



Michael D. Hattem. *Past and Prologue: Politics and Memory in the American Revolution.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020. 320 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-23496-1.

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In *Past and Prologue*, Michael Hattem examines American historical memory between the imperial crisis in the 1760s and the early US republic. While ideological, intellectual, and legal interpretations of the American revolutionary era and founding of the United States are well developed, Hattem maintains that historians have neglected the broader cultural importance of the British past and its interrelationship with the politics of the revolution. Using the methodology of history culture, which encompasses all references to and uses of the past, Hattem effectively incorporates a variety of sources to analyze rhetorical changes in American revolutionary discourse and show how the American Revolution gradually created a shared American past. Demonstrating how historical memory was fundamental to early American nationalism, Hattem argues that “American history” did not merely result from the American Revolution but was a driving force behind it. Consequently, this book contributes to a number of American historiographies but especially the fields of the American Revolution, American national identity, and postcolonial United States.

According to Hattem, historical culture contributed to the development of American nationalism in three ways. First, American patriots decon-

structed their relationship to the British past and thereby their cultural affinity to Britain during the imperial crisis. At the same time, colonists began constructing a newly shared colonial past focused on settlement narratives. Finally, following political independence, cultural nationalists constructed a deep national past built on mythical symbolism, epic renderings of the American past, the nationalization of natural history, and appropriation of the Native American past.

Hattem uses the first part of the book to analyze history culture leading up to the Declaration of Independence and shows how American patriots both dismantled their former historical memory and began constructing “American history.” Chapter 1 masterfully establishes specific characteristics of history culture. Contrary to the rapidity of technological innovation in the modern era, which tends to inflate the perceived distance from the past, historical distance for eighteenth-century Anglo-Americans was truncated, fostering a more intimate relationship between past and present. The chapter also shows how historical memory was important for legal interpretations since common law was based on precedent and custom. Hattem additionally traces three strains of historical memory: a millennialist rendering used

by evangelicals, a cyclical view expressed through the rise and fall of empires, and a progressive linear depiction associated with the Scottish Enlightenment. Long popular, the cyclical view maintained that societal declension could be overcome by a return to “first principles” and normalized political revolutions as a means of reestablishing good foundations. However, whereas the cyclical interpretation persisted in the British Empire, Hattem argues that by mid-century governing establishment Whigs were beginning to adopt the linear interpretation and reinterpret the Glorious Revolution as a break with the past.

Chapters 2 and 3, and the interlude all follow rhetorical turns during the imperial crisis. In chapter 2, Hattem shows how colonists began creating a sense of a shared past. He contends that the novel challenges facing the British Empire after the Seven Years War encouraged Britons to relinquish their cyclical interpretation of their past. This British shift to a linear interpretation of history created “mutual unintelligibility” when colonists maintained the cyclical view. As Parliament usurped the authority of the past, it created a cultural as well as political crisis. In response, Hattem contends, colonists created a new historical memory of their shared colonial past of American settlement, centering on contract and charter rhetoric in an attempt to demonstrate colonial civic equality with the metropole. Chapter 3 demonstrates how colonists began shedding their British past. At the beginning of the imperial crisis, colonists deployed memories of the English Civil War as a framework for arguing against imperial reforms, which provoked Britons and loyalists. However, Hattem contends that as the imperial crisis continued and colonists increasingly challenged Parliamentary supremacy, they also challenged the legacy of the Glorious Revolution. With appeals to Parliament proving futile, Hattem argues, there was a rhetorical turn to the Crown for remonstrance in the late 1760s and early 1770s out of necessity, not because of a royalist turn, as Eric Nelson has suggested.[1] Following the royal

rhetorical turn, the interlude delves into the ephemeral shift to natural rights rhetoric between 1773 and 1776. According to Hattem, the shift from common law (British past) and charters (colonial past) to natural law and natural rights, as seen in Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* and the Declaration of Independence, was indicative of a final departure from a British past.

The second half of the book explores the national history culture in the early American republic. In parallel to chapter 1, chapter 4 explains the dynamics of history culture in the new nation. Not only was history culture in various forms of print, Hattem skillfully traces historical memory in multiple genres of literature and art as well. Furthermore, the chapter explains the process of historical cultural production. Hattem shows how a diverse informal network of historians, antiquarians, poets, painters, politicians, and publishers worked together in four ways to provide research assistance, patronage, feedback, and publishing advice. As history was institutionalized in the nation’s first historical societies, they predominantly maintained the same four functions of the network. Hattem also maintains that history culture changed in the new nation through increased historical production, democratization, nationalization, and institutionalization.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine the characteristics of this new national history. Chapter 5 shows how cultural nationalists altered memory by highlighting colonial independence from Britain and emphasizing historic colonial unity. Hattem maintains that cultural nationalists did so by focusing on the United Colonies of New England (1640s) and the intercolonial Siege of Louisbourg (1745). Hattem also demonstrates how, along this narrative of unity and independence, unsuitable facets of history like slavery were omitted from much of the historical narrative. Hattem goes on to argue that with early national instability, cultural nationalists sought continuity with the colonial past to deemphasize change and encourage national

identity and unity. Further distancing themselves from Britain, chapter six shows how cultural nationalists created a deep past separate from Britain. By focusing on Columbus discovering America, replacing the image of Britannia with Columbia, and making epic and biblical allegories, cultural nationalists not only distanced the nation from Britain but created a common past. Furthermore, cultural nationalists contested Buffon's degeneracy theory by nationalizing American natural history and appropriating an abstract image of American indigenous history that created ideological ties to the land that emphasized independence.

While there is much to like about *Past and Prologue*, since the book is focused on the creation of "American history," it lacks an appreciable analysis of British history culture. Although the book mentions some eighteenth-century British historians like Catharine Macaulay, it omits other histories critical of British imperial reform that were contemporaneously produced in Britain and sent to American patriots. Much of this "real Whig" history culture was already significantly democratized, including women and clergy as opposed to university professors or philosophers.[2] The book also creates an overly monolithic depiction of British opinion by often referring to British loyalists and establishment Whigs as merely "Britons" (pp. 84, 88, 107).[3] Furthermore, a comparative approach in part 2 could have revealed key differences or continuity between postcolonial American history culture and British history culture.

Despite these transatlantic shortcomings, *Past and Prologue* not only perceptively traces the origins of "American history," but challenges readers to recognize the revisionist nature of early America's cultural nationalists. Hattem adds a key contribution to contextualizing the "mutual unintelligibility" between the colonies and Parliament that not only contributes to Bernard Bailyn's *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* but aptly contextualizes the royalist rhetorical turn as situ-

ational necessity, not sincerity.[4] The book also contributes to the field of postcolonial studies with its emphasis on Columbus, Columbia, and nationalizing natural history. Furthermore, chapters 1 and 4 provide a much-needed context for the other chapters as well as a foundation for academic and popular audiences in conceptualizing historical memory. *Past and Prologue* makes an exceptional contribution to the fields of the American Revolution, early national identity, and postcolonial United States.

Notes

[1]. Eric Nelson, *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

[2]. For a more detailed exploration see Tanner Ogle, "Republicans Resurrected: Memories of the English Civil War and Peaceful Transatlantic Resistance in the Beginning of the American Revolution (1762-1765)," *Journal of Religious History, Literature and Culture* 6, no. 1 (June 2020): 50-70.

[3]. On the diversity of British opinion at the time, see especially Troy Bickham, *Making Headlines: The American Revolution as Seen through the British Press* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009); and James E. Bradley, *Popular Politics and the American Revolution in England: Petitions, the Crown, and Public Opinion* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986).

[4]. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1992).

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