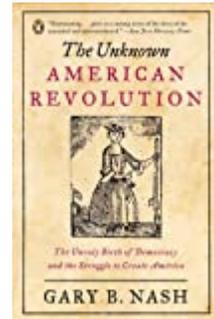


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Gary Nash.** *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America.* New York: Viking, 2005. xviii + 544 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-03420-8; \$17.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-14-303720-0.



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## Bravo!

“The history of our Revolution will be one continued lie from one end to the other,” John Adams grumbled in a letter to Benjamin Rush in 1790. “The essence of the whole,” he complained, “will be that Dr. Franklin’s electric rod smote the earth and out sprung General Washington. That Franklin electrised him with his rod, and thenceforward these two conducted all the policy negotiations, legislation, and war.”[1] As Adams feared, many historians of the American Revolution have approached their field from the vantage point of those great white men we call the founding generation. From the copious memoirs, diaries, and correspondence of these founding fathers, brothers, cousins and uncles is drawn our national myth of “united colonists rising up as a unified body to get the British lion’s paw off the backs of their necks” (p. xvi). For more than thirty years, Gary Nash has sought to “complicate [this] well-established core narrative” (p. xvii). Nash would agree wholeheartedly with Benjamin Rush’s assertion that, “many of the most active and useful characters in accomplishing this revolution, were strangers to the formalities of a Latin and Greek education.”[2]

*The Unknown American Revolution* brings Nash full circle with the thesis that he initiated in *Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (1979). In *Urban Crucible*, Nash argued that colonial American urbanites “turned the seaport towns into crucibles of revolutionary agitation” where “political consciousness grew, especially among the laboring classes.”[3] This book raised new questions about class formation, explored new economic sources, and firmly established itself at the front of the new social history. Economic historians questioned Nash’s interpretation of his data and remained unconvinced by his assertion of class formation in the lean years following the French and Indian War. Critics had difficulty with Nash’s proposed progressive popular consciousness, how advances in participatory politics incrementally challenged traditional ways. In *The Unknown American Revolution*, Nash resolves many of these issues. He makes no sweeping claims of class consciousness, but does highlight “the true radicalism of the American Revolution” that found its fullest expression in the hopes and aspirations of “those who felt most dissatisfied with the conditions they experienced as the quarrel with Great Britain unfolded”

(p. xvii). Telling the tale of the American Revolution through the eyes of colonists “not in positions of power and privilege” allows Nash to focus on the rise of political consciousness by the disenfranchised without complicating the issue with the specific economic concerns that clouded his earlier work (p. xvii).

Nash’s latest synthesis encompasses many of his previous works and pushes his theme of history from the bottom up to a new level. Specifically, Nash intertwines four “unknown” stories into a complex narrative that makes a significant contribution to our understanding of how displeasure at the passing of Britain’s salutary neglect toward her prosperous colonies hardened into rebellion, insurgency, and revolution. Each section of Nash’s chronological narrative views the climactic events that produced the Revolution, as well as actions taken during the War for American Independence, “through the eyes of those not in positions of power and privilege”: Native Americans, enslaved Africans, women, and lower-class males (p. xvii). Nash reveals the political agendas of urban artisans and backcountry farmers, female urbanites and camp followers, and those who stood to gain or lose the most in this Revolution against British authority—slaves and Indians. Bravo! It takes a master conductor to produce a symphony from such discordant melodies.

Although he has done a masterful job with little-known and rarely used sources, not all of Nash’s constituent parts carry equal weight in his concerto of the unknowns’ ideas, dreams, and aspirations. The weakest of Nash’s harmonies is the voice of women. Colonial women were not considered political actors, but when the American boycott of British goods made shopping in the early 1770s a political act, domestic duties became political weapons. During the Revolution, bread rioters kept the plight of many of those most disadvantaged by the military conflict—the widows and families of the soldiers in the fight—in front of elites who preferred not to think about the immediate consequences of their rebellion. Given the scarcity of primary sources, Nash effectively interprets women’s actions more than their words. The women’s words we do see frequently in this narrative are those of elites, such as Mercy Otis Warren and Abigail Adams. One could wish that Nash had dug deeper to unearth the impact of the war on the home front and how the experience of these women influenced the conduct of the Revolution. Women such as Lois Peters (wife of former saddle maker and Continental Army Captain Nathan Peters), whose pleas for money and the return of her “Dear,” and whose son “Says he wants Dadie Should

come home” from the war, are not unlike letters soldiers have likely always received, and continue to receive.[4] Nash does more with other less common refrains of the Revolution.

The stories of Native Americans, enslaved Africans and early abolitionists like Tachnedorus, Dragging Canoe, Phyllis Wheatley, Peter Salem, Samuel Hopkins, Nathaniel Niles, and others may be recognizable to those familiar with Nash’s earlier work *Red, White, and Black: The Peoples of Early America* (1974). For many, the multitude of stories revealing Nash’s tight argument on the dual nature of the American Revolution, a nature that denied more freedoms than it championed, might be unfamiliar tunes. Explaining how the Iroquois (led by Joseph Brant) chose to side with the British or why thousands of slaves fled to British lines, as well as describing the difficulties faced by early American abolitionists, in readable prose, is one of the many valuable contributions of Nash’s *The Unknown American Revolution*. It is not, however, the book’s greatest contribution to our understanding of the Revolution.

In his chapters detailing events before the shot heard round the world, Nash uncovers that which historians still struggle to define: how the colonies fell from the pinnacle of their “Englishness” in 1763 to insurgency and revolution in the same generation.[5] Nash’s chapters “Years of Insurgency, 1761-1766” and “Building Momentum, 1766-1774” establish how and why the American Revolution was possible. Often it was despite the leadership of those we consider the founding fathers that the radical agenda of anti-authoritarianism overthrew “the ingrained patterns of conservative elitist thought” (p. xvii). The underlying turmoil in the vast manors of New York, among the artisans of Philadelphia, and in the backcountry of the Carolinas made the insurgency of the American Revolution possible. Despite such recent excellent monographs as David Hackett Fischer’s *Washington’s Crossing* (2004), and Edward Lengel’s *General George Washington: A Military Life* (2005), we still have a minimal understanding of how Washington and other Revolutionary leaders harnessed the insurgency into a more conventional resistance. Nash’s detailed exposition on this insurgent background makes the difficulties George Washington experienced in leading the Continental army comprehensible.

Gary Nash has spent more than thirty years exploring the unfamiliar and dimly heard voices of the unknown participants in the American Revolution. *The Unknown American Revolution* brings to light those outside “re-

spectable” society upon whose backs the American Independence depended. Although some might balk at categorizing Professor Nash’s excellent monograph as “military” history, his insights into the nature of the Revolutionary War and the role the all-too-often voiceless majority played in that conflict deserve thoughtful consideration by serious students of warfare.

#### Notes

[1]. John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 4 April 1790, letterbook copy in Adams Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, quoted in Marcus Cunliffe, “Congressional Leadership in the American Revolution,” in Library of Congress, ed., *Leadership in the American Revolution* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1974), 41; See also Alexander Biddle, ed., *Old Family Letters: Copied from the Originals by Alexander Biddle*, 2 vols. (Philadel-

phia, 1892), 1:55-56.

[2]. Quoted in Meyer Reinhold, “Opponents of Classical Learning in America during the Revolutionary Period,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* CXII (1968), 230.

[3]. Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), x.

[4]. Lois to Nathan Peters, 7 December 1775, in William F. Guthman, ed., *The Correspondence of Captain Nathan and Lois Peters April 25, 1775 -February 5, 1776* (Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society, 1980).

[5]. John Murrin, “Anglicizing an American Colony: The Transformation of Provincial Massachusetts,” (Ph.D. diss.: Yale University, 1966).

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