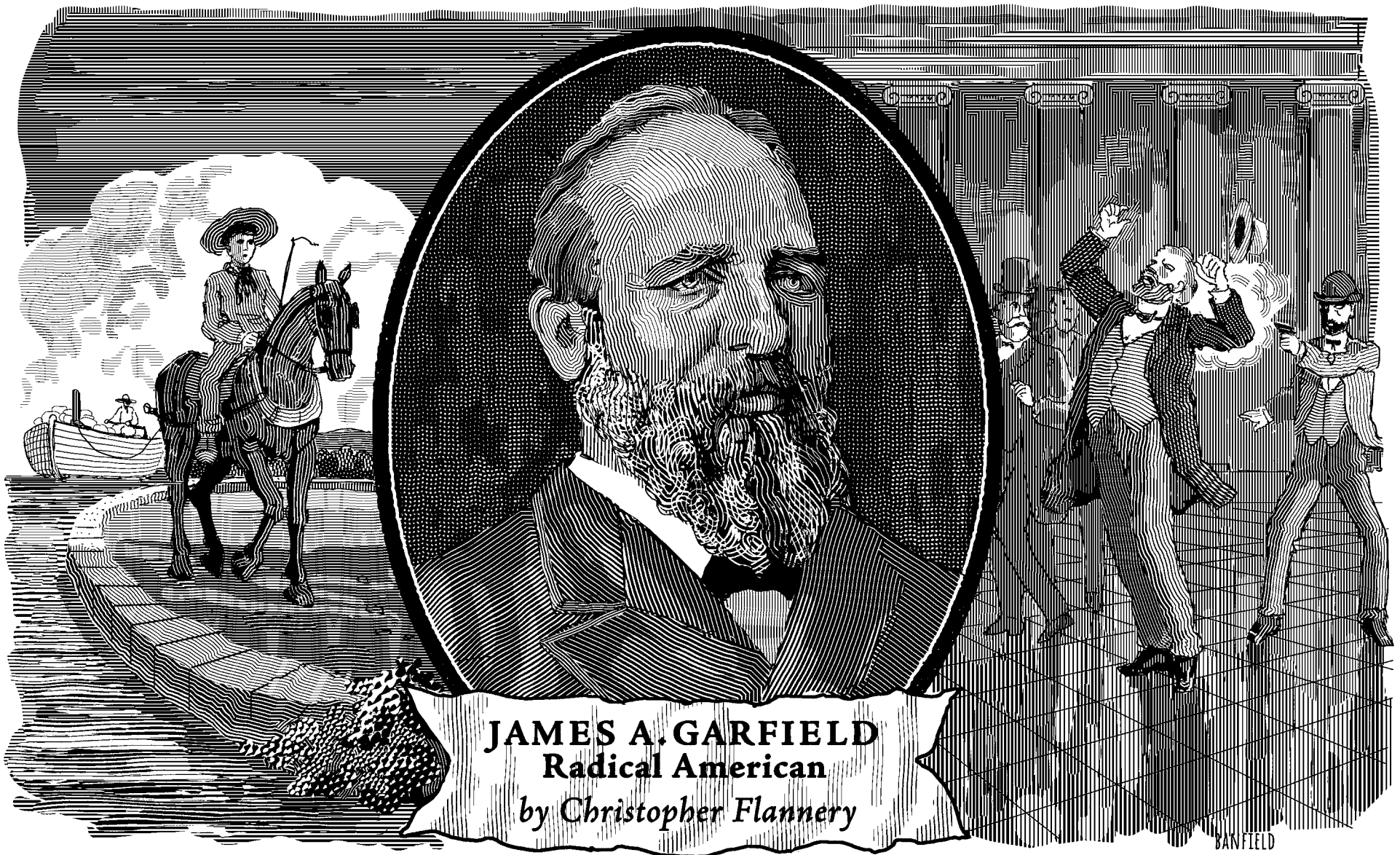


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Book Review by Darren Staloff

BREWER AND PATRIOT

The Revolutionary: Samuel Adams, by Stacy Schiff.
Little, Brown and Company, 432 pages, \$35 (cloth), \$21.99 (paper)



SAMUEL ADAMS, THE MOST IMPORTANT founding father in the period before independence, has finally found his popular biographer in Stacy Schiff. To tell the tale of Adams's political activism in Massachusetts and beyond is largely to narrate the colonial protest and resistance movement, and Schiff, a former editor at Simon & Schuster whose previous biographies include *Cleopatra: A Life* (2010) and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Vera* (Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov) (1999), does this with remarkable wit and grace. By the time independence was declared in 1776, Adams had risen from an impoverished and failed tax collector to the principal leader of the patriot cause in New England, a leader of the Boston Town Meeting, a member (and longstanding clerk) of the Massachusetts Assembly, and a delegate to the Continental Congress. Although his "real whig" sentiments would prove less useful in governing than in opposition, he returned to Massachusetts to serve in its constitutional convention, then in its Senate, before ending his career as lieutenant governor and ultimately governor of the Bay State. Not bad for someone who had been, in Schiff's words, "a perfect failure until middle age."

The key to Adams's success as a leader of the patriot cause was his profound awareness

of the importance of publicity and controlling the flow of information. A tireless essayist, he wrote a dizzying spate of newspaper entries under a variety of pseudonyms and drafted many of the incendiary messages from the Boston Town Meeting and the colonial assembly, always with what his cousin John Adams called "the most correct, genteel, and artful pen." He also coordinated information within the colony (through the Massachusetts Circular Letter of 1768) and beyond its borders with his creation of the *Journal of Occurrences* that sent regular dispatches of the depredations of British troops in Boston to be printed in newspapers throughout the colonies (and only then reprinted in Boston). Finally, in 1772, he connected all the colonial protest movements with the Committee of Correspondence, which Schiff describes as "a daringly original institution, a news service, an alarm system, to some a proto-terrorist cell." Despite this immersion in publicity (or perhaps because of it), Adams never sought to collect his writings for posterity, and routinely destroyed his correspondence. This lacuna has left historians grappling with the questions of motivation: when did Adams first resolve on independence and what drove him to it?

SCHIFF EXPLORES THESE QUESTIONS, but rarely in a straightforward fashion and never didactically. Instead, she discloses relevant information by way of narration, letting the chronicle of Adams's actions shed whatever light is available, and only sparingly offering a direct judgment. She does something far more interesting than answer the questions of academic historians. Like the very best popular historians, she reveals her subject's character, illuminating what seem to be his deepest dispositions. It is in this character, expressed in his actions and supplemented in his writings, that Adams's core motivations are revealed. And that character, told in full, is that of a gentleman in the best sense of the word. As his star-struck cousin John described him, Samuel Adams exuded "steadfast integrity, exquisite humanity, genteel erudition, obliging, engaging manners, real as well as professed piety, and a universal good character." We see a tender, loving father and a respectful, affectionate husband, a man who failed as tax collector because he could not bring himself to demand payment from the distressed, an outspoken opponent of slavery who refused the gift of an enslaved housekeeper (once emancipated, she became "a fixture at the

Adams address for nearly fifty years"). He even wore his poverty with aplomb: indifferent to his slovenly appearance and serene about his downward social mobility, when elected governor he refused to ride in a carriage provided for his installation.

ONE OF SCHIFF'S MOST POWERFUL techniques in developing Adams's character is to contrast it to others'. Among his fellow patriots, Schiff focuses on James Otis, Jr., and John Hancock, the former often careening between intoxication and madness and the latter obsessed about his popularity with the narcissism of a poorly raised adolescent. Both broke with Adams at various points for infantile reasons and with churlish pique. Only Adams's maturity and selflessness kept the movement in Massachusetts from fracturing. But his nemesis was Thomas Hutchinson, who served as Massachusetts Bay's governor in the 1770s. Unlike Otis and Hancock, Hutchinson emerges in this book as a thoughtful and honest person—one who, like Adams, sincerely cared about the well-being of Massachusetts and could not fathom how this down-on-his-heels figure could whip up his colony and others into what he saw as a paranoiac frenzy.

Given the exquisite pleasure Adams seems to have taken in publicly deriding and undermining Hutchinson (especially in carefully curating and exposing the governor's private correspondence), it is hard not to sympathize with the plight of a man driven from office by calumny and innuendo, much of it inaccurate and unfair. If this campaign of vilification sheds an unflattering light on Adams, it is exacerbated by the fact that much of his reportage of events in Boston and Massachusetts generally was what Schiff calls "pure propaganda," hyperbolic at best and often simply false. Adams's lack of misgivings about such mendacity—he "saw no reason why high-minded ideals should shy from underhanded tactics"—might be what was required of a revolutionary, but it is hard to square with the polished manners and honorable deportment he shared more with his enemy in the governor's mansion than with his comrades. To be sure, the casual contempt that Hutchinson displayed toward Massachusetts' plebeian farmers mitigates Adams's palpable acts of character assassination and disinforma-

tion, but Adams's only true defense lay in his conviction—shared by his cousin John and most leading patriots—that Hutchinson represented a direct threat to their liberties and privileges.

WHAT ARE WE TO SAY OF ADAMS'S motivation? Regarding the timing of his resolve for independence, Schiff notes that though some scholars suspect him of desiring independence from the outset and others think he hoped for an accommodation until the very end, most scholars place the decisive turn around 1768, when Hutchinson later recalled him declaiming at a town meeting, "Independent we are, and independent we will be." Schiff rightly questions the accuracy of that recollection, especially its timing, and prudently declines fixing a moment of resolution, insisting only that "there is no evidence whatsoever that he had independence in mind all along."

On the broader question of ideological motivation, Schiff notes that many scholars have seen Adams as a sort of neo-Puritan commending "the spirit of Rome or Sparta" in his obsession with simplicity and virtue, while others stress his classical republicanism. Schiff gives evidence for both views without coming down on either side, but I suspect we are supposed to find the answer to that question in his character and the experiences that informed it. To be sure, Adams took religion seriously. His father had been a deacon in a church that warmly embraced the Great Awakening (a somewhat rare thing in Boston) as well as a prosperous merchant and malt brewer. Adams was also well educated in the classics of republican political thought; his 1743 master's oration at Harvard justified resistance to tyranny.

Adams's political convictions, however, were less doctrinal than communal and familial. His father had been a leading member of the popular or country party for much of the 18th century and had lost most of his wealth supporting that faction's attempt to create a land bank to supply much needed currency for the province in 1740. Indeed, after his father's death, young Samuel was only able to retain possession of the family home and business by repeatedly (and successfully) threatening legal harassment against the sheriffs enjoined to auction the properties.

THIS EXPERIENCE SEEMS TO HAVE DEEPLY informed much of Adams's political career. He learned that when extraneous political forces threatened what was by all rights "his own" (Adams had tried to adjudicate his debts with the General Court only to be stymied by a vindictive court party), any means of securing his birthright were honorable. This lesson was reinforced by the Knowles Riot in 1747, which successfully secured the release of Bostonians abducted and pressed into service by the British Navy. Adams also learned that only the direct intervention of Parliament—the quashing of the land bank was the first such intervention in the colony's history—could undermine the popular will and self-government of Massachusetts and that, as evidenced in the Knowles Riot, British authority was powerless to check the popular will when that will was unified in both the elected branches of government and in the streets. In short, despite the rise of monarchical culture and its networks of patronage in British North America, colonial New Englanders had largely ruled themselves for the better part of two centuries and could continue to do so if they chose to.

As Schiff notes, the core question that underlay all of Adams's writings was "are we—or is someone else—in charge of our destiny?" For Adams, the question answered itself. His identification with his colony and its popular liberties was absolute; John Adams judged that, of all the revolutionary leaders in Boston, Samuel had "the most thorough understanding of liberty, and her resources, in the temper and character of the people" as well as "the most habitual, radical love of it, of any of them." With allegiance to the crown or without, Massachusetts would plot its own future, and any attempt by Parliament to strip that power from the people of the Bay colony would meet the same pugilism and recalcitrance that Adams unleashed on those who threatened to turn him out of his home. If that meant defaming a dangerous rival like Thomas Hutchinson who threatened that power, it was the least a gentleman and a revolutionary could do in defense of his own.

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