

Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

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Brilliant Bailyn Showed Importance of Evidence, Context, Reason in Study of American History

Bernard Bailyn died on Aug. 7. He was 97 years old. One of the great American historians of the post-World War II era, Bailyn was remarkable not only for his numerous books, his two Pulitzer Prizes, his Bancroft Prize, but also for the *long* list of notable students he taught.

Bailyn's former students constitute an honor roll of contemporary American historians, including Pulitzer Prize winners Michael Kammen, Jack Rakove, and Gordon Wood, whose *The Creation of the American Republic* also won a Bancroft Prize. He also taught Mary Beth Norton; Fred Anderson, whose *Crucible of War* might be the best one-volume study of the French and Indian War; Stanley Katz; and Pauline Maier, whose *American Scripture* will disabuse you of the notion that the Declaration of Independence, like Athena from the head of Zeus, sprang full-blown from the mind of Thomas Jefferson.



There is a myth in higher education that all faculty are scholar-teachers. Many are fine teachers, who work diligently at their craft. A much smaller cohort are genuine

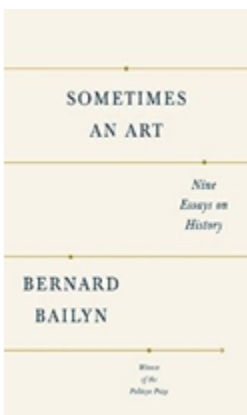
scholars. But only a very precious few, like my mentor at the University at Buffalo, Bruce Johnstone, are both outstanding scholars and great teachers.

Bailyn epitomized the notion of the scholar-teacher.

I never met him, but he was an important influence on my intellectual journey. To call my personal journey an intellectual journey sounds pretentious. Let's say Bailyn affected my bookish interests, helping me to find a return from my self-imposed exile in administration-land to the realms of history and literature, which I love. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say Bailyn helped me find a balance between the two, between faculty life and its academic pursuits and higher education administration as I traveled from director and dean to vice president of this and that to president of two institutions.

Bailyn helped me make that connection twice. First, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, helping me recall why I got into higher education in the first place and then again in the 2010s as I transitioned from higher education to the Jefferson Educational Society.

In the early 1990s, it was Bailyn's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* that opened my eyes to the notion that there might really be a *zeitgeist* – a spirit of the times animating events. In the 2010s it was his *Sometimes An Art: Nine Essays on History* that showed me historiography was not that dry as dust bane of many an undergraduate history major (and graduate student, too), but that it actually examined the soul of the enterprise by asking What is history? How is it done? Why is it done? What about that last *why* that is important?



By the early 1990s, I had been an administrator for more than 10 years. I taught a course every term, but in those days, having picked up an MBA in marketing and strategic planning, I usually taught marketing or one of its variants. Still, I did not drift entirely away from my liberal arts roots, having written a master's thesis titled "*Towards a Rhetorical-Theory of Marketing.*"

Regardless, during that period I began again to read history.

It was the early days of the period I now call "Founder's Chic." Surrounded by a group of administrators, faculty members, and book club associates deep into reading about the Civil War, I rejected their antiquarian fascination with Civil War memorabilia and with Civil War military history. They seemed absorbed with questions about what would have happened if General "X" had gone left rather than right or what would have happened if Colonel Strong Vincent had not stood his ground

on Little Round Top. I realize now that their interest in these tangential issues were an unconscious way of avoiding the Civil War's real and abiding questions – those that bedevil us to this day.

So, I happily enlisted in “Founders Chic,” reading a surfeit of biographies of the men (and at first it was *the men*) who made America. From Joseph Ellis's ***American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*** to Flexner and Southall Freeman's multi-volume lives of George Washington to David McCullough's 2001 bestseller ***John Adams*** and H.W. Brand's ***The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin***, it was an era of “great men revisited.” The firehose stream of biographies culminating in Ron Chernow's by-the-pound recounting of the lives of Alexander Hamilton and George Washington seemed determined to prove the accuracy of John Adams' whiny complaint that he would be forgotten, that future Americans would think the American Revolution the result of Dr. Franklin smiting the earth with his electrical rod and out sprang George Washington.

In short, great men made history and that was that.

Sometime during this period, I read Bailyn's ***The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution***. Published in 1967 and recipient of the 1968 Pulitzer Prize for History (frequent readers of these ***Book Notes*** will find that date a curious coincidence), Bailyn reminded me that while people make history, they do not do it in a vacuum. They are actors within a context; to understand them, one needs to understand the context in which they acted. Thus began for me a 20-year immersion in early American history seeking to not only know those who acted upon that stage, but the nature of the stage itself, of what it consisted, and how it motivated those who acted upon it.

So, for me, in a sense, Bailyn changed history. Interestingly, that is what he did for the profession itself. All of his obituaries point out that when he began his professorial career, early American history was considered a backwater. No place from which an ambitious person ought to launch their academic career. The history of the American Revolution was dominated by the great man school sketched above and by the economic theories of Charles Beard, who said the American Revolution had been primarily a class warfare between competing social classes.

To which Bailyn said, “Hmmm, not entirely.”

While it was true that Boston merchant John Hancock's commercial interests drove him and that southern grandees like George Washington, George Mason, and others resented being at the mercy of London merchants, there were other forces at work. Bailyn detailed those other forces through a meticulous examination of 18th century

North American pamphlets, particularly those written between 1750 and 1776. These pamphlets, written in what Bailyn characterized as “the great hinterland of belief,” i.e. written in the remote colonies of North America, echoed the sentiments of 18th century British Whigs who sought to counter the power of the court and to reassert the power of Parliament. In short, they sought to limit government power and to increase the power of the people.

Of course, who they considered “the people” added more than a bit of texture to the proceedings with repercussions in our own day.

Bailyn refuted Beard’s assertion that the Revolutionary rhetoric of liberty and freedom was so much window dressing camouflaging their true materialistic intentions. Bailyn said no, the language of liberty and freedom was genuine. It was not simply propaganda. It was, as mentioned earlier, the zeitgeist, the spirit of the times.

Bailyn argued that it was the central motivating force driving the colonists to rebellion. As John Otis (whose name is another curious coincidence) wrote in his obituary of Bailyn in *The Washington Post*, “Burrowing himself in 18th century materials, Dr. Bailyn used pre-revolutionary political pamphlets to portray the colonists as deeply principled and driven by radical ideas about republicanism and liberty in the face of encroaching British power.” [1] A C-SPAN interview of Bailyn discussing these issues can be found [here](#).

This resulted in a rewriting of history, which immediately raises the question “How can history be rewritten?”

It is or isn’t, isn’t it? Well, no and yes.

Yes, in the sense, as Joseph Heller once wrote, *Something Happened* .[2]

But what?

And, as a result, no, for how can we be sure that our perception of the “what” is correct, given that ours is but one point of view in a swirling Roshomon-like montage of different points of view?

Which raises the question, what is history?

If Bailyn’s *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* taught me that history was more than the sum of what a few men did, that it was a much richer story than that, then at a later stage in life his *Sometimes An Art: Nine Essays on*

History taught me to think about history as a mode of inquiry, taught me to think about history *qua* history.

For history, as the very word itself states, is an inquiry, an investigation into the past. As an investigation, it is never complete. As an inquiry, there is always another question to ask, for as William Faulkner said, “The past isn’t dead. It’s not even past.”

While discussing the French theorist Pierre Nora, Bailyn remarks that “historiography ... is the critical, skeptical, empirical source-bound reconstruction of past events, circumstances, and people based on the belief that the past is not only distant from us but also different. ...[Historians] avoid anachronisms of all kinds and seek to reconstruct the contexts of the past.” [3]

The key element here is “empirical source-bound reconstruction.” It is not fiction; it is not fantasy. It is not original, although the reconstruction might be original in the sense that it “reconstructs” not only past events, but previous understandings of those past events. But it is also “source-bound,” in that it is accountable to the evidence. It cannot say more than the evidence will support.

In that sense, it is “scientific.” It is always contingent. A hypothesis is proposed; it is tested against the available evidence, against the available data. In history, the evidence, the data, are almost always documents, and documents are not to be trusted, certainly not in isolation. If the documents support the hypothesis, a new slant on the past has been established. If not, then the hypothesis must be rejected, although in rejecting a thesis the picture’s focus becomes a bit clearer.

Pick your metaphor: if “history is the art of making an argument about the past by telling a story accountable to evidence,” [4] then one must understand it is a story that is never complete because new details, new information, new ways of looking at old information are always being discovered. And if it is a story making an argument about the past, then it is very important to know the storyteller’s – the historian’s – point of view and to hold her scrupulously accountable to the evidence.

Or, if in John Lewis Gaddis’s memorable metaphor, history is a landscape in which assessment shifts with one’s shifting point of view as new evidence or new ways of looking at old evidence sharpens one’s focus, then the historian’s perspective is critical because what they choose to include, what they choose to exclude, what they choose to emphasize, what they choose to obscure is their argument. By their choices, historians assert a thesis, which must be held accountable to the evidence. [5]

Historians are channels. They are the media by which we approach the past. As McLuhan pointed out, there are no neutral media. There is no such thing as an

objective historian. Even the most scrupulous chronicler imposes a bias by what they include, by what they choose to emphasize. It is simply impossible not to have a point of view.

These simple **Book Notes** do not provide sufficient space to thoroughly examine a question as large, as amorphous, as “what is history?” But as Bernard Bailyn’s work attests, it is not an idle question. It might well be the question of our times.

Why? Why history as **the** question of our times? Well, if we tell ourselves stories to make sense of our experience, if history is a story we tell ourselves about how we got to now, then as I am exploring in my **The American Tapestry Project** at the Jefferson and on WQLN-FM, getting the story of how we got to now – in as clear a focus as possible – is essential if we are ever going to understand ourselves and what it means to be, in our cases here in the United States, American.

So, let me ask a historical question related to my opening comments about not being interested in the Civil War if it was only a story about what this general did and what that other general did not do.

If the only stories one heard about the Civil War were about battles and dates, what was left out? To begin with, what were they fighting about? Why did more than 650,000 Americans die? In that old Hollywood reductionism of everything to black and white (the ham-handed pun intentional), who were the good guys and who the bad? When did it begin – 1860, 1852, 1850, 1846, 1820, 1787, 1619 or ____? When did it end – 1865, 1877, 1954, 1965, 2020 or ____?

And who won the Civil War?

These are all historical questions to which different stories told by different storytellers have different answers. Edward Pollard and **The Lost Cause** have one take; Archibald Dunning and the “Dunning School” he created another; Shelby Steele yet another; W.E.B. DuBois still another; and Eric Foner yet one more. Where does James M. McPherson’s **Battle Cry of Freedom** fit into all of this? Which is correct? Maybe all; maybe none; maybe they are all part of an evolving understanding of the past that is critical to determining our future.

Next week in **Book Notes** we’ll look at yet another response to the above questions: Heather Cox Richardson’s **How the South Won the Civil War** and **West From Appomattox** and what they tell us about our current discontents.

So what? We've wandered a bit from Bernard Bailyn, but not really. His students said his most withering classroom rejoinder was to ask in reply to any assertion, "so what?" Which is to say, why is that important? Why should we care? Help me understand.

Bernard Bailyn's (and his students') great contribution was to never stop asking those very words, "so what?"

While the past needs to be understood on its own terms and in terms of its own times, Bailyn wanted us to see that history – telling the past's story – is essential if we are to understand how we got to now, if we are to understand our own times.

In an America fracturing amidst culture wars about whose story, whose history, defines it, there can be no greater imperative than to honor Bailyn's memory by asking of any story purporting to tell us who we are, "so what?"

Like any great teacher, Bailyn leaves us with more questions than answers, but he also provided us with the tools to answer them.

So what?

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End Notes

1.Otis, John. "Bernard Bailyn, historian who reinterpreted the American Revolution, dies at 97", **The Washington Post** August 7, 2020) available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/bernard-bailyn-historian-who-reinterpreted-the-american-revolution-dies-at-97/2020/08/07/babbcb6c-d8fa-11ea-930e-d88518c57dcc_story.html accessed August 17, 2020.

2. See the novel by Joseph Heller **Something Happened**. (New York: Knopf, 1974).

3. Bailyn, Bernard. "Considering the Slave Trade", in **Sometimes an Art: Nine Essays on History** (New York: Knopf, 2015), p. 14.

4. Lepore, Jill, **The Story of America** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p.15.

5. Cf. John Lewis Gaddis, **The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past** (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Book Cover: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/246851/sometimes-an-art-by-bernard-bailyn/>

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