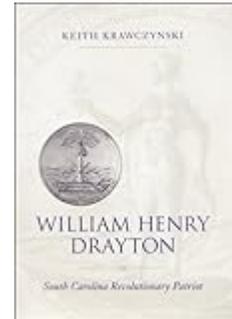




**Keith Krawczynski.** *William Henry Drayton: South Carolina Revolutionary Patriot.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001. xvi + 358 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2661-5.



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## Revolutionary Patriot and Conservative Polemicist

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In his introduction to *Paul Revere's Ride*, David Hackett Fischer noted that "the only creature less fashionable in academe than the stereotypical 'dead white male,' is a dead white male on horseback." [1] Fischer's tongue-in-cheek observation did more than capture a perception that historians migrate toward explorations of the dispossessed. Fischer's provocative words also encapsulated the ambivalence of many historians toward biographical studies of traditional political leaders, especially from the colonial past. Works on "founding fathers" and "revolutionary heroes" have tended to arouse suspicion, but not only for their often-unwavering patriotic tones and their assumptions of an individual's self-evident importance. The ability of a single individual to shape the past assumes a degree of historical contingency and a definition of power that betray standard historical interpretations.

Perhaps nowhere are the tensions more profound than in explorations of the American Revolution, a field where social historians have offered some of the most persuasive interpretations of the revolution while biog-

raphers have routinely credited a handful of men with shaping the course of a nation. Some recent biographers have tried to bridge the gap between the two approaches in order to demonstrate how individuals reflected as well as helped shape the worlds in which they lived. Keith Krawczynski's *William Henry Drayton: South Carolina Revolutionary Patriot* strains to bridge these two approaches, and the result is an interpretation that leans heavily toward prioritizing how one man shaped the revolutionary experience.

The heart of Krawczynski's text chronicles the political and social career of an often-overlooked "revolutionary patriot." Most of the volume illuminates Drayton's ideological and constitutional grievances while exploring how an obsession over personal reputation shaped his actions and perceptions. This is no easy task. Until his premature death at the age of thirty-seven in 1779, Drayton seemingly participated in every political meeting and debate concerning the struggle for independence in South Carolina. Drayton began the era of revolution an ardent supporter of the English crown and South Carolina's oligarchy, but by 1774 he had become a central

leader of the revolutionary cause.

Drayton may have embraced the revolutionary cause relatively late in the dispute, but he used his participation to ensure that his class would continue to rule the Palmetto State in the post-revolutionary world. Through Drayton's words, actions and perspectives, Krawczynski demonstrates how Drayton's participation in the struggle over "home rule and who would rule at home" led to a conservative revolution in South Carolina. As a result, Drayton emerges as an individual whose actions had both ideological consistency and self-serving results.

Drayton grew up with all of the connections and privileges of a gentry birth. His grandfather and uncle had both served as lieutenant governors of South Carolina. His father, John, was a member of South Carolina's royal council and the owner of more than 900 slaves, 31 plantations, and 16,000 acres of land. William Drayton lived on his father's most opulent possession, a 600-acre estate near Charleston that contained nearly every luxury one could imagine. In addition to housing Drayton Hall, by far the largest plantation house in the colony, the English-style estate had an abundance of house-slaves, majestic oaks, manicured gardens, a deer park and a private lake. In this environment, Drayton quickly learned that he too was expected to take his place among the colony's ruling elite. At the age of nine, Drayton traveled to England to obtain a proper schooling. In 1763, at the age of twenty-one, he returned home with a college education and an optimism that he would "make his mark and take his place among the South Carolina gentry" (p. 19).

William Henry Drayton did not immediately take his presumed position among Carolina's ruling elite. While he set up a law practice, Drayton married Dorothy Golithly and obtained a £40,000 dowry and an estate that included a Charleston townhouse, slaves, livestock, and a large plantation on the Ashley River. With this economic independence, Drayton entered the public sphere. In 1765, he became a justice of the peace and soon after was elected assemblyman. Drayton, who had rarely attended assembly meetings and whose excessive gambling and general overspending resulted in extensive debts, found his name in disrepute. When he came up for reelection in 1768, Drayton's deteriorating reputation and the public's disdain for his aristocratic roots led to defeat.

Drayton's early hostility to the revolutionary cause also damaged his public reputation. This was most evident in his hostility toward nonimportation—an attempt to boycott British imports in order to convince Parlia-

ment to repeal the Stamp Act. Drayton feuded with the supporters of nonimportation because he viewed it and the coercive methods of the patriots as attacks on his English liberties. In his despair he fled to England.

Drayton returned from his year in England a changed man. No longer in financial ruins or willing to gamble away his fortune, he took a seat on the South Carolina legislature. Almost immediately Drayton found himself in a series of disputes with British-born supporters of the Crown—from Superintendent of Indian Affairs John Stuart to some of his fellow councilors. He increasingly viewed these non-Carolinians with suspicion and resentment, especially as they both took positions that Drayton believed he should have held and foiled his land-lease schemes with neighboring Catawba Indians.

Over the next two years, as it became apparent that the Crown was not going to replace the English-born officials with South Carolinians, Drayton's loyalties drifted away from the Crown. Drayton, though, did not abandon his concern for his English liberties. Instead, Krawczynski claims "the British, through their constitutional innovation in recent measures passed against the American colonies, who were being untrue to the English constitution. In essence, Drayton was not revolting against the British constitution, but on behalf of it" (p. 93).

As the tensions increased and the perceived assault on his English liberties continued, Drayton recognized that if he wanted a prominent role in the revolutionary movement he had to make concessions to its democratic leanings. This he did. In the following years, Drayton "embraced the American cause with the enthusiasm of a recent convert" (p. 121). Most of this monograph is dedicated to outlining this participation and Drayton's justification for it, and the catalog of his pro-revolutionary acts are too extensive to explore in any detail here. Drayton served South Carolina and the cause of independence in almost every political role imaginable. He helped suppress Tory supporters in the Carolina backcountry by capturing leading loyalists and intimidating their followers, he helped prevent English gifts from reaching their Indian recipients, and he "became the first leading figure in South Carolina to openly call for independence," (p. 215).

Primarily a polemicist, Drayton also commanded a frigate of war, served on and chaired countless committees, councils, and governmental bodies, became president of the provincial congress, chief justice, privy councilor, and assemblyman, coauthored South Carolina's 1778 constitution, and represented his state as a dele-

gate to the Continental Congress. In short, even though he died in 1779, long before independence was secured, Krawczynski claims “Drayton did more to resist British rule than any other South Carolinian” (p. x).

Krawczynski effectively restores Drayton to the center of the revolutionary movement in South Carolina. Rather than a reflection of the motivations of South Carolina’s conservative revolutionaries, Drayton often appears as the central mover and shaker. At times, the author gives the sense that Drayton single-handedly initiated action and led the revolution. This view of how Drayton and the Revolution were connected may result from Drayton’s “continual drive for fame” (p. 232)—one of the central themes of the volume. While Drayton participated in the revolutionary struggle, he self-consciously wrote his memoirs to fashion himself as the central, all-knowing participant and to interpret the meanings of events as he wanted them understood.

Krawczynski, in several chapters, relies heavily on Drayton’s memoirs and speeches for interpretations and the general narrative. As a result, Krawczynski concludes that “Without exception, no other individual had as great an impact on South Carolina’s rebellion as did William Henry Drayton. No other South Carolinian pushed harder for independence or labored more to preserve it. No other local patriot held as much power or wielded it with as much vigor. No other South Carolinian, finally, served the American cause in as many official and unofficial roles” (p. 323). This is a remarkable series of claims about someone who resisted the revolutionary cause for almost a full decade and died before it had been secured. He may have come around to the American cause, but this explanation of Drayton’s importance is misleading.

Finally, Krawczynski repeatedly advances the argument of Robert Weir and others that the American Revolution in South Carolina was a uniquely conservative event.[2] Krawczynski details how Drayton’s conserva-

tive assumptions about the social structure never wavered during the revolution and explains how Drayton’s visions of the pre- and post-revolutionary worlds did not differ remarkably from each other. The origins of this conservatism, apart from Drayton’s tremendous financial wealth and his prominent family name, hardly appear in the narrative. We learn that Drayton owned an unknown number of slaves, but we hear little about his experiences as a master, slave trader, or planter. Krawczynski explains how Drayton and his father accumulated wealth through marriage, political office, and rice and indigo harvests. The exploitation of African labor, though, is never explored. He provides only glimpses of Drayton’s dealings with neighboring Cherokee and Catawba Indians, fear of slave rebellions, and the patriarchal nature of South Carolina gentry society. As a result, the hierarchical society that Drayton fought to preserve appears in the shadows of Drayton’s conservative political writings and ideology. In the end, Krawczynski leaves us with the questionable impression that Drayton’s ideological concerns about liberty could be separated from the social and cultural context in which he lived.

Without a doubt, this is the most comprehensive study of William Henry Drayton to date. In compelling prose, Krawczynski demonstrates how Drayton’s self-interest and his desire to protect English and then American liberties allowed a unqualified supporter of both the Crown and the status quo to evolve into a leading spokesperson for independence and revolution, albeit a conservative one. In the end, though, we are left wondering how much Drayton was shaped by his times rather than the central shaper of them himself.

#### Notes

[1]. David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere’s Ride* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), xiv.

[2]. Robert M. Weir, *‘A Most Important Epocha’: The Coming of the Revolution in South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970).

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