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Rewriting History - with Alan Taylor '77

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REWRITING HISTORY

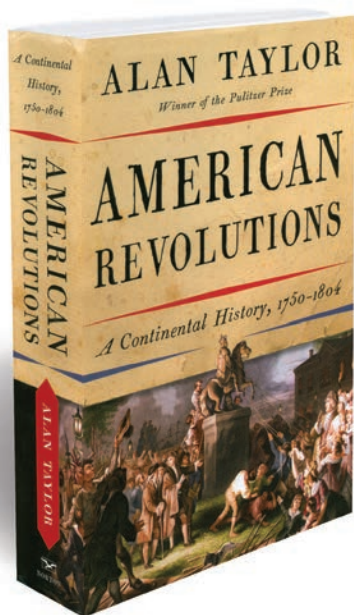
WITH ALAN TAYLOR '77

By Kate Carlisle

Once upon a time in America, schoolchildren studying the Revolution learned about the feisty minutemen and the surly redcoats. We read about brave farmers who turned out of the New England woods to surprise British troops, about George Washington's leadership during the merciless winter at Valley Forge, and the thrilling civil disobedience of the Sons of Liberty, dressed up as Indians to hurl boxes of tea into Boston Harbor.

That narrative comes under the critical gaze of Alan Taylor '77, one of the nation's leading historians and a two-time Pulitzer winner, in his book *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804*. The book examines the pre-Revolutionary roles and lives of Native Americans, French, Spanish, African slaves, and women, and questions the motivations of some wealthy Founding Fathers, revealing a complicated political tapestry that laid the groundwork for what Taylor refers to as a civil war.

Naturally, we had some questions. Especially following a political year, when Colby's Center for the Arts and Humanities is focusing on revolutions. So we caught up with Taylor, a University of Virginia professor who is teaching this year at Oxford.



Q: What happened to the familiar narrative? Your book upends it.

A: (My book) challenges the narrative but I don't think inverts it. My point is not to say that the Loyalists were good guys and the Patriots were bad guys, but rather to question the whole concept of dividing people in the past into good guys and bad guys.

Q. How did you come to this theory? What spurred the scholarship that led to the book?

A: The assumption was that the American Revolution was a great and good thing, and anyone (in the 18th century) who opposed it was at best ignorant, and at worst, malicious. But I started doing work on Canada, which received refugees after the Revolution, and remained loyal to the Empire. I became familiar with those people's stories and their narrative. And I said, let's go back to the American Revolution and try to look at it with fresh eyes and a neutral perspective and see what happens when you treat everyone with some respect, and try to understand why they did what they did, rather than put labels on them.

Q: The attention you pay to the roles played by Native North Americans, slaves, and women is notable. Is it just another example of continuing cultural disenfranchisement that our history hasn't paid attention to these groups?

A: The standard narrative (of the Revolution) began with political and military leaders—all men and all white—with the assumption that they were speaking for all American people. You didn't need to look at the enslaved people or native people, and



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the assumption was that women went along with what ever the men said. But (recently), historians have been able to look at records of ordinary people, and not to assume people in the Continental Congress, for example, necessarily spoke for everybody. There were even people *within* the ranks of leadership who dissented from what the top leaders wanted to do.

Q: How do you think historians in 100 years are going to describe our current state of politics and governing?

A. I don't know. I think there are certainly causes for enormous concern right now—no matter what your perspective—on what strikes me as the growing dysfunction of our constitutional institutions. They're not operating as they have in the past, successfully, and not the way the founders of our republican institutions intended them to function.

Q: Journalists are fond of saying they write the first draft of history. Do you think a different or more evolved press in the 18th century might have made a difference in the Revolution?

A: That's what we call a counterfactual, and historians are very averse to that.

But I don't think press of the 18th century could be any different than it was, subject to political pressures. Given the high stakes of that civil war, it would be hard to imagine the belligerence on either side would have tolerated what we could consider a neutral press. That's not how civil wars work.

Q. Do you think your book will change the way history is taught?

A: I don't know. I think mine is one of a number of books coming out now trying to look at the American Revolution in a fresh way. ... I'm not the only one. I would like to hope that we could write about the Revolution in a neutral and open-minded way ... but I'm not so naïve to think there isn't going to be a lot of pushback by people who believe it must be written about in a celebratory way, because it is so foundational to our democracy.