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### Book Review: Alan Taylor. *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750- 1804*. NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 2016.

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Book Review

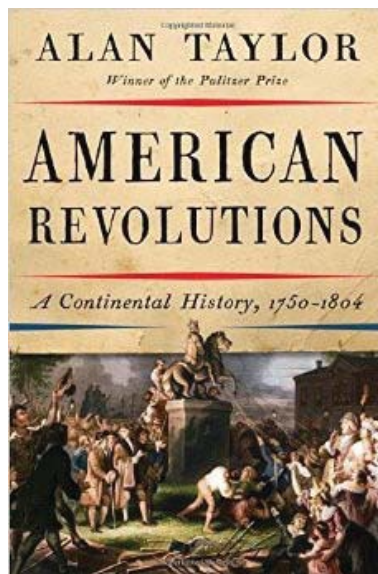
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Stan Prager

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*American Colonies*, the first volume of *The Penguin History of the United States*, was published to critical acclaim in 2001. This groundbreaking work by historian Alan Taylor broadly surveyed not only those English colonies that later became the United States, but also the often-overlooked rest of North America and the West Indies, including the French, Spanish, and Dutch colonizers, as well as the Amerindians they supplanted and the Africans they forcibly transported and enslaved.<sup>1</sup> Some fifteen years after the publication of *American Colonies*, Taylor—a professor of history at the University of Virginia who has won two Pulitzer Prizes for other fine works of early American history—has written a sequel of sorts: *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804*.<sup>2</sup>

The plural implication in the title, *American Revolutions*, is deliberate. Americans tend to think of the American Revolution as a singular event, but in fact, what occurred here in the latter part of the eighteenth century was a series of social, economic, and political revolutions, both among its English inhabitants as well as among competing cultures. As in *American Colonies*, Taylor leans more to the “big history” approach to relationships and interdependencies frequently ignored by a more traditional historical methodology. Thus, he reveals how events, ideas, and individuals acting in one arena often produced striking consequences elsewhere.



Especially unintended consequences.

The British decision to permit a French and Roman Catholic element to persist and be tolerated in that portion of Canada that was her prize after the French and Indian War generated a frustrating barrier to conquest and annexation for the

English colonials in America who had helped prosecute that war, something rarely noted by other historians. Stymied in Quebec, their ambition for domination was more cruelly successful elsewhere. After Independence, the British no longer served as a brake upon the territorial expansion of Americans hungry for new lands and utterly unsympathetic to its aboriginal inhabitants, whom they wantonly displaced and slaughtered with little reluctance. The other great irony centered upon human chattel slavery, which the British retreated from and gradually abolished throughout the empire. In contrast, slavery saw great expansion in a newly independent United States, especially in the southern states where it served as a critical component central to the economic model of plantation agriculture. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison are often credited with the expansion of the rights of white planters and the increase in social and economic mobility that resulted in the abolition of primogeniture and entail that had formerly kept estates intact. However, this bred the chilling and often overlooked consequence of facilitating the breakup of African-American families, as these human commodities could be sold to other geographies at premium prices.

This reviewer has read four histories penned by Alan Taylor, and all of them are highly recommended.<sup>3</sup> If there is a weakness, it is that some of Taylor's books get off to a very slow start and are frequently populated with a vast cast of minor characters that add authenticity but can bog down the narrative. That is happily not the case with *American Revolutions*, which adroitly opens with a discussion of an iconic short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," that serves as a metaphor for the dramatic societal shift that was the result of the toppling of British rule over the thirteen colonies.<sup>4</sup> The War for American Independence was indeed one of those revolutions. There were many more. For instance, the aftershocks of the American Revolution sent legions of despised loyalists to Canada, later followed by numbers of disenchanting rebels struggling in the economic morass that was the byproduct of revolution and separation from the empire; these were the building blocks of what came to be a nation north of the Great Lakes. That initial financial disaster begat the revolution of Hamiltonian fiscal policies that forged a new economy. At the same time, hints of early instability and fears of mob rule spawned a new revolution against the original loose federation of states under the Articles of Confederation that saw the propertied elite of those states come together to seize the reins of government and force a more structured and perhaps more conservative Constitution upon the masses. Still, the break with Britain irrevocably loosened social hierarchies and there was truly a revolution in this regard for citizens of the new United States—if they could count themselves as white males—but certainly not if they were women

or blacks or Native Americans. The shift, for those white men, was underscored in what has been called the “Revolution of 1800,” as Jeffersonian Republicans came to power and the influence of the Federalists that constructed the new constitutional government first waned and then went extinct. There was indeed a great leveling in the game, if one was qualified by complexion and gender to play the game.

Taylor relates this saga in an extremely well-written and engaging narrative of complexity and nuance that never loses sight of all the action on the periphery. He surveys the dramatic way the American Revolution resounded in monarchical France, upon slave insurrectionists in the West Indies, and even in the uprisings of Spanish Peru, as well as how these events sometimes echoed back on the new nation. He also reminds the reader not to look back from the union of “those” thirteen colonies and the creation of the United States as if it was destined to be; there were other English colonies to the Canadian north and the West Indian south that could well have been part of that union but are conspicuous in their absence. Most critically, he returns again and again to the horrific consequences that an independent United States had upon Native Americans and enslaved blacks.

A tragic constant was the almost universal disregard for the welfare and very lives of the natives who occupied lands coveted by expansionary white Americans. Decimated by Old World pathogens that devastated once thriving populations, their traditional lifestyles upended and reshaped by horses, guns and alcohol, and frequently used as proxy pawns by European powers struggling for control of North America, Native Americans found themselves ultimately powerless to avoid displacement and often extermination by shrewd and ruthless citizens of a new nation who justified brutal tactics on the grounds of race and religion and paternalism. In 1929, The United States issued a commemorative stamp that honored George Rogers Clark, the courageous soldier and adventurer of the Northwest Territories. *American Revolutions* reveals a far less heroic Clark who zealously executed Amerindians he encountered and declared that “he would never spare Man, woman or child of them on whom he could lay his hands.”<sup>5</sup> In those days, South Carolina and Pennsylvania offered bounties up to \$1000 for Native American scalps, “regardless of the corpse’s age or gender.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, in what became known as the Gnadenhutzen Massacre, in 1782 Ohio militiaman David Williamson directed an attack on “a peaceful Delaware village led by Moravian missionaries . . . [and] . . . butchered 96 captives—28 men, 29 women, and 39 children—by smashing their skulls with wooden mallets before scalping them for trophies. The natives died while singing Christian hymns.”<sup>7</sup> There were

no repercussions for this hardly uncommon kind of white savagery on the frontier. For African-Americans, the legacy was no less tragic. Despite the wishful thinking of some members of the revolutionary generation that human chattel slavery would wither over time, it instead gained new traction in an America unburdened by growing British guilt over what came to be called the peculiar institution. Meanwhile, few—north or south, or across the Atlantic for that matter—could ignore the paradox of Americans crying out in ringing rhetoric for a universal right to a freedom from tyranny while at the same time reserving the contradictory right to enslave others because of the color of their skin. That irony was everywhere: “In New York City . . . [in 1776] . . . Patriots toppled the great equestrian statue of George III and melted its lead to make 40,000 bullets to shoot at redcoats. In that blow for liberty, the Patriots employed slaves to tear down the statue.”<sup>8</sup> African-Americans fought on both the British and American sides in the Revolutionary War, in hopes for freedom and a better life, but were in the end betrayed by each of them, although most of those that remained in America had the worst of it. Conditions for blacks, both slave and free, deteriorated markedly in the new nation, just as these gradually improved elsewhere in the British Empire. Slavery remained an essential economic building block, despite a horrific brutality too often overlooked by more traditional studies of the early Republic. Taylor reminds the reader that recalcitrant slaves were routinely beaten, branded, and even killed, something known to others at the time if not advertised, but nevertheless rationalized by planter elites with a new brand of Christian paternalism: “At the first hint of resistance, these paternalists expected their overseers to practice the old brutality but less conspicuously. In barns and secluded spots, they whipped backs and inflicted ‘cat-hauling:’ dragging a cat by the tail along the bare back of a trussed-up victim.”<sup>9</sup>

Heritage historians no doubt loathe Taylor’s approach; they want to celebrate the birth of liberty in British North America while often ignoring its contradictions. Massacred Native Americans and enslaved Africans uncomfortably get in the way. There is indeed much to champion in the creation of the American Republic, but sound historical scholarship must include more than self-congratulatory patriotism. *American Revolutions* soundly highlights how a variety of social, economic, and political revolutions produced an independent United States at the catastrophic expense of Native Americans and African-Americans. The history that was foisted upon most Americans, including this reviewer, in schoolrooms of the 1960s contained precious little of that. Alan Taylor’s masterful narrative succeeds both in widening the lens and restoring the balance of what it was like for the actual people who lived those events, both the winners and the

losers. This is an exceptional volume from a gifted historian that belongs on the shelf of anyone serious about early American history.

The author previously published a slightly different version of this review of *American Revolutions* on his book blog at: <https://regarp.com/2016/10/30/review-of-american-revolutions-a-continental-history-1750-1804-by-alan-taylor/>.

## Notes

1. Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (NY: Viking, 2001).
2. Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804* (NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 2016).
3. Stan Prager has reviewed Alan Taylor's *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies* on his book blog at <https://regarp.com/2015/10/01/review-of-the-civil-war-of-1812-american-citizens-british-subjects-irish-rebels-indian-allies-by-alan-taylor/>; and, *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and the War in Virginia 1772-1832* at <https://regarp.com/2016/02/09/review-of-the-internal-enemy-slavery-and-the-war-in-virginia-1772-1832-by-alan-taylor/>.
4. Nathaniel Hawthorne, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" (originally published 1831), accessed on October 30, 2016, <http://www.eldritchpress.org/nh/mm.html>.
5. Taylor, *American Revolutions*, 260.
6. *Ibid.*, 258.
7. *Ibid.*, 262.
8. *Ibid.*, 161.
9. *Ibid.*, 476.