

EDWARD
COUNTRYMAN
AMER-
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A COLLISION OF HISTORY



AMERICANS

A Collision of Histories

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EDWARD
COUNTRYMAN

 HILL AND WANG

A DIVISION OF FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

NEW YORK

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Published in Canada by HarperCollins *Canada Ltd*
Printed in the United States of America
First edition, 1996

The maps on pages 24 and 25, from David J. Weber,
The Spanish Frontier in North America, published by
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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Countryman, Edward.

Americans, a collision of histories / Edward Countryman.—1st
ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. National characteristics, American. 2. United States—
Civilization—To 1783. 3. United States—Civilization—19th
century. 4. Group identity—United States—History. I. Title.
E169.1.C792 1996 306'.0973—dc20 95-47728 CIP

*In history there are no control groups. There is no one to tell us
what might have been. We weep over the might have been, but
there is no might have been. There never was.*

—CORMAC MCCARTHY

*The joy of history lies in its telling, and in its relevance to
current times and relationships.*

—KATE BORNSTEIN

FOR
EVONNE BLACKBERRY
with my love and deep thanks

*You bring it all together,
this history,
your self,
and my life.*
E pluribus unum, *indeed*

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PREFACE

This book began with a chance encounter. On a summer evening late in the 1980s a young black man stopped me to ask for directions in the English town where I used to live. That was no surprise. Asian, African, Afro-Caribbean, black British, and white people all live in the neighborhood. His speech, however, was American, and I was delighted to hear it. I speak American too, despite my long time overseas, and he was just as glad to hear me. I walked him to the pub he was seeking and we talked a while before going our ways. Neither learned the other's name.

Our differences were great. He was from Texas; I still called myself a New Yorker. He was a serviceman from the nearby air base; I was a peace campaigner. He was African-American and I am white. In the poisoned racial atmosphere of the United States, that difference often cannot be overcome. Had we met in his native San Antonio or my native Albany or in Dallas, where I live now, we might have been polite, at best. We might have felt mutual suspicion, each representing danger to the other, especially on an open street at night. But in Royal Leamington Spa, Warwickshire, we felt what we had in common.

By then it was on my mind to attempt the theme of "being American" in historical terms. Writers have proposed many answers to that problem. There have been a distinctive "American character" and an "American political tradition." We have been "characteristically American" and a "people of plenty." One distinguished Cornell scholar when I was studying there in the late 1960s still thought he could trace an "American quest." But another was coming to see his conflicted, Janus-faced subjects as a "people of paradox."¹

Beginning to address these large issues, I had been wondering for some time about the significance of the American Revolution in defining our

society and in releasing the nineteenth century's enormous burst of creative energy. I had been wondering as well what the price of that creativity was, and who paid it. My generation of historians had redefined the Revolution, seeing it as profoundly disruptive and transforming. Our goal had been to understand the complexities of how the United States became a separate power and Americans a separate people in the world.²

The Revolution turned subjects of the British monarchy into citizens of the American Republic. It fundamentally changed relationships of power, authority, obligation, and subordination. The Revolution altered how every person and every group of the time lived their lives. All sorts of people affected the Revolution, and it affected them. The rising republic of George Washington was very different from the troubled colonies of George III. The Revolution was genuinely revolutionary.³

I began wanting to see where all these changes led. Using a teacher's prerogative, I organized my courses around that problem, perhaps to my students' puzzlement. I was trying to bring together current thinking about the Revolution and the larger enterprise of American social historians who have worked on the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Students at Warwick, Cambridge, Yale, and now Southern Methodist University all have endured my efforts.

Like lemmings, historians often rush toward the same cliff, and many others were thinking along the same lines. My own first published attempt asked whether the Revolution made a difference in how people with money to invest used it.⁴ Shortly afterward Pauline Maier addressed that same problem in "The Revolutionary Origins of the American Corporation."⁵ Alfred Young was putting together an anthology to follow the influential volume that he had edited in 1976. That earlier collection is called *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*. Its theme is internal struggle during the Revolution, and Young's intent was to continue along that line.⁶ His writers, however, cared more about consequences than process in the new volume, *Beyond the American Revolution*.⁷ About the same time, Gordon Wood published a book that promised to show "how a revolution transformed a monarchical society into a democratic one unlike any that had ever existed."⁸ He stretched the Revolution well into the nineteenth century, made Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren actors in it, and turned Alexis de Tocqueville into its most astute observer. Clearly, my own interest in the Revolution's larger significance was one eddy in a powerful current. The young republic's achievements had turned into a major problem of historical understanding.

But something is missing from the current round of studies, with their stress on republicanism's American success. It is missing from accounts that would see us in terms of a single tradition or character, or in terms of a material abundance that many Americans never have enjoyed. For all my own willingness to employ Marxian ideas, it would be missing from an account framed solely in terms of social class.⁹ Ideas derived from European experience do make sense in the American context, whether we speak of the Protestant east coast heritage, Catholicism in Louisiana and New Spain or Irish immigrant Boston, the republican political tradition, or Marx's attempt to understand how capitalist society emerged and works. Nonetheless, America is not just a "neo-Europe." It cannot be understood solely in terms of its white people and their own particular heritage. My encounter with that Texas airman has helped me (I believe) to identify why that is so and what its significance is.

The achievements of the young American Republic are undeniable. Fascinated intellectuals went to America during the early nineteenth century to see and report. Alexis de Tocqueville, Michel Chevalier, Frances Wright, Frances Kemble, Frances Trollope, Harriet Martineau, and Charles Dickens all did it and there were many others. Thinkers who never made the journey also addressed the problem of America. After the French Revolution collapsed into terror and tyranny, Friedrich von Gentz asked about the difference between it and the successful American Revolution. Half a century later Marx considered the meaning of the Civil War, wrote with admiration about Abraham Lincoln, and thought about going to America. Richard Wagner thought about it too. Neither went, though José Martí, Leon Trotsky, and Ho Chi Minh did go. Franz Kafka made the journey within his own wild and wonderful mind, aided only by travel brochures. So, horrified and fascinated, did the Spanish-Mexican-East German artist Josep Renau. To the present day, America never has ceased to compel the attention of foreign observers.

Americans got into the act too, most notably James Fenimore Cooper in his nonfictional *The American Democrat*.¹⁰ What is perhaps the greatest achievement of mid-nineteenth-century American letters, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* may represent its author's attempt to come to terms with his own culture after a long time abroad. For all its literary merit, Melville's novel went almost unnoticed at its publication in 1851. One key to that epoch's other unnoticed triumph, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, is that it begins with its author's parody upon the theme of wandering and return. Foreign or American, traveler or stay-at-home,

the more astute observers realized that Americans knew tragedy and loss as well as rising glory. That returns me to my chance encounter on an English summer night.

That black airman came from Texas. In all probability his ancestors had gone there as slaves in the mid-nineteenth century, torn from places they knew and people they loved. In cotton-growing East Texas they settled on land that had been a province of Mexico not long before and that Caddo Indians regarded as their own. To borrow the astute comment of an African-American student whom I taught in Dallas,¹¹ that airman *was* Texas. He *was* the South. To extend the point, he *was* America in all of the country's capacity to confuse and disrupt. So were the Lone Star State's Indians, Hispanics, and Anglos among whom he had grown up and among whom I now live.

On their way west, the ancestors of both that airman and my student probably passed through Mississippi. Counties there bear such names as Washington, Adams, Hancock, Jefferson, Lafayette, Madison, Warren, and, for that matter, Bolivar. The white people who founded those communities came from New England as well as from Virginia and the Carolinas. They intended those history-laden names to honor the revolutionaries, whose heirs they were. They honored another history too, with county names like Issaquena, Tunica, Pontotoc, Choctaw, and Yalobusha. We need not doubt their sincerity, in either case.

But all of those counties "became southern."¹² They turned into places of intense suffering for the people who transformed their wooded, often swampy soil into productive plantations. The Revolution, with its assertions about the equal unalienable rights of all men, may have thrown into sharp relief the contradiction between American slavery and American freedom. It may have been—it was—among the events that transformed slavery from a simple fact of life into a perceived moral abomination. It may have contributed—it did—to slavery's ultimate extinction. But the same American Revolution that set free the creative, expansive, liberating energy of the Republic's white people led to slavery's expansion and intensification for black ones. The same forces that freed my maternal ancestors to travel from overcrowded New England to the open prairies of Illinois and then back to New York State sent that airman's forebears on a very different journey.

Nor is that all. Both his ancestors and mine moved west onto soil that other people already had made their own. For the Illinois prairie to become the land of Abraham Lincoln, for the Black Belt, the Mississippi/Yazoo Delta, and East Texas to become the Cotton Kingdom, required

that Indian people no longer use it their way. In 1830 it became government policy to force all Indians who lived east of the Mississippi to go west of that river, whether or not they had taken to white ways, whatever treaties had been made, whether they had fought for or against the young republic in its wars. In practice, that policy was underway well before the law was passed. Not all did go, but most were forced at gunpoint into "Indian Territory," now Oklahoma.

Among their descendants the bitterness is not forgotten. Yet today when Native American nations gather at Grand Prairie, Texas, for the National Pow Wow Championships, dancers bear a Stars and Stripes into the central arena, claiming the Republic for their own. Then Congressman and now United States Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell made the same point in 1992, when he officiated in full Plains chief regalia as co-grand marshal of the 1992 Tournament of Roses parade in Pasadena, California.

Pasadena occupies ground that Spanish-speaking Europeans and their mixed-race progeny had claimed while English speakers were just beginning their westward push. Once it was called the Rancho San Pascual. Practically every event and process that pitted Europeans, Africans, and Natives against one another in the East has its southwestern counterpart. The great Pueblo Indian rebellion of 1680 far outstrips both the scope and the significance of eastern uprisings. British and Spanish alike encountered Indians on the same bloody, disease-ridden, alcohol-soaked terms. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Mexican communities and missions defined a line from Texas to Arizona and up the California coast. To the advancing Anglos, their people were semi-savages, whatever their color or language. By 1850 all those people, Indian, mestizo, and Hispanic alike, had become Americans, not by migration but by military conquest.

The expulsion of the Indian nations was at the hands of the President Andrew Jackson, who operated Tennessee and Mississippi plantations throughout his presidency. The conquest of the Far Southwest was at the hands of Jacksonians, particularly Jackson's self-proclaimed heir, the slave-owning President James K. Polk. These are the same Jackson and Polk whose version of democracy is now being offered as the American Revolution's final achievement.¹³ That interpretation of Jacksonian democracy—that it completed the Revolution's political promise—has much to commend it. Jackson himself eloquently articulated the ideology of "equal rights" that the Revolution had begun to shape, most notably in his message to Congress vetoing renewal of the Second Bank of the

United States. "There are no necessary evils in government," Jackson wrote. "Its evils are only in its abuses. If it would confine itself to equal protection and, as Heaven does its rains, shower its favors alike on the high and the low, the rich and the poor, it would be an unqualified blessing."¹⁴ Jackson and his followers helped make the Revolution's language of equal citizenship into a powerful defense against the erosion of individual freedoms. But the link that joins romantic American democracy, slavery's expansion, the eastern Indians' stark choice to be expelled or destroyed, and the conquest of northern Mexico is not happenstance. The connection among the four is fundamental to nineteenth-century American social history.

We have our political tradition; we have a long history of people rejecting its hypocrisies; we also have a tradition of people claiming it even though it might seem to mean nothing to them. We are a people of plenty; we are also a people of want and poverty. We are a people of paradox; we also like to think we are innocent (or used to be innocent sometime in our past). I seek to explore all these matters and to offer a social history of many kinds of American people before full modernity.¹⁵

Each of the founding American peoples has its own story. For the people who were here first, it is one of catastrophic defeat, near-destruction, and difficult survival. For Africans who became American, it is one of being enslaved and then painfully forging their own freedom. For English-speaking white migrants, it is a triumphant tale of colonization, independence, expansion, republicanism, and capitalist development, tempered by a tragic and bloody civil war. For Tejanos, Nuevomexicanos, and Californios, it is a story of lost possibilities. None of these stories reveals its full sense unless we see it in reference to the others. Each of these stories is different.

Nonetheless, all the stories circle around the mixture of hope and disappointment of Thomas Jefferson's proclamation that "all men are created equal." All the people in all the stories have found themselves living in a world of disruption and transformation. All of them have tried to form meaningful ties with other people in the same plight so they could establish patterns that would give their lives sense and cohesion. They have not always succeeded. Indian treaties and African-American families were broken by forces too powerful to withstand. Prairie land refused to flower, or turned out to be owned by a distant speculator. The streets of Manhattan and Lowell and San Francisco were not paved with gold. Nineteenth-century immigrants lived their lives without ever escaping the tenements to which migration first took them.

Nonetheless, people kept trying to make sense of their lives, to organize the world around them, and to claim American freedom for themselves. In the sense that we all have faced those problems, we have far more in common than most of us may realize. That may be what the airman and I implicitly understood. Had he chanced to be Native American or Hispanic instead of black (or I any of those instead of white), we still might have shared the recognition.

I study American history to understand the people of whom I am a part. One result of my long stay among the British was to learn that I never would be one of them, however great my taste for "real ale" and fish and chips doused in salt and vinegar, however adept I am at driving on the left. That encounter in Leamington helped me see why. As a white American, rather than a European, I am the product of a society that many kinds of people have produced, not just the children of Europeans. Fundamentally, this book is about how we have produced categories to separate ourselves from one another but have nonetheless shared enough to call ourselves a people. The categories blur if we look at them closely, dissolving into what is shared, despite all enmity and difference.

If I, a white American, would understand what shaped me, if I would not be a stranger to myself, I must understand people who may not look like me but whose history is fundamentally, inextricably, and forever intertwined with my own. Indeed, that history is my own, just as all American history in its terrible and exciting complexity belongs to all of the American people. *Americans* offers some ideas about how that became so.

A NOTE ON METHOD AND CITATION

This book is unashamedly interpretive and eclectic. The preface gives my personal reasons for writing it. My academic justification is the existence of a huge body of fine work on American social history during the period it covers, more, in fact, than any sane person can really master. Without doubt, there is good material that I have missed. That's my fault, and I am sure that reviewers will let me know where the omissions weaken my argument, or actually discredit it. My own sense, from random readings and conference sessions, is that I am on the right track.

Clearly, there are important debates among the scholars who have produced this work, but for the most part I do not attempt to be historiographical. Instead, I have sought to take their work "as read." I try here to fit it together into a coherent picture of how Americans became a distinctive people, allowing for all their differences. One way or another, this scholarship has centered on the central problems that I pose here: the establishment and continuation of "race" followed by nationality as primal American social categories; the emergence of such other important categories as class, gender, ethnicity, party, community, and section; the social significance of the American Revolution; and the common experiences of many different groups as they faced the single reality of developing America.

My title, *Americans: A Collision of Histories*, speaks to the point. I have not sought a spurious "inclusivity" or "multiculturalism" that merely mentions names. Nor have I sought to write *the* whole history of my subjects. That would be incredibly arrogant, given how little we can really know about the people with whom we live closely, even intimately, let alone the dead who leave only traces behind. I have sought only to address the terms on which many kinds of people shared a place and

experiences over a long period of time despite their differences, and how they ultimately came to share an identity as well.

In some places dealing with these problems has meant abandoning traditional chronology and looking instead at how the same problem has provoked similar answers in different places and times. My model for working that way while still attempting a narrative that shows process and makes sense across time is the title essay in the late Herbert G. Gutman's influential collection *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (1976). As I wrote, I found myself listening over and over and over to Richard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungen*. I found myself reading William Faulkner's novels and stories too. Eventually I realized why. Like Gutman, those two majestic artists address the problem of telling many different stories at the same time, within a single account that makes sense of them all. Compared to what a musician or a novelist can accomplish, written history can seem a poor, thin thing, nailed to the earth with notes and bibliographies. But there is merit to being limited by what the evidence permits us to say. It is that we are talking about people who once lived lives as uncertain as our own, not simply about figments that our imaginations conjure up. We can try to know those people, both in the ways that they were like us and in the ways that they were not.

Back to earth. I don't give citations for "classical" quotes from sources like Walt Whitman. In most places where I do provide notes, I simply cite the immediate scholarship on which I am drawing. As I was working toward this book I tested some of my ideas with heavily researched essays, which are cited in the appropriate places with their masses of bibliography and direct evidence. In some places I draw on primary material or complex debates. In those cases my citations are heavier. Nonetheless, my central concern is not "what can we prove?" but rather "what if it should be true that these things do hang together?" I borrowed that formulation from Daniel Calhoun's *The Intelligence of a People* (1973) once before, and I am happy to acknowledge my debt to him again.

THANKS

When I started to create this file my word processor refused the file name "acknowledgments." It's too long. So I called it "thanks" instead, and that seems good enough a heading too. I owe many thanks indeed.

Southern Methodist University made this book possible in a number of ways. I began thinking about it long before my move to Dallas, but SMU's fine library system, excellent support for faculty productivity, and exciting intellectual atmosphere all have made a difference to me. I started to name individuals among my colleagues in the Clements Department of History, but quickly realized that I owe something to practically everybody with whom I have worked here over the last four years. Enough, perhaps, to let Daniel T. Orlovsky ("Dr. Dan, the Chairman man"), who has presided over this remarkable group with a leprechaun-like wit, stand for all the rest.

I owe a lot to the SMU history majors and graduate students who have pushed me, challenged me, and given me good suggestions after reading parts and drafts of the manuscript. Among them are Corey Capers, Lonnie Dean, Mark Easley, Jane Lenz Elder, Kenneth Larisch, Kate Haulman, James McMillan, Guy Nelson, Elizabeth Stearns, Cameron Taylor, Ondria Weinberg, Anne-Elizabeth Wynn, and Amanda Wright. Corey, in particular, took real interest and offered many good ideas over a long period of discussion. There are quite a few others and I apologize for not naming them all. I owe a great debt to the adult students who took my evening courses in the Master of Liberal Arts program. The pay was good, but the interchange with nonacademic people who just wanted to *know* was terrific. I should note my debt to the people of Texas too. This Yankee who lived overseas for a long time found himself really challenged by the shift in perspective that moving to the Lone Star State required. Thanks, y'all.

Outside SMU I owe debts to my Yale graduate students when I visited there, particularly David Waldstreicher. Too many undergraduates to name joined willingly as I tried out ideas in classes there, at Warwick, and (years ago, when the book first began to gestate) at Cambridge. I owe institutional debts to New York University and the American Antiquarian Society (for research facilities and support) and to the American Historical Association, the American History Seminar of the University of Cologne, the Dallas Social History Group, the Institute of Early American History and Culture, the John Carter Brown Library, the Milan Group in Early United States History, the Organization of American Historians, the Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies, and the faculties/departments of history at Cambridge, Oxford, and Warwick for chances to talk to informed audiences. I want particularly to thank James Axtell, Susan Branson, David Brion Davis, Richard Dunn, William Dussinberre, Drew Gilpin Faust, Eric Foner, Robert A. Gross, Woody Holton, Rhys Isaac, Charles Joyner, Christopher Morris, David Narrett, J. R. Pole, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Fredrika Teute, Loretta Valtz-Mannucci, and Marion Winship for helpful and sometimes pointed comments at those presentations. At the very last moment Charles E. Curran helped me track down some elusive biblical citations. Again, I'm sure that I am leaving people out and I apologize.

Philip De Loria, Sylvia Frey, June Namias, Gordon S. Wood, and Michael Zuckerman gave formal commentaries on preliminary pieces. Michael McGiffert saw two of those pieces through the press at the *William and Mary Quarterly*. Carol Berkin gave me the chance to spend an incredibly stimulating week with a summer seminar of high school teachers at Princeton, thinking together about some of the issues I consider here. In addition to people I have already named, Joyce Appleby, James Baird, Alan Conway, John Mack Faragher, Steven Hackel, James A. Henretta, Allan Kulikoff, Neil Salisbury, Luke Trainor, and Richard White gave me written commentaries at one point or another. John Cumbler and Ronald Hoffman have talked many an idea through with me. Neil Evans has too, both formally in a number of sessions at the remarkable Coleg Harlech, Wales, and informally while we climbed Cadair Idris, Cnicht, and Rhinog Fawr and strolled on Traeth Harlech. He read the whole manuscript and made boundless good suggestions as well. Lizbeth Cohen also read the final manuscript, to good effect. My sister and brother-in-law, Judith and Leo Fournier, stepped in at a vital moment. So did Lyn Mitchell, the incomparable "Mum."

Alfred Young has encouraged me more than he can know ever since