

Two Revolutions Compared

A Better Guide Than Reason: Studies in the American Revolution, by M. E. Bradford, *LaSalle, Illinois: Sherwood Sugden and Company, 1979. xxi + 217 pp.*

ONE OF THE GREAT MERITS of *A Better Guide Than Reason: Studies in the American Revolution* is that M. E. Bradford writes with the knowledge that the past matters. If the debates of a previous day had the power to stir the hearts and minds of men, so should they move their modern student to reasoned but impassioned interest. In this vein, readers of this journal will not be surprised to find that Professor Bradford in his essays speaks as much of the later American revolution of 1861 (which he believes turned America away from her true origins to the false notions of democratic centralism, utopian reform, and destabilizing rootlessness) as he does of the more happy revolution of 1776. Yet the most persuasive of these essays delineate the nature of the first of these revolutions and steer clear of commentary on the War Between the States.

At the heart of the book stands a group of first-rate essays on three neglected figures of the revolution (Patrick Henry, William Henry Drayton, and John Dickinson) and two complementary essays on the historical roots of the revolution. Bradford's chapter titles tell his story: "A Better Guide Than Reason," "According to Their Genius," "No Master but the Law." The Americans fought their revolution, not in the name of some body of abstract rights or even in the name of a new nationalism, but in defense of familiar liberty, ancient custom, and long established community against the innovations of an external and increasingly foreign power. When the Declaration of Independence spoke of men "created equal" it meant, according to Bradford, "created equal in their right to expect from any government to which they might submit freedom from corporate bondage, genocide, and massive confiscation . . . equal as one free state is as free as another." Furthermore,

in "Word from the Forks of the Creek," Bradford shows that this American response to central meddling was not new in 1776, nor did it end with the revolution. From the seventeenth century onward, when the central authorities in their superior wisdom acted in an arbitrary manner against the interests of the people, the hinterland rose up against the external power to reassert the ancient rights of the country. In the last essay in the volume, Bradford pays well-deserved tribute to Russell Kirk, who wrote so well on many of these points in *The Roots of American Order*.

Since Bradford bases these essays on wide-reading in the primary sources and on an extensive knowledge of modern scholarship, and since he writes as the skilled rhetorician that he is, these essays make for interesting and thought-provoking reading. Since the essays are committed to historical controversy they necessarily call forth a response from the reviewer. It is in Bradford's connection of the Revolution of 1776 to the Southern secession of 1861 that the controversy lies.

In Bradford's view the secession was simply another revolt of the country against the overbearing, domineering central power, this time in the form of the increasingly urban, radical, and reformist North. The Secession of 1861 was simply the Revolution of 1776 "All to Do Over." But to argue this point, Bradford, in the name of conservative political theory, must radically separate his thesis from the political history of the early national period. During this time America continued to undergo conservative change as the political tradition of the nation absorbed seventy-five years of development. New states entered the Union. The entire nation came to expect continued economic growth and an expanding prosperity. Railroads, canals, rivers, and roads forged the links of an increasingly national economy. An exuberant, combative party system based on white manhood suffrage (dominated more often than not by southern statesmen) ran American politics. Both North and South were national in their outlook.

On the Negro question neither section was particularly egalitarian, but, as time went on,

increasingly in the North (and often in the South), people had gradually come to worry over the anomaly of the presence of slavery in a society based on human liberty. As Lincoln himself pointed out in his debates with Douglas, no reasonable defense of slavery was possible; all arguments on behalf of slavery could be reduced to the time-honored assertion of the stronger that he would do as he willed with the weaker. But the defense-from-strength thesis called into question the whole basis of American society. Blacks and whites might not be equal socially or racially, but they were equal as men and, therefore, had the right to be treated as the men which they were and not as property which they were not. Bradford's favorite, William Henry Drayton of South Carolina, argued that equality before the law was the American tradition which the British violated in 1776. By 1861, North and South, it was painfully obvious that slaves were men, that they were not equal before the law, and that, therefore, no matter how benevolent and communal, slavery was in opposition to historic American principles. The North, no more than the South, knew what to do about slavery; all that the Republicans insisted upon was no further extension of slavery. Even Lincoln's House Divided Speech of 1858 only made the modest proposal that eventually there should be found a way to put slavery on the way to extinction.

Confronted with this situation, the South chose to secede from the Union. But in this context, secession was not an act of conservative revolution, but was a radically destructive event. The southern Democrats had lost an election; they had not had a radical social policy forced upon them by an external power. Nor were there any serious signs that such a development was imminent. One may debate again the question of whether Lincoln should have called for southern troops to help suppress the rebellion, but Lincoln could not permit the South to leave the Union. As Bradford himself writes: ". . . one of two parties to a legal connection cannot feel free to reinterpret their union for the sake of private advantage; and if they made the

attempt, the other party is released from obligation to them." It was the South, not the North, that made this attempt in 1861.

The black flag of the anarchy of war can never be a banner under which conservatives can comfortably serve. All the violence to the constitutional balance of 1787 which Bradford deplors came after the war began: the suspension of habeas corpus, conscription, the war economy, Lincoln's Second Inaugural, the expansion of the domestic powers of the federal government, the Fourteenth Amendment. These developments would not have come about had the South not seceded and had Southern conservatives remained in Congress. For that matter, in the name of the war effort the South, too, departed from the strict construction theory of the Confederate Constitution. Even before the war the South matched the North in radical, intemperate acts: the suppression of anti-slave petitions and southern dissent, the approval of the beating of Senator Sumner, the destructive nature of the Dred Scott decision, the continual calling for southern economic conventions. The tragedy of 1861 was that a war could break out between two conservative sections over a problem that neither section really knew its mind on or had a clear solution to.

Problems exist with several other points in Bradford's thesis which can only be mentioned here. Millennialism was not confined to the North but was characteristic of the whole of American evangelical Protestantism. New England Puritanism itself helped form a conservative tradition mostly free of that reformist zeal which insisted on viewing one's opponents as one's enemies. The country Whig ideology of the Revolution, as recounted by Bernard Bailyn and others, itself grew organically out of long British experience with the defense of rights, was honed in opposition to the administration of Robert Walpole, and

was used by the colonists as a descriptive explanation of what was wrong with their relationship with the English government. Certainly the commercial-minded Whig party of the 1830's and 1840's, by any standard, was a socially and politically conservative movement. Lincoln, however messianic he sounded in the Gettysburg Address or the Second Inaugural, up to the war was a sober-minded country lawyer, a moderate in his party, and a canny, temporizing politician.

In each of these cases Bradford overstates his case because of his insistence that the northern, Puritan, New-England influence from the seventeenth century onward had been meddlesome, opinionated, self-righteous, messianic, and pernicious. If Bradford's view were correct on this, one might well wonder how the founders pieced the country together out of the thirteen colonies.

Despite these problems these are exciting essays to read. Bradford provides a necessary warning that once a nation tries through positive law to establish social equality it has embarked on a never-ending course of unfulfilled promises and unreasonable expectations destructive of community and at odds with the nature of republicanism. Bradford reminds us too of the deep historical roots of southern culture, of the divergence of southern from northern ante-bellum conservatism, and of the seriousness of the issues underlying the sectional disputes of the 1850's. That scholars and friends over one hundred years later can still disagree with informed passion over an interpretation of the crisis of 1861 demonstrates once again how difficult it was (and is) to solve the problems of liberty and union within the context of American republicanism.

Reviewed by WILLIAM C. DENNIS