
TOWARD A MORE PERFECT UNION

*Virtue and the Formation of
American Republics*



Ann Fairfax Withington

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For
L.A.W.

and to the memory of
P.R.W.
P.R.W., Jr.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am always amazed, when I pour over the acknowledgements in books (often the best part), at the number of institutions and foundations that disgorge of their gold and the exuberance of the authors for research. I remember my first research trip. I was shoved into a room brimming with folios but noticeably lacking in those amenities that make reading pleasurable, like a chair and perhaps a table. Light of only a very modest nature filtered in from a distant window and warmed a sleeping tarantula. The folios that interested me were, of course, on the top shelf so I had to repress rampant acrophobia, gambol up a wobbly step ladder, and gracefully balance a fifteen-pound folio while it rained a shower of dead insects over my spick-and-span “power” suit. In a second room adjoining the first, the shelving method had been abandoned altogether. Here the folios were piled on the floor, their spines modestly facing the wall; when stirred from their repose, the bindings with the informative titles disappeared in a cloud of dry rot.

I am grateful to the people who helped me overcome the hazards in gaining access to the past, especially various colleagues. Alden Vaughan is the ideal senior colleague for someone tottering in her first job. He lent me his books, sat by me at the dinners of the Columbia Seminar in Early American History, introduced me to Pat Bonomi and other celebrities, and came to my talk even though he was stricken with ague and the pox. Comrades Foner and Garafola, two sophisticated New Yorkers who took pity on a provincial from Boston (“that toy town”), taught me the names of the strange foods

in delicatessens and invited me to sumptuous parties where people of all ages and occupations filled the apartment with the feast of reason and flow of wit. I have written this book so that the comrades will have something fluffy to read to Baby D after the intellectual strain of *Marmalade the Doctor Cat* and *Watch the Pony Grow*. Eric McKittrick plied me with oysters at the faculty club, and smiling with the bland dignity that testified to his superior knowledge disabused me of my erroneous thoughts on George Washington. (Methinks that verily his Lordship be inordinate as to the appetites and that gluttony breeds a dangerous distemper and flatulency of the stomach which must needs put acrimony in the blood.) He talked a lot about bouillabaisse and boasted of his skill at wielding a saucepan, crushing the garlic, and massaging the tender-fleshed fish, but like many professors, it was all talk and no action. Marsha Wright and Walter Metzger took me to operas and concerts, and several funny people kept my spirits up during those times of ennui, despair, and melancholia that so often haunt the untenured professor: Jim Shenton, Jack Garraty, Ainslie Embree (the handsome). Norm Pollack warded off despondency with stories about being an untenured radical Marxist professor at Yale in the sixties, and Gene Rice, with stories of the relics of St. Jerome and the feminization of Columbia's core course, Contemporary Civilization. Gene, like so many of his colleagues, cooks an exquisite meal, and he chivalrously invited me to Thanksgiving dinner after I had left him several notes explaining in detail that I had no place to go. The Midwest has a gourmet cook who rivals the best of New York. Sus Miller prepares banquets on hand-painted Royal Copenhagen plates and plays on the motif of abundance. I have enjoyed being the ward of the Millers and only hope that Doug does not get so fat that he can no longer waddle towards a drop shot.

In my graduate student days, several friends lashed me into productivity. Rachel Klein took me to the library and pointed out the card catalogue; Bill Breitenbach inspired me and his lunchtime congregation with his brilliance; and Jim Essig, who had a calling to write history, proselytized me with missionary zeal. Had the world been kind he would by now be on his fifth book.

For a long time my manuscript just lay around, unable to get up in the mornings year after year. Several people raised an eyebrow at this sloth. Dick (Webfoot) Brown and Kip Pells both read every page of the manuscript and encouraged me to send it off. Others showed

more impatience with my argument that the planets had to be in a favorable position for such an ambitious undertaking. Josh Freeman, who was surging ahead with his own gigantic book, beat me to a black and blue pulp. Never a moment went by—on the tennis court when I was preparing a magnificent backhand drive, in his apartment just as I was plunging into a platter of lox—when he would not gratuitously remark that a book couldn't get published unless it was sent to a publisher. Chip Radding took to calling every morning at 6:00 to ask me if this was going to be the day for starting the voyage to the post office.

Several close female friends have helped set the world in the proper perspective as a male plot. I've had many very satisfactory conversations on PMS, fat, and male insensitivity with: Wizzy Whiteside, Freddy Gamble, Puss Schutt, Page Coulter, Betsy Blackmar, Lauissa Brown, and Maureen Flanagan. In a situation that usually calls for introspection, Diane Girling, between debulking and sysplatinum, kept me laughing with an endless stream of whimsical observations on the way of the world. One male friend has pampered me over the years, David Earnest.

I'm not so good at the nitty gritty business of what I believe academics call research, so while others might go to card catalogues and databases, I prefer to consult the living, breathing bibliographies, and I can, without reservation, recommend two: Jeffery Merrick and Michael Undsworth. Jeff (and Jeff is an excellent cook in his own right; in mentioning his academic skills I certainly don't mean to derogate from his more important culinary ones) can produce a hundred index cards on any topic: crime, charivaris, Jesuits, sex—an indispensable friend, and also a reliable one who never failed, whatever meteorological event might be devastating the Village, to take me to La Ripaille for a birthday dinner of some main course and white chocolate mousse smothered with sauce aux framboises. Michael, the reference librarian for history at Michigan State University, took misspelled vague references ("I think his last name might have been Brown, a minister, perhaps, who wrote sometime in the eighteenth century") and wrestled results from ARLIN, STC, OCLC, and other acronymous monsters.

Several people helped with the mechanics of producing a book in the flesh. Albin Jones showed me how to collect statistical data and then processed it for me. Sacdone, my computer buddy, kept my

tables from marching off the page, got me out of metas, and taught me how to setf, yput, pick, change, and exit. Kathy Morrissey, my second-base woman, did midnight proofreading; Jean Breitung, our resident herpetologist, and Mary Cary Chipley, manufacturer of jets, promise to read the page proofs. Gregory Yarmesch and Mary Mapes had the exhilarating task of checking citations; they both aged considerably while serving their terms in the microform room. Bill Hixson caught many ugly orthographic blunders and pulled out noxious commas. Two anonymous readers offered excellent advice and saved me from at least some errors. Joanie Withington, my Maryland agent, came up with the title.

My greatest academic debt is to Edmund Morgan, who still reads everything I send him (and I send him every little thing). I like to think of Ed rocking back and forth behind the lecturn and stroking its edges, up on his roof mending a hole, behind the coffee pot with a brown paper bag and a bottle of Amontillado at T.A. lunches, arching his eyebrows at a bowl of Indian pudding in Mory's, at the helm of his sailfish, and roaring around Mt. Washington at MACH .82, dipping his wings—always in all ways a verray, parfit gentil knyght.

I have great personal debts, too. Ellen Lee Kennelly gave me a mature lime-green Volvo to putter around to various archives; Franci Wakemen gave me a cottage by the sea to inspire great thoughts; and Aubrey Smith gave me Peter's bed. Mary Hilton (G.G.G.) has over the years stoked me with chocolate chip cookies, cinnamon toast, and cheese soufflé. She also taught me to whistle, lace my skates, ride my bike down the big hill in the cemetery, and catch crabs in the tidal pond behind Big Beach. Obviously without her this book could never have been written.

Perhaps in the course of these acknowledgements I may have been overplaying the prandial motif. I do want to thank one person who definitely cannot cook, my mother. (Her brother, catching her in a rare moment in the kitchen, her hand tentatively on a skillet, a perplexed and affronted look on her face, said that she reminded him of a whore presented with a Bible.) My mother didn't need to hold the family together with puddings and tarts because she read aloud to us hour after hour—Freddy the Detective Pig and Robin Hood to my brother and me, Rex Stout and Dickens to my father (with the usual way-past-bedtime hangers-on). Generally not a patient woman, the Aged P continued to encourage and support me while I pursued a

leisurely academic career, testing out first this subject and then that in various settings: Virginia, Cambridge, Melbourne, Berkeley, and exotic New Haven. And all this time, when other people's children were scaling corporate ladders, not by a flicker of an eyelid did she even hint that I might never be educated. Her reward is a history book on funerals and cocks.

I think my ancestors in Virginia and New England deserve recognition for their glorious performance in the American Revolution. The Fairfaxes decided they didn't like equality and went back to England. Ebenezer Withington, a hermit who lived in a hut in Sodom on the shore of Nantasket Bay, discovered a chest of tea floating on the tide. A frugal sort, he swooped it up and stashed the tea away (we strongly believe he chopped up the chest for kindling and saved the nails). But rumors spread. A committee visited him, and he has come down in history as "Old Straddlebug Withington."

And so, gentle reader, I leave this little book to your serious consideration. As far as the exactest care can carry me, I have written it so punctually true that I am hopeful there is none can have any just exception to any part of it, and even though the devil hath in these late and declining times possessed the hearts of many with cursed opinions which do beget a world of error, ruin, and desolation, I shall incessantly pray at his hands, who is the giver of all good things—the god of mercy and peace—that these labors shall prove successful in their operation. In the corrupted currents of this world a guilded hand may often shove by justice and it has been rumored (who will stop the vent of hearing when foul rumor speaks?) that Sheldon Meyer received together with this manuscript a standing cup of scallop shells, one perfuming pot in the form of a cat, and two barrels of figs. If any gross and blind idolaters, fallen away from undoubted truths and wandering daily in vice, should thunder these false calumnies, the end thereof shall be their eternal damnation unless speedy repentance prevent God's judgement, which to wish is godly but to believe is foolish. Meanwhile I shall always pray as I do sincerely desire that by all my endeavors God may be glorified, the truth divine and human vindicated, and the public benefited.

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PREFACE

From 1764 to 1776, Americans had to deal with the feeling of dislocation and scatter left by a Parliament that was breaking the previously established rules. Amidst all their bustle of practicality (they formed congresses, produced documents articulating their rights and grievances, established importation and exportation embargoes), they also took measures to alleviate internal tensions and to strengthen themselves as a people. In 1774, the first Continental Congress drew up an official and very specific code of behavior. They banned cockfighting, horse-racing, and the theater, and modified the funeral ceremony. This book will consider the somewhat curious behavior of the Congress and the odd assortment of activities they chose to focus on.

Banned activities, like empty holes, cannot be seen. We can, however, get around that invisibility by roaming through the tracts of moral condemnation that accreted over the years, sometimes centuries, on the activities singled out for purging; by spotting the moral themes that might bear on the political issues; and by dissecting the activities themselves. Cocker manuals, betting odds, bawdy comedies, sentimental tragedies, lewd prints, stark funeral processions: all comment obliquely on the political events of the day and on the character Americans were making for themselves as a people.

Colonists not only abided by the regulations of Congress (they gave up the forbidden activities and modified their funerals), but they also bowed and crooked traditional ceremonies—the funeral and the execution—into mock ceremonies in the service of the politi-

cal cause and took over the traditional European “skimmington ride”—the ritual by which a community expressed its moral outrage at people who deviated from normal behavior—and produced an American version, tarring and feathering. While the banned activities have to be brought back into visibility for their political significance to be understood, ceremonies, in contrast, were co-opted and refashioned by the patriots for their very visibility. The ceremonies present a text to be read, and the modifications of traditional ceremonies present a conversation between a society at peace and a society in tension. Colonists used ceremonies to make political statements, and the ceremonies themselves, when put to such a use, framed and structured the political issues.

Congress had a political strategy. In regulating behavior, Congress tried to make colonial society homogeneous and cohesive, both horizontally (bonding different colonies together) and vertically (blurring class and gender distinctions). They banned activities and modified ceremonies that splintered social cohesion by stimulating self-absorption (gambling), by encouraging competition (cockfighting and horse-racing), or by emphasizing class divisions (funerals with elaborate display). Congress also identified different sectors of society that might potentially speak in different voices: the poor, women, servants, Tories, gamblers. The poor, women, and servants, all of whom were deemed to have weak wills, were to be insulated from contamination, either moral or political, and incorporated into the political resistance. The deviants—gamblers, spendthrifts, and idlers, whose self-absorption and obsession left no room for political commitment, and Tories, whose political tenets were twisted and warped—were to be transformed into committed patriots or expelled.

This book delves into oddities—the quirks and twitches of the American Revolution (cockfights, horse-races, funerals and executions, real and mock, tragedies and comedies)—and from these oddities, dissected, scrutinized, and injected with significance, ruminates on a national character that emerged in the twelve years of political crisis and eventually freed Americans of their dependence on Britain. The American character was forged in an austere, seemingly arbitrary, morality, slowly fashioned and pieced together between the Sugar Act of 1764 and the Coercive Acts of 1774 and then officially brought together in a code of behavior by the first Continental Congress. This ascetic morality, crystallized in an odd assortment of

specificity, put on display and made explicit certain assumptions and values that gave their own hue to the political events and prepared Americans for the establishment of republican governments.

We have long since violated the ethic on which republican government was founded. The virtuous citizenry dedicated to lean austerity—that alleged bulwark of republics—disintegrated shortly after the Revolution into autonomous consumers engulfed in the desire for possessions. Instead of honoring the hard life of cramped gratifications, Americans today revel in materialism. Implicitly, the more you own, the more American you are; and sooner or later in America, all classes, all races, all ages, and both sexes are marked as consumers. We no longer extoll the pinched morality of frugality or even the work ethic. Yet while the austere virtue that gave Americans the confidence to establish republican governments has long since dissolved, the great legacy of the American Revolution, republican government, still survives.

Many historians have dealt with virtue and corruption in the American Revolution. Some (Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, and J. G. A. Pocock) have concentrated on the opposition of virtue and corruption as an intellectual and linguistic paradigm that colored the perception Americans had of themselves and the British. Others have focused on the morality itself. Edmund Morgan revealed the similarities between the ethic of the Puritans and the ethic of American revolutionaries. Garry Wills analyzed sentimentalism and Scottish moral philosophy and showed how immersed Jefferson was in these European schools of thought. This book concentrates on the use of morality as a political strategy and is far more oriented towards culture than other books that have dealt with virtue and corruption in the American Revolution. I concentrate on cultural activities that were highlighted during the Revolution, trace their function and structure in eighteenth-century colonial society, and analyze the moral hostility they generated.

European historians like Robert Darnton and Natalie Davis have developed the field of cultural history in sophisticated and analytical ways. Some American historians have dealt with culture in this period (most notably Kenneth Silverman, who surveyed painting, music, literature, and the theater) and a few have related culture to ideology. Timothy Breen has studied the *mentalité* of Virginia tobacco planters and ascribed their crisis of confidence to deteriorating

debt relations. Eric Foner placed the artisans of Philadelphia in a culture before analyzing them as a political class. Rhys Issac studied the hostility between the Virginia gentry and Baptists, located it in cultural differences, and related the internal conflict to the imperial crisis. This book, instead of using culture as a means of understanding one class or of distinguishing among classes, concentrates on aspects of eighteenth-century Anglo-American culture that colonists in the period of political crisis could agree on. I deal with a society's self-conscious response to its own culture. I analyze certain activities and ceremonies in depth and probe for connections between political ideology grounded in virtue and behavior organized and controlled by cultural imperatives.

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