



Attack by a Turkey: Learning to Write History from Bernard Bailyn

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IN the mid-1980s, Bernard Bailyn, having earlier redefined our understanding of the American Revolution's origins, turned his attention to the great debate of 1787–1788 on ratifying the Constitution. During a year as Pitt Professor of American History at Cambridge University (1986–1987), he wrote a preliminary version of his lecture “The Ideological Fulfillment of the American Revolution,” which he delivered at Oxford University in the Spring of 1987. He gave another version at the American Historical Association Annual Meeting in Washington that December.

In 1987, the nation observed the Constitutional Convention's bicentennial. Chief Justice Warren Burger had retired from the Court to lead the commemorative efforts. For Bailyn, however, the important events were the public debates over ratification after the Convention finished its work, not the Convention itself. He was fond of James Madison's comment from 1796, that the Constitution was “nothing but a dead letter until life and validity were breathed into it by the voice of the people”: its meaning would not be found in the Convention at Philadelphia, but in the state conventions which ratified it. Bailyn used this quotation as his epigraph when he republished his own 1987 lecture on ratification in an essay concluding the twenty-fifth and fiftieth anniversary editions of *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*.¹

¹*The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution: Enlarged Edition*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) 321. Mary Bilder has pointed out

Bailyn returned to Harvard in the fall of 1987, the same time I arrived as a graduate student. A used copy of the 1967 edition of *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, which cost fifty cents at the Phoenix Public Library's book sale, had made me think seriously of studying history, rather than continuing on my career trajectory as a cook at the Phoenix Hilton. I came to Boston, finished college at the Harvard Extension School, and in the fall of 1987 enrolled in Bailyn's seminar. Others have written about Bailyn's teaching method and the seminar's format, which did not change from year to year, though the students did. Our cohort did not seem very exciting—there were a lot of awkward silences. Either we were too awed by Bailyn, or too impressed with ourselves, to move the conversation along. Early on he suggested paper topics. The one most intriguing to me was to look into the relationships among the Otis family of Barnstable—a remarkable group that included a diverse array of characters who wrote a lot. Their papers, he told us, were waiting to be mined at the Massachusetts Historical Society. When I went to talk to him about the topic, he was apologetic. One of the students, a visitor from England, had already chosen that one. Why didn't I pick something else?

He had also mentioned the origins of the Second Amendment. I had done some research on the Constitution's ratification, thanks to a summer NEH fellowship which had allowed me to examine the role of slavery in the constitutional debates. I went to work on the topic, using the terrific volumes being produced by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.²

that Madison made this statement in 1796, during a contentious political debate with two other members of the Philadelphia Convention, President George Washington and former Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, as they cited the records of the Philadelphia Convention to justify their position on an issue of the day. William Vans Murray asked Madison what gave the House or Representatives the power to interfere with treaty ratification (the issue was Jay's Treaty with England). Mary Sarah Bilder, "The Mind is Like a Bat: Bernard Bailyn and the Debate on the Constitution," *Law and History Review* (2021), accessed July 16, 2021, <https://lawandhistoryreview.org/article/mary-sarah-bilder-the-mind-is-like-a-bat-bernard-bailyn-and-the-debate-on-the-constitution/>.

²John P. Kaminski et al., ed. *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution: Digital Edition* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/RNCN.html>.

Midway through the semester he began one seminar session sliding an index card across the table to the student on my right, "Here's an article that will be helpful!" Then to the student on my left, "I just found a document you should look at," and she busily wrote down the citation. Then he gave me a blank look and asked, "What are you working on again?"

A week or two later I went to our assigned meeting on the paper. After hearing about my pile of research, he asked, "Why are you writing this?" I sensed that the wrong answer would be, "Because the paper I wanted to write was taken, so you told me to do this one." So, I said something else—not realizing that this question, "Why are you writing this?" as his "So what?" or "Who cares?" or "What's the news here?" was not about me, but about the topic. It was not the last time he would ask it. This has been a valuable lesson in teaching, as was his constant effort that semester to spark our laggard group into a discussion.

Despite my success in not being noticed, or perhaps because of it, he liked the paper I wrote. When I went to see him after the semester, hoping for a recommendation for a Harvard summer fellowship, he said after a few minutes of amiable conversation, "Look, I know you from the seminar, but don't really know enough to write a reference." As with "Why are you writing this?" I realized the initial response that came to mind—"Thanks for your time"—was not the right one. So, I took as an invitation to tell him more. I mentioned the summer NEH project, researching four or five members of the Convention and their relationship with slavery. More importantly was that I did this while getting my undergraduate degree at the Harvard Extension School, having dropped out of the University of Wisconsin ten years earlier and working for the next decade as a cook. This was more interesting than he expected, and we talked for a bit about researching in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin's *Documentary History of the Ratification* series, which was then up to eight volumes, and about the characters of some of the people involved in the debate. I did not get the fellowship, though things worked out in other ways.

He mentioned that a Harvard alumnus had given Houghton Library some money to mount an exhibit on ratification. They were looking for someone to put it together. He sent me to see Houghton's director, who was delighted to have someone walk through the door ready to put on an exhibit that an alum was pressing them to do. The generous alum, Charles Tanenbaum, was quite excited as well, particularly because Stoddard introduced me as "a student of Bud Bailyn's." Hearing Bailyn's lecture on ratification at a Harvard alumni event had inspired Tanenbaum to sponsor this exhibit. I had not heard or read about this lecture, and in fact did not know that Bailyn was at all interested in the subject. Nonetheless, that summer I spent my days off from making omelets on Cape Cod putting together an exhibit on Massachusetts Ratification, which opened in September in the Widener Rotunda.³

The exhibit opening was an event, mounted by Joan Nordell, the Library's wonderful public affairs coordinator. She organized a viewing with Mr. Tanenbaum and other notables whom I had not met—Sidney Verba and C.Y. Feng from the Library, and others who have since become friends—Henry Lee, Lilian Handlin, and Pauline Maier. Lilian did not attend the opening, but with her husband met us for lunch at the Faculty Club. Oscar Handlin asked me gruffly why he should bother to look at the exhibit? By now I knew my initial answer—"You can do whatever you want"—would not be a proper one, though he had certainly earned the right to do that.

One person neither at the lunch nor the opening was Bernard Bailyn. He had sent the organizer regrets, as he was traveling. This was true only in the narrowest sense. As we walked out of Widener's lobby we met him coming in, traveling to his study on Widener's top floor. All were surprised to see each other—he recognized Sydney Verba, C.Y. Feng, Henry Lee, and Pauline Maier before he recognized me, and now was

³Robert J. Allison, *Creating the Empire of Reason: Massachusetts Ratifies the United States Constitution: An Exhibition of Materials from the Houghton Library*, Widener Library Rotunda, Harvard University, September 7–October 12, 1988 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard College Library, 1988).

perhaps regretful at not joining us. Probably not. He tended to avoid these kinds of social gatherings, no matter how elevated the company.

Shortly after this, Bailyn called with another project. He was, in fact, working on the ratification. He had delivered his lecture on ratification the previous March at Oxford and then in December (as I was finishing my seminar paper) at the American Historical Association, in a session chaired by William E. Nelson, with comments by Linda Kerber and Thomas C. Grey.⁴ The Library of America had engaged him to produce two volumes of documents on the ratification debate. As he would freely acknowledge, this project, and his examination of the debate, were made possible by the yeoman work being done by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, in collecting, annotating, and publishing *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*. This series had been launched by Merrill Jensen at the University of Wisconsin, with a projected thirty-one volumes. The editors made photocopies of all their materials available to Bailyn—a daunting prospect (now the entire series is available online). Jensen's focus on the Revolution had emphasized its economic, social, and political dimensions, not ideas or ideology. Later that year when Bailyn advised a group of graduate students preparing to read with him on early American history, he said, "There are different ways to interpret all of this. I have been identified as part of one school, there are others and you should read them," mentioning Jensen, Gary Nash, and others.

He was already immersed in these sources when he called me in to be his research assistant. Thus began the most important part of my graduate education, indeed probably the most important part of my education since learning to read. We would not often be in the office at the same time. He left notes and queries on my desk, and I would return the citations to him. He already had typed out an outline for each document

⁴The panel was on Sunday evening, opposite a discussion featuring Eric Hobsbawm on "The Reception of Jazz in Europe." American Historical Association, Annual Meeting, Washington, DC, December 27, 1987.

he considered for inclusion, along with many that would not make the cut. He found through this immersion links and connections among the ideas and arguments, coming to know the documents and minds of their authors better perhaps than they had, and certainly better than anyone since.

It was, he saw, part of the same argument he had developed in *Ideological Origins*, a continuing argument over power and liberty. That project had begun with the notion of publishing four volumes of the pamphlets of the Revolution. By the time Bailyn had finished the first volume, *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750–1765*, the introduction had swelled into a major essay, and the relationship between editor and publisher had fallen apart.⁵ Though the book earned Bailyn the Harvard Faculty Award, and he published the introduction in expanded and revised form as *Ideological Origins*, none of the other three volumes of *Pamphlets* ever appeared. The first volume ends in 1765, though Bailyn's engagement with the arguments and ideas extended well beyond the year of the Stamp Act.

The Constitution created a system of power. The Revolution had taught those involved in this debate about the dangers of power. How could it be controlled? Who could control it? These arguments, he saw, were at the heart of both the Revolution and the Constitution. The story was more than simply replacing one regime with another or changing one poorly-functioning system with one its proponents thought might work better. His experiences during the Second World War—a moment when the world witnessed the working out of power in different forms—and the questions he always asked about underlying causes—all focused his mind on questions of power. Among the opponents and proponents of the Constitution he saw these arguments about power being articulated, advanced, critiqued. It was part of a broader argument—one fundamental to human nature.

⁵Bailyn, ed., *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750–1765* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

For the Library of America edition, he needed to do more than merely trace connections among the writers' ideas and those of their contemporaries and antecedents. Actually, he needed to do less. He needed to annotate each and explain the entire frame of reference for today's readers. Most of the references he knew. My task was to find the ones he did not. A reference which Bailyn did not know off the top of his head would be, by definition, pretty obscure. For example, Arthur Lee, in responding to James Wilson, says, "Oh sense where is your guard! Shame where is your blush!"⁶ There were no quotation marks in Lee's speech. Would the reader be any the worse for thinking that Arthur Lee had coined this? No, it was part of the frame of reference, Lee's audience would have recognized the allusion, so to understand their world I had to track the passage's origins.

Mindful that I was paid by the hour, Bailyn gave me a clue. "I think this is *Hamlet*," he said, "Act 3, scene 4." That was quite a hint. Down into the stacks I went, found a copy of *Hamlet*, and brought it back. Bailyn read over with some pleasure Hamlet's speech, not just the line Lee quoted (81) but the entire diatribe against poor Queen Gertrude for marrying her brother-in-law too hastily. "Never was a mother criticized more mercilessly," he said.

He always wanted to know more. John Dickinson's "Fabius" Essay VI quoted a speech Lord Belhaven gave to the Scottish Parliament on November 2, 1706, warning about the dire consequences awaiting Scotland should it agree to a union with England. It was not enough for Bailyn to state what was already in the text—that Lord Belhaven gave this speech on November 2, 1706, in opposition to the union of the Scottish and English Parliaments. He needed more background and context. My task was to find Belhaven's original speech—now available online, then only in Daniel Defoe's 1709 *History of the Union of Great Britain* or the fifth volume of *A Collection of*

⁶[Arthur Lee] "Cincinnatus" V, in Bailyn, *Debate on the Constitution* (New York: Library of America, 1993), 1:115.

Parliamentary Debates of England (twenty-one volumes, 1741–1742). Bailyn also wanted any other Belhaven materials, relevant or not. Dickinson’s point in quoting Belhaven was to show that union with England was not the disaster Belhaven had foreseen for Scotland but resulted in “the cultivation of her virtues and the correction of her errors.”⁷ Dickinson did not mention that opposition to the union landed Belhaven in prison, where he died, a result that might have given pause to opponents of ratification.

Bailyn and I spent what seemed like weeks consumed in this Scottish debate of 1706 and 1707. One evening I went to retrieve notes and found Bailyn still at his desk, poring over these volumes which had spent nearly a century unmolested on the shelves before I dredged them up for his perusal. I said something about “burning the midnight oil,” to which he responded, “I am burning the Belhaven oil.”

Remembering his immersion in Belhaven, in writing this essay I turned to the index of *The Debates on Ratification* to find it. How large a figure Belhaven and the union of England and Scotland must have made in this debate! Neither Belhaven nor the Scottish fears are there. Two of Dickinson’s other Fabius essays are included, the one featuring Belhaven did not make the cut. Bailyn had spent a good deal of time getting right with Belhaven, though in the end none of it made it into the book.

Yet Bailyn did not consider this endeavor a waste of time—either his or mine. No intellectual exercise is ever wasted, he once told me (and probably others). On first entering his office, I nearly tripped over the first fifteen or twenty volumes of *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*. “I was going to review those,” he said. It had not worked out, and every day he had a reminder of this project that did not happen, and I was reminded that we do not have a “Labaree’s Franklin: Notes for a Sketch” as

⁷Fabius VI, in *Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, vol. 17, *Commentaries on the Constitution, Public and Private*, vol. 5, April 1 to May 9 1788 (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1995): 210–14, accessed April 11, 2022, <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/History.DHRCv17>.

a companion to “Butterfield’s Adams: Notes for a Sketch” or “Boyd’s Jefferson: Notes for a Sketch.”⁸

Finding a speech by Hamlet or Lord Belhaven was relatively easy compared to other more complicated issues. When a speaker or writer mentioned a burning contemporary issue, it had to be explained. Bailyn would send me to track it down—what did the speaker mean? What was the contemporary reference? I would dig through the sources and write out a page or so explaining or telling the story. Bailyn insisted that I type, as he found my handwriting indecipherable. He would read through what I had written, go to his typewriter in the corner, and in a sentence or two condense the issue so clearly and concisely it seemed he had spent a career thinking it through.

Not all issues were so easily explained. One was the obscure matter of Virginia’s “commutable taxes.” What were they? What was taxed? What was commuted? Bailyn sent me into the stacks to find out. I dug through legislative journals, books on taxes, and Johnson’s *Dictionary* to find the meanings of “commutable” and “tax” in the 1780s, and wrote something up—it was more than a page—trying to explain this, though I only vaguely understood what it all meant.

Bailyn could not understand it, either. “I don’t understand this,” he wrote on my draft. We rarely saw each other, and even though his study was one of the few air-conditioned spaces on campus, I tried to avoid contact if he was going to ask questions I could not answer. Better to leave it on his desk. Our correspondence on commutable taxes must have gone on for several days, I would leave a new draft and he would return it still not understanding. We both were perplexed—I could not figure out commutable taxes or how to explain them, and he perhaps wondered why I could not answer so simple a question.

⁸Both “Butterfield’s Adams,” originally published in the *William and Mary Quarterly* (1962), and “Boyd’s Jefferson,” originally in the *New England Quarterly* (1960), are reprinted in *Faces of Revolution: Personalities and Themes in the Struggle for American Independence* (1990; repr. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992). Bailyn’s “Realism and Idealism in American Diplomacy: Franklin in Paris, *Couronné Par La Liberté*,” originally presented to the American Philosophical Society, appears in *To Begin the World Anew: The Genius and Ambiguities of the American Founders* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

One day I was in Widener J., puzzling over commutable taxes, and over how much longer I would hold this job, when the door flew open. In he came, followed by Barbara DeWolfe, my predecessor as his research assistant. I had not met her, though I knew she was coming in that day.

He did not bother to introduce us. He walked past my desk complaining: "I keep asking you for something straightforward and you won't tell me!" He now strode around his desk. "I don't know why you can't explain this!" Barbara walked more slowly and seemed to be looking particularly critically at me during this diatribe. "What do you have against a clear explanation of commutable taxes? I just want to know what they are but you won't tell me. Maybe you have some ideological reason not to tell me!"

Barbara stood before my desk glaring. I thought she was going to fling the 1786 Virginia tax code at me. Instead, she pointed to the window: "If I worked for Bernard Bailyn I would jump out of that window."

"I've tried," I said, "but he keeps it bolted!"

"Now I am being abused!" he said. That ended our discussion of commutable taxes. As with Lord Belhaven, I could not find them in the index of *The Debate on the Constitution*.

I was more successful in finding other sources. Bailyn was particularly interested in Noah Webster's fifty-five-page pamphlet, *An Examination into the Leading Principles of the Federal Constitution*, published under the pseudonym "A Citizen of America" on October 17, 1787. In his lecture on ratification, Bailyn showed how Webster critiqued Charles de Secondat, Baron de la Brède et de Montesquieu, and grappled with the connections between power and liberty. Webster discounted Montesquieu's notions on "civic virtue" as a mainspring of a republic. "Webster developed his view of liberty," Bailyn wrote, "and then turned to the concept of power. 'In what,' he asked, 'does *real* power consist?'"⁹ For Webster, real power was in property, not military force nor "cultural forces, like religion."

⁹Bailyn, "The Ideological Fulfillment of the American Revolution," in *Faces of Revolution*, 263.

Webster wrote that “[t]he system of the great Montesquieu will ever be erroneous till the words *property or lands in fee simple* are substituted for *virtue*,” which would never be a “fixed, permanent principle and support of government. . . .” Rather a distribution of property, with a prevention of “combinations of powerful families” accumulating all of it, was the “very soul of a republic. . . . Let the people have property and they *will* have power.”¹⁰

Webster saw the various “palladia of freedom”—liberty of the press, trial by jury, habeas corpus, “even Magna Charta itself”—as “inferior considerations” to a “general distribution of real property among every class of people.” This was Webster’s explanation for why a Bill of Rights was unnecessary. With a wide distribution of property, the liberty of Americans “stand on the broadest basis.”¹¹ Abstract virtue and disinterested patriotism would no more preserve liberty than parchment barriers would withstand arbitrary power.

For our purposes, though, Bailyn was less interested in Webster’s ideas than in his ostentatious and pompous erudition. “Brutus,” the opposition writer Bailyn found most intriguing, wrote that the anonymous author, Webster, “was some pedantic pedagogue who had been accustomed to deliver his dogma to pupils, who always placed implicit faith in what he delivered.”¹² Bailyn also saw through Webster’s pomposity, his allusions to obscure figures from antiquity: Zamolxis and Odin, Romuluso, Numa, Alfred, Solon, Fohi (a Chinese term for Buddha) and Manco Capac (the legendary founder of the Inca empire). In one long footnote on the Roman Senate, Webster quotes in French from the Abbé de Mably’s “*sur les Romains*,” and also refers readers to the “the learned Vertot” and a “discussion

¹⁰Webster, quoted in “Ideological Fulfillment,” 264. The quoted passages are in Webster, *An Examination into the Principles of the Constitution*, in *Debate on the Constitution*, 1:157–59.

¹¹Webster, quoted in “Ideological Fulfillment,” 264.

¹²Brutus IX, January 17, 1788, in *Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. 15, *Commentaries on the Constitution, Public and Private*, Vol. 3, *December 18, 1787 to January 31, 1788* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1984), 395.

between Lord Harvey and Dr. Middleton,” ending with, “See Vertot, Mably, and Middleton on this subject.”¹³ Webster placed himself on an intimate footing with “the learned Vertot” and had been party to the discussion between Middleton and Harvey.

Brutus and Bailyn saw that Webster was trying to show off. My job, though, was to find the citations—identify Manco Capac and Zamolxis, track down the quotes from the learned Vertot, the Abbé de Mably, Harvey, and Middleton. I hardly knew where to start. Fortunately, in Webster’s other pedantic writings, he had covered the figures of antiquity. For the Roman Senate, my day and Bailyn’s both brightened considerably when I found a few things. Though the card catalogue did not contain *sur les Romains*, the Abbé de Mably’s *Observations sur les Romains* had been published in both French and English in 1751, with the English translation more widely available than the French original. The card catalogue turned up neither Middleton nor “the learned Vertot” (under L or V). Instead, I found Nathaniel Hooke’s 1758 book, *Observations on I. The answer of M. l’abbé de Vertot to the late Earl Stanhope’s inquiry. . . II. A dissertation upon the constitution of the Roman senate. . . III. A treatise on the Roman Senate, by Dr. Conyers Middleton, . . . IV. An essay on the Roman Senate.*¹⁴

Webster had not been mining tracts on Roman history, or conversing with “the learned Vertot.” He had found Hooke’s anthology in the Yale library and presented himself as an authority on Roman and all other history. This book was the eighteenth century equivalent of a Wikipedia entry that Webster glossed.

¹³“A Citizen of America,” [Noah Webster], *An examination into the Leading Principles of the Constitution*, in *Debate on the Constitution*, 1:138.

¹⁴N. Hooke, *Observations on I. the answer of l’Abbé de Vertot to the late Earl Stanhope’s inquiry, concerning the Senate of Ancient Rome: dated December 1719. II. A dissertation upon the constitution of the Roman Senate, by a gentleman, published in 1743. III. A treatise on the Roman Senate, by Dr. Conyers Middleton: published 1747. IV. An essay on the Roman Senate, by Dr. Thomas Chapman: published in 1750* (London: Printed for G. Hawkins, 1758). This is available both in the Widener Library and at the Yale Library.

Never had I seen Bailyn so delighted: “This is perfect! I will use this to skewer that pompous pedant!”

Bailyn relished an opportunity to show up the smug Webster. But this desired outcome was not to be. The Library of America has its own formula, rigidly set, but effective. The documents are presented with a minimum of editorial commentary. Bailyn planned to do this additional work, setting each document in context, but the publisher said no. The communication was entirely by phone and by mail, and ultimately though reluctantly (each side said they might step away—he would abandon the project, they would find someone else to finish it) he conceded. It was not the first time he had tangled with a publisher, nor probably the last. He would refer to the publisher as “our heroes,” or “our friends in New York.”

Unable to skewer the pompous pedant in an introductory essay, Bailyn turned to the footnotes, which became more than simple citations. The notes comprise a total of ninety-nine pages. In the note on Webster’s note, Abbé de Mably’s *Observations sur les Romains* was a “well-known book that had been available in English translation since 1751,” and that the “references to Roman history and to the views of Philip Dormer Stanhope,” etc., “are in Nathaniel Hooke’s *Observations . . . concerning the Senate of Ancient Rome* (1758).”¹⁵

Bailyn was interested not so much in Webster’s personality as in his ideas, and those of others in the debates. John Stevens Jr., who wrote as “Americus,” in his first essay (published on November 2, 1787, three weeks before Madison’s *Federalist 10* appeared) took on Montesquieu’s axiom that only a small state could have a republican government. Stevens went further in subsequent essays, challenging Montesquieu’s notions of civic virtue as a mainspring of republican government. Unable to present all of this in an introduction to the Library of America volumes, Bailyn published a revised version of his Ratification lecture in his “Ideological Fulfillment” in *Faces of Revolution* and as an afterword to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Ideological Origins*, which both appeared before the Library of

¹⁵*Debate on the Constitution*, 1:1147–148n.

America volumes appeared. Murray Dry in a *William and Mary Quarterly* review declared that the essay would have been “an excellent introduction” to the volumes.¹⁶

Bailyn continued developing these ideas in a course, History 1610, *The Constitution of the United States: Origins, Formation, Intention, and Character*, offered jointly by the College and Harvard Law School, in the Spring semesters of 1989 and 1990.¹⁷ I sat in on the course the first time, taking extensive notes during his lectures. The next time I was a teaching assistant, one of four or five supervised by Sally Hadden.

The TAs would gather with Bailyn after every Friday’s lecture for lunch, which the TAs took turns buying. Over two successive weeks, I saw how our relationship had changed. A colleague had gone to a trendy Cambridge deli for sandwiches, only to discover to his mortification that Bailyn did not like fancy mustard. My poor colleague was undone, and apologetically scraped the offending mustard from his own sandwich.

The next week was my turn. My spouse, frugal for good reason, economized on the sandwich-makings (good quality from the supermarket) so we could splurge on cannoli from the famous Spinnelli’s in East Boston (where we lived). It turned out that Bailyn did not like cannoli. Unlike my unfortunate colleague of the offending mustard, I now knew Bailyn well enough not to be intimidated. “How could someone not like cannoli?” I asked. Not something that can be argued (I have since learned that he liked Salzburger Nockerl). He did leave more for the rest of us.

The desultory pleasantries about mustard or cannoli done, Bailyn would throw out a question, deceptive by its simplicity. After a lecture on the Antifederalist fears of an unresponsive and overbearing federal government, with an intrusive taxing power that would obliterate the states and intrude into every aspect of daily life, including a long quote from “Brutus”:

¹⁶Review, “Debate on the Constitution,” *WMQ* 52 (1995): 211.

¹⁷Harvard University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, *Courses of Instruction: Harvard College, Radcliffe College, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 1988–1989* (Cambridge, MA: Published by the University, August 18, 1988), Seq. 426, 410, Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

This power . . . will introduce itself into every corner of the city, and country—It will wait upon the ladies at their toilett, and will not leave them in any of their domestic concerns; it will accompany them to the ball, the play, and the assembly; it will go with them when they visit, and will, on all occasions, sit beside them in their carriages, nor will it desert them even in church; it will enter the house of every gentleman, watch over his cellar, wait upon his cook in the kitchen, follow the servants into the parlour, and preside over the table, and note down all he eats or drinks; it will attend him to his bed-chamber, and watch him while he sleeps; it will take cognizance of the professional man in his office, or his study; it will watch the merchant in the counting-house, or in his store; it will follow the mechanic to his shop, and in his work, and will haunt him in his family, and in his bed; it will be a constant companion to the industrious farmer in all his labour, it will be with him in the house, and in the field, observe the toil of his hands, and the sweat of his brow; it will penetrate into the most obscure cottage; and finally, it will light upon the head of every person in the United States. To all these different classes of people, and in all these circumstances, in which it will attend them, the language which it will address them will be GIVE! GIVE!”¹⁸

Bailyn asked, “Weren’t they right?” A good subject for discussion. I came to realize his questions were the ideal way to begin our weekly undergraduate sections. (His section for law students was different. He stood in front of the lecture hall, looking at the assembly of prospective lawyers, and challenged them, “Ask me a question.” Despite, or perhaps because, of their rigorous Socratic practice, none seemed willing to take him up on the offer).

To prepare for attending his lectures I reviewed the extensive notes taken the previous spring. What was striking were the differences between the two years. He began each lecture revisiting what he had said the previous time, working his way into a discussion of something new. Though material and themes recurred from one year to the next, each course was different as he thought through the material again, seeming to rethink

¹⁸Brutus VI, *New York Journal*, December 27, 1787, *Debate on the Constitution*, 1:617. Bailyn also quoted the passage in his “Ideological Fulfillment” essay. *Faces of Revolution*, 235; and *Ideological Origins*, 336.

it before our eyes. One of my undergraduates, who had been enraptured by another faculty member justly celebrated for his dramatic and engaging delivery, said to me after Bailyn's first lecture, "I thought Professor ___ was the greatest lecturer I had ever heard. But then I heard Bailyn!"

Bailyn found some parts of the story more important or notable than others. At a time when graduate students were fixated on race, class, and gender, he had little to say on any of this analytic trinity. And though he was probing documents, he did little in the way of deconstruction or considering sources as "texts." A focus on ideas (as ideas, rather than as theoretical social constructs) had its strength, but it also leaves gaps. In one lecture he noted the contentious aftermath of Pennsylvania's ratifying convention, which led to a mob storming the Carlisle jail to spring imprisoned opponents of ratification. A student asked if he could tell them more. Bailyn looked up to the back row and asked me to elaborate. I probably went on too long and gave too much detail. When I finished, he said to the class, "That is someone who has done a deep study of the subject."

It got a laugh, but I realized Bernard Bailyn had just asked me to explain something to his class. By this time I was immersed in preparing the chronology and bibliographical sketches for the end of the volumes. Here the task was to be concise yet thorough. This chronology of constitutional developments between 1774 (Parliament's response to the Boston Tea Party) and 1804 (the ratification of the 12th amendment), runs to sixty-five pages of small print. In his review of the book, J.C.A. Stagg called it "excessively lengthy."¹⁹

For the biographical sketches, I began with a list of every person—all 134—quoted in the volumes, either as a writer or a speaker at a convention—and found what information I could. These posed different problems. Not the French diplomats—as I was working with the sketch of Louis-Guillaume Otto, Comte de Mosloy from the *Biographie Universelle*, my wife asked if Bailyn knew that I could not read French. No matter; with a

¹⁹Review, *Debate on the Constitution*, NEQ 67 (1994): 668.

dictionary I powered through. More troubling was Washington, or Franklin, about whom we know too much, or William Jones of Maine, about whom we know very little (and for someone named William Jones, unlikely to know more). I wrote up what I found, running off the expanding document on a dot-matrix printer, tearing off the guiding side panels and leaving the entire piece for Bailyn to review. He would mark it up with questions and excisions. I would revise, bring him a fresh copy, and he would again go through it, and we repeated the process over several weeks.

One of my favorite characters was Samuel Spencer of North Carolina, not so much for his accomplishments as for the lesson learned writing his biographical sketch. Born in Connecticut, Spencer went to Princeton in the 1750s then moved to North Carolina to practice law. This was enough to lead me to James McLachlan's *Princetonians: 1748–1768*.²⁰ Spencer fought to suppress the North Carolina Regulators, served in the legislature, and became a judge, and he opposed ratification at both of the North Carolina conventions. Judge Spencer's untimely end struck me as the most interesting part of his story. One warm April afternoon he sat, wearing a red hat, on his front porch in Anson County. In the warm afternoon sun, Spencer began to nod off. A turkey in the yard saw the bobbing red hat, took it for a challenge, and attacked the napping judge. Though Spencer fought off the bird, it had severely bitten his hand. Judge Spencer died of the infection.

My sketch of Spencer ended with this story—the warm afternoon sun, the red hat bobbing, the turkey attacking, the ensuing infection. Bailyn made a red X through the turkey story. In the next draft I condensed—taking out some extraneous details (the warm April sun). Again, he crossed it all out. I cut some more—was the red hat important? He crossed it all out again. This back and forth continued: I wrote and he crossed out. He never asked why I kept putting the story in; I never asked why he kept taking it out. Finally, as it all was going off

²⁰James McLachlan, *Princetonians: 1748–1768, A Biographical Dictionary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

to our heroes in New York, I delivered a final version, sure that the turkey would not make his final cut.

When *The Debate on the Constitution* volumes appeared a few years later, and I saw them for the first time—on a shelf at the Harvard COOP, I immediately turned to volume 2, page 1013. There was Samuel Spencer, whose profile ends, “Died at home in Anson County on April 20, 1793, of an infected hand wound sustained from an attack by a turkey.”²¹

Twelve words! It took me sixty-plus to retell the story above. Spencer is the only character for whom we give a cause of death, and without an unnecessary, extraneous, or distracting word Bailyn tells us all we need to know, in an elegant “wound sustained from an attack by a turkey.”

By this time, in 1993, Bailyn was organizing The International Seminar on the Atlantic World and working on *The Barbarous Years* in speaking engagements (“The Federalist Papers” at the Library of Congress, 1996, “The Living Past—Commitments to the Future,” at the White House, 1998, “Politics and the Creative Imagination,” the Jefferson Lecture for the National Endowment for the Humanities, 1998). I was teaching at Suffolk University and at the Harvard Extension School. My proximity to Cambridge and being on campus once a week gave me occasion to keep in touch. Every few months I would stop in, benefitting from his disinterested advice on my various professional challenges. He always seemed interested in what I was doing.

When e-mail became a steady habit, I would send him stories he might find amusing: the student who said she was distracted from studies because her father’s new job required her to spend time traveling with him. What was the job? He was president of Angola. Bailyn remembered as head tutor being tasked with asking the Aga Khan, whom they were told to call “Mr. Khan,” why he had not turned in his papers. “Yes, Mr. Bailyn,” Mr. Khan said, “but we had the Tanganyika crisis.” Bailyn admitted he had no good response to that one. When Harvard’s American Civilization Program asked me to come talk to

²¹*Debate on the Constitution*, 2:1013.

current grad students about “teaching in a non-elite college,” I was touched that they recognized this as a legitimate career path. My wife thought it somewhat insulting. So, I mentioned it to Bailyn, who said it was not insulting, but odd. Another former student, he said, taught in a prison. Knowing Bailyn probably would not see a blog post from the Society for US Intellectual History on *Ideological Origins*’ fiftieth anniversary, I sent it to him. I had read the whole thing before I realized that the IOTAR in the title was *Ideological Origins*. He was glad I had told him that, as he thought it might be pronounced “Yo! Tar!”²²

Bailyn agreed in 2003 to moderate the Colonial Society’s Graduate Student Forum. The role of the moderator, a senior scholar, was to listen to the student presentations and, at the end of the day, offer some reflections. Some moderators spent the day in the back of the room writing up their remarks, others were more engaged. Bailyn sat at the back of the room and for every presentation would suggest a book or article or a line of thought. By this time he had been working on the Atlantic World Seminar for a decade, and his interests were expansive. His suggested readings ranged from community studies in Nigeria and a German scholar of education to something he had read on music theory. In his closing remarks at the end of the day, he told his story of working with Samuel Eliot Morison and also told the graduate students how much more difficult their world was than his had been. In his day, he said, a scholar had only a shelf or so of books to sift through on a topic, while their generation had massive amounts of material to weigh and to ponder. He encouraged them to press on.

The USS CONSTITUTION Museum in 2011 presented Bailyn with its Samuel Eliot Morison Award. He came to the dinner at the Copley Plaza, and gave a few remarks about Morison. He was particularly impressed with the award—a piece of live oak carved into the shape of a book—and with the traditional grog toast. Guests could take the grog glasses home.

²²Sara Georgini, “IOTAR50: Paper Politics,” *Society for U.S. Intellectual History*, accessed June 13, 2017, <https://s-usih.org/2017/06/iotar50-paper->

Later he asked for more of the glasses, as they are also suitable for Rakija, a popular Balkan fruit brandy, introduced to him by his daughter-in-law. David Curtis Skaggs, distinguished historian of the War of 1812, received the award the next year, and was less impressed with the grog than with his name forever being on a list of historians right below Bernard Bailyn's.

In the fall of 2016, Yerevan State University in Armenia invited some American scholars to come talk about the Declaration of Independence. Jack Rakove and I both accepted, and we met for the first time in Yerevan, where we spent a memorable two days. We emailed about this chance encounter. Bailyn could not fathom why our State Department allowed "you two clowns" to go abroad and cause chaos.

Then in early 2017, I received an unexpected email from the Library of America. They had asked Bailyn to do an abridged version of the *Debate on Constitution*, trimming over eighteen hundred pages to four hundred fifty, with seventy-five rather than nearly three hundred documents. Now in his nineties, he declined the opportunity, as he was working on *Illuminating History* and other things. He recommended they contact me. They did not want to do that, understandably, as they had never heard of me. He told them to call me. They agreed, and after I said I could do it, they asked him to be the editor, while Allison—whoever he was—would be the consulting editor. "No," he insisted. "Allison is the editor, I am the consulting editor." For him, the project was a distraction; for me, being a co-editor of a book with Bernard Bailyn was a career achievement.²³

At the age of ninety-five, and with other things on his mind, Bailyn remained as sharp as ever on the arguments of the essays and their context. He still had his original notes on all the essays—those included and those not—rating their importance. We had a process of winnowing and tossing out some of our favorite pieces. Jack Rakove helpfully suggested which

²³Robert J. Allison and Bernard Bailyn, eds., *The Essential Debate on the Constitution: Federalist and Antifederalist Speeches and Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 2018).

of the Federalist essays to include, giving different options if we were to use five, or ten, or fifteen, or twenty; we included nine. Mercy Otis Warren came out to make more room for Brutus and John Stevens, though Bailyn warned me about consequences should she not appear. I pointed out one benefit of having a co-editor is we each had someone else to blame.

We arranged the selections into manageable sections, and I wrote short introductions for each group and a chronology, now four pages with large type rather than sixty with small. We were confused about whether one of us should do an introduction, and the other a preface, or whether we together would write one introduction. Hoping to spare him extra work, I transcribed his interview on Liz Covart's "Ben Franklin's World" podcast, in which he talked about the founders' obsession with power, and refit it as a preface.²⁴ He still insisted on writing his own preface, as he saw the Constitution's system of checks and balances challenged as it had never been in his lifetime.

Writing the book's preface might have been the end of the story, but the publishers offered more suggestions. Instead of organizing the book chronologically, the way historians do, they thought it would be more useful in classrooms if we arranged it topically. That did make sense, though the topics the publisher had in mind were abortion, gun control, and other issues of contemporary constitutional import. We reasoned with them that dividing the essays topically would be impossible, as most discussed multiple issues, and none of the writers had the foresight to anticipate our problems. It was enough that they grappled with the fundamental issues of power and liberty, with which we continue to grapple. Bailyn conveyed this to the publisher, whom he now called "your friends in New York." They did not argue.

During the course of editing the book, I finally began to call him Bud. When the book finally arrived, in 2018, we began referring to each other as "my co-author." I asked him what he

²⁴Liz Covart, "Origins of the American Revolution," September 19, 2017, in "Doing History," podcast, <https://benfranklinworld.com/episode-152-origins-american-revolution>.

thought our next project should be. “What I remember most about that collaboration,” he said, “was a lot of laughter.” Would that we can say the same about every project.

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