

The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson

L. F. S. Upton

Volume 4, Number 1, Autumn 1974

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad4_1rv01

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Upton, L. F. S. (1974). Review of [The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson]. *Acadiensis*, 4(1), 130–133.

Reviews/Revue

The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson

Bernard Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1974, pp. xx, 423, \$12.50.

Reg Murphy, standing unshaven and dirt-smearing on the front porch of his home, explained: "They managed to frighten my family, they frightened me very badly. They played another one of those silly revolutionary games, but that's not the way you go about turning this country around."

Who was Murphy? A Loyalist perhaps, just back from a reception given by the local Sons of Liberty, with possibly a little tar and feathers thrown in? Or a householder who had just spent the night huddled with his family in the parlour while the local patriotic rowdies hurled rocks through the windows? Perhaps that little bit of dirt had got on his face when he had tried to go out and reason with his assailants; he probably had been unsuccessful in explaining to them that you do not turn America around by playing silly revolutionary games.

What was the year of Murphy's ordeal? 1774, 1775, 1776? and the place? Marblehead, Poughkeepsie, Concord? The date was February 22, 1774, and the town Atlanta, Georgia. Reg Murphy is no Loyalist, but the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*. He had not been ridden out of town on rails, but driven around town in the trunk of a car.¹

Two hundred years have made a great deal of difference in the way Americans regard revolution, and Murphy's comments put that difference in a nutshell. Professional American historians have lagged somewhat behind current attitudes, but they are now using a certain degree of maturity in their scholarly probings of their Revolution. The change has been recent and rapid, and nowhere more marked than in the approach taken to Loyalism.

An example of what has happened can be seen in Pauline Maier's *From Resistance to Revolution*, published as recently as 1972, and already bearing the stamp of obsolescence on it. Her emphasis was on the consensus that produced the minimum of restrained violence necessary to ensure "adherence to a revolutionary argument that was in its own terms rational and compelling." Those who got in the way of that argument were simply brushed aside.² Maier, in a 1974 review, conceded: "The Loyalists lost the Revolution, but they seem to be winning the Bicentennial . . . They might well be the one component of the Revolution with whom Americans can still 'safely' identify."³ Edmund Morgan, at a 1971 symposium, commented that "Loyalism . . .

1 *The Province*, Vancouver, February 23, 1974.

2 Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, New York, 1972, xv.

3 *New York Times*, February 3, 1974.

tended to absorb social groups that felt endangered or oppressed," which was harmless enough; but when he added that it "removed from the scene the intransigents, of whatever persuasion, who might have prevented the achievement of consensus" he was obviously beginning to flounder. Writing in 1974, Morgan found himself fighting a rearguard action to preserve his consensus mythology. He felt very much alone. Historians on the left were interested only in the inarticulate; those on the right, having survived the student revolutionaries of the 1960's, could hardly be expected to sympathise with the Mohawks of the Boston Tea Party; while liberal academics were so alienated from their present-day "morally bankrupt government" that they had little taste for celebrating its origins. And in the midst of this demoralisation, Morgan had to review a work that left the American Revolution "looking a pretty shabby affair," reduced "to the level of a witch-hunt."⁴

The book that put Morgan so rigorously on the defensive was Bernard Bailyn's sympathetic study of the most famous Loyalist of them all: *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*, last royal governor of Massachusetts. This volume, by the most influential American Revolutionary historian writing today, marks a definite development in his own approach to the whole subject. It is hard to believe that it is the work of the same man whose brilliantly arrogant introduction to *The Pamphlets of the American Revolution* left no room for those doubters who did not share the vision of Americans as the chosen people.⁵ *The Ordeal* originated in the same mind that produced the overwhelmingly smug, self-satisfied observation that "though we are now able to see the peculiar patterns of fears, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, and aspirations that underlay the Revolutionary movement, we have not yet made it clear why any sensible and well-informed person could possibly have opposed the Revolution."⁶ Some students may have thought that they had already made clear, many times over, why so many missed out on the wonders of the Revolution. Apparently, none of these authorities had impressed Professor Bailyn in the least. His breath taking choice of words — "sensible," "well-informed," "possibly," endowed the Loyalists with an aura of idiotic incomprehensibility that repelled in advance any attempt to treat them as members of the species *homo sapiens*. Yet it is now obvious that this was Bailyn's challenge to himself to undertake a task he wished to represent as making the discovery of the philosophers' stone simple by comparison.

4 Edmund Morgan, "Conflict and Consensus in the American Revolution," in S.G. Kurtz and J.H. Hutson, eds., *Essays on the American Revolution*, Chapel Hill, 1973, p. 292; "A Loyal Un-American," *New York Review of Books*, March 21, 1974.

5 Bernard Bailyn, *The Pamphlets of the American Revolution*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1965, p. 202.

6 Bernard Bailyn, "The Central Themes of the American Revolution," in Kurtz and Hutson, *Essays*, p. 16. He repeats the substance of this assertion in the preface to the *Ordeal* (p. x), adding "right-minded American with a modicum of imagination and common sense."

The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson is a biographical study, not a full-length biography. Hence it is possible to compress the first fifty years of Hutchinson's life into a very fine character sketch that prepares the way for the tempestuous decades of the 1760's and 1770's. Bailyn presents the reader with an extremely intelligent, devoted family man, well read in history and law, a veteran of thirty years of colonial politics, yet limited in sensibility. This last quality carries the burden of explaining how he came to be so persistently reviled and misrepresented by his contemporaries. Blamed for the Stamp Act which he had opposed, he was pursued by "Furies" (Bailyn's term) ever after. As his daughter wrote, the family had been "running from a mob ever since the year '65." Hutchinson saw himself, and indeed was, the victim of demagogues and self-seeking merchants for whom "No libel against the government was too vicious or too seditious . . . no lie or slander against individuals too outrageous." He was a man of logic, of reason, incapable of overcoming the sheer volume of abuse directed against him, or of convincing men of the "sheer irrationality and self-destructive nihilism of the extremists' claims and demands."

Bailyn sums up Hutchinson's whole career in describing his conduct at the time of the Tea crisis: "Correct, honorable, courageous, and fatal." There are elements of universal tragedy in the story. Berated by those he defended, as in the 1773 debate over the nature of parliamentary authority; hounded by avengers as in the publication of his "secret" letters that said nothing he had not uttered many times before in public, yet effectively destroyed the last shreds of his reputation in America; courted in London as an influential adviser, then discarded and held up as a scapegoat; stricken by deaths in his family at a time when he was least able to bear them. Hutchinson died knowing that he was an exile, that he had been ineffective, that the slurs on his character had not been cleansed away. There were no saving illusions.

This study is avowedly sympathetic to Hutchinson. It has to be. A biographer has to see the world through his subject's eyes to a large extent or else the task of biography is impossible. The fifteen years preceding the Revolution are presented in the very personal terms of the small world of Massachusetts where everyone knows, by sight and name as well as reputation, everyone else. Here political conflict is intensified by the very familiarity of those involved and is most readily explained in terms of personal ambitions, jealousies and vituperation. There is no doubt that the author is frequently as outraged as Hutchinson by, for example, the shameless manner in which facts were distorted to make a gratuitous insult out of an innocent event. But we do receive constant reminders of Hutchinson's shortcomings. A reading of his correspondence, Bailyn notes, reveals "the acquisitiveness of the provincial bourgeois playing the hard-headed politics of Walpole in the age of ideology." His concern for his family, and the multiplication of their offices, is blameable, as is his blinkered insistence that patronage, even in

the 1770's, was the key to control. His inability to come to terms with what was happening is shown in a pathetic vignette where Hutchinson, then in London, writes concerning the correct rank-ordering of mandamus councillors, almost all of whom had already been bullied into resigning their commissions. But above all, Hutchinson's failure is the failure of something larger, and time and again the reader is brought back to the insufficiency of logic, of reason, as an explanation for the events that led to Revolution and destroyed Hutchinson on the way.

The study tends very much to the depiction of the American Revolution as a passionate, irrational, illogical event. One might hazard a guess that Bailyn will take this up as his next theme. He has come almost full circle from the rational-compelling-logic train of thought by following through the career of one Loyalist. What happened to Hutchinson happened to many men less famous than he: the accusations, the threats, the absence of any opportunity to defend against charges based on wilful misrepresentation and personal jealousy, the failure of logic and reason to compete with passion and violence. If earlier writers on the Loyalists were not able to make these points with sufficient strength to impinge on the consciousness of the professional American historian, they can now count on powerful reinforcement from *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*. And this was the basic point of the study: not so much to look at one Loyalist but at Loyalism. The work is rounded off with an original historiography of Loyalism, tiresomely entitled "The Losers," which gives a final touch of sincerity to Bailyn's discovery that only the study of Loyalists "allows us to see the Revolutionary movement from the other side around, and to grasp the wholeness of the struggle."

Perhaps one day that consideration will lead Professor Bailyn to the wisdom of Reg Murphy: revolutionary games are not "the way you go about turning this country around."

L.F.S. UPTON

LOYALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

"The history of our Revolution will be one continued lie from one end to another", declared John Adams. Although it is not what he had in mind, the failure to understand the Loyalists has been a major source of weakness in that history. It is true that complaints of historians' neglect of the Loyalists have often been exaggerated,¹ but it is a fact that only during the last decade have Loyalist studies have come into their own. Indeed the freshet threatens to become a large-scale flood, encouraged by the approach of the bicentennial of independence in the United States and the rather later bicentennial of the Loyal-

1 See my bibliographical essay: "The View at Two Hundred Years", *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 80, (1970), pp. 25-47.