



American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804

Alan Taylor

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“Excellent . . . deserves high praise. Mr. Taylor conveys this sprawling continental history with economy, clarity, and vividness.”—Brendan Simms, *Wall Street Journal*

The American Revolution is often portrayed as a high-minded, orderly event whose capstone, the Constitution, provided the nation its democratic framework. Alan Taylor, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, gives us a different creation story in this magisterial history. The American Revolution builds like a ground fire overspreading Britain’s colonies, fueled by local conditions and resistant to control. Emerging from the continental rivalries of European empires and their native allies, the revolution pivoted on western expansion as well as seaboard resistance to British taxes. When war erupted, Patriot crowds harassed Loyalists and nonpartisans into compliance with their cause. The war exploded in set battles like Saratoga and Yorktown and spread through continuing frontier violence.

The discord smoldering within the fragile new nation called forth a movement to concentrate power through a Federal Constitution. Assuming the mantle of “We the People,” the advocates of national power ratified the new frame of government. But it was Jefferson’s expansive “empire of liberty” that carried the revolution forward, propelling white settlement and slavery west, preparing the ground for a new conflagration.

American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804 Details

Date : Published September 6th 2016 by W. W. Norton & Company

ISBN :

Author : Alan Taylor

Format : Kindle Edition 682 pages

Genre : History, North American Hi..., American History, Military History, American Revolution, Nonfiction, War, Literature, American

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Ted Hunt says

This is a very interesting and important book on the American Revolution. Its subtitle calls it a "continental history," and it lives up to that notion, as it moves the "camera" back from a narrow focus on the conflict in the 13 colonies/states to a broader focus that includes the Caribbean, South America, Canada, and the American West. (And to be honest, it moves beyond the Western Hemisphere, as it crosses the Atlantic Ocean to describe the birth of Sierra Leone.) Because of the broader frame through which it views the Revolution (and not simply the "war of the Revolution"), it does not go into as much detail about the military campaigns of the war. But there are other books that do this extremely well, so the reader can take on this book as a complement to other histories of the Revolution rather than as an all-encompassing volume. The book does an excellent job of analyzing the impact of the Revolution on groups like Loyalists and slaves, and it truly does show the broad range of impact of the struggle, most notably on the American Indians of the West (today's Midwest). Perhaps the strongest part of the book was its final chapter, "Legacies," which describes the impact of the Revolution on American life in the immediate postwar era. It addresses very thoroughly the question of "how revolutionary was the American Revolution". I only have two complaints about the book: 1. there are a couple of fairly serious factual errors, most notably the author's statement that the Sedition Act was repealed after Jefferson was inaugurated (the law had actually expired--by design-- the day before); and, 2. the final part of the book (from the ratification of the Constitution to 1804) dealt with that period of history too superficially to be of real value. In my view, the book would have been just as valuable if it had ended its narrative in 1788 and then concluded with its "Legacies" chapter. In any event, "American Revolutions" is a welcome addition to my book shelf.

Steve Middendorf says

With all the talk lately about defending the Constitution and particularly certain Amendments to it, I was motivated to buy a copy of The Federalist Papers, a series of 85 articles commissioned by Alexander Hamilton as to why the States should ratify this proposed system of government. In fairness, I also noticed and bought a copy of The Anti-Federalist Papers. What can I say, I'm a middle child. However, the very first line of The Federalist Papers, "In September 1787..." What? The only date I remembered was 1776 and the signing of The Declaration of Independence. What happened in the intervening 11 years? And, now that I was interested, what was the history of the American Revolution that generated this new Constitution that Hamilton was arguing "For" and certain others were arguing "Against?"

One of the unheralded benefits of old age is the ability to get distracted and the freedom to follow up on it. So: I set aside The Federalist Papers and The Anti Federalist Papers. Back to the booksellers I went for a book on the American Revolution. From the many books on the subject, I chose this book: American Revolutions: A Continental History, by Alan Taylor. Taylor specialises in the subject, has written 10 books on it and has won the Pulitzer Prize for his writing. I particularly liked this line from the book jacket. "This magisterial history reveals the American Revolution in its time, free of wishful hindsight." "Perfect context" I thought, for my refresher on 'American' history.

From my school boy days, I remembered the American Revolution as a heroic battle of good against evil in the name of freedom, justice and liberty for all. It was not nearly that. One third of the colonists (Loyalists) received patronage and remained loyal to England throughout the war. Another one third (Merchants and Slave Owners) saw the "republican" revolution as a threat to their economy and their fortunes. In addition to

owning plantations, this group became the first shoddy American Real Estate Developers. They (including Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin) got million acre grants from the Crown and sold 160 acre blocks to the last group on dodgy financing schemes. The remaining one third were historical Donald Trump supporters: they fought the wars; they paid the taxes; they couldn't get any respect. All the players in this except the slaves, women and the Indians shared the common characteristics of hypocrisy, greed, and the vicious control and betrayal of those with less power.

Now I am ready to read the Federalist Papers. But here are some quotes from the book which include reference to or quotes from all of our whitewashed heroes of the American Revolution.

In 1775, Benjamin Franklin recalled, "I never had heard in any Conversation from any Person drunk or sober, the least Expression of a Wish for a Separation, or Hint that such a Thing would be advantageous to America."

Instead of resolving the union's problems, the Federal Constitution postponed the day of reckoning until 1861, when the union plunged into a bigger civil war that nearly destroyed the nation. That later civil war erupted over western expansion: whether territorial growth would commit the nation to free labor or, instead, extend slave society and its political power.

Thanks to the swelling volume of trade, the colonial economy grew faster than did Britain's. From just 4 percent of England's gross domestic product in 1700, the colonial economy blossomed to 40 percent by 1770, assuming greater importance to the empire.

Per the law of coverture, a British colonial woman passed by marriage from legal dependence on her father to reliance on a husband, losing her last name and gaining no civil rights. The influential jurist William Blackstone explained, "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or . . . consolidated into that of the husband." (note: liberty attained in the revolution did not change this.)

Colonial politics lacked formal parties, but there was an unstable polarity pitting a faction that supported the governor against his more numerous opponents, who resented exclusion from his patronage. Posing as "Patriots," the opponents claimed to defend colonial liberty and property against the greed of a grasping governor and his corrupt minions. In Pennsylvania, a governor lamented that "the people" were "always fondest of those that opposed the Gov't." Another governor noted the conviction of Virginians "that he is the best Patriot that most violently opposes all Overtures for raising money."

Yet on a per capita basis, the colonists paid only 1 shilling in tax directly to the empire compared to 26 shillings per capita paid in England.

We might have been a free and a great people together." But that imagined empire of freedom depended on a shared superiority over natives and the enslaved.

The colonial land system favored speculators and governors at the expense of Indians, who lost the land, and settlers, who had to rent or buy their new farms.

In the North Carolina back country, settlers faced similar demands for payments from speculators who claimed millions of acres. If settlers balked, they faced expensive lawsuits, which they almost always lost because the county sheriffs and justices were appointed by a royal governor in cahoots with the speculators.

Imperial officers also could not control the speculators who defied the Proclamation Line to stake illicit claims to vast tracts. The speculators feared that common squatters were taking the best lands while the Proclamation deprived gentlemen of the legal standing to prosecute and evict intruders. In 1767, George

Washington directed his land agent “to secure some of the most valuable Lands in the King’s part . . . notwithstanding the Proclamation that restrains it at present & prohibits the Settling of them at all, for I can never look upon that Proclamation in any other light (but this I may say between ourselves) than as a temporary expedient to quiet the Minds of the Indians & must fall of course in a few years.” His agent dutifully marked and claimed 25,000 acres. Washington urged him “to keep this whole matter a profound Secret” and “leave the rest to time & my own Assiduity to Accomplish.

By offering just £10,000 (and ultimately paying much less), Henderson and (Daniel) Boone acquired a shaky Cherokee title to 20 million acres in Kentucky.

During the mid-1760s, competing elites divided Boston and other seaports. By winning royal favor, some prestigious families had secured the most lucrative and powerful offices. Gentlemen with less clout posed as Patriots to champion the rights of common people.

In Boston in October 1769, a defiant conservative printer, John Mein, revealed that some Sons of Liberty, including John Hancock, covertly imported goods while exploiting the boycott to drive smaller competitors out of business.

As poor men filled the ranks, politicians became more indifferent to supplying the army with pay, clothing, and food. Congress also mismanaged the commissary and quartermaster departments, which were supposed to supply the troops. Confusion, corruption, and incompetence brought rancid meat, spoiled flour, or nothing at all to the encampments. For want of proper uniforms, soldiers often looked like ragged beggars. The post-1776 Continental Army belied the myth of heroic citizen-soldiers putting down the plow to pick up their muskets and win the war. In fact, a small regular army of poor men sustained the Patriot cause by enduring years of hard duty and public neglect. Although often initially conscripted, soldiers developed a commitment to the cause greater than their more fortunate neighbors who stayed home

A popular myth casts the revolution as waged by a united American people against British rule. That myth derives from Patriot claims to speak for all true Americans, dismissing Loyalists as a deluded few corrupted by the British. A Patriot declared, “A Tory is a thing whose head is in England and its body in America, and its neck ought to be stretched” by hanging. After the revolution triumphed, nationalist historians endorsed the Patriot view, marginalizing or ignoring Loyalists to concoct a unifying American identity. In fact, the revolution divided families and neighborhoods. Benjamin Franklin hated his son William for clinging to loyalty.

Political choices were often unstable and temporary. The ebb and flow of victory and defeat in a long war flipped many people from one side to another and sometimes back again with sojourns along the way in the broad ranks of the wavering. Many profited by selling their produce or services to the likely victors: a probability which changed as one force surged at the expense of the other. More often, people acted defensively, switching sides to save farms and lives from the power of the ascendant party. Paine complained of the many Pennsylvanians “who are changing to whig and tory with the circumstances of every day.”

In 1775, the New England states enlisted 200 blacks, but Washington forbade recruiting any more. He subscribed to the prevailing, although contradictory, conviction that black people were too cowardly to fight and, yet, that training them as soldiers menaced white domination.

While waging war in the east against British rule, Patriots fought west of the Appalachians to suppress the independence of native peoples. Patriots meant to create an “empire of liberty” premised on the ability of common whites to obtain private property by taking land from Indians. Noting that frontier folk “will settle the lands in spite of every body,” Jefferson reminded Congress that all “endeavours to discourage and prevent the settling [of] our Western Country” had failed, so it was “necessary to give way to the torrent.”

In 1784, Robert Morris resigned as superintendent of finance for want of any money to superintend. A year later, much of the foreign debt owed to France and Dutch investors came due, but Congress had nothing to pay. Spain's ambassador reported that the United States was "almost without Government, without a Treasury, or means of obtaining money, and torn between hope and fear of whether or not their Confederation can be consolidated." The American foreign secretary, John Jay, agreed, "Our federal Government is incompetent to its Objects."⁹⁷ Weak and diffuse, the American union had become a diplomatic joke in Europe. "To be more exposed in the eyes of the world & more contemptible than we already are, is hardly possible," Washington lamented. He expected "the worst consequences from a half-starved, limping Government, that appears to be always moving upon crutches, & tottering at every step." Lord Sheffield declared that the United States "should not be, for a long time, either to be feared or regarded as a nation." Britons felt contempt for the weak republican union, which seemed doomed to collapse: "Their Fate seems to be—A DISUNITED PEOPLE, till the End of Time." Posted as a diplomat in Paris, Jefferson reported that Europeans "supposed everything in America was anarchy, tumult, and civil war." Without a truly national government, Americans could not secure reciprocity in foreign trade.

Austerity policies coupled with high taxes redistributed income from common people to pay wealthy public creditors. In 1786, just sixty-seven creditors received almost all of Pennsylvania's annual interest payments. In Rhode Island, sixteen men owned half of the public debt. That debt became consolidated in fewer hands because common men rarely could afford to keep their paper certificates issued by government officials during the war. Under subsequent austerity policies, they needed specie to pay taxes and private creditors, so they sold certificates to speculators for hard pennies on the paper dollar. Then the hard-pressed former holders of the debt had to pay higher taxes to fund the full face value of the certificates to the speculators. A Massachusetts newspaper writer blamed the "great possessors" of the public debt for the "abominable system of enormous taxation, which is crushing the poor to death."

In March 1787, Washington conceded the potential "utility" and perhaps "necessity" of a switch to monarchy but worried that such a counterrevolution would shake "the Peace of this Country to its foundation."⁵⁵ Like Washington, most gentlemen still hoped to find, in Madison's words, a "republican remedy for the diseases most incident to republican government." They wanted to redesign republican governments to weaken the many and empower the few. Rejecting equality, Benjamin Lincoln insisted, "Men possessed of property are entitled to a greater share in political authority than those who are destitute of it."

Foiled at the state level, conservatives turned to an alternative: concentrating power in a national government. By ditching the weak Articles of Confederation and writing a new constitution, conservatives hoped to kill two political birds with one stone. While rescuing the federal government from impotence and irrelevance, they would also subordinate the state governments. Hamilton attributed revived nationalism to "most men of property in the several states who wish [for] a government of the union able to protect them against domestic violence and the depredations which the democratic spirit is apt to make on property." Conservative worries about the weak union merged with a growing dread of state governments as too strong and democratic. To achieve both goals, nationalists drew on the ideas of James Madison. From a close study of state politics, Madison concluded that a popular majority could act as tyrannically as any king. During the 1770s, Patriots had sought to free the people from the tyranny of executive power. A decade later, Madison decided that in a republic "it is much more to be dreaded that the few will be unnecessarily sacrificed to the many." He insisted that a truly just republic had to "protect the minority of the opulent against the majority."

In August, another heated debate erupted over continuing the import slave trade. On this issue, southern delegates divided. Seeking to expand their operations, planters in the Lower South demanded continued imports from Africa. The Upper South's leaders, however, believed that they had a surplus and could profit by sales to the Lower South. Banning import competition would enhance those profits, but principle also played a role with some delegates, particularly Madison, who insisted that importing more slaves would "dishonor" the nation.

Americans often romanticize the founders of the nation as united and resolute and then present them as a rebuke to our current political divisions. Pundits insist that Americans should return to the ideal vision set by the founders. That begs the question, however, which founders and what vision? Far from being united, they fought over what the revolution meant. Should Americans follow Jefferson's vision of a decentralized country with a weak federal government? Or do we prefer Hamilton's and Marshall's push for a powerful, centralized nation that promotes economic development and global power? Conservatives today embrace Jefferson's stances against taxes and for states' rights, but skip over his opposition to a military establishment, his unease with inequality of wealth, and his push to separate church and state. They like a Hamiltonian military but not Hamiltonian taxes to pay for it. Instead of offering a single, cohesive, and enduring plan, the diverse founders generated contradictions that continue to divide Americans.

Northern racism intensified as the free black population grew. Tocqueville noted, "The prejudice of race appears to be stronger in the states that have abolished slavery than in those where it still exists." Few blacks could vote or serve on juries, and none held political office. In 1821, New York State abolished the property requirement for white voters but kept it for African Americans, so that only sixteen qualified. Denied access to education and better-paying jobs, most blacks had to labor as sailors, menial workers, domestic servants, and laundresses. A young black man despaired, "Shall I be a mechanic? No one will employ me; white boys won't work with me. Shall I be a merchant? No one will have me in his office; white clerks won't associate with me. Drudgery and servitude, then, are my prospective portion." Kept at the bottom of society, most free blacks lived from day to day on pittances and without real estate or long-term security.

Contrary to the wishful thinking of many Patriots, slavery did not wither away after the revolution. Instead, it became more powerfully entrenched in the southern states. From 700,000 in 1790, the number of enslaved doubled to 1.5 million in 1820. As foreign imports faded after 1807, natural increase accounted for most of the population growth. Between 1790 and 1860, slave traders and migrants herded over a million slaves south and west from the Chesapeake to expand southern society to the Mississippi and beyond. Highly profitable, plantation slavery helped drive the capitalist development of the nation. No aberration from the national norm of liberty, the South was an especially vibrant half of the nation, and, in politics, the more powerful half. Masters would never part with so much valuable human property without a fight.

In his celebrated Notes on the State of Virginia, Jefferson denounced slavery as brutalizing for both master and slave, but he also argued that blacks were innately inferior to whites in their bodies and minds. Opposed to retaining black people if freed in America, Jefferson urged their deportation back to Africa. The great Patriot champion of equality drew racial limits in the name of a supposed science that grew more popular in the nineteenth century. Racism developed to protect inequality from the implications of revolution.

But abolitionists and feminists persisted in seeking broader liberties as a better legacy for our ever-contested revolution. Later in the nineteenth century, Americans reworked the legacy of the revolution to seek different ends, including abolishing slavery and extending political rights to women and African Americans. More inclusive versions of the revolution's promise lingered in American minds until circumstances allowed them to pursue, in Abraham Lincoln's phrase, "the better angels of our nature." But no generation will ever settle the revolution once and for all. In a constant ebb and flow, we will debate and advance competing and partial versions of our contradictory revolutionary legacy

Chris Jaffe says

This was a really good book. Even though I already knew a lot about this period, and even though this book is just meant as a general overview for an average reader without too much assumed background knowledge, I still got a lot out of it. Taylor takes the broad view, looking at the Revolution, it's build-up, and after effects

- from a national and international perspective.

The main problems I'd have is that the beginning/ending dates are arbitrary. I still don't quite know what 1804 was picked as an end date. 1750 just seemed like a big round number to start with.

Early on, Taylor notes that the American Revolution caused more people to flee into exile (60,000+ loyalists) than even the French Revolution. Yes, it was brutal in the South - but it also was in the areas around NYC, Philadelphia, and the frontier.

After 1700, British America imported 1.5 million slaves, four times the number of whites that came; though a tenth of the slaves came on the way over. Transatlantic shipping was up three-fold in the 18th century. People here weren't just yeomen farmers growing for themselves. There was a consumer revolution going on. George Whitfield used advance men, handbills, and newspaper adverts to help promote and advertise his revivals. A 2nd round of revivals came in the 1760s and 1770s. British citizens felt superior to the Spanish and French. Colonists were thrilled by the British win in 1763. The UK debt vaulted from 74 million pounds to 133 million. By the mid-1760s debt service was most of the UK's national budget.

Population in the colonies was doubling every 25 years. Neolin was the prophet of Pontiac's Rebellion, which was really more than an uprising that could be ascribed to just Pontiac. Raiders killed or captured 2,000 colonists. The British attempted to settle the newly one Florida. The UK lost all credibility and influence on people in the Ohio River Valley. The Quebec Act was the placate the 70,000 residents there, but the 13 colonies to the south hated it.

In Massachusetts, ambitious young lawyers like John Adams felt blockaded by Hutchinson's cabal. Massachusetts's colonial Gov. Bernard thought the UK did it backwards and should've created structural changes to colonial government first and taxes'n'stuff second. The Sons of Liberty isolated and shamed those who didn't support the boycott. Patriots suppressed their opponents, terrorizing them and breaking into their private mail. Colonial women supported the boycott, which was necessary. Colonists felt enslaved, and formed the Continental Association to enforce the 1774-75 boycott.

Gen. Gage requested 20,000 troops but was denied. Loyalists supported England for various reasons. The UK demanded less of them than the new pushy mobs of patriots. Loyalism appealed to traditionalists. They saw the Sons of Liberty as the true threat to their liberty. They saw patriot leaders as demagogues. They believed in social order, not the tyranny of the majority. Elite loyalists also resented the social mobility patriots called for. Radicals in the Continental Congress strove for unity, and so let moderates take the fore early on. 14 other British colonies in North America stayed loyal, including East Florida, West Florida, Nova Scotia, Barbados, Jamaica. Dunmore's Proclamation began as a bluff. It only applied to young men who could bare arms, but they weren't inoculated from smallpox and many died of it as a result. The UK passed the Prohibitory Act to seize all colonial ships on the seas. NYC had many loyalist. By late 1776, the British felt the war was nearly won. Washington had 6,000 men, but 75% of their enlistments were nearly up before Trenton/Princeton.

There was fear that a foreign ally would make the US dependent on them. Loyalists were plundered and horsewhipped after Saratoga. Conway and other critics of Washington were marginalized in the army. The British failed to find allies, and by 1778 gave concessions that would've solved things in 1774 - but too late. States started drafting men into their militias in 1777. Wives and daughters ran shops and farms and provided food/clothing. Relations shift with men.

Contrary to what John Adams guesstimated, Taylor figures that 1/5 were loyalist and 2/5 patriot, with the others wanting to be left alone - and more likely to be bothered by the patriots. Loyalists were more common in the more ethnically diverse colonies - the minorities were usually loyalist. From 1774-6, patriots seized the printing presses and militias. Patriots often control courts, sheriffs, jails - and they used them. The war

was more small raids than big battles. Civilians in the areas between the armies had it the worst. The British didn't like using loyalist troops. The patriots armed some slaves in Georgia after the UK took it, but other southern colonies refused to do likewise. The Carolinas turned into a nasty fight, with the British in clear control only of the coastal centers.

Kentucky's population went from 1,000 to 8,000 from 1778 to 1782. War in the west became racialized with moderates (like Daniel Boone) marginalized. Spain attacked British forts on the Mississippi River and took West Florida. Spain was preoccupied by South American rebels in 1781-3. Indians west of the Mississippi gained guns. Comanche expansion occurred, which had a domino effect on the region. More natives were on the Plains, and then came smallpox.

The Royal Navy was stretched then and the French had more military forces in the Caribbean, so the UK prioritized that region. In 1780, the UK declared war on the Dutch. Cornwallis and Clinton had petty squabbling. Yorktown gave harsh terms to loyalists, as Cornwallis wasn't interested in defending them - and that hurts loyalist morale elsewhere. The British lost naval battles in 1781-82, but then captured France's Adm. DeGrasse in April 1782. The UK improved their situation in India. They gave concessions to the Irish, in part to entice North America to return - but that was a no-go. France and Spain didn't gain much despite their loss of life/money. The US got nice terms. The UK centralized their power in the Caribbean.

The UK often abandoned their loyalists. They were often captured and killed in the Carolinas and Georgia. There was a counter-revolution vs. the area's enslaved down there in 1783-84. NYC was the last haven for the British army. Blacks went to Nova Scotia or the Freetown in Sierra Leone or elsewhere. Land in Canada was virtually free, much cheaper than in the US. Canada ended up with lower taxes than the US. UK gave concessions to the Caribbean. The overall goals were to avoid political discontent and calls for popular political participation. The empire was more hierarchical and also more authoritarian and paternalistic. The new US wanted a weak national government. The Articles of Confederation were ratified. There was fear of western states seceding. What's now Tennessee tried to leave North Carolina as the state of Franklin - but only 7 of the 13 states supported it, and they needed 9 to do so. Spain encouraged settlement in Florida and Louisiana. 20,000 (including Daniel Boone) went to the latter in the early 19th century. The UK kept their border forts, armed Indians, and wooed settlers. The UK also put trade restrictions on the US. Pirates were a problem. The US was a joke in Europe. Jay's negotiations with Spain caused some in the south to threaten secession.

Gentlemen had needed commoners to fight the British/Indians/loyalists. A new breed of politician emerged, playing to the masses. State constitutions were written, but still contained property requirements on voting. Conservatives disguised their elitism with the language of republicanism. Inflation happened, and some local committees tried to create price controls. Two-thirds of state money went to creditors and austerity programs kicked in. Massachusetts had the most regressive fiscal policies. Shays Rebellion happened and sparked an overreaction. Only 15 delegates at the Constitutional Convention spoke with any regularity. Hamilton's plan there was in response to the New Jersey Plan. Anti-Federalists were a diverse lot and lacked ties across state boundaries. The biggest problem for Federalists was the lack of a Bill of Rights. Federalists were a minority in most states but stronger in population centers (where newspapers were). They pressed for a speedy ratification, which helped.

Washington's general bearing made him appear as a republican monarch, which helped. A backlash to the Federalist Party's government set in. Hamilton had his economic plan. Federalists wanted carefully managed western settlement. Tennessee did some flirting with Spain. Opposition to Hamilton organized. A belief in being non-partisan led to extreme partisanship (the other guy opposes not just my group, but America!). Republicans celebrate the French Revolution, even as it goes off the rails. Jefferson won in 1800, but then governed as a moderate. The Federalists kept power in the courts, as John Marshall worked to build as strong a consensus as possible. Folks, the founders were NOT united in their ideas.

The Revolution opened up the existing hierarchy by promising equal rights in an unequal society. Education expanded, including public education. Evangelicals were up, and they allied with secularists to disestablish state churches. No single denomination dominated the religious culture. There was a belief in public manhood and feminine domesticity. A third of all brides were pregnant. An emerging belief in gradual emancipation began. Indentured servitude rapidly declined. The North had less than 1,000 free blacks in 1775, but over 50,000 in 1810 (alongside 27,000 slaves). Racism increased with a rising free black population. Inheritance laws changed, with the decline of entail and primogeniture (which let a big landowner bind his heirs to never divide the land). Cotton rose up. Historians still debate how revolutionary the Revolution ultimately was.

Adrian Hussey says

Looking at America today one is tempted to ask: how did we get here? Perhaps this book helps to answer that question. The account given of the circumstances surrounding the revolutionary war, and the subsequent formation of the republic makes both an eye opening and exciting read. The uncertain and unclear objectives and various aspirations on both sides of the European opponents, the important and ultimately tragic participation of Native Americans, the international influences, and the mendacity, confusion and sheer viciousness will surprise newcomers to the subject like me. Goodbye to “mother and apple pie”.

David Eppenstein says

This was a long book, 480 pages of text, and to say that it gives the reader a lot to think about is an understatement. First, let's say that this is probably not a book a casual reader of history will enjoy. I have to admit in several places it had me nodding off but it was still fascinating enough to keep me going forward. I have to say of all the books I have read about our revolution this one was unique. While it touches all the major events before, during, and after our revolution it doesn't dwell on them as the focus of discussion. Instead these events are used, dare I say, as a platform for discussing what the author is really interested in and that is the revolutions. By revolutions I believe he means the conflicts that took place between 1750 and 1804 and indeed still exist today in many respects. The conflicts he discusses are more than those of the battlefields of the military. The conflicts that he discusses that are the most illuminating are the conflicts of principles, ideas, economic theory, social order, race, gender, property, morality and so on. In treating these various areas and using the events to illustrate their affect on the attitudes and behavior of both the Patriots and the Loyalists as well as the Neutrals. And in that area alone is this book a wonder to read since the author clearly identifies our revolution as something of a bully boy movement as concerns the civilian population of the time. Neither the Patriots nor the Loyalists ever had anything approaching a majority of the population supporting them. Something like 60% of the American population tried to remain neutral as they had no idea who was going to come out top of this war and backing the wrong side would have serious consequences. The result was that both sides were frequently disgusted by the ever changing loyalties of the population. And both sides showed their frustrations and rage in very violent and destructive ways. I was surprised to learn just how brutal and violent our patriotic forebears were toward Loyalists and those suspected of being Tories. It is a mistake to think that our revolution was more civilized and less violent than that of the French which followed a few years later. There were lynchings, house burnings, tar and feathering, and even the loss of heads. In fact what is especially fascinating about this book for me is that in discussing these conflicting issues the author gives the reader a real sense of what an average person endured living through these events. This book is not about the great battles or great personages of nation's early years. The great events and people certainly figure prominently but this book is about the abstractions of that era and how these people dealt with those abstractions. A very interesting and thought provoking book especially now since current

events seem to share more than an echo of these past events.

Constantine says

Totally changed what I thought I knew about how we got started. Cannot recommend highly enough.

Vheissu says

If you're looking for a heroic narrative of the American war of independence, this is not the book for you. There are few if any noble characters in Alan Taylor's work, not Patriots or Loyalists, English, French, Spanish or American Indians. Everybody involved shared common characteristics of hypocrisy, greed, betrayal, and vicious suppression of their enemies. Not exactly the yarn propagated by school marmes over the centuries.

Taylor is strongest in describing the events leading to and conduct of the war, which he convincingly argues was a civil war, not a revolution. It was the bloodiest battle fought among Americans until the Civil War. On the surface, British taxes were an irritant in imperial-colonial relations, but the deeper causes included the disposition of newly acquired western territories and the preservation of slavery. Profiteers, swindlers, competing land developers, and Indians confronted white settlers in the Ohio Valley, who assumed the French and Indian War was all about grabbing land in the first place. Patriot leaders were deeply invested in the new territories and feared royal competition in the assignment of land titles and the revenues derived therefrom. Meanwhile, the English encouraged both African slaves and freedmen to join the loyalist cause, posing a dual threat to southern slavers. Whatever "freedom" and "liberty" meant to the Patriots, it was never intended to include Africans, women, or Indians.

Taylor is less original in his description of the failures of the Articles of Confederation, the Constitutional Convention, and the ratification debate. His presentation is conventionally Beardian (Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*). The chaos of a loose confederation jeopardized the wealth of traders, slavers, merchants, and land developers, and America's elite pulled the wool over the eyes of naïve farmers in the west and artisans in the east.

Taylor finishes strong, however, in his conclusions regarding the many consequences of the revolt and federal Constitution. The contradiction between liberty and slavery became acute. The role of women in the war justified greater recognition of their role in civil society, which men resisted with all their might afterward. And more than in any other western nation, the Americans developed an ideology of individual merit and self-sufficiency, notwithstanding the persistence of inherited wealth. As Taylor notes, none of these contradictions were resolved and all inform contemporary political debate.

Lynn says

The revolutionary period as taught in American schools is pure fiction, in which the entire population of 'the colonies' (only 13 are worth mentioning) was unified in rebellion, based on fully formed republican ideals, against a tyrannical British establishment; Indians were either mindless savages or tragic figures with no

political agency or agenda of their own; and the many other parties involved - the numerous colonies north and south of the rebellious 13, for example, and the Spanish empire to the west - were non-existent.

American historians, as well as others, have tried with varying degrees of success and various levels of bias to paint a fuller picture, but Taylor has outdone them all, in my view. Evaluating this period from a continental perspective allows him to consider a far more complex - and more interesting - tale, which he tells with a refreshing lack of American presupposition and in an animated style that makes a lengthy academic work read like a storybook. Probably the best book I've ever read on this topic.

Caroline says

Apt reading for our time.

There is some coverage of Haiti and some French and Spanish American conflict/history, but the English colonies get the majority of attention.

Taylor explores the deep divisions of the revolutionary period, focusing on the years from about 1750 to 1825 (I listened, so my memory may have the range a bit wrong). He describes clearly the violence that pervaded all parts of the frontier, and anywhere slaves were held. He also spends a fair amount of time describing the violence outside of formal battles that was done by the patriot and loyalist sides before, during and after the 'official' American Revolution of 1776. Both patriot and loyalist non-combatants were liable to suffer tar and feathers, property destruction, and even murder.

One comes away with the message that land speculation drove a very great deal of the conflict throughout the period. The English couldn't afford to defend colonists on the long Indian/white-settler border so they ordered the colonists to stay in the east. That was perceived as tyranny by both those who wanted to work the land, and those who wanted to just make money off of selling it (including George Washington). After it 'belonged' to the new country, the US government found it couldn't afford to defend the vast area either and again tried to restrain settlers (the government also wanted to control the westward movement in order to make money off of selling the land, since squatters jumped ahead of the process). There are plenty of examples and quotes regarding conflict and deception in relations between colonists/settlers and Native Americans throughout.

This process, and the westward movement of slave holders, also resulted in the same geographic political and social divisions we saw in such stark display earlier this month.

Taylor also provides a lot of detail about the roles that blacks played during this period, on both sides of the formal conflict and in the economics of slavery. Certainly most Americans denied or danced around the fundamental contradiction, sometimes pointed out by Europeans, between a revolution purportedly fought for freedom and equality and the resulting government that denied them to a large proportion of the population. There is no shortage of quotes on the subject by our founding fathers in these chapters.

He also does a good job of pointing out how many vigorously held and conflicting opinions had to be cobbled together into the governing documents that were adopted as the states lurched toward their union, constitutions, bills of rights, and early laws. The governance of slavery, property and suffrage they ended up with could be looked at on one hand as revolutionary, and on another, as much like England's. You had to be male, white, and own property to vote. As a male, you controlled your wife's property. In some ways they were worse; you had to return fugitive slaves.

We know about this constitutional mess from high school history and civics, but a refresher course with more detail is a forceful reminder that there is no ‘original intent’--there were thousands of ‘intents’ that were grudgingly wrapped up together in hopes that sectarian power and time would solve the inherent contradictions. There was also the undercurrent of violence waiting to resurface at any time.

Certainly Taylor has shaped his narrative and chosen his evidence to support these views, but his message that the revolution was less than noble, that greed for land drove much of it, and that anyone who was not a white male didn’t get included in the revolution, can’t be argued with. His big picture is not news, but his perspective in this book, and the details, are well worth your attention.

Stan Prager says

Review of: American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804, by Alan Taylor
by Stan Prager (10-30-16)

For some years, I have urged all those seeking a deeper understanding of our national origins to explore *American Colonies*, by Alan Taylor, an outstanding epic that broadly surveys not only those English colonies that later became the United States, but also the often-overlooked rest of North America and the West Indies, including the French, Spanish and Dutch colonizers, as well as the Amerindians they supplanted and the Africans they forcibly transported and enslaved. Some fourteen years after the publication of *American Colonies*, Taylor – who has won two Pulitzer Prizes for other fine works of early American history – has written a sequel of sorts: *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804*. This too is a must-read for all students of American history.

The plural implication in the title, *American Revolutions*, is deliberate. We tend to think of the American Revolution as a singular event, but in fact what occurred here in the latter part of the eighteenth century was a series of social, economic and political revolutions, both among its English inhabitants as well as cross-culturally. As in *American Colonies*, Taylor leans more to the “big history” approach to relationships and interdependencies frequently ignored by a more traditional historical methodology, thus revealing how events, ideas and individuals acting in one arena often produced striking consequences elsewhere. Especially unintended consequences. The British decision to permit a French and Roman Catholic element to persist and be tolerated in that portion of Canada that was her prize after the French and Indian War generated a frustrating barrier to conquest and annexation for the English colonials in America who had helped prosecute that war, something rarely noted by other historians. Stymied in Quebec, their ambition for domination was far more cruelly successful elsewhere, and after Independence the British no longer served as a brake upon the territorial expansion of Americans hungry for new lands and utterly unsympathetic to its aboriginal inhabitants, whom they wantonly displaced and slaughtered with little reluctance. The other great irony centered upon human chattel slavery, which the British retreated from and gradually abolished throughout the empire, yet which saw great expansion in a newly independent United States, especially in the southern states where it served as a critical component central to the economic model of plantation agriculture. Jefferson and Madison are often credited with the expansion of the rights of white planters and the increase in social and economic mobility that resulted in the abolition of primogeniture and entail that had formerly kept estates intact, but there was also the chilling consequence of suddenly facilitating the breakup of families as African-American human commodities could be sold to other geographies at premium prices.

This is the fourth Alan Taylor history that I have read* and I highly recommend all of them. If there is a weakness it is that some of Taylor’s books get off to a very slow start and are frequently populated with a vast cast of minor characters that add authenticity but can bog down the narrative. That is happily not the case with *American Revolutions*, which adroitly opens with a discussion of an iconic short story by

Nathaniel Hawthorne, “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,”** that serves as a metaphor for the dramatic societal shift that was the result of the toppling of British rule over the thirteen colonies. That was one of those revolutions. But there were many more, especially in the after-shocks of this one that sent legions of despised loyalists to Canada, later followed by numbers of disenchanting rebels struggling in the economic morass that was the byproduct of revolution and separation from the empire; these were the building blocks of what came to be a nation north of the Great Lakes. That initial financial disaster begat the revolution of Hamiltonian fiscal policies that forged a new economy. At the same time, hints of early instability and fears of mob rule spawned a new revolution against the original loose federation of states under the Articles of Confederation that saw the propertied elite of those states come together to seize the reins of government and force a more structured and perhaps more conservative Constitution upon the masses. Still, the break with Britain irrevocably loosened social hierarchies and there was truly a revolution in this regard for citizens of the new United States – if they could count themselves as white males, but certainly not if they were women or blacks or Native Americans. The shift, for those white men, was underscored in what has been called the “Revolution of 1800,” as Jeffersonian Republicans came to power and the influence of the Federalists that constructed the new constitutional government first waned and then went extinct. There was indeed a great leveling in the game, if you were qualified by complexion and gender to play the game.

Taylor relates this saga in an extremely well-written and engaging narrative of complexity and nuance that never loses sight of all the action on the periphery, including the dramatic way the American Revolution resounded in monarchical France, upon slave insurrectionists in the West Indies, and even in the uprisings of Spanish Peru, as well as how these events sometimes echoed back on the new nation. He also reminds us not to look back from the union of “those” thirteen colonies and the creation of the United States as if it was destined to be; there were other English colonies to the Canadian north and the West Indian south that could well have been part of that union but are conspicuous in their absence. Most critically, he returns again and again to the horrific consequences that an independent United States had upon Native Americans and enslaved blacks.

A tragic constant was the almost universal disregard for the welfare and very lives of the Amerindians who occupied lands coveted by expansionary white Americans. Already decimated by Old World pathogens that devastated once thriving populations, their traditional lifestyles upended and reshaped by horses, guns and alcohol, and frequently used as proxy pawns by European powers struggling for control of North America, Native Americans found themselves ultimately powerless to avoid displacement and often extermination by shrewd and ruthless citizens of a new nation who justified brutal tactics on the grounds of race and religion and paternalism. Back when philately was my hobby, I recall owning the 1929 commemorative stamp honoring George Rogers Clark, the courageous soldier and adventurer of the Northwest Territories.

American Revolutions reveals a far less heroic Clark who zealously executed Amerindians he encountered and declared that “he would never spare Man, woman or child of them on whom he could lay his hands.” [p260] In those days, South Carolina and Pennsylvania offered bounties up to \$1000 for Native American scalps, “regardless of the corpse’s age or gender.” [p258] There is much more. “David Williamson, an accomplished Indian killer ... [directed his militiamen to attack] ... a peaceful Delaware village led by Moravian missionaries ... [and] ... butchered 96 captives – 28 men, 29 women, and 39 children – by smashing their skulls with wooden mallets before scalping them for trophies. The natives died while singing Christian hymns.” [p262] There were no repercussions for this hardly uncommon kind of white savagery on the frontier.

For African-Americans, the legacy was no less tragic. Despite the wishful thinking of some members of the revolutionary generation that human chattel slavery would wither over time, it instead gained new traction in an America unburdened by growing British guilt over what came to be called the peculiar institution, a sturdily intrinsic economic building block that was only finally dislodged by Civil War nearly a century hence. Meanwhile, few – north or south, or across the Atlantic for that matter – could ignore the paradox of Americans crying out in ringing rhetoric for a universal right to a freedom from tyranny while at the same time reserving the contradictory right to enslave others because of the color of their skin. And that irony was everywhere: “In New York City . . . [in 1776] . . . Patriots toppled the great equestrian statue of George III and melted its lead to make 40,000 bullets to shoot at redcoats. In that blow for liberty, the Patriots employed slaves to tear down the statue.” [p161] African-Americans fought on both the British and American sides in

the Revolutionary War, in hopes for freedom and a better life, but were in the end betrayed by each of them, although those that remained in America were by far the worse off. While sadly the United States in 2016 still contains apologists for slavery who sugar-coat its horrific brutality, their mythical revisionism does not bear historical scrutiny. In fact, recalcitrant slaves were routinely beaten, branded, and even killed, something known to others at the time if not advertised, but nevertheless rationalized by planter elites with a new brand of Christian paternalism: “At the first hint of resistance, these paternalists expected their overseers to practice the old brutality but less conspicuously. In barns and secluded spots, they whipped backs and inflicted ‘cat-hauling’: dragging a cat by the tail along the bare back of a trussed-up victim.” [p476]

Heritage historians of the conservative stripe no doubt loathe Taylor’s approach; they want to celebrate the birth of liberty in British North America and ignore what might clash with such righteous notions; massacred Amerindians and enslaved Africans uncomfortably get in the way. There is indeed much to champion in the creation of the American Republic, but sound historical scholarship must include more than self-congratulatory patriotism. The history that was foisted upon me in schoolrooms of the 1960s contained precious little of that. Alan Taylor’s masterful narrative succeeds both in widening the lens and restoring the balance of what it was like for the actual people who lived those events, both the winners and the losers. The advantage of having a fine home library is that I could randomly reach up on a dusty shelf and pluck down a volume of Hawthorne short stories to read “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” for the first time. American Revolutions is an exceptional volume that I am proud to add to my collection of books on American history, and I highly recommend it to those who appreciate the complexity of historical studies as well as a truly fine analysis of the same by a gifted historian who never disappoints.

[*for the two other Alan Taylor histories that I have reviewed, see <https://regarp.com/2015/10/01/review-...> and <https://regarp.com/2016/02/09/review-...>]

[** “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” is available online <http://www.eldritchpress.org/nh/mm.html>]

My review of: "American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804," by Alan Taylor is live on my book blog <https://regarp.com/2016/10/30/review-...>

happy says

With narrative, Mr. Taylor gives the reader a fascinating look at the beginning of the “American Experiment.” The author looks at the political and economic underpinnings of the American Revolutions, covering the time from the French Indian War to the end of Jefferson’s first term as president. He paints a convincing picture of how the colonists in 1760 who thought of themselves as loyal Englishmen, came to demand independence 15 yrs later. He looks at the distrust the elites of the colonial society had of the common man and how that shaped both the revolution and the founding documents. He also discusses the white/male supremacy and how that affected the attitudes of every member of colonial society, from the highest to the lowest, women included. Finally he looks a slavery not only in the south, but the north as well and how the economic dependence on slave labor drove the compromises during the drafting of the US constitution.

Almost every US child has been taught that the cause of the Revolution was the unjust taxes the British government imposed on the colonies. In looking at this narrative, Mr. Taylor looks at the reasons they were imposed (to pay for the troops guarding the frontier and to recoup some of the costs of the French Indian War) the actual tax burden imposed (much less than on the citizens of England proper). He explains why the colonist were upset and how the English gov’t could have shut down the protest without driving the colonists

into revolt.

One aspect of the causes of the Revolution that Mr. Taylor explores is the English Gov'ts attempts to put a check on the Westward expansion of colonists. With the defeat of the French in 1760s, French American colonies came under control of the British. The author looks at the difference between the French and British colonial systems and the effect this had on the 13 colonies when the British took control of the French Colonies in the interior of the continent. The British Gov't attempted to keep the French system in place, ie limited colonization of Indian lands, a trading relationship with the Natives etc. The citizens in the English colonies fought this decision, they felt it was their God given right to move west of the mountains into the Ohio River Valley and establish their own way of life, ie farms and towns on Native territory. Also for the elite, there was much riches to be gained from selling the newly acquired lands to the westward moving colonists.

In looking a slavery, Mr. Taylor looks at the distribution of slaves and how that came about. Why the plantation economy "needed" chattel labor and why slavery never really caught on in the Northern colonies, even though it was legal in all 13 of the colonies, until after the Constitutional Convention of the late 1780s. In looking at the slave economy he also looks at the sugar colonies of the Caribbean and how the percentage of the population affected the actions of the Plantation/white settlers. The southern states were roughly 40% slave, while the Sugar Colonies had upwards of 90% slave populations. This population meant that even though the Plantation Owners were sympathetic to the goad/aims of the mainlanders, they couldn't afford to forgo the protections of the British Military, and especially the British Navy.

On the fascinating portions of the book for me, was his take on the motives and personalities of the men who wrote and adopted the constitution. The author brings out the distrust the elites had for the common man. Much of the Constitution is written to control direct democracy. Some more obvious examples is the Electoral College and the state legislatures electing senators. Mr. Taylor does a good job of telling the out-right politicking that had to happen in order to pass a constitution. Some of the compromises are the composition of the senate (each state gets 2 senators not-with-standing the population) the length of term and re-electability of the president (originally proposed as a single six year term) and probably most infamously the famous 3/5 clause for slaves in determining the number of representatives in the House. The Northern states didn't want any slaves to count, while the Southern States wanted each slave to count as a "whole" person. Also another slavery compromise was on the importation of slaves. The Northern states wanted importation to end on the adoption of the constitution, while the South didn't want any limit on the slave trade. The compromise that was reached was that in 20 yrs after the adoption, the importation of slaves would cease. This was more symbolic than anything. There was enough natural increase of the slave population to cover the "needs" of the plantation owners. The author makes clear that without these compromises the southern states would have walked out and the "Noble Experiment" would have ended before it began.

In telling the story of the revolutionary war its self the author is fairly straight forward and accepts the common narrative of the war.

In summary, this is a revisionist and probably much more realistic look the causes of the American Revolution and at the minds behind it and later the minds that created the American Constitution and form of government it created. I would rate this a solid 4 stars, but don't expect to read what you learned in elementary school.

Jill Cordry says

Alan Taylor has written the best three books on North American History (including the importance of the British and French West Indies). Start with AMERICAN COLONIES: it goes way beyond the 13 and how the rest influenced the history of the US. Then this new volume. Follow with the excellent THE CIVIL WAR OF 1812, and you will have a comprehensive and complete history of the exploration, colonization and settlement of the northern half of the western hemisphere.

Kantemir says

Thoroughly enjoyed this book. I find most books on history to be tough reads due to their characteristic 'density' but the way Taylor goes about presenting historic events and their context makes it much more interesting and manageable.

Jim says

Longer review coming. If you have a "Johnny Tremain" view of the revolutionary era, prepare to have many of your illusions shattered. Taylor does a bang up job looking at the era from all angles. The motivations, and contributions of every class of citizen is reviewed, and much of it is not admirable.

Constitutional originalists really need to read this. Like Bible literalists who cherry pick what to ignore, many on the right today do the same relative to the founding and to the Constitution. There is no original intent ascribable to the "founders." The Constitution was a massive compromise that allowed different factions to delude themselves into thinking it confirmed their view of the role of government.

We are still fighting those battles today. Recognizing the founding for what it was, and what it wasn't, could go a long way to bringing us together. Unfortunately, adhering to the myth of the founding only drives us further apart.

Ross says

This is a very comprehensive and detailed book covering the American revolution in the U.S. and also in Latin America, which is why the plural "Revolutions."

I have read many, many books on our revolution and there was still a lot of material in this book which I had not read about before.

There was a good deal of information on how the slaves and the native Americans were treated which was very sad reading. Human beings really are overwhelmingly not decent and moral creatures. We are still trying to make progress on this issue today around the world.
