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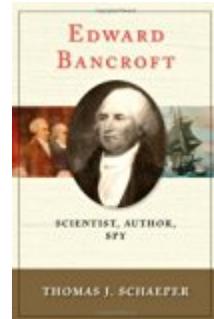
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas J. Schaeper. *Edward Bancroft: Scientist, Author, Spy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. 352 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11842-1.

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Published on H-War (April, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



For a Scientist and Man of Letters, Two Faces and a Mask

The transition of personal allegiance away from the British king and toward a fledgling new republic during America's Revolutionary period is a fascinating but elusive area of study, occurring as it usually did in the most private recesses of thought and emotion. Many who would later be included in the pantheon of patriots experienced some degree of uneasiness when called upon to reorient a virtue as praiseworthy and deep-seated as loyalty. The roots of allegiance are many and complex, and the cause of betrayal can be difficult to understand even though exhibited by overt behavior. The Constitution's treason clause, for instance, defines the crime as "adhering" to our enemies when combined with "giving them aid and comfort." It is easy enough to identify acts of aid and comfort, but supremely difficult to produce evidence of adherence. In an acknowledgment that treason could be hidden from the most astute patriot—even from Washington!—the effigies of Benedict Arnold paraded through American cities and towns in the fall of 1780 often depicted the traitor as having two faces with which to deceive his comrades, and if that wasn't sufficient, in his hand he also held a mask.

In *Edward Bancroft: Scientist, Author, Spy*, Thomas J. Schaeper methodically details the acts of aid and comfort rendered by Bancroft on behalf of the British, while also offering careful and evidence-based speculation as to the nature of Bancroft's adherence. Schaeper notes that he originally intended to write a book focusing entirely on Bancroft's espionage, but to the book's benefit he found that the clandestine activities were best under-

stood in the context of Bancroft's larger life experience. The life at issue is significant: by the time the Stamp Act began to roil continental discontent, Bancroft was in his early twenties and was completing the first detailed scientific study on northeastern South America (which was included among several dozen books recommended by James Madison for a library of Congress). In his lifetime, Bancroft's contemporaries knew him as a natural historian, expert in inks and dyes, physician, businessman, novelist, and political commentator, all of which are adequately explained throughout Schaeper's narrative, although the central line of inquiry—the cause, conduct, and implications of Bancroft's espionage—is never far from the surface.

Raised in modest and sometimes difficult circumstances in Massachusetts and Connecticut, the teenage Bancroft broke his apprenticeship contract with a physician and sailed for South America. After a brief return to New England he sailed for London in 1767, where he spent the years leading up to the Revolution. From 1776 to 1783 he resided mainly in Paris, where his growing reputation as a man of letters fostered close associations with Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, the Marquis de Lafayette, Silas Deane, John Paul Jones, and other prominent Americans and Frenchmen. A month after the Declaration of Independence was signed in Philadelphia, Bancroft was approached in London by Paul Wentworth—formerly the official agent of New Hampshire who had by now thrown his hat in with the Crown—who recruited Bancroft to inform the British government on the ac-

tivities of his American associates in Paris. Schaeper carefully traces Bancroft's daily intimacies with these influential figures and investigates the nature of specific relationships, enabling him to clarify the allegiance of some who were close to Bancroft (determining that Franklin's loyalty to the American cause was uncompromised, for instance) and debunk certain suspicions surrounding Bancroft himself (such as the proposition that he poisoned Silas Deane).

Bancroft served as a British agent from the beginning of the Revolution through to its formal end in 1783. Schaeper's description of Bancroft's tradecraft is as precise as covert behavior will reveal to a historian, covering an array of ciphers, aliases, invisible inks, and messages hidden in a particular boxwood tree in the Tuileries Gardens. As for the information that Bancroft transmitted to the British, Schaeper suggests that while it may have been both substantial and largely accurate, it ultimately made little difference. George III distrusted any word coming from spies, sharing the popular opinion that espionage was ignoble work, largely performed by dishonorable persons for pecuniary motives, or to deceive those for whom the spy was ostensibly working (Schaeper also dispels the notion that Bancroft was a double agent). More importantly, the British government was disinclined to act on intelligence if such action might provoke open hostility with France. Thanks to Bancroft (and others), for instance, the British were well informed about ships carrying weapons and supplies to America, but seizing these ships would have instigated a set of diplomatic and military difficulties that would have made matters worse for the British war effort.

Despite the marginal value of the intelligence, the betrayal of trust and personal loyalty certainly damned Bancroft among American historians ever since his duplicity was discovered in 1889. Schaeper points to three prominent historians from the first half of the twentieth century—Samuel Flagg Bemis, Lewis Einstein, and Burton J. Hedrick—who sealed Bancroft's reputation as an immoral, underhanded traitor, setting the tone for subsequent historians who give Bancroft only a passing treatment. In contrast to these earlier studies, Schaeper's in-

vestigation of Bancroft's deeds is more complete, and his estimation of Bancroft's motivations is a good deal more nuanced. There is little to suggest that Bancroft engaged in espionage for financial gain or to manipulate markets. Most noticeably, Schaeper neither finds nor attributes a sense of malice on Bancroft's behalf. It suitably mystifies Schaeper that Bancroft did indeed appear to have two faces, as Schaeper documents Bancroft's numerous acts of guileless assistance and genuine affection toward Franklin and the other American representatives in Paris. This poses the historical conundrum for Bancroft's biographer: is it even possible to see behind the mask?

In the end it is not, although Schaeper's thorough and revealing study is likely to be the best examination we will have of the multiple and conflicted allegiances that Bancroft masked so well. Schaeper presents Bancroft as a man of intelligence and ambition whose adult life was largely spent in Europe, who found himself caught up in a historical moment of dramatic change, but whose own sense of identity and allegiance—as a subject of Britain and its empire—had not undergone the stark transition that had taken hold in his American colleagues. Finding that his interests, talents, and reputation aligned him with players on both sides, and harboring the political preference that the American colonies be reconciled with Britain, Bancroft got himself enmeshed in a web of deceit, “entangled and obliged to proceed in a kind of Business,” he explained in 1784, “as repugnant to my feelings, as it had been to my original intentions” (p. 59).

As Schaeper points out, it was Poor Richard—the agreeably disguised Benjamin Franklin—who advised, “Let all men know thee, but no man know thee well” (p. 271). To be sure, Bancroft wanted all men to know him, but he succeeded in letting no man know him well. While this is no small challenge to the biographer, Schaeper manages a compelling reappraisal of Bancroft's life that puts his acts of both betrayal and loyalty into personal and historical contexts, making a significant contribution to how we interpret the transitions of allegiance that surely disquieted the minds of men and women during the Revolutionary period.

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Citation: Brian Carso. Review of Schaeper, Thomas J., *Edward Bancroft: Scientist, Author, Spy*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. April, 2013.

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