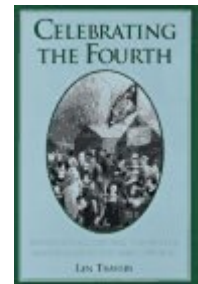


Len Travers. *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997. x + 278 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-060-4.

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Published on H-SHEAR (September, 1997)



Precocious Nationalism?

A few weeks ago, Americans celebrated the 221st year of their independence. Judging from the local goings-on along the Front Range of Colorado, it was a day marked by lawn-mowing, family gatherings, barbecues, and municipal fireworks displays. Few stores closed for the holiday and the only noticeable difference between this and any other weekday was that banks were closed and mail went undelivered. Few American flags or other national symbols were in evidence. It was in short a typically secular holiday in postmodern America.

Viewed from the vantage point of Len Travers' *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic*, the nation's 1997 celebrations were in equal measures reminiscent of and declensions from Fourth-of-July celebrations in the past. Depending upon circumstances, Fourths-of-July in the years between the American Revolution and the War of 1812 were, according to Travers, celebrated with enthusiasm, indifference, and intermittent contention. Focusing on Independence Day celebrations in the port cities of Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston, South Carolina, *Celebrating the Fourth* recounts the disparate careers of an putative national holiday in three of the new nation's more important cities.

The first celebrations took place in 1777, in the midst of the Revolutionary War, and were part and parcel of the "rage militaire" that marked the early years of the war. General enthusiasm reigned during the inaugural year of American independence and the celebrations served to

bolster public faith in the Revolutionary movement and, perhaps most importantly, served to distinguish friend from foe.

The success of the Revolution posed a different problem for those who would make the Fourth a permanent remembrance and celebration. For who really cared? Faced with the economic and social dislocations of the Revolutionary years, most people understandably turned to reconstructing their lives and livelihoods. Some urban elites, especially members of the Society of the Cincinnati, viewed this turn to private interest differently, perceiving in it a dangerous potential for social disorder and unvirtuous behavior on the part of the urban populace. The Fourth of July, they concluded, should be used as a vehicle to educate and uplift the urban masses, hoping that by making the Fourth into a exercise in citizenship and patriotism, they could restore a sense of community and forestall the self-seeking habits of ordinary urban dwellers.

It was a short journey from this elite-led form of celebration to the politicization of the Fourth, a phenomenon that marked Independence Day from the late 1780s to the beginning of the Second Anglo-American War. Beginning with the third chapter, which reveals the increasingly successful use made by politicians of Fourth-of-July celebrations and its associated rhetoric, Travers reveals the ways in which competing urban political factions and early political parties attempted to claim the mantle of the Revolution for themselves, each group defining itself

as the one and only “true” heir of the “Days of 1776.”

The cultural power of the Revolution was formidable, but not complete, and Travers is careful to point out that not everyone bought into the partisan rhetoric or the idea of Independence Day itself. African-Americans and women were denied official places in these celebrations, just as they were routinely marginalized in the nation’s larger public sphere. Many working people simply saw the Fourth as a day away from work, while others claimed it as a opportunity for sport and amusement. By the early nineteenth century, circuses and concerts drew growing numbers of people away from official commemorations of the nation’s birthday, and as many conservatives and middle-class moralists feared, drunkenness and criminal activity constantly marred the civic celebrations.

By the beginning of the second war with Britain, the cultural energy of the Independence Day celebrations had spent itself. Tired by twenty years of mind-numbing rhetorical excess practiced by competing political parties, Americans took the opportunity presented by the demise of the Federalists and the dawning of an era of political “Good Feelings” to separate themselves from the screed of the past and, equally important, to separate themselves decisively from the Revolutionary generation itself. The War of 1812 permitted the young men of the era to establish their own military bona fides at the same time that it allowed them to claim a contribution to American independence that was entirely their own.

Celebrating the Fourth gives us a fine account of the changing focus of Fourth of July celebrations in Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston from the Revolution to the Second Anglo-American War. By emphasizing the shifting forces that shaped Independence Day in the Early Republic, Travers has deftly placed the Fourth into the historical context in which it belongs. But as a study of the “rites of nationalism,” the book leaves many significant questions unanswered. Indeed, it leaves them mostly unasked. Nationalism has had (and continues to have)

many competing definitions, but at base it is typically defined as wide-spread attachment to and identification with the nation-state. Given this definition, there is little actual discussion of nationalism in *Celebrating the Fourth*. For Travers, nationalism is an unproblematic concept, a concept so self-evident that he allots only six pages to its analysis (pp. 7-10; pp. 224-27). What many others consider to be one of the most difficult and recondite historical phenomena Travers defines simply as “myths of cultural unity, of social continuity, of unchanging tradition, of shared belief” (p. 225). Beyond the fact that this might serve as a ready definition of culture, or mentality, or even religious belief, this easy definition reflects the author’s failure to engage the larger question of the rise of American nationalism.

Does celebrating the Fourth signify a national identification? This is especially important since so much of the book’s evidence points to the persistent localism of these celebrations in the three port cities. Most importantly—was there indeed a shift in political culture and identity away from localism and toward a sense of political nationalism? If there was, then we need to revise our understanding of popular nationalism, which most writers view as a development of the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The answers to these questions are partly empirical and partly conceptual. Greater attention to the discussions of nationalism in Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (especially the revised edition) and Eric Hobsbawm’s *Age of Empire* might have oriented this book differently. Certainly it would have forced the author to consider the question of nationalism more deeply. *Celebrating the Fourth* may not engage important questions about nationalism, but it is a well-argued and nuanced study of the early career of Independence Day nonetheless. That is accomplishment enough for one book.

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Citation: Ronald Schultz. Review of Travers, Len, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. September, 1997.

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