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THE PULITZER GUY

Historian Alan Taylor has his eye on everything but the prize

By Douglas Rooks '76



Winning major prizes can have a chilling effect on unprepared authors who worry that their next book might not measure up. When Alan Taylor '77 won both the Pulitzer and Bancroft prizes in 1996 for his book *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic*, he was stunned. "I didn't even know I was a finalist, much less that I could be a winner," he said.

Though he almost saw the initial press attention spin out of control, the University of California at Davis professor of history recovered and has suffered no writer's cramp in the aftermath of the prizes. Moreover, the acclaim brought some prestigious opportunities, which he has fielded nimbly—as lead-off author in an important book series, as a contributor to a top national magazine and as the recipient of what may be the most enviable job offer in all of academe.



The Pulitzer Prizes are announced with no notice to the winners. In newsrooms, where most Pulitzers are directed, announcements produce cheers, toasts and hugs. At UC-Davis, where Taylor has taught since 1994, his 1996 Pulitzer produced confusion.

He had just returned from a tennis match ("my opponent had trounced me pretty thoroughly," he said) when his office phone started ringing. "I was sitting there, tired and sweaty, and I had no idea what I was supposed to say." Things didn't get any better. "As soon as I put the phone down it would ring again. They wanted to send photographers, and soon they were in my office, too."

Finally, he persuaded the paparazzi to let him go home, change and return for photos and a news conference—his first and, so far, his only. The story ran on the front page of

Davis is now the third largest campus in the UC system, with 25,000 students, a growing history department and a chance to eclipse the more geographically constrained Berkeley and UCLA in enrollments.

Walking through the downtown next to the campus on an 80-degree late October day, Taylor said, "My friends from Maine all think I must hate it here." He doesn't, though. Northern California, he said, "appeals to my outdoors side."

Taylor has no plans to pull up academic stakes, though winning the big history prizes while just into his 40s has opened doors for him.

He received an invitation from *The New Republic* to become a contributor, and his quarterly essays in the journal cover an extensive range of subjects, among them

The Penguin History series were assigned at once, *American Colonies* was first to appear, in November 2001, and *Publisher's Weekly* predicted: "This bold new view of early America should be widely and well reviewed, and will attract a broad range of students of American history."

Finally the prizes led—indirectly—to the offer of a coveted faculty chair at Harvard, seemingly the pinnacle of a New England historian's profession. In 1997 one of Taylor's mentors, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich (who had won both the Pulitzer and Bancroft in 1991 for *A Midwife's Tale*) asked him to participate on a search committee to rebuild Harvard's history department after it had been depleted by retirements, and he agreed. As sometimes happens, the rest of the search committee turned its attention to Taylor as a possible

TAYLOR, AS A CONTEMPORARY HISTORIAN, GIVES FULL VOICE TO THOSE FORMERLY EXCLUDED FROM AMERICAN NARRATIVES. YET HE IS, IN HIS OWN ESTIMATION, OLD-FASHIONED IN HIS CONVICTION THAT "TRUTH IS AN OBJECTIVE WORTH PURSUING."

the *Sacramento Bee*, and for a time he was a local celebrity. A colleague recounts that there was even a pizza delivery boy who, when Taylor opened the door to his condo, said, "Hey, aren't you the Pulitzer guy?"

When one sits in Taylor's cramped office—standard issue for the UC-Davis history department—it's easy to imagine that scene. Tall metal shelves filled with books take up most of three walls, and the fourth wall also would be filled with books, except that they'd cover a window. A bicycle—the campus is built around bike paths and Taylor doesn't own a car—consumes much of the remaining space. Though professors joke that their 1993 concrete building is "1970s Stalinist" in style, the architecture doesn't dampen the camaraderie inside.

UC-Davis might seem an odd place for a native Mainer and a historian of the early republic. Once an agricultural school amid California's vast and fertile Central Valley,

George Washington, Benjamin Franklin and DeWitt Clinton, the powerful New York governor who never quite became president.

The prizes also brought him to the notice of Eric Foner, the DeWitt Clinton Professor of History at Columbia University (and the son of the late Jack Foner, who taught history to Taylor at Colby). Foner, who served on the 1996 Bancroft prize committee, was planning an ambitious new series—The Penguin History of the United States—and he wanted Taylor to write the first volume, *American Colonies*. Taylor pointed out that his field was the early republic, not colonial history, and Foner said he was welcome to write that volume instead. After thinking it over, though, Taylor decided that rather than sticking to what he knew best he would take on the new challenge. "I already taught the Colonial America course, and decided this would be a great way to go deeper into the period," he said. Though all five parts of

candidate, and reluctantly he consented. "It was an absurd situation, really," he said. "I told them there was almost no chance of my accepting." Yet the offer, when it came, was tempting. "You expect Harvard to be, well, snobbish, and it wasn't like that at all," he said. "They were warm and welcoming."

Ultimately, though, he turned down Harvard. He was deeply involved in a similar rebuilding process at Davis and felt, according to Ulrich, "as if he'd be leaving them in the lurch." He also was concerned about his partner, Emily Albu, who had just gained a tenured position in classics at Davis after years of searching.

"I figured he was gone," said Charles Walker, an ebullient older colleague of Taylor's at UC-Davis. The two men, who bow and call each other "doctor," had bet on it, in fact. "I lost a hundred dollars on him," Walker said. "I went down to the ATM and got five crisp twenties. He was disappointed. I

think he was expecting a hundred-dollar bill, so he could frame it.”

Alan Taylor was born in West Buxton, Maine, and grew up in Windham, graduating from Bonny Eagle High School. He decided to apply to liberal arts schools, and Colby accepted him. There he took a history class from Harold Raymond, and from then on he took every Raymond class he could.

Raymond, who retired in 1994, was the History Department’s “utility superstar,” Taylor said. Raymond threw himself into four or five different specialties. His Civil War course was perhaps best known, but he also offered seminars on the Napoleonic Wars and Russian history.

“Your first impression was someone who was quite shy and retiring,” Taylor said of his mentor, “but he just lit up in front of a class. . . . He’s the best lecturer I’ve every heard, and I’ve heard a lot.”

Taylor learned his lessons well, according to Raymond, who still lives with his wife in Waterville and gets periodic visits from his former student. Asked if Taylor is his most accomplished student, Raymond agreed, adding, “One of the two best.” He also had Doris Kearns Goodwin ’64, who, he notes, was a government major: “Alan is more solidly entrenched as a member of the profession. He was my best student in terms of the pleasure of working and talking with him.” Raymond was equally impressed with Taylor’s teaching during a one-year stint in 1984-85 when they both taught at Colby. They still talk history intensely, “even when he’s gone way beyond my ability to contribute to his knowledge,” Raymond said.

When Taylor received an honorary doctorate from Colby in 1997 he spoke fondly of his old professor. “I’d like to believe that it’s all true,” said Raymond, though he does

claim one bit of influence. “I rarely advise my students to do anything, but when I found he was under some family pressure to go to law school, I decided to say something.” Pointing out Taylor’s uncanny research abilities, “I told him he had something that’s really unusual, a rare gift.”

Research remains at the heart of Taylor’s historical enterprise, though he succeeds with engaging narrative and memorable characters as well. In an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Harvard’s Ulrich mentioned that when she first met and befriended Taylor, he was doing research—and living in a tent.

True, says Taylor. A purely practical arrangement; a way for a graduate student to economize. He was studying early-19th-century town and county records from the border of what was then the district of Maine—work that led to his doctoral dissertation and his first book, *Liberty Men and*

TAYLOR ON THE MARGINS

“In a place and a time that celebrated sincerity while practicing insincerity, [Benjamin] Franklin seemed far too accomplished at the latter. . . . Owing to his smooth manner and shifting tactics, Franklin invited suspicions far beyond his actual intent to trick. Even when he was frank and honest—especially when he was frank and honest—he aroused the distrust of rivals and colleagues certain that he must be up to something especially devious.” *The New Republic*, March 19, 2001

“In past generations, Virginia’s and New England’s historians competed to claim the birthplace of democracy; but now they contend over when and where racism emerged. The common denominator is a persistent pride in their chosen region as more important in defining 19th-century America—which used to be known as a land of liberty but is now seen primarily as a domain of inequality and injustice.” *The New Republic*, April 13, 1998

“The elusive border that so frustrated national and imperial officials in the early 19th century holds a lesson for historians of Maine. Fundamentally, that porous border reveals that Maine has long been much more than the northeastern margin of the United States. Instead of accepting a marginal status within a nation-centered story, we should recognize that, as a borderland, it is a region that draws people together, rather than one that keeps people apart.” *Maine History*, spring 2000

“The historical imagination works best, surely, when it takes us beyond the self, beyond personal and contemporary limits and into the lives of people who have been rendered alien by the passage of time.” *The New Republic*, Dec. 9, 1996

“Smashing open the cabin door, the vigilantes quickly butchered the Indian families, then plundered and set ablaze their homes. Later that day, colonists rummaging through the smoldering ashes and the scorched bones found a bag containing the Conestoga’s most precious possessions: two wampum belts and six old documents, all produced at past treaty councils to certify the Indians’ status as allies of Pennsylvania. The longest and oldest document was a cherished copy of the treaty made in 1701 with William Penn, the colony’s Quaker founder. By the terms of that treaty, the Indians and the colonists pledged ‘that they shall forever hereafter be as one Head & One Heart, & live in true Friendship & Amity as one People.’” *The New Republic*, Aug. 9, 1999

“As the first president over the empire of liberty, [George] Washington created and mastered an almost impossible role that has consumed most of his successors: somehow to appear always, perfectly, and simultaneously imperial and democratic.” *The New Republic*, Jan. 19, 1998

Great Proprietors. He haunted public libraries by day and campgrounds at night. "After all, it was summer in Maine," he said. "Lots of people camp out."

Taylor rarely seems impressed by his own research feats. One of the more intriguing, in *William Cooper's Town*, involves an analysis of Cooper's electoral popularity as the town spread. By analyzing 19th-century voting records (voters' preferences were then public), Taylor shows that the farther from the village a voter lived, the less likely he was to support Cooper. Asked about that discovery, Taylor said it was no big deal.

"That's Alan all over," Ulrich said. In retrospect, it may look easy, but "it involves hundreds of hours of going through census records, town by town. And of course it requires a keen analytical mind to phrase the question to get the answer you want," she said.

An archive that was an essential source for *William Cooper's Town* represents another facet of Taylor's abilities—people skills. Taylor had been curious about the Coopers since his own boyhood when he read *The Pioneers* by James Fenimore Cooper—in large part, a

fictionalized account of the life of Cooper's father, William. But unlike most 19th-century documents, which repose in public archives, the Cooper family papers were still in the hands of a lineal family descendant, Paul Fenimore Cooper Jr.

Paul Cooper had been approached by scholars but had turned down their sometimes high-handed requests for access. He hoped to write a book himself and, in fact, made several false starts. By the time Taylor approached him, Cooper was 70 and doubtless realized he would never write the book. He gave Taylor a tour of the collection, which, Taylor quickly realized, was a historical treasure.

Once the ice was broken, Cooper warmed to the younger man. "By the end of the week, he had practically adopted me," Taylor said. Cooper eventually gave full access, asking only that Taylor not write about William Cooper's storekeeping or maple sugaring—subjects about which Cooper still hoped to write articles. Paul Cooper died only a few months later. The papers were given to Hartwick College and, after a suitable interval, Taylor resumed his research with a plan for the book already in hand.

Among the papers sent to Hartwick, Taylor eventually saw the drafts Paul Fenimore Cooper had written. "It was kind of sad," Taylor said. "He always got stuck at the same place—a classic case of writer's block."

Asked whether he ever suffered from the malady, Taylor said, "Thank God, no." To the contrary, he writes "quickly and a lot," he said—a method that requires much rewriting. He spent almost two years converting his doctoral dissertation into *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors*, halving its length. For his most recent book, *American Colonies*, based on secondary sources rather than archives, he worked one chapter at a time.

Taylor needs six to seven years to produce a book, he said. He describes a laborious process that depends on summers, sabbaticals, research fellowships and presenting papers at conferences.

Along with his success as a scholar and author, Taylor remains committed to teaching and excels at it, colleagues say. "The traditional way college teachers are evaluated is in scholarship, teaching and service," said one, Karen Halttunen at Davis. "Normally, you find a teacher whose books are stimulat-

RECLAIMING TOWNBALL

For those who imagine that a historian's life is all work and no play, there's something to see every Friday afternoon on the athletic fields of the University of California at Davis. It is townball, a game Alan Taylor learned during his many stays in Cooperstown, N.Y., and introduced first to the Boston University campus when he taught there.

One of a number of ball games that, by a process still dimly understood, produced the modern American game of baseball (and the British game of cricket), townball probably most closely resembles rounders, a game still played by British schoolgirls. In Cooperstown, the Farmer's Museum organized a team in the 1980s, and eventually a league, to revive the game.

There are four bases, but the batter stands between home plate and first, and the bases are actually stakes. As in cricket, any hit by the batsman is in play; there is no foul or fair territory. The most effective offensive strategy is to hit between

fielders rather than to swing for the fences. One out—on a caught fly, or a throw that hits a runner, who need not keep to the basepaths—is all the batting team gets. Games are won with 11 or 21 runs.

Taylor describes townball as "less competitive," but after a match with his junior and senior undergraduates, this visiting writer—who joined the seniors—attests that it's certainly not for the faint-hearted. Keeping up with the students was tough enough that an imminent engagement after seven innings provided a welcome exit.

While his colleagues can't fault Taylor's integrity as a scholar or writer, they do have occasional questions about his townball performances. Taking advantage of his position as the local townball authority, "He's been known to bend the rules a bit," one colleague said. Adds another, "I wouldn't bet against him on that field."

ing, but whose lectures are dull, or one who's uninvolved in the community. Alan excels in all three."

The two courses Taylor was teaching last fall offered striking contrasts. On one particular Friday his upper-level class in colonial history studied images, from Queen

Revolution, immigrated to Canada. The book will focus on upstate New York and the Lake Ontario region. Taylor sees similar phenomena along the Maine border, though, and he discusses them in a *Maine History* article about the tragicomic career of George Ulmer, assigned during the War of 1812 to

ing that eventually he found a new advisor.

Overcoming marginalization is at the root of Taylor's achievement, according to his friend and colleague Charles Walker. Walker praises Taylor's "brilliant understanding of the first political party system" in *William Cooper's Town*, where he uncovered the transition

TAYLOR'S GRADUATE ADVISOR IMPOLORED HIM TO FORSAKE HIS DESIRE TO WRITE A THESIS ABOUT MAINE. . . . THE ADVISOR SUGGESTED THREE POSSIBLE TOPICS: A HISTORY OF DREAMING, A HISTORY OF THE CHICKEN IN AMERICAN SOCIAL LIFE OR A COMMUNITY STUDY ON CAPE COD. "FOR A TIME I JOKED THAT MY DISSERTATION WOULD BE A HISTORY OF DREAMS ABOUT CHICKENS ON CAPE COD."

Elizabeth to the Virginia settlements. Taylor was quiet as he moved around the classroom seeking responses, willing to wait. Most of the students were history majors whom he'd had before.

In a freshman-level survey of American history through the Civil War, a large afternoon lecture, Taylor's demeanor changed. He paced the stage, spoke dramatically using a microphone and drove home his points about the Constitutional Convention with bullet-like precision. Asked about the contrast, he said, "You have to be able to adjust to a different audience."

Taylor's next project, already well under way, is a study of the borderlands of the Northeast—a hot topic among historians who are intrigued by questions of identity and how people do or do not fit into existing social, racial and ideological frameworks. As in previous works, he includes marginalized people so long left out of formal history.

The paradox of borders, Taylor said, "is that they are intended to separate people, but end up attracting them instead." That is also the case along the Canadian border, which continues to be a magnet for settlement and development on both sides.

Taylor's book will examine the "late loyalists," former colonists who, well after the

Eastport, across the border from St. Stephen, which was then in the hands of the British. Ulmer, failing to perceive the local and regional interest in commerce as opposed to an embargo, was ultimately sacked.

"As historians redeem the places and peoples previously dismissed as marginal, as peripheral, we can perceive the truth that every region is in the center of some wider network of human exchange of people, goods, and cultures," Taylor writes. "We start to perceive a fuller North American history where borders are invitations rather than walls."

The article strikes a rare personal note as well, detailing Taylor's experience as a graduate student at Brandeis, where his faculty advisor implored him to forsake his desire to write a thesis about Maine, warning that it would kill his job prospects. Maine was too marginal. "Historians treated Plymouth, Dedham, Andover, and Newburyport as if they were microcosms of the American whole," Taylor said. The advisor suggested three possible topics: a history of dreaming, a history of the chicken in American social life or a community study on Cape Cod. "For a time I joked that my dissertation would be a history of dreams about chickens on Cape Cod," he writes, not-

from the Federalists to the Jeffersonians who succeeded them. "It's deeply moving to see how people who were marginalized were empowered," Walker said. "His discovery is one of the great contributions to historical writing in the last century."

Taylor, as a contemporary historian, gives full voice to those formerly excluded from American narratives. Yet he is, in his own estimation, old-fashioned in his conviction that "truth is an objective worth pursuing. Many academics have given up on it, even as an ideal." Such relativism comes at great cost, he said. "It drains academic work of a lot of its excitement."

Making judgments isn't something Taylor shies away from. "[He's] a master of clarity and analysis," Ulrich said. "Whatever topic he takes on, he illuminates."

He does so without a lot of fuss. Whether it's his Maine upbringing, his desire to balance family with career considerations or his decision to remain at a less-famous institution, Taylor seems content to continue his work in unexplored corners of history. He isn't looking for any new prizes, which are, in the case of the Pulitzer and Bancroft, generally once-in-a-lifetime events. "I have all the prestige I need," he said. "I want to be able to go where my principles take me." •