

JOYCE APPLEBY

# INHERITING THE REVOLUTION



*The First Generation of Americans*

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JOYCE APPLEBY

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# INHERITING THE REVOLUTION

*To my sons, Mark and Frank, I dedicate this book with love*

## P R E F A C E

I BEGAN THIS STUDY inductively following the lives of several thousand American men and women born between 1776 and 1800, but, of course, having studied American history for over forty years, my mind was hardly a *tabula rasa*. My goal was to examine the “inheriting generation,” the children and grandchildren of those who participated in the revolutionary break with Great Britain that conferred formal nationhood on a cluster of New World colonies. Much of their collective story will be familiar, but not, I think, the multifarious ways that as individuals confronting a new set of options, they crafted the political style, social forms, and economic ventures of an independent United States.

My research strategy resembled a vacuum cleaner. Reading in primary and secondary sources, I made cards on every member of my cohort whom I encountered. More systematically I looked for records of them in standard encyclopedias, school registers, and manuscript collections. From

these leads came information about their associates, writings, and enterprises. I also read over two hundred published autobiographies written by those born between 1776 and 1800, seeking information about persons, places, and things that animated American society during their lifetime, as well as the forms and interpretations that gave meaning to them.

The self-conscious crafting of a life story is a historian's delight and snare, for autobiographies can obscure as much reality as they reveal. Mature authors often put a distorting gloss on youthful decisions. Memory plays tricks, vanity trumps honesty. In the West autobiographies developed as a genre alongside the novel; they often follow the novel's lineal story line, plotting a life around dramatic moments. And like the novel, they usually emphasize individual choices while minimizing the powerful structuring forces of law, property, and custom. There is also the possibility of confounding a first-person narrative with an objective report.

Mindful of these tendencies, I have used memoirs to learn about early childhood, emotional ties, job choices, and the material and social environment in which the lives unfolded. While historians are taught to be suspicious of self-presentations, they ignore the information at a loss. Autobiographies are an unparalleled source of clues about sensibilities—the most evanescent of cultural phenomena—as well as of the values and interpretations that constructed reality for a given generation.

Many people over the last nine years have helped me clarify my thoughts as I have written this book: Joan Waugh, Daniel Howe, Karen Orren, Margaret Jacob, Lynn Hunt, Naomi Lamoreaux, Ann Gordon, Iryne Black, Aimee Lee Cheek, William Cheek, Kirsten Hammer, Ludmilla Jordanova, Anne Sheehan, Christopher Clark, Winifred Rothenberg, Mark Valeri, Carole Shammas, Andrew Robertson, John Majewski, Malinda Alaine, Maggie Brambilla, Elizabeth Townsend, Ruth Bloch, Barbara Packer, Kariann Yokota, Christopher Gantner, Cynthia Cumfer, Eric Altice, Anthony Iaccarino, Gregory Vanderbilt, Sandra Moats, Robert Baker, Andrew Lister, and Gregory Beyrer. I want to give special thanks to Stephen Aron for his trenchant reading of the manuscript and to J. R. Pole for attending to matters of syntax, style, and substance with exquisite care.

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# I

## INTRODUCTION

“PETER RUGG, THE MISSING MAN” enjoyed the reputation of being the most popular short story of the early republic.<sup>1</sup> A phantasmagoric tale, it begins when the title character sets off for Concord one sunny, autumn day in the year of the Boston Massacre. Rugg is on his way home when a violent storm overtakes him. Rather than wait out the bad weather, he swears that he “*will see home to-night, in spite of the last tempest, or may I never see home!*” Having aroused the fates and furies, Rugg is doomed to traverse the back roads of Massachusetts in his horse-drawn chaise, startling travelers with his mad appearance and the unexpected showers that always accompanied him. A half-century later, Jonathan Dunwell, a New York businessman and the narrator of the story, becomes intrigued by the weird phenomenon he encounters in his frequent trips to Boston and accosts Rugg, wresting from him the facts about a trip to Concord gone awry.

Clearly a desperate man, Rugg turns out to be an opinionated one as

well, scoffing when Dunwell tells him that the handsome city he has brought him to is New York. "Poh, New York is nothing; though I never was there," Rugg asserts irascibly. Unperturbed, Dunwell guides Rugg's chaise through Pearl Street, where he observes Rugg's changing countenance: "his nerves began to twitch; his eyes trembled in their sockets; he was evidently bewildered." Awestruck, Rugg exclaims, "This surpasses all human comprehension; if you know, sir, where we are, I beseech you to tell me." Dumbfounded upon passing into Broadway, Rugg insists: "there is no such place as this in North America. This is all the effect of enchantment; this is a grand delusion, nothing real. Here is seemingly a great city, magnificent houses, shops, and goods, men and women innumerable, and as busy as in real life, all sprung up in one night from the wilderness; or what is more probable some tremendous convulsion of Nature has thrown London or Amsterdam on the shores of New England."<sup>2</sup>

William Austin's much-reprinted story, with its contrast between the turbulence on a road to Boston and the majesty of a thriving commercial metropolis, offers an apt introduction to my history of the first generation of Americans—those born after the Revolution. Comparing Rugg's intemperate confusion to the urbane composure of his guide, readers of Austin's tale must have recognized their own good fortune in being the heirs of a revolution they did not have to fight. The narrator's certainty of self acts as a foil for the ambiguity of Rugg's identity—is he a ghost or an aged relic of the colonial era? The transfer of European greatness to the shores of the United States no doubt seemed credible to Americans living in 1825, as did the enormous satisfaction that Dunwell, the buoyant embodiment of American success, took in astounding an old man, trapped in an earlier era. And well might Dunwell boast, considering that between the Boston Massacre and the 1820 census, Boston had tripled in size while New York had grown sixfold, increases without colonial parallels. Dunwell was a modern man; he compared the past to the present and found it wanting. His creator, William Austin, a distinguished member of the Boston bar, registered his own commitment to an egalitarian future when he refused membership in the newly-formed Phi Beta Kappa Society because of its inherent elitism.

The passage of social responsibility from parents to children is always a fascinating interplay of the inherited and the novel. The destruction of much of their elders' world forced the members of this generation to move forward on their own, a necessity that set them apart from earlier and later

cohorts. Neither their parents' example nor their communities' tested formulas could guide them in the new situations they encountered. Like Rugg, their mothers and fathers were immured in the past, stuck there at the very time that the pace of change exaggerated the difference between past and present. Many of the new generation became agents of change in an era of change marked by the convergence of political revolutions, commercial expansion, and intellectual ferment that penetrated, as we shall see, the most mundane aspects of life. Never forced, like their parents, to revoke an earlier loyalty to Great Britain, the men and women of the first generation were much freer to imagine what the United States might become. The celebration of Revolutionary events that marked their childhood also made them conscious of not having fought in the war, or run the farm for an absent spouse or parent, or participated in a boycott, or hidden farm produce from marauding British troops.

The very idea of generations resonated with new meaning after the Revolution. As families exerted less influence in the lives of those born after Independence, the young people looked more to their peers for models of behavior. This attachment to one's age group weakened traditional loyalties, but it held out the promise of creating a fresh political will, as the Revolutionary figure Gouverneur Morris discerned when he wrote that a "national spirit is the natural result of national existence; and although some of the present generation may feel colonial oppositions of opinion, that generation will die away, and give place to a race of Americans."<sup>3</sup> In the following decades Morris's "race of Americans" disclosed the creative potential that had long been coiled like a spring within Britain's North American colonies. Engaging with their desires, callings, decisions, and reflections offers an intimate view of how the vibrant new abstractions of democracy—the nation, free enterprise, and liberal society—thickened with meaning during the early nineteenth century.

Highlighting the members of one generation, while largely ignoring those people younger and older who are living alongside them, requires some justification. My correction to this distortion has been to concentrate on the forty years when my cohort predominated in the population, starting when the first of them came of age in the 1790s and ending in 1830 when their juniors, now adults, outnumbered them. A related, more serious problem comes from homogenizing the experience of diverse groups, as-signing collective nouns to actions that were really performed by small subsets of the larger society. This would be particularly misleading during

the early nineteenth century, when deep political divisions, competing religious insights, and profound disagreements about slavery embroiled the first generation as it assumed responsibility for the nation.

Another conceptual problem when dealing with the early nineteenth century concerns the perception of historic transformations. Since the invention of the printing press and the voyages of exploration, European society has moved through a succession of irreversible developments that have given each generation the strong feeling that theirs has been the great period of change, or even the principal divide between the traditional and modern. The sense of transformative change is no doubt real, but the repetition of such experiences warns us off the notion that there has been one singular period in the long, arduous, and fateful move away from the world of custom. Rather than thinking of a series of ages, each utterly new, it would be better to consider the peculiar mix of innovations and continuities, ruptures and reactions that confronted each cohort. In the case of those born right after Independence, their newfound geographic and social mobility, the novel applications of steam power, and expanding uses of print communicated the sense of the modern that Mr. Dunwell conveyed so effectively to Peter Rugg with a trip to New York City.

Historians talk easily about continuity and change, but in a study that claims so much change for one generation, it is important to be more explicit about the tension between the two. In a very real sense, what Independence brought was an enlarged scope for acting on desires and convictions that had long lain close to the surface of colonial life. The casual oversight of the British government had permitted social experiments and encouraged the kind of personal independence that made possible a collective move for political independence. New science, new technology, and new literature had come to the colonies with every boat from Europe. The natural rights philosophy embedded in the Declaration of Independence came from English political thought, radicalized by French philosophers during the eighteenth century. Other novelties that astounded contemporaries were but part and parcel of the industrial process affecting all of western Europe.

Where American commentators differed was in attributing their material accomplishments to the superiority of their political institutions and construing their economic progress as testimony to the soundness of the revolution they had inherited. So much that they saw around them had been newly built, newly ploughed, newly invented that it was possible to think of the United States as having implanted itself on a blank canvas,

flourishing because of its good sense in adopting democratic ways. In their eyes, Independence made possible the creation of a distinctive American society that honored individual initiative, institutional restraint, and popular public participation. However inadequate as an explanation of historic change this view might be, the connection between prosperity and democracy sealed the American imagination against a critical stance towards either, a portentous development.

Facing a dramatically different challenge from that of their parents, the men and women born between Independence and 1800 worked out the social forms for the new nation. They—some enthusiastically, others reluctantly—took on the self-conscious task of elaborating the meaning of the American Revolution. Their knowledge of it consisted of passed-on tales rather than first-hand experiences, yet they were the ones to fashion the revolutionary affirmations that gave the United States a national culture replete with purposes, heroes, taboos, prescriptions, symbols, and celebrations. Familiar elements in the colonial world had transmogrified into novelties; Britain changed from a sovereign authority to a rival, and the continent, once at their backs, became a part of a new, national destiny to be faced in the West.

Any study focusing on how a group interprets its shared experience over a specific period of time must confront the vexed relation between the realm of reality—conditions, situations, and decisions—and the constructions bestowed upon it by the participants. My own view is that interpreting reality is the most serious intellectual activity people take part in, but that the process of interpretation—both individual and collective—is always prompted by outside events. Growing to maturity after Independence, my cohort advanced an interpretation of American democracy that included a narrative about the future that left the next generation with far fewer intellectual alternatives. A kind of closure about collective meaning had taken place. Expressed in universal terms, the first generation's understanding of its revolutionary heritage obscured for decades to come the variety of identities and affinities within the nation. Universality was claimed for the qualities displayed by successful white men, throwing other people into the shadows of national consciousness.

Many contemporaries concluded that both democratic and limited government enhanced their free-enterprise economy. Journal commentary, life stories, published gazetteers, and travelers' accounts put into circulation tributes to individual initiative with explorations of risk and venture that contributed discursively to a culture of capitalism. The engagement of

America's first generation with the market provided the intellectual foundations of free enterprise, what we could call the invisible support for material success. This part of the story also abounds with paradoxes. Slave labor produced far higher profits than that from free workers and farm proprietors. Northern indictments of slavery ignored this fact when they promoted free choice and personal liberty as avenues to prosperity. Similarly, religious revivals inspired passionate engagements with God while they enhanced the capacity for disciplined work. By teaching young men and women how to act responsibly and acquire the habits of planning and risk-taking, America's churches furnished the lessons that added moral capital to the entrepreneurs' dollars in the bank.

The decisive events of the 1770s, 1780s, and 1790s structured the world in which the cohort born after Independence took their bearings. The control over information and opinions once exercised by an elite had been wrested away by the articulate critics of that elite in the 1790s. The mobilization of popular will through print campaigns overpowered the tactical advantages that had long accrued to a small, literate upper class. By 1800 a party of reforming democrats had found its voice, a cause, and the strategy for prevailing at the polls. The presidential election of Thomas Jefferson led to the uncoupling of social and political power, drowning in a democratic tidal wave the colonial belief that authority should be exercised through the uncontested leadership of a recognized cadre of families. Jefferson moved swiftly to dismantle the Federalist fiscal program, rushing the land of the national domain into the hands of frontier buyers, reducing taxes, and cutting the size of the civil service. By 1810 a third of the American population lived in a new settlement while even in the older cities the population had more than doubled.

Three European witnesses have left pithy accounts of the perpetual-motion society they discovered in their travels. The Duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt spent thirty-three months in the United States between 1795 and 1797. At every tavern in the rural areas of New England, Pennsylvania, and New York, he encountered farmers moving to some other place. La Rochefoucauld wanted to know if American farmers shared any of the French peasant's attachment to a particular piece of ground, but when he tried to explain this sentiment to them, they invariably told him that such permanence revealed a certain lack of pluck. "It is a country in flux," the duc concluded; "that which is true today as regards its population, its establishments, its prices, its commerce will not be true six months from now."<sup>4</sup>



Thirty years later another perceptive French observer, the young Michel Chevalier, covered much the same territory, geographically and culturally. Responding more philosophically to the constant churning of people in the United States, Chevalier concluded that if “movement and the quick succession of sensations and ideas constitute life, here one lives a hundred fold more than elsewhere; here, all is circulation, motion, and boiling agitation.” “Experiment follows experiment; enterprise follows enterprise,” he reported, observing that riches and “poverty follow on each other’s traces and each in turn occupies the place of the other.”<sup>5</sup>

Frederick Marryat, a British naval officer, more laconically commented that “the Americans are a restless, locomotive people: whether for business or pleasure, they are ever on the move in their own country, and they move in masses.” “Wandering about seems engrafted in their Nature,” he added; they “forever imagine that the Lands further off are still better than those upon which they are already settled.”<sup>6</sup> Better than Americans themselves these observers saw the novelty of a society directed almost entirely by the ambitious dreams that had been unleashed after the Revolution in the heated imagination of thousands of people, most of them poor and young.

Although starting from the political moment of Independence, my study ranges back and forth from the public to the personal as it follows the men and women—black and white, immigrant and old stock—of the first generation when they engaged in partisan politics, responded to new market forces, explored the meaning of intimacy in a mobile society, fashioned new social cues for a democracy, and created a network of voluntary associations to take the place of defunct colonial institutions. From these diverse experiences and the welter of intentions that prompted them the autonomous individual emerged as an ideal. For many years we have treated individualism as a natural phenomenon. In the following pages we will see this exemplar taking shape historically, as an ideal, a filter, a measure for invidious comparisons, and the human underpinning for market enterprise and moral reform. By no means reflective of the heterogeneous population of the United States, this autonomous individual came to personify the nation and the free society it embodied, a patriotic icon that differentiated the United States from the savagery at its borders and the tyranny across the Atlantic.

My witnesses are those who did something in public—started a business, invented a useful object, settled a town, organized a movement, ran for office, formed an association, or wrote for publication, if only an autobiog-