

H-Net Reviews

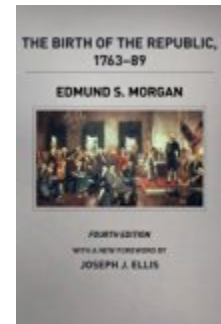
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Edmund S. Morgan. *The Birth of the Republic, 1763-89*. 4th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. xiv + 224 pages. \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-92342-0.

Reviewed by Matthew Jennings (Middle Georgia State College, Macon)

Published on H-War (December, 2014)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



An Early Look at a Late Great

To say that Edmund Morgan, who passed away in 2013, enjoyed a lengthy and influential career as a historian of early America is to state the blindingly obvious. Morgan's first book, *The Puritan Family*, came out in 1944, and his last monograph, *Benjamin Franklin*, appeared in 2002 (two collections of essays and reviews followed). In between those bookends, and alongside dozens of books and articles, Morgan produced at least two classics, and maybe more, depending on who's counting: *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975) and *Inventing the People* (1988). It's not like they just give away Bancroft and Pulitzer prizes, either. Morgan won the former in 1988 and the latter in 2006. Edmund Morgan's credentials are beyond repute, and he achieved a level of renown outside of the academy that few historians can aspire to match, without sacrificing an iota of scholarly integrity. As if to make the current undertaking even more daunting, Morgan's skill as a reviewer of books was legendary.

The Birth of the Republic, first published in 1956, remains a masterpiece of concision and clarity. It is not, technically speaking, a work of military history, but the republic in question would not have been born if not for the war that secured its independence. Further, military history itself is capacious enough as a field, especially in its most recent incarnation, to move beyond strategy and tactics to a discussion of the role that ideas and culture play in military conflict, and vice versa. So while it is true that *The Birth of the Republic* is mainly concerned with politics and ideas, those ideas drove people to violent action, and the connection between ideas and vio-

lence cannot be overlooked.

The book proceeds in a number of chronological chapters, beginning with the imperial crisis of the 1760s, moving through the increased tension and widespread bloodshed of the 1770s and early 1780s, and concluding with the formation of United States governments from confederation to federal constitution. Morgan's work is strong and succinct on parliamentary politics, and he gets beyond the "greatest hits" of the Boston "Massacre" and the Tea Party to provide an almost atmospheric look at the dispute between Parliament and colonists. Some of these sections might be rightfully accused of being Boston-centric, but the early stages of the independence movement were Boston-centric, so this bias may be forgiven.

The chapter on the actual fighting of the war is very nearly the shortest in the entire book, so it is very difficult to gauge its value as a piece of military historical scholarship. Morgan does not concern himself with anything but the largest troop movements and the grandest strategy. He does zoom in for close-ups at Lexington, Bunker Hill and, to a lesser extent, Trenton, Saratoga, and Yorktown. The military aspects of the conflict are of secondary importance to Morgan, which is appropriate, given the brevity of the book overall and its focus on other matters. We also get very little about the conditions under which soldiers fought, their day-to-day lives, and other things which would eventually receive scholarly scrutiny in later generations.

Morgan takes as his evidentiary base the proclamations of the revolutionists and their opponents, and he weaves them skilfully together with deep reading in the secondary literature about the time period. In *The Birth of the Republic*, Morgan took especially sharp aim at Charles Beard and his followers, whose economic interpretation of the 1787 Philadelphia Constitution he found cynical and crass. Morgan points out that certain decisions taken by the framers may have profited them personally, but that they also believed deeply in the ideas behind them. In short, Morgan posited that it was possible to do the right thing and derive economic benefit at the same time. In his marriage of economic, philosophical, and cultural history, Morgan comes across as forward-looking. At the same time, his pronouncements on the foolishness of purely economic interpretations of historical change mark *The Birth of the Republic* as a relic of the Cold War.

Despite some modest efforts at revision in the 1970s and 1990s, *The Birth of the Republic* comes off as a touch blinkered. In response to changes in the historical profession and society at large, later editions of the book included more material on slavery. Unfortunately, these mainly treated slavery as a system of labor and an ideological contradiction for white people, and focused too little on the actions undertaken by enslaved women and men during the era. Other, later, books have treated

different aspects of this era that Morgan chose not to include, or glanced over. The question of how harshly to critique the work for largely ignoring Native Americans, African Americans, and women of all colors is a thorny one. In 1956, Morgan's book broke new intellectual ground. The original edition predates Bernard Bailyn's 1967 *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Gordon Wood's entire career, and a library full of books devoted to the diverse experiences of people of color and women during this pivotal era.

This fourth edition is framed by two short pieces that assess the staying power of Morgan's contribution. Joseph J. Ellis pens a laudatory foreword, while Rosemarie Zagari provides a succinct overview of everything that has changed in the study of the period since *The Birth of the Republic* first appeared. Both Zagari and Ellis conclude that Morgan's work was built to last. And they are more or less correct. This is a book that shows its age, but *The Birth of the Republic* has held up far better than other works dating to the same period. That fact testifies to Edmund Morgan's skills as a writer and teacher. The book works on two levels, both as a conceptually tight, clean rendering of the era of the War for Independence, and as an artifact of an early stage Morgan's lengthy and exemplary career.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Matthew Jennings. Review of Morgan, Edmund S., *The Birth of the Republic, 1763-89. 4th ed.*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41582>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.