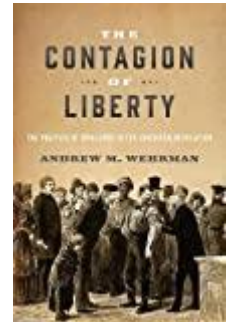


Andrew M. Wehrman. *The Contagion of Liberty: The Politics of Smallpox in the American Revolution.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2022. 416 pp. \$32.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4214-4466-6.



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In his famous *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America* (1825), St. John de Crevecoeur narrated two fictional Loyalists' damnation of the American Revolution and the "slavish rule" that supposedly emerged from the radical movement. Hoping that "societies, like individuals, have their periods of sickness," one of the men recommended that this friend "bear this as you would a fever or a cold." [1] Though imagined, Crevecoeur's quippy conversation revealed how, if left "untreated," Americans have long understood their nation's future according to murky ideas of health and convalescence.

Andrew M. Wehrman deftly historicizes Crevecoeur's imagined dialogue, arguing that, for "tens of thousands" of early American republicans, the ever-looming dangers of smallpox amplified social tensions in the revolutionary era, which in turn helped colonists formulate a clear, effective language of personal liberty, political duty, and public health (p. 6). From the private hospitals of Massachusetts to the diseased tents of the battlefield, riotous public forums to clandestine back-

room deals, Wehrman traces how early Americans understood their access to inoculation as equal to independence, contending that "the potent fears of smallpox ... helped [colonists] connect the intellectual ideologies of Revolutionary leaders to their personal lives, a crucial step in creating revolution" (p. 5). In doing so, he foregrounds the importance of smallpox for the birth of America, pocks and all.

The Contagion of Liberty: The Politics of Smallpox in the American Revolution contributes to a burgeoning field of health-related, revolutionary-era studies, most of which concentrate on the Continental Army's smallpox inoculation, the British military's destruction by malaria in the American South, or Native Americans' struggles against smallpox and other infectious diseases. [2] Wehrman, however, is more concerned with American civilians' efforts at combating this disease. He provides ten chronological chapters that demonstrate how colonists pressured leaders into facilitating smallpox inoculation, a "common cause"

that many asserted must be “overcome before true independence could be achieved” (p. 5).

As chapters 1 and 2 reveal, British American colonists outstripped their European colleagues in researching and administering smallpox inoculation. With epidemics raging at different times during the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century, white colonists appropriated African medical knowledge to formulate their own form of resistance to smallpox. Soon realizing the efficacy of such measures, leaders in New England especially took up the mantle of public inoculation. However, as covered in chapters 3 and 4, such efforts were not without controversy, for private inoculation might mean public woes if not adequately governed and planned. After multiple riots, ordinary colonists showed wealthy officials that only through governmental policies that favored the whole over the few could smallpox inoculation prove physically and politically effective. By encouraging “a responsive government, public debate, and informed citizenry,” these efforts aided not only colonists in dispelling smallpox but also, eventually, British rule in America (p. 87).

But efficacy was not enough for many colonials. Wehrman argues in chapters 5 and 6 that British American colonists began to identify smallpox inoculation as their own invention after mid-century, not only ignoring the African roots of their wonder drug but also denigrating British attempts to commandeer credit at the same time that certain businessmen crafted their own lucrative brands of “American” inoculation. As the British Crown began to station troops in New England in the 1770s, these same assertions translated into fears that British occupiers were trying to spread smallpox among American colonists. By the outbreak of the American Revolution, arguments over military occupation and smallpox confirmed New Englanders’ worst fears: “the British government and military cared little for the safety and security of Americans” (p. 161).

Wehrman’s final four chapters illustrate how Continental soldiers and noncombatants engaged in a shared war against smallpox during and after the American Revolution. Chapter 7 deftly demonstrates that General George Washington’s “about-face” concerning smallpox inoculation emerged out of pressure from below, while chapter 8 follows this monumental decision throughout the rest of the war—temporally and geographically—to show how a shared political cause did not necessarily translate to shared feelings about inoculation practices. Southern leaders generally shunned efforts at mass public inoculation over fears of negative economic effects, cities shutting down, already-vulnerable enslaved peoples dying, and tenuous trade networks being disrupted by sickly patients.

Chapter 9 follows these arguments about personal and public health into the postwar years, while chapter 10 ends on a rather dour note, explaining that even though Americans gained access to incredibly effective vaccinations in the late eighteenth century, efforts at mass use failed because private doctors did not want to give this profitable tonic away for free. Thus, while during the revolutionary era white American colonists demanded access to vaccination for the public good, in the early republic such measures came to a screeching halt, with wealthy leaders attesting that “good health could be achieved through private efforts alone” (p. 315).

Wehrman concludes that personal profit ultimately guided Americans’ battle against smallpox more than public well-being. Yet, in doing so, he also alludes to a central conflict of the book: causation versus correlation. Wehrman repeatedly demonstrates the importance of smallpox during the American revolutionary era but misses some opportunities to support contentions of causation rather than anecdotal correlation. For instance, Wehrman notes that Boston’s last town meeting before Lexington and Concord concerned mass smallpox inoculation instead of eradicating British

troops. He then wonders how the Revolution might have unfolded differently “if Boston had voted for a general inoculation to begin April 1, 1775” (p. 163). But Bostonians did not choose general inoculation. Instead, American rebels decided to raise “arms” (guns rather than bare shoulders) to initiate a violent Revolution.

Revolutionaries’ actions at Lexington and Concord reveal another complication in this narrative: not all those living in North America during the revolutionary era were complicit in such decisions. When Wehrman refers to “colonials/Americans,” he almost always means white, “republican” men, especially in the northeastern region (roughly 75 percent of the book concerns New England). Yet, for “tens of thousands” of white, black, and Native American peoples, this “contagion of liberty” felt less like a “straight-line march of triumphs” than a steady descension into hell: a world turned “topsy turvy” where, as Crèvecoeur’s Loyalists opined, “the warlike Americans” were “insensibly led from one error to another, conducted by the glare of false-deceiving meteors” (pp. 6, 315).[3] While Wehrman does note the plight of white Loyalist, Black, and Native American peoples throughout his study, their voices are seldom heard when compared to those of the white American victors.

These quibbles aside, Wehrman’s study is timely and thought provoking. Arguments about disease, public health, and personal profit continue to define American culture, as does anger over self-preservation and politics. As a result, *The Contagion of Liberty* will appeal to broad audiences, ranging from scholars hoping to historicize long-term disputes over the rocky, often-contradictory birth of American “liberty,” to casual readers hoping to make some sense of our present struggles with various diseases, in the guise of physical, social, or governmental maladies.

Notes

[1]. St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America: More “Letters from an*

American Farmer,” ed. Henri L. Bourdin, Ralph H. Gabriel, and Stanley T. Williams (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1825), 279-80.

[2]. See, for instance, Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001); Ann M. Becker, “Smallpox in Washington’s Army: Strategic Implications of Disease during the American Revolution,” *Journal of Military History* 68 (2004): 381-430; J. R. McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Peter McCandless, *Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 98-101; and Catherine M. Cameron, Paul Kelton, and Alan C. Swedlund, eds., *Beyond Germs: Native Depopulation in North America* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016).

[3]. Michael A. McDonnell, “A World Turned ‘Topsy Turvy’: Robert Munford, *The Patriots*, and the Crisis of Revolution in Virginia,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 61 (2004): 235-70; and Crèvecoeur, *Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America*, 280.

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