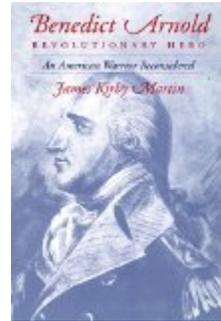


James Kirby Martin. *Benedict Arnold, Revolutionary Hero: An American Warrior Reconsidered*. New York: New York University Press, 1997. xvii + 535 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-5560-0.

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The Traitor Vindicated

In this work, James Kirby Martin presents chronologically the life of Benedict Arnold, dwelling briefly on his childhood and then focusing on Arnold's military career through the year 1778. In the spring of 1778, Arnold, bedridden from battle wounds sustained at Saratoga, miraculously appeared at George Washington's camp in Valley Forge. In his delight to receive Arnold, Washington was deceived. He could not know that Arnold by then felt so defrauded of proper recognition and promotion by American political leadership that his great military valor had given way to self-pity—and a festering search for revenge. Arnold's path to treason, Martin emphasizes, began over two years before its eventual commission in 1780.

Thus, as the title suggests, *Revolutionary Hero* emphasizes Arnold's battle courage and pivotal role in the early and middle stages of the American Revolution. Martin seeks to correct our view of Arnold through the prism of his treason. Thus, we now see the man right up to the brink of the (heretofore) defining act of his life, the reason for his infamy in our culture ever since. But Martin does not delve into the treachery itself. He leaves to the book's prologue and epilogue the events after the spring of 1778, covering in eighteen pages Arnold's escape from America to England as well as the last twenty years of his somewhat futile existence, spent in England (with a stint as commander of British raiding forces in Virginia and Connecticut), then Canada, then England again. Benedict Arnold died, rather more as an afterthought on both sides of the Atlantic, in 1801.

Does the book improve our opinion of Benedict Arnold? Martin emphasizes moments in Arnold's life in which Arnold himself felt betrayed, and which foreshadowed his own faithless denouement. Arnold was born into wealth, but was deprived of both an inheritance and social status, the result of his father's alcoholism and business failures. Arnold was always lured to danger and the prospect of command, and early in the Revolution he organized a daring attack on British-held Fort Ticonderoga. While the expedition captured artillery pieces that proved vital to George Washington's liberation of Boston, the Continental Congress considered it a brash act and ignored Arnold when it laid plans for a later invasion of Canada in the autumn of 1776. Undaunted, Arnold approached Washington himself about the prospect of a second invasion force, cutting through the Maine wilderness and targeting the great fortified city of Quebec. During this campaign some of Arnold's men plundered civilian homes. A court-martial that ensued labelled Arnold himself as a thief, prompting Arnold to challenge his lower-ranking officers to a duel. When the Continental Army expanded its officer corps in early 1777, five men with less field experience were promoted over him. It was the hesitating Horatio Gates, not Arnold, who has come down to posterity as the "hero of Saratoga." Arnold often paid for campaign supplies out of his own pocket, but he was rarely if ever paid his army wages due him. And so forth. Poignantly, one of Arnold's few friends warned him in the midst of all of these disappointments, "your best friends are not your countrymen" (p. 234). All such episodes support

the subtle portrayal in *Revolutionary Hero* of its subject as a victim, a man meaning well but done in. Is it possible that his ultimate treachery, appropriate for a book in the 1990s, was not his own fault?

Benedict Arnold's courage and leadership in battle, which Martin correctly emphasizes, help nurture the sorrow we are made to feel for this wayward American warrior. Arnold's ingenuity and doggedness on the four-hundred-mile Quebec campaign were remarkable, earning him even at the time the nickname "America's Hannibal." He organized and commanded the first American naval squadron, building or retrofitting seventeen vessels in a matter of weeks to prevent a British invasion of New York via Lake Champlain. Arnold's makeshift navy fought to a standstill an enemy squadron three times its size; Arnold at one point was pointing his ship's cannons himself, so inexperienced were his artillery crews. He organized the patriot recapture of Danbury, Connecticut, partly out of anger, not at British marauders but at the cowardly behavior of Connecticut civilians. Arnold spent his life trying to teach others a lesson. At Saratoga, Arnold himself, before suffering a crippling wound to a leg injured previously at Quebec, led the critical charges late in the day that turned a slight patriot advantage into an overwhelming American victory. He gained the favor of the Founders. Jefferson and Adams recommended him to the Congress. Washington saw in Arnold a man of action and, to an extent, he shared Arnold's resentment of civilian authority over military affairs.

What emerges, then, is a truly corrective study of the great American traitor, situating him in the context of both war, his favorite surrounding, and high-stakes politics, which he hated and had no skill for. This latter element, showing the backbiting and misrepresentations that American civilian and military leadership were prone to during the War for Independence, is revealing and is a strong point of the work.

Martin states his effort to "look at every available source" for this work (p. xiii). To this end he uses accounts left by Arnold's soldiers as well as papers of other war commanders and official congressional records. Such a range presents Arnold as both a soldier's general and as a protagonist in high-level deliberations of Continental army strategy. Martin might have supplemented such sources with contemporary newspaper accounts of Arnold's exploits to provide a sense of the public persona of the most successful American general through the end of 1776. Noting Arnold's severe injuries to his left leg, not his right, Martin does correct the error of the 1990 Arnold biography by Willard Sterne Randall.[1]

But in carrying the details of the story at least through the treasonous days of 1780, Randall's biography perhaps presents a more complete picture than does *Revolutionary Hero*. Neither Randall nor Martin, it might be argued, has written a definitive Arnold biography. It would be interesting to read of Arnold's descent from heroism to ignominy and of the rise and uses of the black Arnold mythology in America—comparable, say, to Eric Foner's study of Thomas Paine, another outcast patriot.[2] James Kirby Martin writes that if Arnold had died at Saratoga he would be for us a champion, not a villain. But that is not what happened. A narrative is still to be written of the rise and fall, and fall, of Benedict Arnold.

Notes:

[1]. Willard Sterne Randall, *Benedict Arnold: Patriot and Traitor* (New York: Morrow, 1990).

[2]. Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

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