DRUMS

JAMES BOYD

MODERN STANDARD AUTHORS

DRUMS

BY

JAMES BOYD

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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TO

KATHARINE-LAMONT-BOYD

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In this book the main facts of history have been followed except in two cases: the *Bonhomme Richard* did not sail from Brest but from Lorient; the incident of the vagabond in Chapter XXXV did not occur at Brooks's Club but at another club in London.

J. B.

INTRODUCTION

FEW historical novels of recent years have stood up so well as James Boyd's "Drums," which made its first appearance in 1925. There are reasons, and good ones, for its staying power. The historical romance is like a pageant in which the plot is just a device for presenting a series of scenes from the past. Upon the worth and the vividness of these scenes the book depends for its success. Now James Boyd has many competitors who rival him in the unrolling of a plot, but of scenes he is a master. The reader of "Drums" who sits thinking over the story when he has finished it, will not fail to see, as in a pageant, scene after scene—the cypress-hung river as it broadens to the sea with a small boy crouched by the negro at the bow of Captain Flood's boat; the pioneers gathering by their meeting-house in the pines; the old Cherokee squatting by the fire hearing drums, drums beating danger for his people; the fight in the foretop of the *Bonhomme Richard;* the Continental Army marching north, symbol of a country united at last.

Such power over history is indispensable for a novelist who wills to re-create the past. But I would assign an even more cogent reason for the value of "Drums." Stories of our Revolution have been numerous. Scarcely a battle has failed of a description somewhere in fiction. Scarcely a hero, civil or military, or a heroic villain, but has appeared somewhere in a novel. But the great majority of these books on the Revolution belong to a more naïve age of American historical writing, when it was a convention to assume that after the troubles began all good men supported the cause of independence, and all who held back were black-hearted cowards. In these books one sees the honest "sons of liberty"

rising from farm and street against oppression and marching away nobly to war.

Of course this was an utterly false picture. The Tory of, say, 1780, may have been a rich man whose eagerness to keep his wealth intact under a firm government from overseas had resulted in a panic-stricken flight to New York or London. But he was quite as likely to have been a victim of his own honest loyalty to the Crown. As for the loyalist of 1770 or 1775, he was in most cases the best man in his community. He did not want war, he did not want severance from the British Crown, he did not want mob rule, he was eager to do what seemed best for his colony. And the "sons of freedom" in the early years of rebellion were too often the bums and roughnecks of the district, only too glad of an opportunity to beat up their betters, loot the thrifty, and follow any demagogue who would give them a chance at free liquor and easy money under the name of patriotism. Read Crèvecœur's letters for a first-hand account of disgraceful and cruel rowdyism.

Now "Drums," unlike the conventional Revolutionary novel, is a story of the real drama of the Revolution, which was not so much battle and debate as the agonizing struggle of honest minds to know what was right to do. Johnny Fraser, the hero, is so bent on making himself into a gentleman that he goes through the first crucial years of the conflict without ever realizing the greatness of the issue involved. He was a boy. But his friend, the sporting Sir Nat, shows the tragedy of good men and true whose conflicting loyalties broke their hearts at the end. And the mobs, the demagogues, of Edenton, who burnt old Dr. Clapton's books and drove him homeless from his parish, the fine gentlemen, like Wylie Jones, who planned an overturn which would make them rulers in the province, the skeptics, like Johnny's father, who saw only ruin for all in rebellion, are all true to the background

of an age which is far more interesting when presented this way than in the romantic blacks and whites of earlier histories.

Some readers of this book may find the London episode less satisfactory than some of the others. Here Johnny is made too readily into a fop with an entrée into society, the author's purpose being, apparently, to give his readers a contrast between the corruption of the English governing class and honest North Carolinians. But this is only an episode. The French scenes are excellent, the raid of John Paul Jones which carries Johnny off into one of the great sea duels of history, is excellently contrived. And best of all, Mr. Boyd's colonial North Carolina has the feel, the very smell of reality. Thus the dramatic years that led to rebellion, and the dramatic close of revolution in victory, are displayed in this novel in characters psychologically true to the tension of the age, and in scenes which are no antique-shops, no vague generalizations, but re-creations of a South that all Southerners recognize in those disturbed and vital years whose true nature we have usually forgotten.

HENRY SEIDEL CANBY.

BOOK I

DRUMS

CHAPTER I

A FIRE blazed in the deep, clay-plastered fireplace; logs of North Carolina pine dripped turpentine in the wave of flame and sent up scrolls of clotted smoke to join the night. The steady, golden light flooded the brick hearth, flooded broad, hand-dressed floor boards beyond, then softening, touched a wall of shaggy logs and gilded the barrel of a flintlock above a closed oak door. Against the ceiling it threw the shadow of a man who sat before it, a man rough-hewn, brown and rugged, so still, so like the room, that he might have been built there when it was built. His short coat and his kilt were brown, his square beard was brown, only the twinkle of silver buttons and a touch of white stock at the throat showed him to be above the common rank.

Outside, the rustle of the pines crept by in long, low waves which came from the Atlantic to the eastward and crossed the forests of the Province on tossing tops to die away against the mountains in the west. Through this deep murmur of the pines the sound of a whistled tune drew nearer, stopped at the door. The hinges creaked; a straight, thin boy, tugging a bucket of water, came in. With his skirted linen hunting shirt blown forward by the wind, his long brown hair blown around his bright-colored face, he looked almost like a girl, or would have looked so, except for the impish set to his mouth. He closed the door behind him with a thrust of his moccasin and swung the wooden bucket under a table in the corner. He gave a manly and profes-

sional puff and wiped his hands on the sides of his leather breeches.

"There's the water, Dadder."

"Aye, son, I heard ye. How's the wind?"

"East. But I reckon it might fair. I saw a star."

"If it storms the morrow I'm feared your mother willna come home."

"She said she would."

A half smile just touched the man's broad beard.

"Aye, she did. But she was wearing the new camlet gown."

The boy revolved this saying. He stared in the fire, knitted his brows.

"Now, then, lad." His father was looking at him. The boy started from his thoughts and turned to the table. He must get to work. Work! If it only were real work instead of lessons fit only for girls. He rubbed his small, hard, calloused hands together and threw out his chest. Study was no work for a man of the Pine Forests. But his father's eye remained on him. His chest subsided. Taking a horn spelling book and a Latin grammar from a shelf, he stretched himself on his stomach before the fire and peered at the dim letters through the yellow glazed sheet. As he murmured them over to himself he heard his father fumble in his pocket for his pipe, strike his tinder-box, settle back in his chair with slow, measured puffs.

The wind had made him sleepy, his eyes blinked in the firelight; but each time the letters began to fade, another puff from the pipe brought him back. He winked rapidly and put his mind on the words, words meaningless and dead compared to the life of the pine forest in which he spent his days, the life of gray foxes, muskrats, deer, wolves, dark swamp rabbits—another puff—he must get on.

"I've done the row, Dadder." He handed up the book, then rose to his feet with smooth ease and brought from the

shelf a goose quill, an ink-horn, a small box of sand and a sheet of paper. Seated cross-legged by the fire, he held the paper on a board.

"Ten times," his father said, for every word wrong and twenty for 'impartiality,' for ye got that wrong last night." The Great Man cleared his throat. "'Impartiality is an attribute of philosophers.'" The pen scratched, the head bent low, the hair hung around the brown flushed face. "'Misfortune can not impair true virtue.'" A list of aphorisms followed, some from the book, some gravely composed in his father's profound, deliberate brain. The last was, "'Monarchs assume infallibility.'" The boy wrote it out, sanded the paper and gave it to his father. It was passed back after an anxious pause.

"Ten 'infallibilities' wi' twa l's; and close your a's at the top. A gentleman is known by the perfection o' his hand."

He wrote the ten "infallibilities." His father scrutinized them.

"Now for the Latin: 'Balbus has built a long, white wall.'"

"Dadder, what does 'Monarchs assume infallibility' mean?"

His father made as if to read from the Latin grammar. But the boy could see him turning the question in his mind.

"It means that kings think they canna do a wrong—that whatever they do is right. Do ye think that's so?"

"I don't know. I reckon so. God makes kings, doesn't He?"

"Aye, and He unmakes them, too. And for the matter of that, who made you—what says your catechism?"

"God made me."

"And do ye say that you can do nae wrong?"

The boy grinned shyly.

"Oh, no," the man went on. "God made a' men and a' can do wrong, kings above the rest, perhaps, what wi' a' the opportunities for sinfulness that are given them." He

rubbed his bare knees with stern gusto. "Kings can do wrong, never ye doubt—and I should know, for I've fought for one king and against the son of another."

"Was that Culloden?"

The pipe stopped puffing. There was a pause and a whisper like a sigh, "Aye—Culloden."

"I'd like mighty well to hear about Culloden, Dadder."

"No doubt. But though it is thirty years behind me now, the tale comes no easier. We fought the English and we were beaten—and butchered."

The boy subsided, abashed, and stared in the fire. He saw in the flames a vague turmoil of swords and shields and drifting smoke. If only his father could be moved to tell him the tale, perhaps the fray would take shape. As it was, the dim battle scene, too far removed in time and place to stand out vividly, dissolved before the sharper, more familiar pictures of high adventure and great deeds, which, ever since he could remember, had for his secret delectation, formed, beckoned, vanished among the blazing logs.

There in the steady embers a thin line of Indian fighters, lean mountain men, climbed in single file a cloud-wrapped Western range, at their head himself, a long Deckhard rifle across his fringed arm. Provisions gone, hope gone, still they climbed upward, Westward, following their leader's trail above the timber line.

They crested a rocky summit. Beyond the nestling cloud-banks at their feet stretched the sought-for land, forest and park and plain, bright rivers, rolling hills, slow-moving herds of elk and buffalo. His famished men lifted caps high on rifles and raised a wind-whipped cheer.

Crumbling softly down, a charred log burst in flame, glowed, slowly shifted till it took form. Black towers raised their heads, from the battlements flames waved like banners, a drawbridge crossed a moat below the buttressed wall, a road wound off among the hills.

It needed no more to call up the finest dream of all. The distant road was already astir with moving columns. Now they came nearer; light shone on lance and helmet, on plumes and gold caparisons. Now they were here, all the King's horses and all the King's men.

Waving a silver baton, the Drum Major marched before, the trumpets winked, blared out *ta-ra, ta-ra.* "With a tow and a row and a row, row, row of the British grenadiers!" they played. Red coats and white crossbelts came behind, then the knights peering grimly through closed visors, and the King, himself, in mighty beard, full-bottomed wig and crown.

The King waved his sceptre; they wheeled into line, just as they always did, and faced across the fields where now, just as always, the French lilies on great white flags were waving up the slope. Their great white horses tossed their manes. Drums were rumbling. In the dreadful moment the words his mother had taught him murmured in his ear:

"They now to fight are gone,
Armor on armor shone,
Drum now to drum did groan,
To hear was wonder."

Steadily the white French host breasted the slope; now it was nearly on them. This was the instant!

Yes! From the right a flying cloud of arrows dimmed the white ranks.

"Like a storm suddenly,
The English archery
Stuck the French horses."

Another cloud—another! He saw the white horses rear and run, he saw the backs of the crouching bowmen, drawing their bows again.

"With Spanish yew so strong
Arrows a clothyard long,
That like to serpents stung,
Piercing the weather;
None from his fellow starts,
But playing manly parts,
And like true English hearts,
Stuck close together."

The white ranks wavered, broke; the English knights, the red coats, the archers were charging after them.

"Huzzah!" he whispered, "huzzah! huzzah!"

The picture faded. His breath was coming through his teeth, he closed his eyes till his heart stopped pounding, then gave a shiver and a sigh. Try as he would, he could never see himself in this, his favorite dream. England, where men were knightly, brave and splendidly apparelled, was a land not only distant but of unattainable magnificence. Yet was he not a gentleman born? He needed but a suit of armor or a uniform.

His father shifted; he, too, was gazing in the fire. "Culloden," he murmured; his eyes fixed afar, stared through the flames into the burning heart of the ancient tragedy. He was forgetful of all else, forgetful, thought Johnny with a glow of hope, of Balbus and his wall.

"Culloden."

"Yes, Dadder," he said.

His father's eyes were torn from the fire. Beneath their stooping brows, they focused on him.

"Balbus," he said, "has built a long white wall."

The boy was still wrestling with the scratching, sputtering quill, still snatching at the fleeting Latin words, when a broad hand descended, picked up the paper.

"Ye've one word right. That's Balbus. Fetch the sand-glass."

His father turned the sand-glass and set it on the arm of

his chair. The ruddy grains trickled from the upper globe.

"An hour by this, I'll give ye tae learn your lesson. If that won't do it," his grim glance fell on his son, "we'll just have tae find another way."