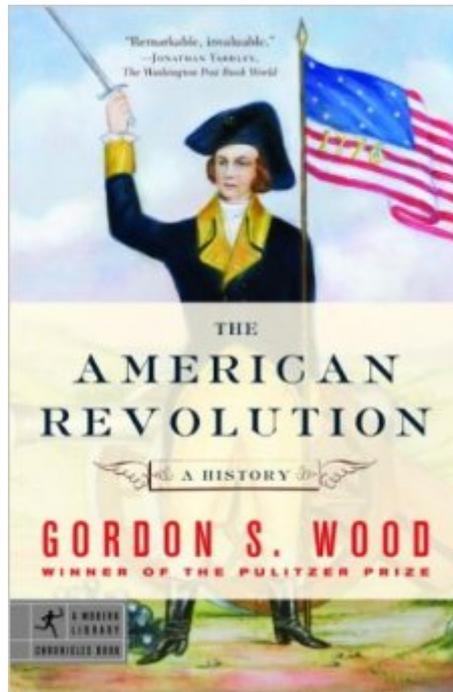


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The American Revolution: A History (Modern Library Chronicles)



Synopsis

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
An elegant synthesis done by the leading scholar in the field, which nicely integrates the work on the American Revolution over the last three decades but never loses contact with the older, classic questions that we have been arguing about for over two hundred years.
—Joseph J. Ellis, author of *Founding Brothers*

A magnificent account of the revolution in arms and consciousness that gave birth to the American republic. When Abraham Lincoln sought to define the significance of the United States, he naturally looked back to the American Revolution. He knew that the Revolution not only had legally created the United States, but also had produced all of the great hopes and values of the American people. Our noblest ideals and aspirations—our commitments to freedom, constitutionalism, the well-being of ordinary people, and equality—came out of the Revolutionary era. Lincoln saw as well that the Revolution had convinced Americans that they were a special people with a special destiny to lead the world toward liberty. The Revolution, in short, gave birth to whatever sense of nationhood and national purpose Americans have had. No doubt the story is a dramatic one: Thirteen insignificant colonies three thousand miles from the centers of Western civilization fought off British rule to become, in fewer than three decades, a huge, sprawling, rambunctious republic of nearly four million citizens. But the history of the American Revolution, like the history of the nation as a whole, ought not to be viewed simply as a story of right and wrong from which moral lessons are to be drawn. It is a complicated and at times ironic story that needs to be explained and understood, not blindly celebrated or condemned. How did this great revolution come about? What was its character? What were its consequences? These are the questions this short history seeks to answer. That it succeeds in such a profound and enthralling way is a tribute to Gordon Wood's mastery of his subject, and of the historian's craft.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

Gordon S. Wood faithfully fulfills the objectives of the fine Modern Library Chronicles series, in *The American Revolution (A History)*. The author, in a short space, effectively gives a history of the American Revolution from its economic, demographic and ideological origins through the war itself and into the second revolution, that of the creation of the constitution. The story is told clearly and made interesting, sticking conservatively to the basic outline without adding any of the more radical views of recent years. This volume is definitely not for those overly familiar with the Revolution but would be a good beginning or a refresher for those interested in the outlines of this fascinating event. All the major personalities makes brief appearances but the focus is on the revolution itself, as it should be.

I was pleasantly surprised by this book. It is written by a professor at an Ivy League university (Brown), and yet from reading his book I am unable to determine his personal political leanings. Either he thinks the same way I do, or he is that "rara avis", a historian whose only ax to grind is that of the search for objective truth about the past. He is a superb writer. There is not a dull sentence in the book, and the narrative flows like a good novel. It is a brief book, intended to be an introduction for general readers as part of a Modern Library series, and yet as a knowledgeable but non-specialist reader of the period, I learned something new on almost every page. Professor Wood has made himself one with the Revolutionary era, and has at the same time cultivated the ability to describe it clearly to us moderns. I suspect he was an excellent classroom instructor for freshmen students. These quotations illustrate his insightful thought and graceful style: "... the Revolution was not only about home rule; it was also about who should rule at home." "The Revolution, like the whole of American history, is not a simple morality play; it is a complicated and often ironic story that needs to be explained and understood, not celebrated or condemned." Note the skillful use of the semicolon, the mark of a good prose stylist, and the concise expression of some very complex concepts in two brief sentences. In a few pages he discusses in a very lucid manner a number of very complicated subjects, for example, the conflict between Burke's theory of "virtual" representation and the experience of "actual" representation in the new frontier towns of the

American colonies, the development of a new conception of sovereignty as residing in the people to explain the proposed Constitution of 1789, the commonality of ideas shared by the Puritans of the English Civil War and the American revolutionists of a century later, the basis for the continued and unique American belief that we are "exceptional", outside the mainstream of history, and uniquely chosen as guardians of human freedom. Wood delves rather deeply into the evolution of American religious belief and practice and its effect on American society in the post-Revolutionary era. He also succinctly outlines the effect of the Revolution on slavery and women's rights. He devotes only 12 pages to The War of Independence, and yet in that brief space gives a surprisingly complete and detailed picture of the military, political, and diplomatic course of the war. His comments on the strategic problems of each side are quite incisive, and his narrative is much clearer than Higginbotham's, for example. The last chapters on the social and political changes set off by the Revolution are his best. I'm not a big fan of the "new history" emphasis on social and economic issues. I think history is mostly about war and politics, in that order. But Professor Wood shows that my prejudice is absurd, that history is history, war and politics can't be separated from culture and money, and that it is all interesting. He probably doesn't emphasize enough the origin of the problems in the Constitution that led to its ultimate failure in the crisis of 1860. But that is a complicated subject, and he lays a sufficient groundwork for further study of that issue. The bibliographic essay at the end is superb. I didn't notice any typos - apparently the publisher has corrected in subsequent printings the "Yorktown, Pennsylvania" error noted by a previous reviewer. Recommended without reservation. Note: (April 15, 2007) For a broader view of Gordon Wood's thought I highly recommend the review that recently appeared in the Winter 2006/07 edition of the "Claremont Review of Books", V. VII, #1, pps. 27-30, by Steven F. Hayward, entitled "The Liberal Republicanism of Gordon Wood."

Gordon S. Wood is one of the deans of scholarship on the American Revolution, and this volume in the Modern Library Chronicles series (each volume dedicated to providing a brief but sound introduction to a specific subject) is the distillation of a lifetime of study of the subject. Although short, this is not a book lacking in content. Some of the reviewers seem to misunderstand the subject: the American Revolution was not primarily a military adventure but an intellectual one. Therefore, the book rightfully dedicates most of its pages to the ideas that drove the revolt against Britain and the formation of a completely original form of government based upon equality and the sovereignty of the people. The genius of the book is not merely that Wood finds space to mention every significant aspect of the American Revolution, but that he is able in a very brief space explain

the why and the wherefore. For instance, in explaining why the people making up the new nation did not respect the rights of Native Americans and consider them equals, Wood explains that the widespread view was that independent individual owned and cultivated land, and since the Indians were hunters, they could not could that they were potential citizens like themselves. Therefore, they could only treat them as foreigner nations. Wood does not condone their conclusions, but he does a great job of explaining their thinking. Likewise, when he addresses the question of slavery, he points out that while the founders did not carry through with the logical implications of the notion that all men are created equal, the foundations were nonetheless laid for its eventual expungement. As he writes, "The Revolution had a powerful effect in eventually bring an end to slavery in America. It suddenly and effectively ended the social and intellectual environment that had allowed slavery to exist everywhere for thousands of years without substantial questioning." The book contains a host of similar insights. Although I have read other and longer books on the Revolution, I have read few that were filled with as much insight. The book proceeds on a series of topics that are largely chronological, beginning with the changes in American society following the end of the French-Indian Wars and the refocusing of the British government on the colonies after several decades of some neglect, and ending with the Constitutional Convention in 1787 in Philadelphia. His focus is overwhelmingly on the ideas that drove the Revolution. He is almost entirely unconcerned with the battles of the War, which he does not view as especially decisive. As he points out, the odds of the British defeating the colonists were long at best, given the overwhelming hostility felt against the Crown and the widespread sentiments for independence. Wood spends approximately fifteen pages on the actual military campaign. There is little regret for this because he is so superb in discussing the nonmilitary aspects. Although the account is first rate, an additional reason this is such a valuable book is the exceptional bibliographical essay that closes the book. Wood provides a ten-page survey of the literature on the Revolution, and if one is unfamiliar with the period, he or she will have a host of suggestions of additional books to read upon completion of Wood's book. I really find it difficult to praise this book too strongly. This book is ideal for someone unfamiliar (or even those familiar desiring a brief survey) with the central factors of the Revolution and wanting a brief but superb analysis of the events leading to the creation of the United States.

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