



Stephen Brumwell. *Turncoat: Benedict Arnold and the Crisis of American Liberty*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. 384 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-21099-6.

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For over two centuries, patriotic discourses have shaped the history of the Revolutionary War and the birth of the United States. For this reason, most Americans still associate Benedict Arnold with treachery and treason. Stephen Brumwell takes a different position, arguing that Arnold conspired to end the Revolution without bloodshed and bring America back into the imperial fold. This book informs readers that the conflict was a bloody civil war that nearly bankrupted the new nation and left some rebels seeking to return to the British Empire. Arnold's conspiracy is an invaluable lens into the revolutionary conflict and the birth of the United States.

Brumwell surveys the early life and military career of Arnold to overturn the dominant assumptions about his treason. Historians have claimed that greed, despair over lack of promotion, and even demonic possession had motivated Arnold to sell West Point, "the Gibraltar of America," to the British (p. 8). *Turncoat* uses novel sources and a fresh perspective to show the underlying facts: Arnold sought to end the civil war which had fractured and torched his country for more than five years. Brumwell skillfully weaves Arnold's ordeal into the revolutionary conflict. Even when the Continental army claimed battlefield victories, it was not clear which side would win the war. Unforgiving winters, partisan raid-

ing, and epidemics of smallpox and measles had raked over the armies in North America. A war-time recession left the value of Continental paper currency in shambles, and Congress with little funds to pay the army. The level of desertion on both sides—often punishable by death—revealed the stark reality of this gloomy and inglorious war.

During the Revolution, there was not a clear distinction between Americans and Britons. Most rebels identified as Britons and even continued to recognize the British monarch as a legitimate ruler. The revolutionary cause was against Parliament and the unfair taxation of the colonies. For loyal and conscientious men like Arnold, this dispute did not justify years of entrenched violence. Though most consider Arnold a traitor, Brumwell's convincing study shows that "he turned his coat for the very best of reasons" (p. 20).

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