt and venal principle of crown interference, through every part of the British dominions".¹⁴

Mercy Warren apparently determined not to encumber her examination of the causes of the Revolution with a boring analysis of legal and constitutional technicalities. Early in the first volume of her history the problem is neatly dispatched by attributing the Revolution to the "love of domination and . . . uncontrolled lust of arbitrary power" which has too often characterized the "dark pages of the British story".¹⁵ Sheer

¹²Ramsay, I, 138, 309.

¹³Gordon, I, 415-16.

¹⁴Belknap, II, 320.

¹⁵Warren, II, 5.

folly and misguided policies had in the long run proved the undoing of the British empire. Where the other historians resist the temptation to credit the dissension with the empire to the consciously wicked policies of George III and his principal ministers, Mrs. Warren partially succumbs to this line of reasoning. She does restrain her venom somewhat by dubiously granting that George was "more obstinate than cruel, rather weak than remarkably wicked."¹⁶ In justice to Mrs. Warren it should be recognized that she generally did evaluate the qualities of certain British figures impartially.¹⁷ A recent biographer of Warren has pointed out that she could be extremely lucid and perceptive about the faults of Americans as well.¹⁸

All four of the historians honestly tried to understand and explain the attitude of the British ministry toward the American colonists. Bewildered by what must have impressed them as unreasonable refusals to give a proper hearing to well-founded colonial petitions, they tried to explain this phenomenon to their contemporaries and to posterity.

All agreed that a large part of the explanation was that the authorities in England had been hopelessly misinformed of both the ability and the willingness of the colonists to submit to taxation. The area of agreement among the four is, however, somewhat narrower than might appear at first. Ramsay

¹⁶Ibid., 22-23.

¹⁷It was Moses Coit Tyler's contention that Mercy Warren "was unable to exhibit that twice blest quality announced in her baptismal name" when evaluating the characters of Englishmen. The Literary History of the American Revolution, II, 421.

¹⁸Anthony, 207.

and Warren charge the British with culpable ignorance of affairs across the Atlantic. Gordon and Belknap cite extenuating circumstances which, when accepted, make the erroneous calculations of the British officials easier to understand. The infatuation of gentlemen of landed interest with the prospect of easing their own tax burdens at the expense of the colonists was the source of the difficulty as Ramsay saw it. The influence of this group on the ministry precluded any serious investigation of the justice or feasibility of taxing the colonies.¹⁹ Warren, again avoiding technicalities, says simply that the respectful petitions of the colonial legislatures were ignored because the king and court were preoccupied with listening to the lies and accusations of "every worthless incendiary" who crossed the Atlantic.²⁰

Belknap and Gordon's explanation of the ministry's superficial acquaintance with affairs in America was somewhat different.²¹ They agreed that many of the ministry's false impressions of the colonies' prosperity were supported by the accounts of British servicemen returned from America after the Seven Years War. The officers told of being lavishly and extravagantly entertained in America. Motivated by gratitude and pride, Gordon and Belknap explained, Americans had outdone themselves

¹⁹Ramsay, I, 50, 249.

²⁰Warren, I, 67-68.

²¹The startling similarity of their accounts may be due to the fact that Gordon often referred to Belknap's history when writing his own. The fact remains that Gordon accepted Belknap's explanation.

in bestowing thanks on their British protectors and thus created the illusion of affluence.²² Belknap also pointed to the sons of wealthy American planters and merchants in English schools, who "exhibited specimens of prodigality" which confirmed British notions of American affluence.²³ The accounts in these two histories leave the reader with the impression that the British ministry was honestly ignorant, rather than consciously cruel and oppressive.

An investigation of that enigmatic group known as the American tories, or loyalists, presents, no doubt, the most severe test of the objectivity of an American historian working in the Revolutionary Era. For many years after the completion of the struggle, no American historian felt equal to the task of evaluating the numerical strength, the influence, or the motivations of the loyalists. Although the Revolutionary generation of historians would probably have preferred to ignore the loyalists entirely, they realized that the proportion of the problem would admit of no such omission.

Determining exactly what type of persons should be classified as loyalists was one of the more perplexing aspects of dealing fairly with this group. If Warren, Ramsay, Belknap and Gordon did not agree on precisely what constituted a loyalist, they did at least agree that some distinctions had to be made within the ranks of those Americans who opposed the Revolution.

²²Belknap, II, 319-20; Gordon, I, 122-23.

²³Belknap, II, 320.

In fact, the tendency of their contemporaries to apply the term indiscriminately to all those who failed to support the war elicited the strongest denunciations from all four historians. Lack of discernment in this area naturally wrought its worst effects in the immediate post-war years. It was only then that the patriots, having repulsed the foreign enemy, had the long-awaited opportunity to turn all their attention to the enemy within.

Belknap stated the problem best in speaking of the confiscation of loyalists' estates during and after the war in his native state of New Hampshire. He expressed strong regret that in the confiscations,

no distinction was made between those persons who had withdrawn themselves from the State, by a sense of duty; those who were in fact British subjects, but occasionally resident here; those who had absconded through timidity; and those who had committed crimes against express law, and had fled from justice . . . the whole were put indiscriminately into one black list, and stigmatized as 'having basely deserted the cause of liberty', and manifested a disposition inimical to the State, . . .²⁴

Such reckless abuses were not restricted to New Hampshire. Injustices committed in the name of patriotism were, however, identified and condemned as such by all four of the historians in question.²⁵ One of the most severe and far-reaching hardships visited upon the loyalists was the absence of any adequate provisions safeguarding their welfare in the final terms of the peace treaty ending the Revolution. That their British patrons

²⁴Ibid., 430-31.

²⁵Gordon, I, 389-90, II, 410-11, III, 376; Ramsay, II, 594-95; Warren, III, 256, 266-67.

had, in effect, abandoned the loyalists was immediately recognized by Mercy Warren. The loyalists, she observed, had very high claims on the gratitude of the British government; these claims obviously were not honored anywhere in the provisions of the final settlement between America and Britain. Warren stresses this point so strongly that she succeeds, at least in her own mind, in shifting the blame for the distresses of the loyalists from America to Britain. The victorious patriots were certainly not as benevolent as they could and should have been, but Warren insists that it "was the indispensable duty of the British government, to protect and to compensate."²⁶

While each of the historians makes much of the tribulations of the American tories during and after the war, it is Ramsay alone who makes a genuine attempt to understand and explain their motives. He is open-minded enough to grant that some of the loyalists took their stand on the basis of honor and principle.²⁷ His overall view, however, is anything but flattering to the Loyalists. He concludes that, in general,

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 friends of independence.²⁸

Unlike the others, Ramsay is interested in age and socio-economic status as determining factors in the decision of the

²⁶Warren, III, 218-19, 225.

²⁷Ramsay, I, 229.

²⁸Ibid., II, 599.

loyalists to oppose the Revolution. He concludes that old men were less inclined to become "warm whigs" than were the young. His findings on the political alignment of wealth during the Revolution are, at best, inconsistent. He says, for example, that the "great mass of the wealth, learning, and influence, in all the southern colonies, and in most of the northern, was in favor of the American cause". But then he notes that "few of the very rich were active in forwarding the revolution".²⁹ Though he may well have recognized the fine distinction between favoring and actively supporting the patriot cause, Ramsay does not convey any awareness of the differentiation to his readers.

All the same, this is objectivity in the face of unresolved complexities in what historians are still striving to understand. It can be said with certainty that the four historians were aware of the problem the loyalists posed - no small achievement for the first generation of historians. For anyone writing in the late eighteenth century to have done much better was, perhaps, impossible. The point which should be emphasized here, however, is that although they largely failed to understand the motives of the loyalists, Ramsay, Belknap, Gordon and Warren all earnestly disapproved of the severe retribution exacted by the patriots.

While the other historians, in large part, honor their pledges, the impartiality of Mrs. Warren largely falls short of the others. In the second volume of her study, for example, while condemning the "black catalogue of cruelties" perpetrated

²⁹Ibid., I, 228, II, 599.

by the British forces in India, she observes:

While the Ganges and the Indus were reddened with the blood, and covered with the slaughtered bodies of men, their armies in the west were endeavoring to reduce their former colonies, to the same state of slavery and misery with the inhabitants of that distant region.³⁰

The author of such a statement will, in many instances, fail to satisfy current standards of historical impartiality. A recent biographer of Mrs. Warren has observed that she made no attempt at "Thucydean impartiality" in her treatment of the Revolution.³¹

To a degree, dispassionate analysis eludes the grasp of all historians. But on the whole, those considered here came close to the mark, with Warren somewhat behind the others. The insight and balance evidenced in Ramsay's analysis and interpretation of the Revolution is found substantially in the studies of Belknap and Gordon.

³⁰Warren, II, 223-24.

³¹Anthony, 206.

CHAPTER IV

NATIONALISM AND SECTIONALISM IN THE EARLY HISTORIES OF THE REVOLUTION

Whether the period from the end of the Revolution to the start of the War of 1812 witnessed the development of a truly national perspective in the writing of American history has long been a disputed point among those interested in the historiography of the era. One school maintains that on the eve of the Revolution the colonies still lacked a genuine national outlook, and further, that an American history in the literal sense was not and could not be written until after the second great war with Britain in 1812. Stressing the prevalence of conflicting localisms, the absence of associations for the encouragement of national histories, and the lack of demand for general histories, some adherents of this school contend that a national outlook in American history did not seem normal until after the Civil War. The lack of a unifying theme, they explain, rendered the American incapable of dealing intelligently with events taking place outside his own colony. If a national history was to appear in the Revolutionary era, it would have to have been pieced together from what Daniel Boorstin has referred to as a "mosaic of local stories".¹

¹Daniel J. Boorstin, The Americans, Vol. II: The National Experience (New York: Random House, 1965), 362-63, 367-68.

It is the opinion of other historians that an emerging sense of New World nationality was apparent almost from the beginning of the colonial period. Though diversity in manners, politics, and religion certainly existed among the colonies and sections, these differences were, in the course of a century and a half, gradually subordinated to a growing native awareness and a sense of common cultural divergence from the old world. The sense of new world nationality, cultivated largely by New England ministers and chroniclers in the first century of the colonial period, became increasingly more pronounced and widespread in the decades preceding the Revolution.² The movement toward cultural autonomy was dramatized and accelerated by the successful termination of the Revolution, and reflected in the increasing demands for an independent literature and nationalistic research in the field of American history in the post-war period.³ Recognizing that national sentiment implies not only community of thought but also awareness of what is distinctive, some historians have emphasized that an appreciation of the differences between Americans and Englishmen was naturally fostered by the animosities and propaganda attending the Revolution.⁴ The war with England, as Merle Curti has pointed out, periodically brought together some of the best minds in all the

² Benjamin T. Spencer, The Search for a National Literature (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1952), 25.

³ Ibid., 2.

⁴ Merle Curti, The Growth of American Thought (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1943), 143-44; Evarts Boutell Greene, The Revolutionary Generation (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943), 303.

states, together with representatives of foreign powers, thus providing opportunities for the exchange of ideas and for the development of the spirit of American nationalism.⁵ But cultural nationalism would become a reality only when Americans stopped thinking of themselves as Englishmen in another part of the globe. The struggle for political independence, and especially the alliance with France, naturally undermined the American's inclination to look to England as the chief intellectual center of the world.

There can be little doubt that the Revolutionary upheaval was a substantial boost to the self-assurance and native awareness of the Americans. Although they faced substantial difficulties and received little encouragement for their tasks, the earliest American historians of the Revolution did not have to create a sense of American nationality, but simply support and encourage it. A century and a half of separate development, a period in which the colonies had advanced toward economic, social, and political maturity, could scarcely have passed without the appearance of a sense of cohesiveness in the colonies. Shortly before the Revolution, the astute French observer, Crèvecoeur, remarked that, for all their diversity, the colonists were becoming "Americans in general".⁶ It would have been surprising if some evidences of the Frenchman's observation were not to be found in the early histories of the Revolution.

⁵Curti, 144.

⁶Benjamin T. Spencer, The Quest for Nationality: An American Literary Campaign (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1957), 3.

It is, nevertheless, true that the generating influence of the Revolution's heightened spirit of patriotism upon scholarly achievement was first and most conspicuously reflected in those histories inspired by allegiances to particular states or regions. The work of the local historians such as Jeremy Belknap in New Hampshire, Samuel Williams in Vermont, Robert Proud in Pennsylvania, John Burk in Virginia, and Hugh Williamson in North Carolina must certainly be placed among the most outstanding achievements in American historiography in the early decades of the new nation. Interest in the Revolution provided a powerful stimulant to the study of colonial origins, and local historians were quick to demand recognition of their particular states' founding fathers and Revolutionary heroes as worthy as those of any of the rest. This was competition to be certain, but competition for national honors. The very pride which stimulated a feverish interest in local history was, in large part, a product of the new nationalism.⁷ Those who wrote local histories apparently believed, with Jefferson, that they were making important contributions to the history of the nation, a belief generally confirmed by those who undertook some more general survey of the Revolution.⁸

It has been noted that the interest in the history of the Revolution inevitably provided a strong stimulant to the study

⁷ Wesley Frank Craven, The Legend of the Founding Fathers (New York: New York University Press, 1956), 66.

⁸ Ibid., 73.

of colonial origins. Those who undertook such studies in the post-war years, however, had the considerable advantage of certain unifying themes denied to their pre-Revolutionary colleagues. Thomas Hutchinson's History of Massachusetts Bay (first volume, 1764) and Jeremy Belknap's History of New Hampshire (first volume, 1784) have often been used as a study in contrasts between pre- and post-Revolutionary histories. The most significant contrast is in the views of the meaning of life in America contained in each. Accepting the two histories as representative productions of their respective era, Russel Nye, has commented that while Hutchinson wrote with little conception of American history as something new and different, Belknap and other post-war local historians "looking back at exactly the same events, saw the colonial period as a dynamic series of acts moving straight to a goal - the creation of the United States - and studied it as an era of genesis and prophesy".⁹ Whether his colleagues shared Belknap's keen appreciation of the meaning of life in America and the significance of the Revolution, is a debatable point.

A belief which they all certainly shared, however, was that the success of the Revolution was to be attributed not to the efforts of a single colony or section, but to the concerted actions of the thirteen colonies. Those who wrote about the Revolution generally agreed that the most remarkable thing about

⁹Russel Baine Nye, The Cultural Life of the New Nation, 1776-1830 (2d. ed.; New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1963), 42. This same contrast is emphasized in Ralph N. Miller, "The Historians Discover America" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1946), 251.

it was the fact that in 1776, as John Adams later stated, "thirteen clocks had struck as one".¹⁰ The Revolutionary generation of historians were aware of the fact that Britain's military strategy was dictated by the strong conviction that the mutual jealousies of the colonies would seriously hinder the American military effort. That the expectations of the British in this regard were in the long run proven spurious was an obvious source of delight to Ramsay, Gordon, Belknap, and Warren. Each emphasized and exulted in the unity of sentiment and unselfish cooperation, which, they felt, characterized the prosecution of the war on the American side.

Warren and Ramsay, for example, were convinced that the support which the Bostonians received in their hard stand against the Coercive Acts motivated union with other sections. The severity of the acts was obviously intended to frighten the colonists into a humble submission to British policies by making an example of the hot-headed Bostonians. If such measures did not quash the spirit of rebellion immediately and completely, they would at least slow it down by forcing the more farsighted colonists to reflect on the wisdom of opposing Parliamentary decrees. The question of whether to support or abandon the Bostonians would introduce dissension and disaffection into the ranks of the patriots at a critical juncture in the Revolutionary movement. Ramsay and Warren clearly perceived the significance of and the strategy behind the Coercive Acts. They both, however,

¹⁰Craven, 63. Craven here cites Adams' remark.

insisted that the calculations which led British parliamentarians to approve such legislation were unsound. The hopes of splitting the Americans on this issue were pretty self-deceptions by British leaders who simply failed to appreciate the broad basis of colonial discontent. The effects of the Coercive Acts were directly contrary to the expectations of those who planned them, Ramsay insists, for instead of dividing the Americans, they provided a "cement of firm union among the colonies from New Hampshire to Georgia".¹¹ Warren was every bit as certain as Ramsay that the support for Boston on this occasion was uniform and consistent.¹² There is, however, a difference in the manner in which Warren and Ramsay analyze this aspect of the early Revolutionary struggle. While the former was content with simply drawing attention to a significant incident of concerted action and uniformity of sentiment in Revolutionary America, the latter attempted to explain why the colonies reacted the way they did.

The men who guided the helm of America, Ramsay insisted, recognized from the start that the people of Boston would surely be crushed unless they received the support and encouragement of the other colonies. But further, and more importantly, they realized that in the successful enforcement of the obnoxious legislation in Boston, a "precedent, injurious to liberty" would be established. This is why patriots from New Hampshire to

¹¹Ramsay, I, 97.

¹²Warren, I, 138.

Georgia rallied behind Boston. Ramsay noted significantly "that a people so circumscribed should take part with a distressed neighbor, at risque of incurring the resentment of the Mother Country, did not afford with the selfish maxims by which states, as well as individuals, are usually governed".¹³ But, Ramsay is careful to point out, the threat of the destruction of liberty in Boston was clear, and such a threat to one area was surely the harbinger of the obliteration of liberty throughout the colonies. That patriots in all the colonies were, at this early period, duly impressed with the seriousness of the crisis, and were willing to accept the suppression of local interests in favor of the national interest, was clearly a very pleasing thought to Ramsay. Prior to 1775 the Americans had enjoyed a long history of self-government, but only after that did they have the opportunity to prove they could cooperate at higher levels. Ramsay was proud of the way his countrymen responded to the challenge.¹⁴

Although the realization that the achievement of independence was the result of the cooperation of the thirteen colonies is not as evident in the histories of Gordon and Belknap as in those of Warren and Ramsay, it is not wholly lacking. That when the decision for independence was forced on the colonies, the people of New Hampshire "freely joined with their brethren in asserting it, and in bravely defending it", was a source of

¹³Ramsay, I, 100.

¹⁴Miller, 303.

pride for Jeremy Belknap.¹⁵ It is significant that when Belknap reached the Revolution in his history he recognized the necessity of broadening his field of investigation. His account of the military operations of the Revolution is characterized by a distinctly national focus. Belknap did not restrict his narrative to military actions which took place in, or affected New Hampshire, but presented instead a general sketch of the overall conduct of the war, emphasizing the role of the New Hampshire militia in certain actions.¹⁶ Even Gordon, whose analysis of the Revolution more closely resembles Boorstin's "mosaic of local stories" than any of the rest, thought it worth remarking that when American affairs were at their lowest ebb, "there was not a single state, or capital town or city, (if not wholly in the power of the enemy) that made advances toward submission".¹⁷

The realization that the Revolution could not have been successfully terminated without the cooperation of all the colonies allowed the historian to view the struggle along nationalistic lines. But there was a stronger and more obvious unifying theme available to those who wished to write a general history of the struggle. This was the belief that it presented

¹⁵Belknap, II, xi.

¹⁶Ibid., II, 410-24.

¹⁷Gordon, II, 185. This is a theme which Warren also dwells on. When Americans were suffering setbacks in both the north and the south, Warren insists that there appeared "not the smallest inclination among the people at large, throughout the American states, to submit to royal authority". (II, ii).

a lesson to the world in the virtues of republican government. In a Fourth of July oration years after the Revolution, David Ramsay expounded on this idea in the following precise terms: "Men of high rank, in Europe, have asserted, that a government formed at noon, on the equal principles we have adopted, would terminate before the setting of the sun", Ramsay said. "Let us teach them, by our example, that genuine republicanism is friendly to order and a proper subordination in society--that it is hostile to mobs and licentiousness of every kind, but the firm supporter of constituted authorities--the guardian of property, as well as the rights of man."¹⁸

Though it is not stated so concisely in his history, the recognition of America's designated mission in world history is manifest in Ramsay's analysis of the Revolution. The American Revolution, Ramsay constantly insists, was more significant than any other revolution in history. It was a struggle between the old and new worlds in the realms of both space and ideas, and most importantly, it was a struggle by the people for the right to govern themselves.¹⁹ The success of the Revolution gave the Americans the opportunity to demonstrate the feasibility of popular government. If they did so, they would vindicate not only republican government, but human nature as well. Thus the responsibility of the Americans to the oppressed peoples of the

¹⁸Brunhouse, 195. Brunhouse includes the complete texts of Ramsay's July 4 Orations of 1778 and 1794 in his study.

¹⁹Ramsay, I, 42.

world was great. Such staggering obligations devolved not upon New Englanders or Southerners, but upon Americans. The American mission was clearly too great an undertaking to be effectively discharged by any particular state or section alone. Hence, the Revolution as a unitary movement of states had to be undertaken.

Mercy Otis Warren was every bit as cognizant of the importance of the American experiment in self-government as Ramsay, and just as aware that the Revolution had made it all possible. "The world", she pointed out, "is now viewing a new system of government, a FEDERAL REPUBLIC." The success or failure of the experiment is of the greatest consequence, for if it succeeds, "it will refute the assertion that none but smaller nations are adapted to republican government".²⁰ The eyes of all Europe are upon the young nation, which must stand as a "monument of observation and an asylum of freedom".²¹

Both Warren and Ramsay were proud of the American experiment in self-government and aware that it was a national undertaking. Neither, however, was about to claim that Americans had a monopoly on love of freedom and on faith in man's ability to govern himself. Both apparently accepted the prevailing view that human nature was much the same everywhere.²² What made the experiment so significant, they pointed out, was that in testing the principles of self-government, the Americans

²⁰Warren, I, preface [unnumbered].

²¹Ibid., III, 298.

²²Nye, 44.

possessed certain God-given advantages which had been denied to other men. Lack of opportunity to demonstrate the strength and efficiency of a popular government previously, Ramsay²³ believed, explained the widespread skepticism of republicanism. But America, unfettered by monarchical and purely aristocratic traditions, and possessing great human and material resources, now had an excellent opportunity to prove the gloomy predictions of the European theoreticians false. Though somewhat more aware of the threats to republicanism in America, Mercy Warren agreed with her colleague that the American experiment was blessed with "more materials that promise success than have fallen to the lot of any other nation".²⁴

When the four historians thought about the future, they did so along distinctly national lines. This is not to deny the persistence and strength of local ties and jealousies in the post-Revolutionary period. However, the assumption that such local allegiances precluded the realization of a national focus in the writing of American history in the years after the Revolution is inaccurate. Awareness of the fact that independence had been achieved by the united action of the thirteen colonies, and acceptance of the concept of America's mission in world history enabled America's historians to view the history of the colonies as the history of the nation. Emphasis on these themes provided a basis for the writing of national histories in the period between the end of the Revolution and the start of the War of 1812.

²³Ramsay, 353.

²⁴Warren, III, 73-74, 400.

CHAPTER V

EFFECTS OF THE REVOLUTION AND THE PROSPECTS
FOR THE FUTURE

It was not, then, as difficult for America's post-Revolutionary generation of historians to envision the history of their native land as the story of a nation as has sometimes been supposed. In the interval between the end of the Revolution and the War of 1812 new world historians had time to pause and reflect on both the past achievements and the future prospects of their young nation. The cyclical theory of history provided a convenient vehicle for their thoughts on the first of the two temporal alternatives. In view of Britain's recent defeat and America's consequent arrival on the world stage, it is not surprising that America's historians looked favorably upon a theory which explained the sequential rise and fall of societies and nations in relation to their obedience to universal moral and natural law. The parallels, real or imagined, between the decline of ancient Rome and the recent embarrassment of Britain were too flattering to be overlooked by America's historians.

Elaborating on the contrasts between republican simplicity and the luxury and decadence of European court circles was an especially gratifying pastime for American historians in the

post-Revolutionary era. This quite naturally led to the conclusion that just as the corrupt Roman Empire had been overthrown by Tacitus's vigorous and virtuous Germanic hordes, so, too, the degenerate British Empire had suffered its first great setback at the hands of robust and unsullied republican patriots. Americans, furthermore, were not alone in the use of the analogy. Indeed, the interpretation was most clearly and pointedly expressed by an early nineteenth century writer in Cork, who, after cataloguing the internal maladies of Ancient Rome, noted that "the preceding description may suggest some of the causes which operated in the order of things, to separate the United States from Great Britain".¹ Nowhere in the four histories in question are the parallels between ancient Rome and contemporary Britain so clearly drawn.

Yet the conception of the cyclical rise and fall of empires, combined with Renaissance suspicion that the Old World was old to the point of death, exerted a powerful influence on the thinking of the Revolutionary generation of American historians. "After this [revolutionary] period," Mercy Warren asserted, "the American continent was viewed by all nations as a theatre just erected, where the drama was yet begun; while the actors of the old world having run through every species of pride, luxury, venality, and vice, their characters are become less interesting

¹An Historical Review and Directory of North America (2 vols.; Cork, 1801), I, 30-31. Cited by Howard Mumford Jones, O Strange New World (New York: The Viking Press, 1964), 250.

than those of the new".² As early as 1778 David Ramsay attributed the movement of empire from the Old to the New World to "the will of Heaven". On July 4 of that year he called the attention of his Charleston neighbors to the foundations of the new empire, which promised to "enlarge itself to vast dimensions, and to give happiness to a great continent". It was now America's turn, he proclaimed, "to figure on the face of the earth, and in the annals of the world".³

Many recent historians have commented on the use and strength of classical examples in the first few decades of America's early national existence. Most would agree with the contention of Howard Mumford Jones that from the first protests over the Stamp Act through the era of the French Revolution "classicism remained a powerful force, whether for propaganda, historical precedent, warning, or the theory of a republic".⁴ As tension between colonies and mother country mounted, and the ultimate resort to arms appeared more inevitable, the history of ancient empires, in the eyes of more and more thinking Americans, assumed greater relevance to their problems. In the post-Revolutionary period interest in Ancient History was encouraged by the conviction that the history of the distant past would furnish guidance for the young republic. Those who employed the cyclical theory were agreed that the America of

²Warren, III, 297-98.

³Brunhouse, 188, 190. The Oration of 1778.

⁴Jones, 251. Others who have focused attention on the use of the cyclical theory and of examples from antiquity by America's early historians are: Krause, The Writing of American History, 58-59; Nye, 43; Stow Persons, "The Cyclical Theory of History in Eighteenth Century America," American Quarterly, VI (July, 1954), 155.

their day belonged to the youthful stage of growth approaching maturity.⁵ They further agreed that the dynamic moving force within the cycle was the operation of the universal moral law.⁶ The concept of history as virtue teaching by example appears to have been widely accepted, as was the view that the decline and fall of empires represented divine judgment upon the corruption of men. Reflecting on the state of the War for Independence in 1778, David Ramsay found it hard to imagine that anyone could "seriously review the beginning, progress, and present state of the war, and not see indisputable evidence of an over-ruling influence on the minds of men, preparing the way for the accomplishment of this great event".⁷ In her history Mercy Warren bore testimony to "that Superintending Power which governs the universe, and whose finger points to the rise and fall of empires".⁸

In the preface to his history William Gordon acknowledged his acceptance of both the cyclical theory and of the prevailing belief that a study of the past would reveal certain axioms of national and human behavior. History, he said, "is calculated for the purposes of showing the principles on which states and empires have risen to power, and the errors by which they have fallen into decay, or have been totally dissolved". "It should

⁵Nye, 43; Persons, 155.

⁶Persons, 152, 161-63.

⁷Brunhouse, 189. The Oration of 1778.

⁸Warren, III, 64.

oblige all," Gordon continued, "who have performed any distinguished part on the theater of the world, to appear before us in their proper character, and to render an account of their actions at the tribunal of posterity, as models which ought to be followed, or as examples to be censured and avoided."⁹

In explaining the fall of Britain and the rise of America, historians in the new world found particular satisfaction in the use of the cyclical theory. But to educated men of the era, the cyclical theory of history implied not only the westward course of empire, but also of the arts and sciences. The cycle of culture, long ago begun in the east, would find its completion in the New World. "There is nothing," said John Adams, in explaining this view, "in my little reading, more ancient in my memory than the observation that the arts, sciences, and empire had travelled westward; and in conversation it was always added . . . that their next leap would be over the Atlantic into America."¹⁰ The Connecticut wit, Timothy Dwight, blandly predicted that the "progress of temporal things toward perfection" would be finished in the new world, and that human greatness would there "find a period".¹¹ Here again, the happiest forecasts of the Americans were often matched and occasionally exceeded by exponents for the life of the mind in Europe.¹²

⁹Gordon, I, Preface [unnumbered].

¹⁰Cited by Spencer, The Quest for Nationality, 22.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Curti, The Growth of American Thought, 147-48. Curti cites the happy predictions of Bishop Berkeley in 1731 and the Marquis de Chastellux in 1782 of the transfer from Europe to America of supremacy in the arts, letters, and sciences.

Americans, however, found more comfort in the belief that political freedom stimulated intellectual progress, than in European assurances of future cultural greatness for America. Attention has been called to the strong movement for cultural autonomy before and during the Revolution in America. Even before the successful completion of the struggle some Americans were predicting that their nation would win not only cultural independence from Great Britain, but cultural mastery of the entire world. The poet-diplomat, Joel Barlow, boldly predicted this in 1778, while David Ramsay, in a Fourth of July speech in the same year prophesied that "every circumstance concurs to make it probable that the arts and sciences will be cultivated, extended, and improved, in independent America. They require a fresh soil, and always flourish most in new countries". Ramsay then expressed the hope "that the free governments of America will produce poets, orators, criticks, and historians, equal to the most celebrated of the ancient commonwealths of Greece and Italy".¹³

Sixteen years later Ramsay delivered another Fourth of July speech in Charleston. Again he stressed the advantages of American independence, but in somewhat more sober terms. In 1794 he had very little to say about the state of cultural progress in the new world. That the expectations of Americans and Europeans on the blossoming of art, literature, and science in America were to be disappointed was inevitable. It was not

¹³Brunhouse, 185. The Oration of 1778.

that America possessed fewer men of talent than the other nations, but rather, as Russel Nye has pointed out, that the effort needed to forge and solidify a new state channeled most of her best talents into other than literary and artistic pursuits.¹⁴

Alone among the four historians, Jeremy Belknap resisted the temptation to glamorize the revolt of the colonies by allusions to Antiquity. The central constitutional question of the limits, if any, to the authority of Parliament was sufficient reason, in Belknap's estimation, for the War for Independence. And just as the most serious difficulties in Britain's relations with her American colonies had arisen over basic political and judicial matters, so, too, in Belknap's analysis, the major problems confronting the leaders of independent America were political and judicial. While he gloried in the achievement of independence, Belknap recognized that this in itself did not guarantee success to the American adventure. He clearly saw that the tumult and chaos of the Revolution had undermined respect for law and order in America. Much was yet to be done after the signing of the peace treaty with Britain. It remained, said Belknap, "to accommodate the minds and manners of the people under the new administration, to a regular course of justice, both public and private".¹⁵ The Constitution,

¹⁴Nye, 251.

¹⁵Belknap, II, 459.

guaranteeing the honoring of contracts and the payment of just debts, appealed to Belknap as a step in the right direction. But a larger problem remained. Once again the most important issue was the limits of political authority, no longer between Parliament and colonies, but now between central government and states. And again Belknap turned to the Constitution as the best tentative solution. It should be the "sincere prayer of every thoughtful citizen", he observed, "that such harmony may prevail between the general government, and the jurisdiction of each State, as the peculiar delicacy of their connexion requires".¹⁶ Belknap was quite clearly dismayed with the disregard for law and general lack of cohesiveness which characterized the conduct of affairs under the Articles of Confederation. The noblest objectives of the Revolution were apparently being compromised by a central government which commanded neither the respect nor the cooperation of the states. The Constitution, in Belknap's eyes, was the best hope for the survival of the young nation, and the only alternative to the disbanding of the union.

David Ramsay unfortunately terminated his account of the Revolution with the adoption of the Constitution. This may account for his unusually dim view of the effects of the Revolution and the prospects for his nation. He spent considerably more time analyzing the immediate effects of the Revolution on various aspects of American life than did his colleagues. He

¹⁶Ibid., 480-81.

concluded that on the whole the Revolution promoted the literary, political, and military talents of the Americans.¹⁷ Though educational institutions were generally closed or destroyed during the war, Ramsay correctly noted that the exigencies of the conflict had stimulated inquiries and discoveries in the realms of geography and surgery, and had also aided the art of public speaking.¹⁸ He also acknowledged that independence had done much to eliminate religious bigotry in the new world by alleviating the fears of dissenting sects that they would be forced to subscribe to the doctrines of the Church of England.¹⁹ But all these and other propitious consequences of the Revolution which Ramsay recognized, were far overshadowed in his assessment by the debasement of public morals during the struggle. While granting that all wars were injurious to the morals of those engaged in them, he insisted that the American Revolution had been pre-eminently so. Because it had been undertaken without adequate funds or "regular establishments," said Ramsay, the Revolution "could not be carried on without violating private rights; and in its progress, it involved a necessity for breaking solemn promises and plighted public faith." He deplored the seeming failure of national justice, which "weakened that sensibility to the obligations of public and private honor, which is a security for the punctual performance of contracts".²⁰

¹⁷Ramsay, II, 608.

¹⁸Ibid., 602-04.

¹⁹Ibid., 602.

²⁰Ibid., 608.

The destruction of churches during the war, the depreciation of the currency, and the lack of provision for the support of the clergy further contributed to the debasement of moral character in America, and the conditions in the post-war years provided little reason to expect an improvement of the situation. In his scheme of cyclical history, however, these conditions were to be sloughed off by future growth.

The fact that Ramsay made the Constitution the final act in his book is more than a coincidence. It is most likely that Ramsay, like Belknap, saw the document as the natural culmination of the Revolutionary movement. A consistent nationalist throughout his career, Ramsay believed in the necessity of a strong central government which could command respect and maintain order. In his home state he campaigned vigorously for the ratification of the Constitution.²¹ Had he seen fit to extend his study of the Revolution somewhat farther into the future, it is certain he would have closed it on a more optimistic note.²²

Both Belknap and Ramsay belie their political inclinations in their histories. The disgust with the shortcomings of the Articles of Confederation and the eager acceptance of the Constitution, so clear in the two studies, mark the authors as dedicated Federalists. Gordon and Warren, on the other hand, may safely be classified as Anti-Federalists. More precisely,

²¹Brunhouse, 19, 48.

²²This was suggested in an ad by an "English Friend", which preceded Ramsay's history.

Gordon was a Federalist in the classical sense of the term, and Warren was a Jeffersonian-Republican to her dying day. Party attachments, however, only modified the historians' analyses of post-Revolutionary America.

Throughout the three volumes of his history, William Gordon scrupulously avoided the temptation to allow his views on affairs in America to be colored by his political sentiments. His treatment of nearly all the controversial issues of the Revolutionary movement was vigilantly noncommittal. When he reached the post-Revolutionary period and analyzed the prospects for America, however, he occasionally slipped. Late in his third volume he refers to the proneness of peoples and governments to "put up with and practice internal encroachments upon liberty, when they have secured themselves from such as are foreign".²³ In the light of certain of his early letters to Washington and others, it is most probable that the "encroachments" Gordon warned against in the passage was the concentration of political authority in the hands of the central government. Shortly after the termination of hostilities between America and Britain, Gordon had seen fit to offer his unsolicited advice on the best future course for America to several of the Revolutionary leaders. In a series of letters from September, 1782, to August, 1783, he reiterated the idea that the most serious threat to America's new-won liberties was the danger of the young nation becoming an "offensive single

²³Gordon, III, 386.

empire". In 1782 he wrote to John Adams: "I would have her [America] remain a collection of Republics, and not become an Empire, for then freedom will languish and die". Gordon was convinced that if an individual or a Congress could command the entire force of the United States, the country would be "more formidable, but . . . less free."

The following year he felt compelled to write Washington that only by "strengthening the powers of government in each state" would there be hope for the survival of American liberties. In the same letter he expressed very strong fears of the increase in the powers of Congress.²⁴ Centralization of authority in the hands of the Federal Government was clearly, in Gordon's mind, the most ominous political trend in post-Revolutionary America. Although he carefully avoided expressing his opinion of the Constitution in his history, it is fairly certain in the light of his early correspondence that he did not rejoice in its ratification.

Mercy Otis Warren preserved her strong partisanship for the non-Federalist point of view unchanged to the end of her life. Her rigid stand on Jeffersonian-Republican principles colored her analysis of America in the post-Revolutionary period. While she was not less aware of the tumult and confusion of the nation under the Confederation Congress than were Ramsay and Belknap, Warren was less inclined to attribute the young nation's foundering to the weaknesses of the central government.

²⁴Proceedings of the Massachusetts Society, XXIII, 469, 488, 499. Letters to John Adams, Horatio Gates, and George Washington.

She preferred to dwell instead on America's "prolific soil, abundant resources, (and) commercial genius", all of which, she felt, augured well for the future of her nation. Unless America became "corrupted by foreign vices, or sunk by the indulgence of her own foolish passions", she inevitably would rise into eminence among the powers of the earth.²⁵ When Warren did take note of the disappearance of the "simplicity of manners" and the "sense of moral obligation" throughout America in the post-war years, she attributed this unfortunate development not to the weakness of the central government but to her countrymen's infatuation with foreign vices. Their "late connexions with other nations" had undermined the Americans' traditional respect for simplicity, justice, and moderation.²⁶

Along with her fellow historians, Mercy Warren gloried in the achievement of American independence and in the American experiment in Republicanism. Like the others, she too recognized that the defeat of Britain did not, in itself, guarantee success to the American venture. The attempt to prove the feasibility of self-government was fraught with dangers. Whereas Gordon stressed centralization of authority as the most serious threat to American liberties, Warren emphasized the subversive machinations of aristocratic cliques as the real danger. While Belknap prayed that the proper balance between the sovereignty of the states and the central government might be found, Warren

²⁵Warren, III, 233.

²⁶Ibid., 333-34.

warned that what was needed was a stable government capable of checking the "two extremes of democracy, and the overbearing influence of a young aristocracy".²⁷ The gravest danger, in Warren's view, was that enthusiasm for Republicanism would be undermined by the "language of some interested and ambitious men, who endeavored to confound ideas, and darken opinion, by asserting that republicanism was an indefinite term".²⁸ It is most likely that the "interested and ambitious men" whom Warren chastised were those very same individuals - John Adams, Hamilton, and the rest - whose advocacy of a strong central government and support for the Constitution presaged the eclipse of Warren's rigid Jeffersonian-Republican views.

Though the views of the four historians on the effects of the Revolution and on America's future are very dissimilar, they are alike in one negative respect. Nowhere in their investigations of post-Revolutionary America did the historians resort to cyclical interpretations of history. Why Warren, Ramsay, and Gordon shelved the cyclical theory when they reached the post-war period is obvious. The confused disjointedness of the states in these years, the too obvious foundering and impotence of the Confederation Congress, the depressed state of the currency, and other difficulties attending the adjustment to peace, were not easily reconciled with grandiose notions of New World empire. Perhaps the America "empire" had seen its day. Perhaps the unity of the colonies during the Revolution

²⁷Ibid., 298.

²⁸Ibid., 250.

represented the apex of the American cycle in the world. Perhaps the inevitable cyclical pattern was being accelerated in the New World, and America was entering its downward stage. Better not to think about it. As partisans they pleaded for reforms of these exaggerated defects. As historians they assumed progressive evolution, even if they would not prophesy how the evolution was working out at the moment. But historians are not prophets. They sometimes must be politicians.

CONCLUSION

Modern American historians have often expressed surprise that the Revolutionary generation produced so little historical writing about the dramatic circumstances and events of the nation's struggle for independence. Their surprise is due, in part, to a disregard of some of the better histories written by the witnesses to the Revolution, and, in part, to a lack of appreciation of the obstacles to sound historical research in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This study has attempted to draw attention to some of the more substantial difficulties confronting the earliest historians of the American Revolution, and to evaluate four representative histories in the light of those difficulties.

The impediments to scholarly historical research in Revolutionary America were real and numerous. Added to the extraordinary difficulties of locating and analyzing the many scattered sources, was the lack of encouragement with which the leading figures of the Revolution responded to the historian's requests for materials and advice. Though they were eager that the memory of the War for Independence be preserved in accurate histories, their direct roles in the major events of the Revolution and their intimacy with its leading characters, forced John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, John Jay and others to conclude that a complete history of the Revolutionary Movement could not

be written. Fortunately, this conclusion did not lead Adams, Jefferson, and the rest to deny all requests for the use of their papers and their counsel.

The aspiring historian of the Revolution was rarely refused outright. In the absence of any central body of reference materials or even local historical societies, the historian's only recourse was to gather the requisite materials by extensive travel and voluminous correspondence. With the right amount of time, money, and industry, he could gain access to the public and private papers of the Revolution's leading figures. At some point in his search for materials, however, the historian was assuredly informed that while what he was doing was significant, it could never be done adequately. The surprising thing is not that so few histories were produced by the Revolutionary generation, but that any accurate and balanced histories were produced at all.

The four authors treated in this study were among the more qualified witnesses of the Revolutionary upheaval who chose to write its history. Jeremy Belknap, Mercy Otis Warren, William Gordon, and David Ramsay possessed the only tools available to the historians of their era. For materials for their histories they relied, for the most part, on firsthand observation of the major events of the Revolutionary movement and close acquaintance with its leading characters. They all conducted extensive correspondence with the Revolutionary leaders preparatory to the writing of their histories. To their ample opportunities for firsthand information, they added a common sense awareness

of the difficulties of treating contemporary events objectively. If their finished works fail to satisfy modern standards of historical impartiality, the failure is not due to any lack of determination on the part of Belknap, Warren, Ramsay, and Gordon to treat the Revolution's major events and characters fairly.

In dealing with the causality of the Revolution, all four authors took a legalistic, or constitutional, approach to the question. The issue of colonial taxation, centering on the Stamp Act controversy of 1765, was the critical question in the judgment of Belknap, Warren, Ramsay, and Gordon. Though their analyses of this question varied slightly, the four historians agreed on two important points: first, that the blame for the failure to arrive at a suitable agreement on this question was Britain's; and second, that British officials were incapable of dealing rationally with the issue because they had been hopelessly misinformed of the colonists' willingness and their ability to pay taxes.

Determining the motives, the numbers, and the influence of the loyalists during the Revolution, is a task which continues to confound historians in the twentieth century. To even address himself to the question was no mean task for any American historian writing in the Revolutionary era. To have fully understood and appreciated the motives of the loyalists in that period was, perhaps, impossible. Ramsay alone among the four historians attempted to explain what prompted the loyalists in their opposition to the Revolution. His conclusions were none too flattering for the loyalists and in some instances inconsistent. Ramsay,

however, was joined by his three colleagues in rigorously denouncing the severe retribution exacted by the patriots from the loyalists during and after the Revolution. What all four deplored most was the unwillingness of their countrymen to recognize distinctions within the ranks of those Americans who opposed the Revolution.

Ramsay, Gordon, Belknap, and Warren viewed the history of the United States as the story of a nation. In the light of their histories, the contention that the persistence of strong regional diversity in manners, politics, and religion in America after the Revolution precluded the development of a national perspective in the writing of American history must be rejected. This study has attempted to demonstrate that these strong localisms, though certainly not eliminated prior to the Revolution, gradually subsided after a century and a half of a growing sense of national self-awareness in the colonies. Moreover, the Revolution itself provided a great stimulant to the growing sense of nationhood, and this burgeoning native awareness was reflected in the histories of America's revolutionary generation.

The historians agreed that the success of the patriot cause was the result of the concerted efforts of all the colonies. Emphasis on this theme allowed them to view the struggle for Independence along nationalistic lines. But a stronger unifying theme in the hands of America's post-Revolutionary historians was the belief that the American experiment in self-government would present an object lesson on the virtues of Republicanism. This theme was seized upon as the mission of the American nation in world history.

In recording the recent achievements of their young nation, the Revolutionary generation of American historians adopted a very satisfying vehicle for the expression of their thoughts. The cyclical theory of history, with stress on the operation of the universal moral law as the moving force in the cycle, was, indeed, a very pleasant way of explaining Britain's recent defeat and the consequent arrival of America on the world stage. It was pleasing to Americans to view their new nation, in Mercy Warren's words, "as a theatre just erected, where the drama was yet begun", and to contrast this scene with the exaggerated tales of European decadence and venality. Belknap alone among the four historians resists the temptation to glorify the successful revolt of his countrymen by allusions to Antiquity.

But the cyclical theory was abandoned by all of the historians when they turned their attention from the Revolution itself to its after effects. It was too difficult to reconcile their grandiose notions of American political and cultural greatness with the too obvious confusion and foundering of the states under the Articles of Confederation. A candid examination of the immediate post-war years was bound to inject a note of dismay into their histories. In trying to determine where the weakness of their young nation lay, the four historians looked more to their political attachments than to any particular philosophy of history. To Federalists Belknap and Ramsay, the answer was clear. The fatal flaw was the weakness of the central government under the Articles. William Gordon, on the other hand, felt certain that an increase in the power of the central government could only

result in the sacrifice of American liberties. Staunch Jeffersonian Republican that she was, Mercy Otis Warren shared Gordon's distrust of the centralization of political authority. But the real threat to American liberties, as Warren saw it, was her countrymen's attraction to foreign vices and the influence of aristocratic cliques.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

- Adams, Charles Francis (ed.). The Works of John Adams. 10 vols.; Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1850-1856.
- Belknap, Jeremy. The History of New Hampshire, Comprehending the Events of One Complete Century from the Discovery of the River Pascataqua. 3 vols.; Philadelphia: Robert Aitken, Isaiah Thomas & Ebenezer T. Andrews, 1784-1792.
- Belknap Papers. Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Part I, Series V, XLII; Boston, 1877. Part III, Series VI, LIV; Boston, 1891.
- Boyd, Julian P. (ed.). The Papers of Thomas Jefferson. 16 vols.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950---
- Brunhouse, Robert L. (ed.). David Ramsay, 1749-1815; Selections From His Writings. Transactions of the American Philosophical Society. Philadelphia, 1965. LV.
- Burnett, Edmund C. (ed.). Letters of Members of the Continental Congress. 8 vols.; Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1963.
- Butterfield, Lyman A. (ed.). The Letters of Benjamin Rush. 2 vols. Published for the American Philosophical Society by Princeton University Press, 1951.
- Cappon, Lester J. (ed.). The Adams-Jefferson Letters. 2 vols.; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959.
- Correspondence Between John Adams and Mercy Otis Warren Relating to Her History of the American Revolution. Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Series V, XLIV; Boston, 1878.
- Cushing, Harry Alonzo (ed.). The Writings of Samuel Adams, 1764-1802. 4 vols.; New York: C. P. Putnam & Sons, 1904-1908.
- Fitzpatrick, John C. (ed.). The Writings of George Washington From the Original Manuscript Sources. 39 vols.; Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931-1944.

- Gordon, William. The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment of the Independence of the United States of America; Including an Account of the Late War; and of the Thirteen Colonies from Their Origin to That Period. 3 vols.; New York: Hodge, Allen, and Campbell, 1789.
- Johnston, Henry Phelps (ed.). John Jay: Correspondence and Public Papers. 4 vols.; New York: C. P. Putnam & Sons, 1890-1893.
- "Letters of the Reverend William Gordon: Historian of the American Revolution, 1770-1799". Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society. LXIII; Boston, 1931.
- Ramsay, David. The History of the American Revolution. 2 vols.; Philadelphia: R. Aitken & Son, 1789.
- Sparks, Jared (ed.). Correspondence of the American Revolution: Being Letters of Eminent Men to George Washington. 4 vols.; Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1853.
- Warren, Mercy Otis. History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution, Interspersed with Biographical, Political, and Moral Observations. 3 vols.; Boston: Manning, 1805.
- Wilstach, Paul (ed.). The Correspondence of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, 1812-1826. Indianapolis: The Bobbs Merrill Company, 1925.
- The Writings of Thomas Jefferson. 20 vols.; Washington, D.C.: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association of the United States, 1903.

Secondary Sources

Books

- Anthony, Katharine. First Lady of the Revolution. New York: Doubleday and Company, 1958.
- Boorstin, Daniel J. The Americans. Vol. II: The National Experience. New York: Random House, 1965.
- Craven, Wesley Frank. The Legend of the Founding Fathers. New York: New York University Press, 1956.
- Curti, Merle. The Growth of American Thought. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1943.
- Ellet, Elizabeth. Women of the American Revolution. 3 vols.; 5th ed.; New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1852-1853.

Greene, Evarts Boutell. The Revolutionary Generation. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943.

Jones, Howard Mumford. O Strange New World. New York: The Viking Press, 1964.

Krause, Michael. A History of American History. New York: Farrar and Rinehart, Inc., 1937.

_____. The Writing of American History. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953.

Morgan, Edmund S. (ed.). The American Revolution: Two Centuries of Interpretation. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965.

Nye, Russel Blaine. The Cultural Life of the New Nation, 1776-1830. 2d. ed.; New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1963.

Spencer, Benjamin T. The Quest for Nationality: An American Literary Campaign. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1957.

_____. The Search for a National Literature. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1952.

Tyler, Moses Coit. The Literary History of the American Revolution, 1763-1783. 2 vols.; New York: Frederick Angora Publishing Company, 1958.

Van Tassell, David D. Recording America's Past: An Interpretation of the Development of Historical Studies in America, 1607-1884. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960.

Vaughan, Alden T. Chronicles of the American Revolution. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1965.

Articles and Periodicals

Eliot, Samuel A. "Jeremy Belknap: A Paper in Recognition of the One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Massachusetts Historical Society," Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society, LXVI (October, 1936 - May, 1941), 96-106.

Hutcheson, Maude. "Mercy Warren, 1728-1814," The William and Mary Quarterly, X (July, 1956), 378-402.

Loring, James S. "Our First Historian of the American Revolution," Historical Magazine, VI (February, 1862), 41-49; (March, 1862), 78-83.

- Mayo, Lawrence S. "Jeremy Belknap," Dictionary of American Biography, II, 147.
- Monaghan, Frank. "William Gordon," Dictionary of American Biography, VII, 426.
- Morgan, Edmund S. "The American Revolution: Revisions in Need of Revising," The William and Mary Quarterly, XIV (January, 1957), 3-15.
- Persons, Stow. "The Cyclical Theory of History in Eighteenth Century America," American Quarterly, VI (July, 1954), 147-164.
- Stromberg, R. N. "History in the Eighteenth Century," Journal of the History of Ideas, XII (January, 1951), 295-304.

Other Sources

- Miller, Ralph N. "The Historians Discover America," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1946.