I recently read a passage in Davis D. McElroy's *Scotland's Age of Improvement* (1969) that gave me pause. On the book's first page, McElroy explained that, while he made “no claim to having exhausted the subject” of eighteenth-century Scottish literary clubs and societies, he “venture[d] to say I have spoiled the subject for anyone else.”[1] The gall, I thought! How could anyone claim to have “spoiled the subject” of any historical subject, no matter the depth or breadth of research? Having now read Benjamin L. Carp’s *The Great New York Fire of 1776: A Lost Story of the American Revolution*, I might “venture to say” that Carp has largely “spoiled the subject for anyone else.” In this fast-moving, deeply researched, and broad-ranging account, Carp concentrates on an often-overlooked event—the fire that destroyed one-fifth of New York City in September 1776—to reveal the charred birth of the American republic: a period when neighbors became firebrands, incendiary nights gave way to blinding, war-riddled days, and everyone involved got their hands sooty.

Though ostensibly about a critical conflagration, Carp’s *The Great New York Fire* remains a deeply human account. Over fourteen sprightly chapters, Carp treats “great men” such as George Washington and William Howe with the same critical eye as the dock workers, enslaved laborers, and tavern servants with whom they endured this tumultuous period. Carp also challenges notions of American exceptionalism, reminding readers that, while rebels liked to celebrate their “admirable” adherence to “lofty principles of liberty, equality, and unity,” they did so at the same time that they “skulked and deceived, burned and massacred, unleashed campaigns of terror, and denigrated people as less worthy of themselves” (p. 5). This was a messy civil war involving equally messy participants, a world in which achieving independence often meant stoking the fires of personal liberty and the bonfires of mass destruction.

New York City’s natural and constructed environments also figure prominently in the fire’s convoluted causes and extensive effects. Carp tracks wind patterns to understand how the fire
spread and eventually smoldered; identifies the
original locations of fires, incendiaries, witnesses,
and damaged areas in an impressive map; and un-
earths New Yorkers’ tenuous existence in the rav-
aged city thereafter. Carp also uses the Great Fire
to explore “one of the most physcally destructive
years in American history” (p. 34). Quebec, East
Florida, Cherokee Lands, St. Kitts, and England’s
Portsmouth Dockyard were all at least partially
destroyed in 1776. Though the flames of revolu-
tion spread far and wide, New York City must be
understood as the literal and figurative ignition
point.

Ultimately, Carp’s painstaking procedure dis-
tinguishes The Great New York Fire as an exem-
plary work of historical analysis. This is, at its
core, a massive “whodunnit.” Could Washington—
a man so lauded by Americans as the torchbearer
of republicanism yet also labeled by Native
peoples as “Conotocoarious” (“town destroyer”)—
have really ordered the burning of New York City
(p. 213)? If so, why? If not, then who, how, and
why? These questions coincide with plenty of oth-
ersto create a cauldron of analytical challenges.
“Only later,” Carp explains, “did witnesses [of the
fire] have an opportunity to testify, speak, or write
down their reasoning about what they had seen.
By then they would draw inferences from their
preconceptions, observations, and recent memor-
ies, and from comparing notes with other wit-
tesses” (p. 106). Even determining when the fire
started is elusive. Add to the mix General Wash-
ington’s purposeful misinformation campaign,
American rebels’ assertions of British atrocities,
and British Loyalists’ feelings of despair and an-
ger, and one realizes the careful approach neces-
sary for such an investigation.

Yet Carp manages with aplomb. When reading
this account, I felt like Carp was actually in New
York City in 1776, pounding the burned-out city’s
streets and taverns, interviewing shell-shocked
witnesses, and digging up dirt on ne’er-do-wells.
We are introduced to a diverse cast of characters,
including a doomed rebel spy, a Loyalist carp-
enter, and mixed-raced and female incendiaries,
never mind a vast array of British and German
soldiers, free and enslaved Black people, and
anxious American printers. They each compound
the mystery and memory, conflict and confusion
of the fire and its bloody aftermath. Through it all,
Carp asks as many questions as he answers, which
is necessary in this point-by-point analysis of such
a muddled, often “smutted over” affair (p. 141).

As Carp notes in his courtroom-style conclu-
sion, “the Great Fire, as a deliberate act, is still
open to interpretation.” Carp cannot conclusively
declare who ignited the fire, or why exactly they
chose to do so. But objective determination—de-
termining whether the Great Fire was “a war crime,
callous strategy, an act of social and political res-
istance, terrorism, or misguided folly”—is not the
point of Carp’s study (p. 246). His analysis forces
scholars to embrace the chaotic realities of the
American Revolution and reconsider those
peoplesoften lost in the historical record.

Thanks to Carp, the Great Fire is no longer a
“lost” story of the American Revolution. Quite the
opposite, in fact. And, though Carp has “spoiled
the subject for anyone else,” his careful, consider-
ate methodology might serve as a model for future
historical scholarship, no matter the period or
place.

Note

[1]. Davis D. McElroy, Scotland’s Age of Im-
provement: A Survey of Eighteenth-Century Liter-
ary Clubs and Societies (Pullman: Washington
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment


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