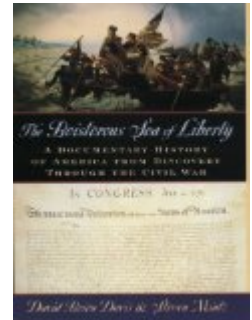


David Brion Davis, Steven Mintz, eds.. *The Boisterous Sea of Liberty: A Documentary History of America from Discovery Through the Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. 608 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-511669-4.



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Culling primarily from the tens of thousands of items in the Gilder Lehrman Collection of American history, David Brion Davis and Steven Mintz have published an impressive collection of 366 primary documents. They have included letters, petitions, journal entries, broadsides, official declarations, and public addresses, on topics ranging from Christopher Columbus's early descriptions of Taino Indians to Tituba's confession to witchcraft, from soldiers' accounts of the Seven Years' and Civil Wars to politicians' private letters on the issues of their day, and from a father's condemnation of dueling to an African child's plea to John Quincy Adams. While *Boisterous Sea of Liberty* may indeed "engagingly introduce all lovers of American history to the people who lived through -- and determined -- the events that shaped our nation" (dust jacket), it unfortunately fails as a text for an American history survey course on two grounds: selection and presentation. Too many perspectives, and therefore too much of America's history, are not represented in the documents selected by Davis and Mintz, while their tendency to deliver knowledge rather than allow the readers to uncover and interpret it for

themselves undermines one of the fundamental goals in using primary documents in the classroom.

Boisterous Sea is broken into eight chronological parts, each of which are subdivided into many thematic sections, of varying length and depth. While the primary documents give readers access to "the living voices of the past" (dust jacket), Davis and Mintz provide "extensive introductions and commentary" in the form of informative documentary headnotes, a series of brief one- to three-page essays (covering topics such as "Repeal of the Judiciary Act of 1801," "Power and Ideology in Jackson's America," and "Manifest Destiny"), and a wide ranging introduction by Davis. Through these commentaries, the primary documents are linked to the larger context and narrative as fleshed out by Davis in the introduction. Rather than establish a meta-narrative, Davis sets up "five organizing themes" (power and authority; sin vs. virtue; perception of "time and historical change"; race, or the conception of human differences; and "the development and fate of transcendent ideals") and "four pivotal issues" (slavery;

the relationship between America and Europe; American exceptionalism; and "Americanness") that he argues define this era in American history (pp. 2-11).

Beginning with "First Encounters," a brief section of only six documents, we are introduced to European, primarily Spanish, visions of the "New World" and its inhabitants. In addition, this section includes an early Spanish critique of the African slave trade, introducing readers from the start to one of Davis's pivotal issues. Not included in this section, unlike in many other document readers available today, are any accounts of these first encounters from the indigenous perspective, a lapse that seriously undermines the editors' attempts to tell history from multiple perspectives, which, they assert, is one of the advantages of documentary history. The following part is entitled "European Colonization North of Mexico," an odd designation since it only briefly mentions and has no documents on French, Spanish, or Dutch colonization efforts north of the Rio Grande. This section does describe early life in Virginia and in New England and pays attention to servitude, slavery, race, colonists' relations with Native Americans, and witchcraft (the only primary document touching on gender in the first four parts of the book). Moving next to "A Land of Contrasts," Davis and Mintz introduce their readers to the development of other North American colonies (South Carolina, New York and Georgia), social issues such as religious (in)tolerance, and the early emergence of revolutionary ideology in ideas about English liberties and arbitrary power while they continue to examine slavery and servitude.

Part four examines "The Seven Years' War" as a crucial moment in the transition from colonies to independent nation. Beginning with this part, and throughout the remainder of the book, Davis and Mintz's selection of documents become primarily political in nature. "The Age of the Revolution, 1765-1825" includes documents detailing some of the events that precipitated the colonies'

declaration of independence as well as descriptions of various avenues of resistance to Britain and ends with a call to consolidate the loose confederation of the newly independent states. "Creating a New Nation" begins with the exile of Loyalists to Nova Scotia and ends with the United States's attempt to exile the Seminoles from Florida, highlighting a theme in U.S. history unexamined by Davis and Mintz: the central role of exclusionary practices in the creation of the American nation and American identity. In between, this sections cover the usual topics of early national history: the Constitution, its compromises, and ratification; the birth of political parties; domestic insurrections; foreign relations with Britain and France; the War of 1812; and Indian Removal. Part 7, covering "Antebellum America," includes the largest number of documents--130, to be precise. Some touch on social history topics, such as changing family and gender ideology and various reform movements, but the vast majority in this section focus on politics: nullification and the bank war; the second party system and individual parties; expansion and manifest destiny; and slavery as a political and sectional problem. The final section of primary documents focuses on the period of the "Civil War" and includes descriptions of the death and destruction caused by new weapons and old tactics, southern and northern opinions on the course of the war, discussions of the Emancipation Proclamation, and reactions to the death of Abraham Lincoln. While the selection of primary documents ends with a letter despairing the "disturbed condition" of the country in June 1865, a brief concluding essay examines some of the issues posed by the ending of the war and the struggles to reconstruct the union.

Many of the selections in *Boisterous Sea* are indeed novel, as Davis claims (p. 2), in comparison to other collections of primary documents available, both in published form and available through textbook companion web sites. Davis and Mintz have included many of the usual suspects (John Winthrop's "A Modell of Christian Charity,"

Gottlieb Mittelberger's description of eighteenth-century German immigration, Alexander Hamilton's "Report on Manufactures," and the Emancipation Proclamation, just to name a few), but drawing from a single, albeit vast, collection of documents, many of them previously unpublished, has forced the editors to be creative in their choices. For instance, instead of the oft-appearing "remember the ladies" letters between Abigail (who doesn't even merit an entry in the index) and John Adams, *Boisterous Sea* gives us a letter from Lucy Knox to her husband Henry chiding him not to "consider yourself as commander in chief of your own house, but be convinced that there is such a thing as equal command" (p. 196). Knox's letter is indeed a novel inclusion but one that unfortunately does not illustrate how men like Adams responded to pleas such as these from their wives: with total dismissal and even derision, demonstrating that, for the moment, women were not part of "we the people" whose consent was deemed essential in a just government.

Although Knox can work as a substitute for Abigail Adams, other omissions are not so easily replaced. While there are two documents authored by Frederick Douglass -- on the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act (pp. 446-47) and "Universal Liberty" (p. 489) -- neither speaks to the condition of enslavement. There are no selections from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* or from Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The only hint we get at "the actual condition of the slaves" (p. 395) comes from the pens of white abolitionists. Admittedly, it would be possible to supplement the use of *Boisterous Sea* with Douglass, Jacobs, or any other readily available slave narratives although that defeats the usefulness of having a single document reader for a survey course.

Among other topics that get short shrift are antebellum reform movements other than abolition and women's rights, antebellum immigration, and, particularly surprising for a collection that

focuses primarily on political history, the Articles of Confederation. But it is the omission of many perspectives that is most troubling about *Boisterous Sea*, especially considering Davis's assertion that "primary sources can encourage readers to see history from opposing viewpoints and to understand the values and perspectives of history's losers" (p. 1). As mentioned, there are no Indian descriptions of the first encounters or slave accounts of slavery. Of 366 documents, only two are authored by Native Americans (both by John Ross, principal leader of the Cherokee Nation), and a mere five are by slaves or ex-slaves. Ross's first letter describes the forced removal of Cherokees from their homelands to Oklahoma and the second was written to Lincoln assuring him of their loyalty to the Union despite the Nation's initial alliance with the Confederacy. We do not learn from this selection nor Davis and Mintz's commentary that, ultimately, it did not matter which side the Cherokee and other Indian nations allied with. Once again, Indian alliances with the winning side would be forgotten while their alliances with the losers (the French in the Seven Years' War, the British in the Revolution and the War of 1812, and the Confederacy during the Civil War) would be used to justify their dispossession. This general blindness to Indian history is best illustrated by the book's chronological beginning, "Discovery," which Davis and Mintz take unproblematically to mean Columbus's arrival in 1492. (It is also telling that Indian on European or Euro-American violence is called a massacre while the reverse is a battle.)

Of the African American voices included in *Boisterous Sea*, the first is a plea for a pension from a Revolutionary war soldier that, aside from mentioning that he "passed the best part of [his] life as a slave," could have been written by any number of ex-soldiers seeking compensation for their wartime services (p. 187). Of the other four, two are the above mentioned by Douglass, one is a brief and not very informative letter from a Virginia slave to his mother before being taken south

(p. 400), while the last is a true gem: an eloquent letter written by a child among the *Amistad* captives to John Quincy Adams that proclaims, "All we want is to make us free" (pp. 424-25). None of the three documents on colonization are by African Americans, although Davis and Mintz note that "the colonization project was bitterly opposed ... by many American free blacks" (p. 339). The omission of more documents representing Native and African American perspectives is particularly troubling because one of the book's "central theme[s] is human power: power exemplified by racial slavery and the relations between Indians and whites" (p. 2).

Despite the book's claim to present multiple perspectives, most selections are authored by men (and I use that word specifically), with recognizable names or (if unfamiliar today) who were members of the political and economic elite of their day. For instance, in "Slavery and Race in Jeffersonian America," the five documents are authored by John and John Quincy Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and William Few, a Georgian signer of the Constitution. The relative silence of Native and African American voices should perhaps not be surprising given that, in his list of winners and losers to whom we need to pay attention, Davis includes "Jefferson and Madison as well as Hamilton and John Marshall" (p. 1).

Davis and Mintz's commentaries and well-written headnotes do much more than tell readers about the author and the context of each document; they encapsulate the important issues and events without getting bogged down in the details, a problem that plagues many textbooks today. In "America at Midcentury," a beautifully succinct essay, Davis and Mintz summarize the state of the union circa 1850, situating it squarely within the trans-Atlantic world by analyzing the "three fundamental social and economic processes that were transforming Western societies at midcentury" (p. 453). Notwithstanding my wish that the documents themselves were more inclusive,

Davis and Mintz do admirably present many threads of American history, especially in their commentaries that intersperse the text. For instance, "Shifts in Sensibility" concisely encapsulates both the cause and consequences of changes in family, gender roles, and religion at the turn of the nineteenth century.

In general, individual documents are well introduced in both their macro- and micro-contexts. There are occasional lapses, however: a Jefferson letter on the Citizen Genet affair also mentions a yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia and "negotiations with the Northwestern Indians," neither of which we learn anything else about. Similarly, despite several references to Loyalists and one letter regarding their postwar migration to Nova Scotia, readers are left with little idea, from either primary or secondary text, as to why twenty percent of Americans "supported the British cause" (p. 194), countermanding Davis's assertion that "it is essential to hear the arguments of Loyalists and British generals as well as American patriots" (p. 1).

From a teaching perspective, the more substantial problem with the headnotes is that they tend to deliver the knowledge that students could be gleaming for themselves from the documents. At the same time, the "extensive commentary" sometimes overwhelms the often brief, one- to two-paragraph selections themselves. In one particular case, Davis and Mintz's four-paragraph headnote makes the two-sentence selection from a Jefferson letter redundant (p. 296). Another example, a 1769 letter from Philadelphia merchant Charles Thomson, suggests a possible alternative way to present the documents in a way that facilitates rather than hinders an inquiry-centered approach. Introducing Thomson's letter in support of non-importation acts, Davis and Mintz write: "Thomson ... argues that British actions—the imposition of illegal taxes, the bloated customs bureaucracy, the stationing of an army among the people—all were part of a plot to deprive Americans

of their liberties" (p. 153). Since the selection outlines these specific grievances against Britain, this introductory passage could be rephrased as a series of questions--What British actions does Thomson complain about? Why does he see these as a threat?--allowing students to work through Thomson's words for themselves.

There are also some problems with the organization of the documents, especially when chronology rather than topic seems to drive how the selections are grouped. Sometimes this leads to repetition as in noting the dates that various northern states abolished slavery (pp. 188 and 218) and duplicate descriptions of the New Jersey plan: once when discussing the Constitutional Convention debates (p. 238) and again, less appropriately, as part of William Paterson's biography in a headnote introducing Paterson's notes on the Whiskey Rebellion trial (p. 269).[1] This chronological approach occasionally makes for some odd groupings. For instance, Abraham Lincoln's 1862 letter outlining his ideas for an emancipation proclamation (p. 512) is placed among documents primarily concerned with the conduct of the Civil War and should be placed immediately preceding the Emancipation Proclamation itself (p. 520) in order to illustrate the progression of an idea. The "Gettysburg" section in the final part is especially confusing as its strict chronological organization leads readers to jump from descriptions of specific battles to an account of white-Indian relations in Minnesota to report on the conditions of freed slaves to a discussion of the Confederacy's Currency Bill (pp. 530-38).

Another problem with organization is grouping unrelated documents under a single, inappropriate heading. In a section entitled "The Whiskey Rebellion," two documents do examine this 1794 uprising of farmers in western Pennsylvania but the remaining two focus on British-U.S. relations in 1794/95 (pp. 267-71). In another section, only two of the nine documents actually address "Slavery and the American Revolution" (pp. 186-201): a

petition from an African American soldier and minutes from a Quaker meeting on the "Iniquitous Practice" of slavery. The section is rounded out with selections on the colonial economic system, justifications of rebellion against Britain, domestic relations, and reports on the state of the revolutionary conflict. Conversely, the several documents on slavery in the colonial and early national periods are scattered throughout their respective parts and would have benefited from being grouped and contextualized together. For instance, pairing Samuel Sewall's 1700 anti-slavery memorial *The Selling of Joseph* with a Quaker's 1757 journal entry would enable readers to see the development of antislavery sentiment in the decades before the Revolution. In organizing a syllabus, it would of course be possible to group these documents together on one's own but, to me, this is another indication that *Boisterous Sea* is just not suited for use in a survey course. While Davis and Mintz have done the historical profession a service by providing an illustration of just what is available in the Gilder Lehrman Collection, the limitations of restricting themselves to that one collection and compiling a useful teaching text were just too great to overcome.[2]

Notes

[1]. The inclusion of biographical dates for Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton twice on a single page (p. 403) would seem to be less an organizational problem than a minor lapse in copy editing. A minor point needs to be corrected here as well: Mott and Stanton did indeed meet at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840 but Stanton was not there as a delegate. Rather she was on her honeymoon with her husband who was.

[2]. In his note on the "Nature and History of the Gilder Lehrman Collection," Davis does acknowledge that, on the earliest colonial period and nineteenth century women's rights, he and Mintz "felt it necessary ... to include some outside documents to ensure an accurate and coherent

view of a given subject" (p. 562). One wishes they had strayed outside the collection a little more often.

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