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## Book Reviews

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# Paul Revere's ride: shattering British myths about the American Revolution

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### Paul Revere's Ride

by David Hackett Fischer

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David Hackett Fischer, Warren Professor of History at Brandeis University, has rendered the first detailed study of the legendary "Midnight Ride of Paul Revere," artfully accomplishing his goal of shattering the popular myth that Revere was a brave, lonely figure, acting entirely on his own. Fischer shows that Revere was in fact part of a large network that had been carefully put in place to rouse the New England countryside against excursions by the British Regular troops posted in Boston.

Fischer shows how the intelligence apparatus of the American patriots assisted Revere in his mission, once they learned on the evening of April 18, 1775 that British troops were, the next day, to march 20 miles through the Middlesex countryside northwest of Boston, with the objective of destroying the cache of American munitions that they believed to be stored in the towns of Concord and Lexington. Spreading Revere's alarm involved a large number of people who had been organized months earlier into what we would today call an "early warning system." As Fischer points out, Revere knew exactly where the leaders of the local militia were to be found. Once Revere had alerted each of these leaders, they dispatched other riders to adjoining towns, so that even before the British troops had left the environs of Boston, literally dozens of riders, with the same mission as Revere's, were racing in all directions. This achieved the intended effect of a rapid and efficient mobilization of the New England yeomanry—which was crucial to the success of American arms that day and which so stunned the British high command.

Fischer provides a detailed understanding of the events leading up to Revere's ride, as well as the events precipitated by it. Not only is Revere's "midnight ride" retold, but so also

are the bloody events that transpired later that day, as the American militia for miles around converged on Concord, to confront the British troops, and fired the shots "heard round the world." Fischer's book is a refreshing break from the politically correct mishmash that flows out of modern-day academia (as Fischer writes in his introduction, "the only creature less fashionable in academe than the stereotypical 'dead white male,' is a dead white male on horseback.').

Fischer's demythologizing of one particularly prominent folk tale made popular by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1863 doggerel—Revere's midnight ride—is useful in indicating how much of the truth about the American Revolution has been deliberately hidden by what passes for American history in classrooms today.

### Britain's cultural war against America

Unfortunately, Fischer fails to deal forthrightly with the larger issue of cultural warfare. Fischer has the evidence at hand: One of the most interesting parts of his historiography (included at the end of the book), details how, in the late 1800s, the history of the Revolution began to be rewritten to dull its anti-British edge, until, by the 1910s, it had been eliminated altogether. In fact, Fischer reports: "In 1917, an American film about Paul Revere's ride was ordered to be seized under the Espionage Act, on the ground that it promoted discord between the United States and Britain. The case was heard in Federal District Court of Southern California, and called *United States v. The Spirit of Seventy Six*."

That such a legal case—with such a name!—could be heard without provoking massive protests indicates just how successful this cultural warfare was in duping the United States into becoming an ally of imperial England in the First World War.

Thus, it is surprising that Fischer's book goes along with the hackneyed story line that the origins of the American Revolution are to be found in the discontent generated by royal taxes. The American Revolution was much more than a mere "tax revolt." In his groundbreaking history, *How the Nation Was Won: America's Untold Story, 1630-1754*, H. Graham Lowry demonstrates that there existed a transatlantic

conspiracy, directed by Gottfried Leibniz in Hanover, Jonathan Swift in Dublin, and Cotton Mather in Boston, to create and cultivate in North America a stronghold of Judeo-Christian republicanism that would eventually defeat the pagan Aristotelianism being spread by the British Empire.

British economic doctrine, imported and implanted from Venice, reflected the intense oligarchical hatred for the republican outlook that man is *imago viva Dei*—the living image of God—possessing intellectual and creative powers that define him as absolutely superior to all other creatures. The republican outlook fostered an economy in which man's creative and intellectual powers were largely directed toward better understanding of the natural world, and deploying that ever-increasing understanding to continually reshape the way society organized its production. The effect of this ever-changing reorganizing was to create ever more powerful methods for transforming nature and its raw materials. It is thus human mentation that is the source of real wealth in a republican economy.

By contrast, the oligarch is utterly unable to differentiate a human being from a cow or a goat, or even a lump of gold. An oligarchical economy values most the physical control of raw resources, and the sheer brawn that could be applied to processes of production and distribution—processes that often stagnated for decades or even centuries. Technological progress is shunned, even feared, because of the liberating effect it necessarily must have on the minds of the empire's subjects. To the oligarchical outlook, the principal means for creating wealth, besides looting and plundering, is to “buy cheap, and sell dear.”

### Looting policy for North America

The British policy for the colonies in North America, therefore, was to maintain them solely as a source of timber, pitch, tobacco, and other raw materials, and retard the development of industry by imposing restrictions on manufactured items, or by refusing charters for certain industrial enterprises. It was the same policy that had been applied against Ireland, where in 1688, the manufacture of woollen goods was officially “discouraged.” Turning its attention to the North American colonies in 1710, the House of Commons declared “that the erecting of manufactories in the colonies had a tendency to lessen their dependence on Great Britain.” When the colonists refused to abide by the wishes of Parliament, and persisted in developing industry, the House of Commons ordered a report be done by the Board of Trade. In 1732, the House of Commons forbade the export of hats from one colony to another, and restricted the number of apprentices that could be taken by hatters.

Within two decades, this anti-industrial policy was increasingly taking the form of outright prohibitions on entire forms of manufacture in the colonies. In 1750, the construction of any new mills for splitting or rolling iron was prohibited. Some time later, Lord Chatham declared that he would

not allow the colonies to produce so much as one hob nail for themselves. (See Henry C. Carey, *The Harmony of Interests: Agricultural, Manufacturing & Commercial*, New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1967, pp. 45-46.) For a skilled tradesman such as Revere, who after the Revolution built one of the largest manufacturing enterprises in the new United States, such royal prohibitions and restrictions rankled grievously. It was an issue referred to pointedly by the colonies' representative before the House of Commons in February 1766, Benjamin Franklin, when, at the end of Franklin's examination before that body concerning the colonies' rejection of the Stamp Act, Franklin was asked, “What used to be the pride of the Americans?”

“To indulge in the fashions and manufactures of Great Britain,” Franklin replied.

Came a second question: “What is now their pride?”

“To wear their old clothes over again, till they can make new ones.”

### Irreconcilable differences

It is doubly surprising that Fischer should end up retailing the “tax revolt” fable, because in the opening of his book, he contrasts Paul Revere with the British military commander in chief for North America, Maj. Gen. Thomas Gage, and concludes that the fundamental difference between these protagonists was defined by radically different concepts, such as the rule of law. Fischer quotes a passage from Gage's correspondence that shows the irreconcilable differences between the oligarchical outlook and the republican. Lamenting the manner in which the colonists clung to the proofs of their ancestral rights, such as the Magna Carta, Gage wrote that New England was a “country where every man studies law, and interprets the laws to his own purposes.” To Gage, who thought the zenith of law flowed from the mouth of the king, the unruly town meetings that were a cherished institution of self-rule in New England, were a particularly odious manifestation of such individualistic anarchy, and Gage repeatedly advised London that the town meetings be banned.

Gage also urged London to confine settlement to the seaboard. Settlers in the interior, increasingly accustomed to fending for themselves away from the royal governors or any other royal officers, Gage wrote, “are, already, almost out of reach of Law and Government.” Far better to have wilderness preserves, rather than have the king's subjects edging toward self-dominion.

The oligarchical disdain for the creative powers of the human mind set the British command up for a rude shock when armed resistance finally came, and they were confronted with well-organized and disciplined militia able and willing to trade blow for blow with the king's Regulars, rather than the howling and cowardly rabble the British commanders had depicted in their reports back to London. In a letter to a London that was increasingly edgy about the direction of events in North America, Gage wrote that colonial firebrands

may “talk very high,” but he assured London that the colonists “can do nothing. Their numerous slaves in the bowels of their country, and the Indians at their backs, will always keep them quiet.”

Lord Percy, the most notable of Gage’s subalterns, scion of the fifth largest landed estate in England, and married to the daughter of King George’s mentor, Lord Bute, wrote to his father, the Duke of Northumberland, in July 1774, “The people here talk much and do little. I cannot but despise them completely.” Fate would decree that Lord Percy lead the force that would rescue the Regulars outside Lexington, where Percy would witness the amazing spectacle of the king’s troops driven by irregular militia, to the point of despair.

### **Another myth destroyed**

Whether intended or not, Fischer demythologizes another Revolutionary fable: that the fighting on April 19, 1775, “merely an open running skirmish along the Battle Road,” with the Americans taking potshots from behind trees, large rocks, and stone fences, each militiaman acting as “his own commander.” Rather, throughout the morning, the Americans fought “a series of controlled engagements, in which the Middlesex farmers fought as members of formal military units,” including attacking in units as large as regiments. Time and time again, the order and discipline of the ragged-appearing Americans surprised the British officers and troops, beginning when five full companies—from Acton, Bedford, Lincoln, and two from Concord, along with one regiment of veteran Middlesex militia, marched down from their training field, where they had warily watched the British enter Concord, and assaulted the three companies of the King’s Own light infantry guarding the North Bridge.

The Americans caught the Regulars at the North Bridge in a deadly crossfire; moreover, the American militia had much better aim than the Regulars. Fischer notes that “of eight British officers at the North Bridge, four were hit in the first American fire.” These three British companies were so shattered by their losses at the North Bridge, that Colonel Wilson, the commander of the expedition, dispersed the survivors to other companies.

As Wilson tried to lead his troops back to Lexington, more and more American militia units appeared on the field. “As Smith’s column retreated to Lexington Green, it was pursued by a body of militia in regimental order,” Fischer writes. “Altogether, from Concord Bridge to Lexington Green, the New England militia stood against the British force in large formations at least eight times. Six of these confrontations led to fighting, four at close quarters. Twice the British infantry was broken, at Concord Bridge and again west of Lexington Green. Altogether, it was an extraordinary display of courage, resolve, and discipline by citizen-soldiers against regular troops.”

The British retreat turned to a rout. By the time they had

reached Lexington, 6.25 miles from Concord, many of the Regulars had lost hope, some even reportedly sitting down in the road to await their fate at the hands of the Americans. It was at this point that Lord Percy appeared, and saved Wilson’s command. “I had the happiness,” Lord Percy wrote to his father afterward, “of saving them from inevitable destruction.”

What followed, as Wilson and Percy led their troops back the 11 miles to the safety of Charlestown, was an extraordinary display of tactical command and control by the Americans. Under the command of Massachusetts militia Gen. William Heath, a close friend of Henry Knox (who became one of George Washington’s ablest and most trusted generals), the various militia units continually streaming onto, and already on the field were deployed to create a moving “ring of fire” around the retreating British column, though the fighting at the rear was the most severe. The Americans “engaged the rear guard so closely that the Royal Welch Fusiliers were compelled to march backwards, eight companies fighting in turn and leapfrogging over one another.” One of every six Fusiliers was killed or wounded, forcing Percy to commit his reserve, the Marines, to relieve them. With fresh militia arriving every minute to join the fight, the Marines suffered even worse than the Fusiliers. Percy was forced to relieve them as well, with survivors from the King’s Own and the 47th Foot.

Heath’s ring of fire became ever more fierce, the closer the column came to Cambridge. In Menotomy, still six miles from Charlestown, the fighting became a vicious house-to-house melee. Twenty-two of the 50 Americans killed during the day were found in and about the Russell House, including the 58-year-old owner. So lame that he could hardly walk, Jason Russell made a breastwork of shingles in his front doorway, and fought, to the death, the maddened British troops bayoneting him repeatedly.

As Fischer writes, “With the sun setting on the ruins of an empire,” the British finally stumbled to the safety of Cambridge, having paid dearly for the miscalculations of London, and the arrogance of the command in Boston. Lord Percy, for one, possessed a much altered view of the peasant rabble that now lay siege to Boston. “You may depend upon it,” he wrote to his father the day afterward, “that as the Rebels have now had time to prepare, they are determined to go through with it, nor will the insurrection here turn out so despicable as it is perhaps imagined at home. For my part, I never believed, I confess, that they would have attacked the King’s troops, or have had the perseverance I found in them yesterday.”

It took eight long years for the oligarchs of London to learn the truth of Lord Percy’s observations. Then they embarked on a determined campaign of cultural and other warfare, that has lasted to this day, to grind down that “perseverance,” and turn as much of America—and the world—as they could into Gage’s wilderness preserves.