



Reviews

The Revolutionary: Samuel Adams. By Stacy Schiff. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 2022. Pp. 432. \$24.50 cloth. \$21.99 paperback. \$11.99 e-book.)

Stacey Schiff's new biography is engaging, immensely readable, and sometimes frustrating. It also left me wondering exactly how to review it for this journal. Reading this book—and contemplating the review—raised a host of questions about reading, audience, and reliability. As a reader, I found much to appreciate. As an academic historian, I found many moments that gave me pause.

The Revolutionary is, by many standards, an excellent biography. Not quite a cradle-to-grave story of Adams' life, it focuses on the years of the so-called "Imperial Crisis" between 1763 and 1776. It is anchored by well-known episodes such as the Stamp Act riots, the Boston Massacre, the Boston Tea Party, and the battles of Lexington and Concord. A wonderful stylist, Schiff emphasizes Adams' remarkable and vivid literary output: "A one-man multitude, he could be silken, glowering, stabbing, melodramatic" (160). These contradictions in Adams' writing seem to be a theme both in his politics and in Schiff's response to them, for she leans into these contradictions as the narrative builds.

Honestly, I wondered as I wrote this review whether there was a mismatch between the intended audience of this book and the audience of the *New England Quarterly*. Should a book like this be reviewed in this journal? If this book had gone through a standard peer review and was published by an academic press, it would be appropriate for me to point out the problems in research and method that mar the book. For example, the heart of Schiff's argument for Adams' impact on

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public opinion is her chapter on the “pure propaganda” (149) that Adams and other Sons of Liberty distributed as the *Journal of Occurrences*. Academic historians would not claim that “no article in the *Journal of Occurrences* left a trace in the court records” (350), especially since my own recent book demonstrated that several of the episodes were in fact prosecuted through the courts. To take quite a different example, Schiff suggested that Adams opposed the ratification of the U.S. Constitution because he “could not get his mind around centralized authority” although he “had done more than anyone to knit together the colonies” (320). Historians of the period recognize Adams as a principled critic of the Constitution (in company with Mercy Otis Warren or Melancton Smith) rather than a befuddled stick in the mud unable to recognize the fruits of his own labors.

It may be churlish of me to nitpick such details, but historians have a responsibility to accuracy of both detail and context. It is better, of course, when we can correct each other in private—through pre-publication peer review, for example—than in the public record. But even for an audience unfamiliar with the latest scholarship on the Boston Massacre, some of these errors represent a missed opportunity. In methodological terms, the narrow focus on Adams mischaracterizes the “insurgency” of Massachusetts in the 1770s. If Schiff had occasionally drawn her focus away from Adams to see how he worked with the participants in Massachusetts’ protest movements, including urban women, rural farmers, and western lawyers, she might have offered readers a better understanding of how grassroots politics functioned in the eighteenth century.

Even so, Schiff’s biography makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the complicated nature of the American Revolution and its participants. Like biographers before her, Schiff depends heavily on Adams’ published writings, as well as a hagiographic account produced at the end of the Civil War by Adams’ great-grandson, William V. Wells. The most original contribution of the book, however, lies in her attempt to create a portrait of Adams that triangulates between the hero-worship of John Adams’ recollections and the seething

frustration of Thomas Hutchinson. The result is provocative, if not always coherent. Seen through these polarizing lenses, Schiff's Samuel Adams is simultaneously naively idealistic and politically savvy, conniving, and heroic. Adams is described, for example, as always looking for a fight ("he seemed to crumple if he failed to head into the wind," 319) and also respectfully tactful ("he spoke seldom but commanded profound attention when he did," 303). It is difficult to get any clear picture of Adams himself. Yet this lack of coherence and consistency is at the heart of the American Revolution, an event that simultaneously offered glorious promises and deep-seated racial exclusions. In light of this contradictory history, I think that Schiff has put her finger on something that is genuinely honest.

One of my favorite aspects of this book is that Schiff refuses to tell her reader how much she actually likes Adams. Fifty years ago, Pauline Maier pointed out how the changing portraits of Samuel Adams reflected Americans' own understanding of their founding history. Wells published his biography at the moment that New Englanders were eager for heroes who supported "the righteous principle of the Revolution," in Wells' words. Writing at the end of the Vietnam War, Maier herself redefined Adams from radical propagandist to moral reformer. As we move towards the semiquincentennial of the American Revolution, a portrait of Adams—who is neither hero nor antihero—may be precisely what we need.

Certainly, definitions of heroism change over time, sometimes even within a single lifetime. Schiff is particularly incisive in pointing out that Adams might have outlived his moment. If so, he was not alone. Thomas Paine is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon. Like Paine, Adams sometimes seems like a has-been even before signing the Declaration of Independence.

In Schiff's characterization, Adams' greatest contribution to the American Revolution is his commitment to the idea of democracy, which drives his radicalism in the 1760s and limits it in the face of Shays' Rebellion twenty years later. Schiff's Adams sees rational thought and careful reflection as necessary for democracy. "Adams banked on the sage deliberations

of a band of hard-working farmers reasoning their way toward rebellion. That was how democracy worked” (8). Is that how democracy used to work? I love this vision of democracy; it is so clean and heroic and selfless and idealistic. It is also, surprisingly, a completely apolitical vision, which sits oddly in the context of a biography that gives such close attention to Adams’ political machinations.

For most of Adams’ political life, he shared with many political thinkers a deep suspicion of democracy and popular rule. Most founders, including Samuel Adams, feared that government by the people was likely to go off the rails. But what Schiff shows us is a man captivated by the belief that people could and should contribute to a political community that exists for the public good. At this moment in our American history, Schiff has given us a story of the American Revolution with which we should all grapple.

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Adin Ballou’s Spiritual Journey through Nineteenth-Century New England: Practical Christianity. By Bryce Hal Taylor. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022. Pp. 270. \$105.00 cloth. \$45.00 e-book.)

Adin Ballou’s spiritual journey embodied the vast religious possibilities that became available in the United States of the early nineteenth century. That is the central claim of Bryce Hal Taylor’s exhaustively researched study of Ballou’s life and writing. Taylor argues that the religious culture of New England allowed a farmer’s son to claim authority as a preacher, espouse a series of reinterpretations of major theological tenets, become a leading voice for social reform, and establish a utopian community—all while keeping established religious leaders and institutions at arm’s length. Ballou represents, according to Taylor, a key figure for understanding an era when, “for both the pastor and practitioner, one’s understanding of religion and