Journal of American Studies, **52** (2018), 3, 682–715
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doi:10.1017/S0021875817000391 First published online 4 April 2017

Disney's American Revolution

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This essay adopts an innovative interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of Disney's representations of the American founding in television and movie productions as secondary works; that is, as works of historical interpretation. "The Liberty Story" (1957), *Johnny Tremain* (1957) and *The Swamp Fox* (1959–60) are analysed in the context of contemporaraneous historiographical trends. The essay demonstrates that despite certain flaws and weaknesses, Disney's representations sometimes presented innovative themes and insightful interpretations, which at the height of the Cold War influenced popular understanding of the American founding and the society that it produced.

On the evening of Wednesday 29 May 1957 the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) televised "The Liberty Story" as an episode in *Walt Disney's Disneyland* television series.[1] Acting as compère, Walt Disney introduced excerpts from a forthcoming live-action movie based on Esther Forbes's novel *Johnny Tremain*, an animated short about a mouse who inspired Benjamin Franklin based on Robert Lawson's novel *Ben and Me*, and a brief presentation by Disney himself about the plans for an American Revolutionary era-themed section of his California Disneyland theme park.[2] Clearly engaged by the significance of the American War of Independence, Disney told viewers that "we have presented stories from the frontiers of

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[1] *Walt Disney's Disneyland* ran on ABC from 1954 to 1958: Disney produced the series in order to help fund and promote the California park, which opened in the summer of 1955. Jeffrey M. Seidel, "Financing the Dream Called Disneyland," *Financial History*, 77 (2002), 20–26; Kathy Merlock Jackson and Mark I. West, "Introduction," in Merlock Jackson and West, eds., *Disneyland and Culture: Essays on the Parks and their Influence* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2011), 1–4.

[2] Esther Forbes, *Johnny Tremain: A Novel for Old and Young* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1943); and *Johnny Tremain* (dir. Robert Stevenson, Walt Disney Productions, 1957); Robert Lawson, *Ben and Me* (Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1939), and "Ben and Me" (dir. Hamilton Luske, Walt Disney Productions, 1953). After the movie theatre release of *Johnny Tremain* in 1957, Disney broadcast the movie in two parts a year later. Walt Disney introduced each of the two programmes, and in his remarks at the start of the second episode he again referred to the production as being about "the frontier of human liberty."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817000391 Published online by Cambridge University Press

adventure, of legend and history. But this program," he continued, "comes from another frontier, the frontier of human liberty."[3]

"The Liberty Story" heralded a significant focus on the American Revolution by one of America's leading studios at a time when others were all but ignoring America's founding era. Although historical dramas appeared in cinemas, biblical epics, the American West and World War II were far more popular with filmmakers than was the military and political conflict that had created the United States: moreover, relatively little history appeared on television during the 1950s and early 1960s. Disney would help change this. *Johnny Tremain* was based upon a popular Pulitzer Prize-winning children's novel, and the animated short "Ben and Me" would secure the Disney Studios an Academy Award nomination (for Best Short Subject, Two Reel). Over the following decade, the Disney studios would follow these productions with a television series about the exploits of the South Carolinian military commander Francis Marion entitled *The Swamp Fox*, and with the creation of Liberty Street, an area of Disney World modelled on Revolutionary-era Boston as it had been envisioned in *Johnny Tremain*.[4]

Why did Disney and his studios choose to focus on the American Revolutionary era, what did they seek to present and how might they have influenced popular understanding of the founding of the American republic? Historians have largely ignored these Disney productions, regarding film, television and theme park depictions as distorted representations of the historical record, more focussed on fictional dramatic storylines and heroic figures than the complicated and nuanced historical record. Disney has become a byword for American conservatism, yet Disney's representations of the American Revolution resonated with elements of contemporary historiography and on occasion anticipated the social movements and new social history of the

[3] Walt Disney, "The Liberty Story" (dir. Hamilton Luske and Robert Stevenson), Season 3, Episode 25, of *Walt Disney's Disneyland*, broadcast 29 May 1957.

[4] *Gone with the Wind* (1939) had brought the history of the American Civil War to film viewers across the globe, setting a new standard for historical costume dramas. The 1940s and 1950s were the glory days for American westerns, from John Ford movies such as *Fort Apache* (1948), *Rio Grande* (1950) and *The Searchers* (1956), to television series such as *Davy Crockett* (1954–55), *The Cisco Kid* (1950–56) and *Gunsmoke* (1955–75). And then World War II provided American moviemakers with a variety of settings and stories, and moviegoers flocked to see films such as *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), *Halls of Montezuma* (1950) and *To Hell and Back* (1955). The one major exception is John Ford's *Drums along the Mohawk* (1939), although stylistically this was less a movie about the American Revolution than it was Ford's attempt to create an eighteenth-century western, showing settlement and conflict on the frontier. While Liberty Square was planned for Disneyland in California, and was discussed by Disney in his presentation of "The Liberty Story," this area was never developed in California and was instead built in Florida's Disney World.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817000391 Published online by Cambridge University Press

later 1960s and 1970s.[5] Disney's focus on the Revolutionary era coincided with a significant moment in academic historiography, for during the mid-twentieth century the creation of the American republic became the focus of a great deal of important historical scholarship, from the Progressive historians like Carl Becker and Charles Beard, to the postwar neo-Whig or "Consensus" historians such as Richard Hofstadter and Edmund Morgan.[6]

The Disney Corporation produced a different kind of history for different reasons and audiences, yet its histories of the War of Independence and the new American republic resonated with the themes and approaches of both Progressive and Consensus historiography. Certainly, the Disney representations of the American Revolution reached far larger audiences than did academic historians, and were made and broadcast in order to reach both children and adults. "The Liberty Story" appeared in *Walt Disney's Disneyland* series, which aired at 7 p.m. on Wednesday evenings on ABC, while *Johnny Tremain* was broadcast in late 1958 on the successor show *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color*, which had been elevated to Friday night at 7 p.m., a prime television slot. *The Swamp Fox* appeared in Disney's next series, *Walt Disney Presents*, beginning in October 1959 in

[5] For examples of studies of Disney which represent him as a fundamentally conservative figure see Richard Schickel, *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art, and Commerce of Walt Disney* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968); and Marc Eliot, *Walt Disney: Hollywood's Dark Prince* (New York: Carol, 1993). In contrast to these see Douglas Brode, *From Walt to Woodstock: How Disney Created the Counterculture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), which asserts that Disney's productions anticipated important aspects of the later 1960s and 1970s.

[6] Progressive history dominated much of American history between the 1890s and the early 1920s. Like the social and political Progressives of this era, Progressive historians such as Charles Beard, Carl Becker and John Franklin Jameson emphasized social, class and economic conflict as engines of social change, and as factors in the coming of the American Revolution and of the constitutional settlement with which it ended. Consensus or neo-Whig history refers to a branch of American historiography which dominated American scholarship for approximately two decades following World War II. During the post-World War II period, leading Consensus historians such as Louis Hartz, Daniel Boorstin, Henry Steele Commager and Edmund Morgan embraced much of the Whiggish interpretation of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, arguing that when compared with European nations the United States had experienced relatively little meaningful social and class conflict, and that American values and ideals based on British civil rights and liberties had unified the nation and its people. For a discussion of Progressive and Consensus history and the American Revolution see Simon P. Newman "Writing the History of the American Revolution," in Melvyn Stokes, ed., *The State of U. S. History* (Oxford: Berg), 23–44. For a more general discussion of Progressive and Consensus history across American history see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 47–85, 320–60.

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the same Friday night slot, but concluding in January 1961 in the coveted Sunday night schedule at 7 p.m. Reaching broad audiences, these American Revolutionary productions played a role in shaping popular understanding of America's story during the years between World War II and the bicentennial of American Independence, the central period of the "American Century."[7]

Disney's portrayals of the American Revolution are flawed and problematic in, for example, their treatment of race and slavery, and both commercial imperatives and Cold War-era patriotic mentalities helped shape these productions. Yet at their best the Disney films present a surprisingly complicated and even nuanced image of the Revolutionary War as a bloody civil war, and as an ideologically informed social revolution. *The Swamp Fox* in particular presented black characters as equal with whites, and as actors in the conflict with Britain and rightful beneficiaries of the political rights and freedoms secured with independence. Indeed, Disney utilized storylines, cinematography, dramatic performance, and a variety of filmic techniques and effects to produce representations of the American Revolution that raised ideas and issues which would rarely appear in academic work until the emergence of the New Social History of the late 1960s onwards.[8] Flawed and problematic though it may have been, Disney's American Revolution was nonetheless a significant mechanism for the communication of ideas about the nature and meaning of a longer-term American struggle for rights and nationhood during the pivotal Cold War years of the American Century, as Americans came to terms with a growing sense of their role as a bastion of liberty in the post-World War II era. Disney himself clearly felt that the story of America's founding was highly relevant to the mid-twentieth-century present: in his introduction to "The Liberty Story" he had commented, "The liberties we enjoy and take for granted didn't just happen, they had to be won, and even today there are parts of the world where the fight for freedom is still going on."[9] Disney's Revolutionary-era productions echoed Henry Luce's pronouncement of almost two decades earlier, that the

[7] Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows 1946–Present* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007; first published 1979), 1681–82. The term "American Century" was famously coined by Henry Luce in "The American Century," *Life*, 10 (17 Feb. 1941), 61–65.

[8] Paul Johnson dates the emergence of the "New Social History" to the late 1960s, and he notes the enormous influence on American historians of E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, which was published in 1963. The *Journal of Social History* was founded in 1967, while *Social Science History* (and the Social Science History Association) were not established until 1976. See Paul Johnson, "Reflections: Looking Back at Social History," *Reviews in American History*, 39, 2 (2011), 379–88.

[9] Walt Disney, introductory remarks, "The Liberty Story."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817000391 Published online by Cambridge University Press

American Century "must be a sharing with all peoples of our Bill of Rights, our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution … an internationalism of the people, by the people and for the people." For Luce, and for Disney too, this was to be founded upon "a passionate devotion to American ideals … a love of freedom, a feeling for the equality of opportunity, a tradition of self-reliance and independence and also of co-operation."[10] Propagandistic as *Johnny Tremain* and *The Swamp Fox* may have been, they nonetheless constituted sometimes complicated and nuanced appraisals of the events and significance of the American founding.

This essay will begin with a brief summary assessment of the ways in which movies and television programmes about historical topics can be evaluated as contributions to historical knowledge and understanding. Filmic histories can potentially be understood and analysed as both primary and secondary sources. As primary sources historical movies can reveal a great deal about the values and beliefs of both the filmmaker and the audience. Historical movies can be analysed as secondary sources, as a means of presenting and enhancing understanding of the motivations, experiences, actions and effects of historical actors. This essay will focus primarily on Disney's *Johnny Tremain* and *The Swamp Fox* as secondary sources, with a particular focus on their relationship with historiography and academic understanding and interpretation of the American Revolution.[11]

Some writers have explored how Walt Disney's films drew upon his own background, life and experiences to fashion a history that he believed would serve American purposes. His idealization of the American folk, for example, is frequently seen as drawing upon his Mid-western origins, and his father's late-nineteenth-century populist radicalism, which Disney remembered in terms of egalitarian populism and an abiding faith in the collective wisdom of the American people. In this Disney was far from alone, and along with other mid-twentieth-century cultural producers like Norman Rockwell and Aaron Copeland, Disney articulated a faith in the American folk, identifying a mythical communitarian past with the consensus history

[10] Luce, 64, 65.

[11] For discussion of aspects of these twin roles of movies and television series, see Alan S. Marcus, *Celluloid Blackboard: Teaching History with Film* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2007), 1; and Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 14–15. See also Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow: Pearson, 2006); Mike Chopra-Gant, *Cinema and History: The Telling of* Stories (New York: Wallflower, 2008); John E. O'Connor, *Image as Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television* (Malabar, FL: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1990); and Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817000391 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and politics of post-World War II America. Disney's faith in the American folk was articulated in part through his movies' presentation of common men as heroic figures. Even Disney's most famous cartoon character, Mickey Mouse, represented an everyman confronting a range of challenges yet always emerging triumphant. During the Great Depression the Disney studios often portrayed Mickey and other cartoon characters in populist movies mocking the elite and their high culture.[12]

As long ago as 1958 James Agee criticized Disney's appropriation and interpretation of American folklore, and more recent Disney films such as *Pocahontas* (1995) have been derided as commercially driven productions which misrepresent history in a heavily stylized and formulaic fashion, applying templates that guarantee success and profit. In the late 1950s and early 1960s *Johnny Tremain* and *The Swamp Fox* were examples of Walt Disney's own mythologization of the American past, but Disney appears to have been creating a vision of the past in which he believed. "I've always wanted to do American History," Disney claimed in 1955. He was confident that the values of the American Revolution as he understood and presented them would resonate among viewers, and thus would be successful. This was not shaping a product solely to achieve success, but rather articulating Disney's views of the American past and its contemporary significance, which, Disney felt sure, had a natural audience among American viewers, and would thus be profitable. In his speech on "Our American Culture," Disney had lauded the democracy and freedom which should "make every American stand up and cheer for our American way of life." In his American Revolutionary dramas Disney sought to present the development and iteration of that democracy and freedom as a national standard, all in an entertaining, family-friendly and commercially successful format.[13]

[12] Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdon: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 70; Kevin Shortsleeve, "The Wonderful World of the Depression: Disney, Despotism, and the 1930s. Or, Why Disney Scares Us," *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 28, 1 (2004), 1–30, 6–7; Steven Watts, "Walt Disney: Arts and Politics in the American Century," *Journal of American History*, 82, 1 (1995), 84–110, 88–89.

[13] James Agee, *Agee on Film*, Volume I (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1958), 404–10; *Pocahontas* (dir. Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, 1995); Walt Disney in *Newsweek* (1955), as quoted in Marianne Holdzkom, "A Past to Make Us Proud: U.S. History According to Disney," in A. Bowdoin Van Riper, ed., *Learning from Mickey, Donald and Walt: Essays on Disney's Entertainment Films* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011), 183–200, 183; Walt Disney, "Our American Culture," radio broadcast to Metropolitan Opera in New York City, 1 March 1942, quoted in Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 163. On Disney's historical productions see Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001); and Scott Schaffer, "Disney and the Imagineering of Histories," *Postmodern Culture*, 6, 3 (1996), 1–34. For the effect of the commercial imperative on more recent Disney productions see Schickel; Ron Grover, *The Disney Touch: How a Daring Management Team Revived an Entertainment Empire* (Homewood: Business One,

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Walt Disney's histories of the American Revolution were able to reach large audiences and to influence their understanding of the subjects of his films and television shows. By the mid-twentieth century, Disney and all major Hollywood studios utilized research departments. While there is no evidence that Walt Disney himself read or was familiar with American historiography, his studio's research staff combed through the Progressive histories of the American Revolution that had shaped the history they were taught in school, and the newer Consensus histories of the post-World War II era. Their work was informed by the research of professional historians. *Johnny Tremain* drew heavily from Esther Forbes's historical novel of the same name, while Robert D. Bass served as the historical consultant for *The Swamp Fox*. Although not professionally trained, Forbes was a very able historical researcher and writer, and the year that *Johnny Tremain* was published she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her biography of Paul Revere. Bass was a historian of the Revolution in South Carolina, whose monograph on Marion was published shortly after Disney's series premiered.[14]

Disney exercised a significant measure of control over the filmic histories *Johnny Tremain* and *The Swamp Fox*. He began by discussing storylines with screenwriters and directors, and then playing a major role through editing. Disney demanded that directors like Robert Stevenson, who was responsible for *Johnny Tremain*, filmed each scene in a number of different ways, often from quite different characters', and general, perspectives. This allowed Disney to select scenes in such a way as to fashion not just storyline, but also the impression that events and characters and their actions would make on viewers. Moreover, as compère of the early television series in which "The Liberty Story," *Johnny Tremain* and *The Swamp Fox* all appeared, Disney was able to articulate their meaning and significance on his own terms. As such, these were works of history, containing particular interpretations and analyses of the past which Disney had a clear hand in producing.[15]

1991); James B. Stewart, *Disney War: The Battle for the Magic Kingdom* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005); John Taylor, *Storming the Magic Kingdom: Wall Street, the Raiders and Battle for Disney* (New York: Knopf, 1987).

[14] Esther Forbes, *Paul Revere and the World He Lived In* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1942); and Forbes, *Johnny Tremain*. Forbes was awarded the John Newberry Medal for *Johnny Tremain*. Robert D. Bass received his PhD from the University of South Carolina, and held academic posts at the United States Naval Academy, the University of South Carolina and Furman University. He was the author of *Swamp Fox: The Life and Campaigns of General Francis Marion* (New York: Holt, 1959); Bass, *The Green Dragoon: The Lives of Banastre Tarlton and Mary Robinson* (New York: Holt, 1957).

[15] Harry Tytle, who directed a number of Disney's live-action productions during this period, recalled that Disney "insisted on plenty of coverage (that is, great variety of shots that he could choose from in editing a film)." See Harry Tytle, *One of Walt's Boys: An Insider's Account of Disney's Golden Years* (Royal Oak, MI: Airtight Seels Allied Production,

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Television reinforced Disney's authorship of his studio's filmic representations of the American Revolution. Although his films were not explicitly political they nonetheless reflected his particular understanding of the American past, present and future.[16] Disney sought to utilize his studio's movies in the struggle against domestic foes – in his eyes, Communists – by championing and strengthening what he saw as core American values.[17] In the spring of 1942 Disney addressed an audience during the intermission at the New York Metropolitan Opera House on the subject of "Our American Culture" by means of a radio broadcast from Los Angeles. A century and a half after Crèvecoeur's exploration of the unique democratic culture of "the American, this new man", Disney addressed an audience in a seat of high culture and spoke about a distinctly democratic American culture which belonged to all Americans and which expressed American society and

1997), quoted in Michael Barrier, *The Animated Man: A Life of Walt Disney* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 263–64. See also David Eldridge, *Hollywood's History Films* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2006), 130–32; Schaffer.

[16] Watts, *The Magic Kingdon*, 70, 100; Shortsleeve, 18–19.

[17] The 1941 strike at the Disney studios by artists protesting against the lack of a union and gross inequalities in the payment of salaries and bonuses had a profound influence on Disney, who was "positively convinced that Communistic agitation, leadership, and activities have brought about this strike." Walt Disney, "To My Employees on Strike," *Hollywood Reporter*, 2 July 1941, reprinted in Tom Sito, *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 137. In 1944 Disney took a leading role in the creation of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (MPA), serving as the group's first vice president. Despite the fact that the United States was in the midst of a war against Axis fascism, the MPA placed Communism first in the list of enemies who "seek by subversive means" to undermine "the liberty and freedom which generations before us have fought to create and preserve." "Statement of Principles," the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, Society of Independent Motion Picture Producers Research Database, at www.cobbles.com/simpp_archive/huac_alliance.htm, accessed 18 March 2015. Disney took an even more active stand when the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) travelled to Hollywood for a series of hearings intended to gauge Communist influences at work in the motion picture industry. Giving testimony before HUAC, Disney repeated his belief that the strike in his studio had been inspired and supported by Communists. When asked his opinion of the Communist Party, Disney described it "as an un-American thing." Testimony of Walter E. Disney before HUAC,' 24 Oct. 1947, Committee on Un-American Activities, House of Representatives, *Hearings Regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry*, 80th Congress, 1st Session, 23–24 Oct. 1947 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1947), digitized by Internet Archive, at https://archive.org/stream/hearingsregardin1947aunit/hearingsregardin1947aunit_djvu.txt, accessed 18 March 2015. See also Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 452–53, 535; Schickel, 191, 256; Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 204–25, 240–88.

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values.[18] While Disney would never identify strongly with particular political parties he articulated a deeply felt commitment to the defence of American values, and he did not hesitate to deploy his cultural productions to that end. His films about American history – and particularly those about the birth of the United States – provided Disney with an opportunity to celebrate and confirm his interpretation and understanding of essential American values of individual rights and liberties in a democratic community.

While Disney's own immediate past and present influenced his understanding and helped shape his presentation of the American past, *Johnny Tremain* and *The Swamp Fox* were nonetheless historical films; that is, attempts to communicate the people and events of the past to present-day viewers. Filmmakers' need to entertain audiences and realize a profit may appear to be in conflict with academic standards of historical scholarship, and even when focussed on the same historical subject, academic and filmic histories often appear dramatically different in content and approach. Academic histories tend to slowly influence widely dispersed audiences, as academics, students and interested members of the public read and assimilate the often complicated mass of information and analysis contained in a single book. In stark contrast, film and television histories can reach large numbers of people at the same time, and may thus shape broad popular understanding of the past far more quickly. Makers of historical films and television series can use background, setting, language and acting in order to almost instantly communicate information about and perspective on particular historical periods and events. While academic histories tend to separate discussion of different themes and issues such as race, gender and politics, the makers of historical films are able to bring these together in a single scene. In one short scene, film can simultaneously relay the conflicting perspectives of different characters, such as a British soldier, a Patriot leader and an enslaved African American.[19]

[18] J. Hector Crèvecoeur, *Letters from An American Farmer, Describing Certain Provincial Institutions, Manners, and Customs, And Conveying Some Idea of the State of the People of North America* (Philadelphia: Matthew Carey, 1793; first published 1782), 46; Disney, "Our American Culture," quoted in Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 162.

[19] There is a rich and growing literature on film and history. See, for example, Robert Burgoyne, *The Hollywood Historical Film* (London: Blackwell, 2008); James Chapman, *Film and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Chopra-Gant; Robert Sklar, "Scofflaws and the Historian-Cop," *Reviews in American History*, 25, 2 (1997), 346–50; Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*; Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*; Robert A. Rosenstone, "History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film," *American Historical Review*, 93, 5 (1988), 1173–85; John E. O'Connor, "History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past," *American Historical Review*, 93, 5 (1988), 1200–9; O'Connor, *Image as Artifact*; Leger Grindon, *Shadows on the Past: Studies in the Historical Fiction Film* (Philadelphia: Temple

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And yet, for all of this complexity, historical films tend to reduce complicated historical narratives to narrowly focussed linear narratives. Films translate great historical moments into individual, personal and often quite emotional scenes, communicating with audiences through the actions and experiences of no more than a handful of individuals, often separated into heroes and villains. A good academic work of history on the American Revolution will attempt to transcend such relatively simple linear narrative by conveying the complexity of many interacting characters and situations, with hundreds of characters from George III and politicians in London, to local leaders in all of the thirteen American colonies, to numerous soldiers and civilians on both sides. In such works, few characters appear absolutely heroic or villainous. Such complexity is impossible in a film such as *Johnny Tremain*, which distils much of that complex and far-ranging narrative into a story of the interactions of about six characters in and around Boston over a relatively brief period. It is extremely hard for writers of academic histories to communicate as much, as quickly, as filmmakers do, and so in this sense filmic histories may appear more complex than written histories, communicating a great deal in less than two hours. On the other hand, the deep research and the slow and careful building of evidence, argument and analysis gives academic histories a range and a depth that are impossible to achieve in films, which helps explain why many academics tend to focus on the shortcomings of historical films. But rather than simply dismissing Disney's mid-twentieth-century filmic histories of the American Revolution as failing to adhere to the standards and conventions of academic history, this essay explores their relation to American Revolutionary historiography, and contends that despite some significant failings these histories were able to present a sometimes quite complex view of the Revolution which anticipated elements of the New Social History of the later 1960s and 1970s.

Filmic representations of the past can combine a great many different themes and elements to quite powerful effect. Thus the interaction of characters and the drama they enact in a single scene might, for example, illustrate how race, class and gender informed political life. Academic histories of the American Revolution produced during the 1950s and early 1960s seldom addressed these issues, and most works, including popular histories and school texts, tended to focus all but exclusively on a traditional military and constitutional chronology. At their best, Disney's films were thus able to

University Press, 1994); Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002); Toplin, *History by Hollywood*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817000391 Published online by Cambridge University Press

transcend contemporary academic work in conveying something of the complexity of the late eighteenth-century past, often in quite subtle and nuanced ways. While an academic work might focus on the significance of race in a particular time and place, a film has the potential to show racial power relations in that time and place as they worked within and in relation to other political, social and cultural elements.[20]

In assessing historical films one must consider not just the factual accuracy of plot line and characters, but also the ways in which the history is presented. Often authenticity in the details – in sets, costumes and so forth – is matched by imaginative leaps in the development of characters and plot lines. Thus historical films can simultaneously be both false and true, yet the blending of these elements of narrative, dialogue, costumes and set design may nonetheless inform understanding of the past by means of cinematography, editing, music, sound, performance styles and direct interventions by the filmmaker (as in a textual or spoken introduction or explanation of what is being presented). In the television presentation of "The Liberty Story," *Johnny Tremain* and *The Swamp Fox* Disney not only used on-screen text but also himself appeared in various settings in order to introduce his studio's American Revolutionary films. Often using props such as costumes or historical maps and documents, Disney claimed that extensive research rendered these films authentic histories. Disney's often none-too-subtle presentation of his historical films, and the aesthetic and narrative power of the dramatizations themselves, can have a powerful and seductive effect, and the viewer comes away with a stronger sense of the nature and meaning of particular aspects of America's struggle for independence and nationhood. Watched on Friday and Sunday evenings by families all around the United States, Disney's American Revolutionary films helped shape mid-twentieth-century Americans' understanding of the founding of their nation.[21]

While many academic historians eschew biography in favour of emphasis on larger social, economic and political forces, films tend to render history less complex by focussing on particular individuals in dramatic narratives that can bring larger themes and issues to life. Films tend to personalize and dramatize history, and the life story of an individual – the various problems that person encounters and how he or she addresses them – become inextricably

[20] Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 11–49, 154–64; Marcus, *Celluloid Blackboard*, 5–6; Holdzkom, 187.

[21] Sklar, "Scofflaws and the Historian-Cop"; Eldridge, 128–33; Ray B. Browne, "Foreword," in Peter C. Rollins, ed., *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), ix; Natalie Zemon Davis, "Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead: Film and the Challenge of Authenticity," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*, 8, 3 (1988), 269–83.

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bound up in the larger historical issues of the day. In many cases these are real historical actors – such as Francis Marion in *The Swamp Fox* and Paul Revere or Samuel Adams in *Johnny Tremain*. But filmmakers such as Disney did not hesitate to utilize fictional characters – including key individuals like Johnny Tremain and Mary Videau and the enslaved African Americans Oscar and Delia in *The Swamp Fox* – to carry not just the narrative but the interpretive weight of these histories. Johnny Tremain's experiences, and his journey from uninterested spectator to active revolutionary, thus serve to communicate a larger story of how and why the residents of Boston became revolutionaries. Both Johnny Tremain and Francis Marion appear as the symbolic incarnations of united Patriot communities, the embodiment of the values and promise of the American Revolution. Thus, for example, a director may show a close-up of a hero's face at a key moment in order to represent a range of factors. The meaning and significance of, for example, what is presented as violent Loyalist treason against the American Patriot cause can be conveyed in the most immediate and powerful fashion by a measured close-up of Francis Marion's facial expressions as portrayed by Leslie Nielsen appearing unshaven, hollow-eyed and haunted following the murder of his nephew.[22]

For all that filmic histories may work as a means of enhancing understanding of the past, they have significant weaknesses and limitations. While at their best films can communicate depth and complexity, they may just as often appear relatively simplistic and shallow. Lead characters often appear more as two-dimensional symbols than as complex and often contradictory human beings, and films cannot convey depth of character as well as longer and more deeply researched academic work. Similarly, the dramatic needs of a short television series episode or even a longer movie mean that complex historical chronologies often are reduced by filmmakers to relatively simple linear narratives. At their best, academic histories convey a greater sense of contingency and increase understanding of the multiple narrative strands of great events. While both academic historians and filmmakers are trying to re-create the past, they often do so in quite different ways: Disney's filmic histories of the American Revolution were, like many of his studio's films, quasi-mythical morality tales presented through historically informative entertainment. His clear desire to present a certain kind of story about the founding of the

[22] Opening scene of "Day of Reckoning," Episode 4 of *The Swamp Fox* (dir. Louis King), first broadcast 8 Jan. 1960 as Episode 5 of Series 6 of *Walt Disney Presents*. Holdzkom, 185; Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 57–60; Noel Carroll, "The Power of Movies," *Daedalus*, 114, 4 (1985), 79–103, 82.

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American republic and what he saw as the values that it represented shaped the stories that Disney's American Revolutionary movies told, and the nature of the characters who carried these stories.[23]

Johnny Tremain and *The Swamp Fox* align with the major historiographical debates over the American Revolution in significant ways. While many Americans might have had a limited knowledge or understanding of the debate between Progressive and Consensus historians over the causes and nature of the American Revolution, we can see that Disney's productions raised and reflected some of the core arguments in these debates, giving viewers ways of conceptualizing and understanding the conflict that had created their nation. During the early twentieth century, Progressive historians such as Carl Becker and Charles Beard had written histories showing American leaders of the Revolutionary era to have been all too human, with vested interests and personal ambitions and objectives. The Progressive historians saw in the late eighteenth century a titanic battle between democracy and economic privilege. In Becker's famous formulation, the American Revolution was first a battle for home rule, but then, and just as importantly, an internal struggle over "who shall rule at home," while Charles Beard saw the Federal Constitution as the work of a property-owning elite who sought a strong national government to protect their interests and ward off social and political radicalism. Shaped by the great economic and political struggles within late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American society, the Progressive histories of the American Revolution made conflict within American society central to the history of the American Revolution and to the shape of the republic it produced. To the Progressive historians, the ideology and rhetoric of liberty and equality were often little more than a smokescreen generated by Patriot elites in order to provide cover for their pursuit of economic and political self-interested objectives.[24]

But during the Red Scare of the 1920s and again during the Cold War of the 1950s and early 1960s, such histories were deemed inaccurate and

[23] Rosenstone, "History in Images/History in Words," 1173–74; Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, 12. For a discussion of the role of myth in the telling and understanding of history in America see Warren Sussman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 9–11; and Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), 3–45; Stuart Airlie, "Strange Eventful Histories: The Middle Ages in the Cinema," in Peter Linehan and Janet L. Nelson, eds., *The Medieval World* (London: Routledge, 2001), 163–83, 163–64.

[24] Carl L. Becker, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760–1776* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960; first published 1909), 22; Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the American Constitution* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1913).

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unpatriotic, and a less conflicted and more consensual American history held sway, portraying the Patriots as virtually flawless men of ideals and principles.[25] In the context of a Cold War against Communist states which promised improvement and equality for all mankind, many American historians looked to the American founding era in order to define and explain what America stood for and the advantages of an American way of life. Edmund S. Morgan articulated this in works such as the neo-Whiggish *The Birth of the American Republic* (1956), which was the best-selling history of the American Revolution most likely to be read by students in school and university in the decade or more following its publication. One review noted that Morgan had rejected the Progressive historians' "dislike of plutocracy," and that his "example of revisionism, written in the flush times of mid-twentieth-century capitalism … has taken on the brilliant hue of the era of Eisenhower prosperity."[26] Morgan deals with the actual conflict of the War of Independence in only ten pages, focussing instead on explaining that the Patriots took clear and consistent stands against oppressive British imperial government, and then utilized the ideological foundations of their opposition to create a new republican system of government. In *The Genius of American Politics* (1953), Daniel J. Boorstin went so far as to deny that there was anything politically or ideologically radical about the American Revolution, which he interpreted as no more than a vigorous defence of the traditional rights of Britons.[27] Consensus history deradicalized the American Revolution, reflecting the social and cultural conservatism of the 1950s by imagining a stable, shared and unifying American past.[28]

[25] Benjamin Fine, "Textbook Censors Alarm Educators," *New York Times*, 25 May 1952, 1; New York State Assembly bill on history, 1923, quoted in Gerard Giordano, *Twentieth-Century Textbook Wars: A History of Advocacy and Opposition* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 30. See also Joseph Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation: Conflicts over American History Textbooks from the Civil War to the Present* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

[26] Edmund S. Morgan, *The Birth of the American Republic, 1763–89* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956); Max Savelle, review of Morgan, *Birth of the American Republic, William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 14, 4 (1957), 618. Morgan's book has never gone out of print, and is currently in its fourth edition.

[27] Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953).

[28] The Consensus school was first identified and delineated by John Higham; see John Higham, "The Cult of the 'American Consensus': Homogenizing Our History," *Commentary*, 1 Jan. 1959, 93–100; Higham, "The Construction of American History," in Higham, ed., *The Reconstruction of American History* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1962), 9–24; Higham, *History: Professional Scholarship in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965). For a more recent assessment of Consensus history see Novick, *That Noble Dream*.

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Disney's films reflected both Progressive and Consensus perspectives on the American Revolution. Neither *Johnny Tremain* nor *The Swamp Fox* shy away from presenting deep-seated tension and violent conflict within late eighteenth-century American society, yet at the same time Disney lauds the power of communities united in defence of shared values and objectives. While greed and ambition motivate some of Disney's characters, others adhere to principle whatever the cost. By their very nature these films were a form of social history, and it was important to Disney that Tremain, Marion and those around them were ordinary Americans recognizable to audiences. When in 1958 Disney introduced the first half of *Johnny Tremain* on his *Walt Disney's Disneyland* television series, he did so in striking fashion, walking through the Disney studio wardrobe department as actors were dressing themselves in late eighteenth-century American costumes. He began by identifying some of the "costumes of many famous men whose names are associated with the age old fight for freedom in the world," going from Charlemagne to Simon Bolivar to General Lafayette. But Disney then changed tack, asking,

> What about the nameless ones, the unsung heroes? The fierce desire for independence burning in the hearts of these unknown patriots made the deeds of our great men possible. This wardrobe department would be incomplete without the costumes of these little people … History records the names of the great men and their deeds, but history too would be incomplete without the stories of these simple people. People who are ready to fight and die, if they must, to defend the right to live and work and worship as free men and women. This program is about the nameless unsung patriots, whose hunger for freedom made possible the independence that is enjoyed in America today.[29]

This was a striking framing device which set the tone for the entire first half of *Johnny Tremain*. By focussing on the actual production of a historical movie, the research and the costumes and a desire for authenticity, Disney projected himself and his studio as historically responsible and the following film as a legitimate historical work which, in his eyes, told the "real" story by focussing on ordinary people, albeit in the case of Johnny Tremain a fictional one. Disney's films thus anticipated the social histories of the 1970s, making the great events of the American founding era more real by showing them from the perspective of ordinary Americans who were almost completely absent from the historiography of the day. Disney ended his introduction by announcing his movie as "the story of one of these unsung Patriots, Johnny Tremain,

[29] Walt Disney, introductory remarks at beginning of episode one of *Johnny Tremain* (dir. Robert Stevenson, Walt Disney Productions, 1957), broadcast 21 Nov. 1958 as Episode 8, Series 5 of *Walt Disney's Disneyland*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817000391 Published online by Cambridge University Press

one of the little people who took part in the stirring moments on the frontier of human liberty."

On the one hand Disney was harking back to the Progressive historians but he was also anticipating the New Social Historians of the 1970s who privileged ordinary men and women of different races in their telling of the American Revolutionary story. *Johnny Tremain* prefigured Alfred F. Young's monumental article about the experiences and role of a common Boston shoemaker caught up in the conflict with Britain. George Robert Twelves Hewes – like the fictional Johnny Tremain – was a working man, a craftsman with little interest in politics, but both were drawn into the conflict in Boston by a growing awareness of a larger ideological significance to British actions and colonial resistance. The real Hewes and the fictional Tremain each participated in the Boston Tea Party, working alongside the disguised leaders of the resistance movement.[30]

Disney may well have had a range of motives for presenting the story of the American Revolution in terms of the experiences of a common man. During his introductory remarks Disney explicitly identified the late eighteenth-century American Revolutionary struggle as "typical of the continuing fight for human liberty everywhere in the world." If ordinary Americans had a role in defending liberty in the 1770s, so too, thought Disney, did ordinary Americans of the mid-twentieth century need to stand firm. But Disney's celebration of the common man pre-dated this kind of political message, and was a constant theme in his cartoons and historical movies alike. However, the social-historical focus of *Johnny Tremain* and *The Swamp Fox* on ordinary Patriots did not fully align with either Progressive or New Social History, for Disney did not present his ordinary heroes as social or political radicals. In fact, while elements of Progressive or New Social History were hinted at by Disney's focus on nonelite everyday heroes, Consensus history dominated in his assessment of the ideas that motivated these Patriots, namely a desire to preserve their liberties as freeborn Englishmen. As he introduced television viewers to the first episode of *Johnny Tremain*, Disney declared that "the fight for human liberty began when King George III forgot or ignored the fact that the American colonists were freeborn Englishmen with Englishmen's hard-won rights."

Disney's focus on these traditional ideological causes of the Revolution corresponded with his movies' apparent weakening of the radical motifs of the

[30] Alfred F. Young, "George Robert Twelves Hewes (1742–1840): A Boston Shoemaker and the Memory of the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 38, 4 (1981), 561–623, later expanded and published as Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999).

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Patriots. The Liberty Tree, both as an actual meeting site and as a symbol, represented the more popular, radical elements of the Patriot cause. Thus, for example, Boston's Liberty Tree was the meeting point for a crowd of artisans and working men who went beyond the wishes of the Patriot leadership in destroying the office of the nominated stamp collector and the home of Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson, expressing popular anger at local officials apparently growing wealthier through their application of British taxes while ordinary Bostonians faced underemployment and economic hardship. In Hutchinson's words, the city of Boston was "under awe of this mob" of working men.[31]

But in Disney's movies, and later in Liberty Square in Disney World, the Liberty Tree held none of this radical Revolutionary import. During "The Liberty Story," scenes of the Boston Tea Party from *Johnny Tremain* were followed by images of Bostonians moving from the tea ships in Boston Harbour to the Liberty Tree, which was illuminated by numerous lamps suspended from its branches. Beneath the tree Bostonians gathered and sang a song about the Liberty Tree. American Patriots wrote a number of songs and poems about the Liberty Tree, including one by Thomas Paine, but in *Johnny Tremain* actors and actresses sung a song written for the movie by Tom Blackburn and George Bruns.[32] The song featured throughout the movie, but despite the focus on one of the American Revolution's most potent symbols of democratic radicalism, this new song was bland and generic. Singers promised nothing more dramatic than to "water down its roots with tea" and to "Hang the lamps of freedom, Boys, high on the Liberty Tree." The chorus enthused,

> It's a tall old tree and a strong old tree,
> And we are the Sons
> Yes we are the Sons
> The Sons of Liberty.[33]

The scene from *Johnny Tremain* of Bostonians singing beneath the Liberty Tree then cut to a close-up of a medallion bearing the words "SONS OF

[31] Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of the Province of Massachusetts Bay: From 1749 to 1774* (London: John Murray, 1828), 125. For a discussion of the Liberty Tree in Boston during the Stamp Act crisis see Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 22–25. The best study of the radical significance of the Liberty Tree is Alfred F. Young, *Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 325–93.

[32] Thomas Paine, "The Liberty Tree," in Frank Moore, *Songs and Ballads of the American Revolution* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1856), 18–20.

[33] Tom Blackburn and George Bruns, "Liberty Tree" (Wonderland Music, 1956), "Johnny Tremain" (1957).

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LIBERTY" and an image of the Liberty Tree, before panning out to show that the medallion was in Disney's hand. Speaking to viewers, Disney made the dubious claim that these medallions were 'the secret identification badge of the Sons of Liberty', and during the movie *Johnny Tremain*'s friend Rab showed Johnny just such a badge. Disney was standing beside sketches of the Liberty Street area he proposed to add to Disneyland. When Liberty Square was later added to Disney World, the illuminated Liberty Tree functioned as a visually impressive centrepiece, yet as in *Johnny Tremain* the radical significance of this symbol had been submerged in a generic symbolic representation of liberty.

The tension between Disney's focus on common folk and his desire to present a consensual and non-radical American Revolution can also be seen in his approach to slavery. Indeed, slavery barely featured in *Johnny Tremain*, despite the fact that by the mid-eighteenth century enslaved Africans comprised nearly 10 percent of Boston's population.[34] While the Patriots appear as an egalitarian community, it is the elite Loyalist Jonathan Lyte who is portrayed as the only man to own an enslaved boy who appears in an elaborate livery to compliment his master's aristocratic fashions.

When Lyte unjustly accuses the impoverished and injured Tremain of theft the boy is supported by the Sons of Liberty. It was unlikely that a lawyer such as Josiah Quincy would have represented an unemployed boy accused of theft. "I'm a nobody," observed Tremain, surprised that one of Boston's greatest lawyers is representing him gratis. Quincy responded, "We're all nobodies when we're standing alone," neatly summarizing the way in which Disney presented the Sons of Liberty and the Patriot cause in general as an idealized form of nascent American society and community, white and unified. Only the Loyalist Lyte, standing apart from the Patriots, owns an enslaved person.

It was impossible for Disney to marginalize black characters to this degree in *The Swamp Fox*. The series was set in Revolutionary South Carolina, where by 1769 almost eighty thousand enslaved people constituted as much as two-thirds of the South Carolina population. Indeed, in the low-country areas surrounding Charleston where the series was set, enslaved blacks outnumbered whites by at least, and often more than, three to one. In St. John's Berkeley, which lay between Charleston and the Williamsburg district in which Marion and his men were most active, seventy-six adult white men were in 1762 outnumbered by more than a thousand enslaved adult African Americans.[35] Yet despite the overwhelming presence of enslaved African

[34] Jared Ross Hardesty, *Unfreedom: Slavery and Dependence in Eighteenth-Century Boston* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 22.

[35] Rachel Klein estimated the enslaved population of South Carolina in 1768 at 82,728. See Rachel N. Klein, *Unification of a Slave State: The Rise of the Planter Class in the South Carolina Backcountry, 1760–1808* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,

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Americans in late eighteenth-century South Carolina, most historians of the 1950s and early 1960s paid relatively little attention to the experiences and significance of the enslaved in their histories of the American Revolution.[36] It has only been during the last quarter-century or so that historians have begun exploring and highlighting the experiences of the enslaved and building up an understanding of how intertwined were pro-slavery sentiment and support for independence.[37]

The Cold War provided a modern context and significance for Disney's representation of race in Revolutionary-era South Carolina. The Soviet Union offered an alternative path for human progress, and the clash between American and Soviet ideologies was at its height in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The "Kitchen Debate" between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet premier Nikita Krushchev in July 1959 sybolized the conflict, with the two men focussing on domestic life and kitchen appliances as they argued about which nation and which political ideology created a better life for its citizens. The American civil rights movement was thus more than an

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1990), 20, Table 2. Peter Coclanis has estimated that the total population of South Carolinain 1770 was just over 124,000. See Peter A. Coclanis, *The Shadow of a Dream: Economic Life and Death in the South Carolina Low Country, 1670–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 84, Tables 3–15. The population estimates for St. John's Berkeley are drawn from David Morton Knepper, "The Political Structure of Colonial South Carolina, 1743–1776," PhD dissertation, University of Virginia, 1971, 36.

[36] Some key works in African American history were published in the mid-twentieth century, such as Carter G. Woodson, *The Negro in Our History* (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1922); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America* (Boston, MA: Stratford Company, 1924); Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935); John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of American Negroes* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1947). However, works of these kinds were somewhat marginalized in many mid-twentieth-century histories of the American Revolution, which continued to regard the struggle for independence as an exclusively white story. The first edition of Edmund S. Morgan's *The Birth of the American Republic* was probably the best-selling survey of the American Revolution between the mid-1950s and late-1960s. In it Morgan treated the struggle for independence as an ideological battle over the rights of Englishmen, and it is a story almost entirely populated by white actors. This approach was continued in Bernard Bailyn's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); and the sophisticated and nuanced analyses of ideas and language framed in entirely white terms of Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, Press, 1969).

[37] Robert Olwell has argued persuasively that South Carolina whites who were determined to defend their freedom to own and profit from slaves were driven into the Patriot camp by a growing fear that Britain was encouraging slave resistance and rebellion in order to maintain control of the southern colonies. See Robert Olwell, "'Domestick Enemies': Slavery and Political Independence in South Carolina, May 1775–March 1776," *Journal of Southern History*, 55, 1 (1989), 21–48, and Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740–1790* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

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embarrassment to the United States, for it suggested that the United states was riven by racism and inequality. The portrayal of African Americans in *The Swamp Fox* must be seen in this context. Patriots are presented as an interracial alliance, and it is Loyalists and the British who are seen to be racist, and to treat enslaved people poorly. If the American Revolution and its ideals were to inspire and motivate American viewers in the mid-twentieth century, this had to be a past they could be proud of, and a past which pointed towards a better future. Steven Watts has described Walt Disney's productions of this era as presenting a Cold War "libertarian populism" which lauded self-sufficient ordinary Americans resisting the encroachments of power-hungry oppressors. Both *The Swamp Fox* and *Johnny Tremain* conform to this approach, and as well as celebrating individualism, democracy and the American way of life, the former in particular showed African Americans as fully assimilated within and committed to the American republic and its goals.[38]

For all that it was motivated in part by a Cold War-era need to defend American society, the Disney studio's development of African Americans as key characters in South Carolina's American Revolution nonetheless represented a significant development, not least because it occurred in a period when there were few key roles for black actors and actresses in most television programmes. On occasion in *The Swamp Fox* black characters perform racially stereotypical roles, playing simpleminded characters, but this is usually in order to fool British officers or Loyalists who simply accept that the person is inferior and less able. Viewers are thus party to a joke, for they know how able and intelligent were the black characters who deceived the enemy by feigning stupidity or slowness. Thus, for example, Joseph smuggles Marion and his men into Charleston in a hay wagon, and he gets the wagon through British lines by pretending to be an inept and foolish slave, rendering himself foolish in the eyes of British soldiers.[39]

To the Revolutionary hero Marion and to his lover Mary Videau, black characters appeared to be dignified and self-possessed friends and colleagues, and far from the subordinate and comic caricatures seen by British soldiers and Loyalists. To a modern audience watching in 1960, these black characters

[38] Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 288. See also Holdzkom, "A Past to Make Us Proud."

[39] "A Case of Treason," Episode 6 (dir. Louis King), first broadcast 22 Jan. 1960 as Episode 16 of Series 6 of *Walt Disney Presents*. For more on Disney's portrayal of black characters see Douglas Brode, *Multiculturalism and the Mouse: Race and Sex in Disney Entertainment* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 68–72. For a more general overview of the television and film characterization of blacks see Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum Press, 2006; first published 1973), 57.

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appear as committed and equal members of the Patriot cause, as American heroes. But this presentation of black people could be achieved only by ignoring the historical reality of the slavery and racism that were integral to South Carolina society in the 1770s. The ways in which *The Swamp Fox* humanized black characters all but obliterated this historical record, placing black characters like Joseph and Delia into situations and relationships with white Americans that were historically impossible. Oscar appears as a black man who regularly accompanied and supported Marion, while Oscar's wife Delia effectively runs the household of Marion's brother Gabe. Both Oscar and Delia appear as friends and colleagues of Marion and his family, and the Swamp Fox's men treat Oscar as an equal in their struggle against British and Loyalist forces. Yet what *The Swamp Fox* never acknowledges is that Oscar and Delia would have been the enslaved property of the Marion family, and it would have been unthinkable for South Carolina whites to treat these enslaved people as equals. On Snow Island, the location of Marion's secret base, Oscar often acts as Marion's deputy and on occasion he gives orders and leads groups of white men, something that would have been impossible in Revolutionary-era South Carolina.

Disney does show racist attitudes towards black characters, but while Marion and the Patriots regarded Oscar and others as fellow Patriots it was the British and Loyalists in Disney's American Revolution who appeared condescendingly and even violently racist. Marion and the Patriots looked forward to the America of the 1950s and 1960s when civil rights appeared poised to acknowledge African Americans as full and equal beneficiaries of the rights and liberties secured by victory in the American Revolution, while Loyalists (and to a lesser extent Britons) symbolized the violent racism of a late eighteenth-century slave society. In the third episode of the series, Marion's lover Mary Videau sent messages to Marion by way of her enslaved houseboy Toby. Loyalists captured Toby and beat and then killed him as they attempted to find out what he was doing. The British colonel Tarlton described Toby's death to Mary with no thought for Toby's father Joseph, who was driving the carriage. Joseph pulled the horses up, and, distraught at the news, lamented "Toby was a good boy, they had no right to kill him." Annoyed, Tarlton treated Joseph as a slave, ordering him to continue driving and only to "[s]peak when you are spoken to." This scene was shot in ways which ensured the audience identified with Joseph. At first the camera focusses only on Tarlton and Mary Videau as they converse, but just before Tarlton reveals that Toby has been killed, the focus changes to a close-up of Joseph. While viewers hear Tarlton's words it is Joseph's reactions that they see and feel. The humanity of this father, and the inhumanity of Tarlton, are emphasized by Disney's choice of shot. Disney's modus operandi was to have directors shoot scenes in different ways and from different vantage points, and he

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would then choose the shots he most liked and put them together to craft the film in the way he wanted. Clearly, Disney wanted viewers to empathize with this black character.[40]

In South Carolina both Loyalists and Patriots were racist and slaveholders. In fact it was the British who had promised freedom to enslaved men who abandoned their Patriot masters, and the British Army utilized black soldiers who secured freedom by serving in the southern campaign. In contrast, Marion and other white southern planter Patriots owned slaves and supported the institution. These revolutionaries were fighting for a range of freedoms, including the right to own slaves and control the profits that these bound people generated. Indeed, in South Carolina in the 1770s enslaved people were property, to be bought, sold and inherited. Enslaved status was integral to their own and white people's understanding and experience of the society that African Americans inhabited. Yet Disney's telling of the story all but completely ignores this basic reality. It is the Patriots who are on the just side of the race issue, while the Loyalists and British are callous and racially insensitive. When Mary Videau lamented that she was responsible for Toby's death and that "it wasn't Toby's war," the Marion family's slave Delia responded, "You're wrong, Miss Mary, it was Toby's war just like it's my war, just like it's all decent people's war."[41] Again, the choice of shot and its framing were significant. Mary sat in a chair looking small and defeated, her voice quiet. Delia stood beside her, strong, powerful and impassioned, gesturing with her hands and dominating the scene. Both dialogue and shot belonged to her, and in just a few seconds the Revolutionary cause becomes identified with black liberty and equality. Toby and Delia transcended their race and enslaved status, becoming members of the Patriot community of "decent people" who waged war against Britain to preserve liberty. In a remarkable piece of historical revisionism, Disney had completely reversed the historical situation: the enslaved in South Carolina appear as firmly committed to an American cause which is as much theirs as it is a white cause, with the British and Loyalists appearing as the oppressive enemy of both blacks and whites.[42]

[40] "Tory Vengeance," Episode 3 (dir. Louis King), first broadcast 1 Jan. 1960 as Episode 13, Series 6 of *Walt Disney Presents*.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Just as slavery was largely absent from the white Patriot world of Frances Marion and his South Carolina Patriots, so too was acknowledgement of its significance in the ideological foundations of the revolutionary cause. Historians like Edmund Morgan have elaborated on the ways in which racial slavery and ideas about rights and liberty were symbiotically "intertwined and interdependent." Morgan and others argued that elite white planters could safely champion political rights and even equality in a society in which the vast mass of labourers were enslaved noncitizens, and that this meant that racism and slavery were essential foundations of the republican ideology of the American South. See Edmund S. Morgan,

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The Swamp Fox is deeply flawed in its presentation of slavery and of the depth of racist sentiment and practice among South Carolina whites. But in anachronistically presenting black characters as committed supporters of American independence and the individual rights and freedoms it represented, Disney was affirming a different kind of historical truth, a different way of remembering and representing the American Revolution that anticipated the historiography that would develop from the 1960s forward. This work would focus on how some African Americans, and some white supporters, would spend the next two centuries pushing to achieve full and equal enjoyment of civil rights by all Americans, regardless of race. During the first half of the twentieth century African Americans rarely appeared as significant characters in much academic history, but from the 1960s forward a wealth of history has enhanced awareness of how even enslaved black Americans were more than simply victims and that they sought to exercise control over elements of their lives. Disney's *The Swamp Fox* was produced during the transitional period between these two different historiographies, and while it ignored the reality of racism and slavery amongst South Carolina's revolutionaries, the series did show black characters not as victims but as actors in the great drama of American independence, as men and women with eyes on the prize of rights and freedoms in a new nation.[43] In *The Swamp Fox*, rich and poor, and black and white Americans all appeared as Americans who identified themselves with the liberties and freedoms promised by the Patriot cause, goals with which television audiences during the civil rights and Cold War eras

"Slavery and Freedom: The American Paradox," *Journal of American History*, 59, 1 (1972), 5–29, 28. See also Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975). However, these ideas were far from fully developed when the Disney studios produced *The Swamp Fox*.

[43] The 1960s were tremendously important in the development of African American historiography. The rise of the New Social History and its emphasis on the histories of ordinary Americans coincided with the civil rights movement, black pride, and black power, and the development of courses and programmes in black studies in American universities. Major works published in the later 1960s and 1970s included George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper Row, 1971); Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968); Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1974); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974); John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Pantheon, 1976). For an analysis of the development of this new historiography see Robert L. Harris Jr., "Coming of Age: The Transformation of Afro-American Historiography," *Journal of Negro History*, 67, 2 (1982), 107–21.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817000391 Published online by Cambridge University Press

could readily identify. The struggle for rights and liberty appeared so self-evident that it required little explanation or justification. Thus, despite its anachronistic and ahistorical quality, the enslaved Delia's affirmation that she and other black Americans shared equally in the Patriot cause appeared right and just to viewers in the civil rights era.

The Swamp Fox also presented a fictional white female character as an active participant in the Revolutionary struggle. Mary Videau appears in the first episode as the daughter of a Loyalist planter, and in the second episode a Patriot crowd sets out to burn down her family home in retaliation for the Loyalists' destruction of Patriot property. With great courage Mary confronts the mob, declaring, "I'm as much an American as any of you, perhaps more." It is a powerful statement of political identity, by a person who has made their own choice to commit to the Revolutionary cause. What Marion, the mob and even the viewer do not yet know is that the Videau family are in fact Patriots who at Mary's instigation are posing as Loyalists in order to glean information from British Army officers for Mary to pass on to Marion.[44] The final three episodes of the series are focussed as much on the fictional woman Mary Videau as on the ostensibly real Francis Marion. Captured by the British and threatened with execution as a spy, Mary refuses to betray Marion and his men. Furthermore, she then contrives to escape and in the process liberates imprisoned Patriot soldiers who arrive just in time to save Marion's depleted force from dissolution. What Mary's character communicates to viewers is that ordinary women could and did participate in the Revolutionary cause, sometimes at great personal risk, and that they identified with the ideological objectives of the cause. It would be another twenty years before academic historians would begin to reach the same conclusions.[45]

By showing poor and wealthy white women and African Americans as sharing a belief in the Revolutionary cause, Disney communicated the cooperative spirit of united Patriot communities as a major theme in both *The Swamp Fox* and *Johnny Tremain*. As shown earlier, community was highly significant to Disney, and in some ways the leading Patriot character in *Johnny Tremain* is not Tremain himself, who at first was uninterested in the Revolutionary cause,

[44] "Brother against Brother," Episode 2 (dir. Harry Keller), first broadcast 30 Oct. 1959 as Episode 5, Series 6 of *Walt Disney Presents*; Disney, introduction to "Day of Reckoning."

[45] "A Case of Treason"; "A Woman's Courage," Episode 7 (dir. Lewis R. Foster), first broadcast 8 Jan. 1961 as Episode 11 of Series 7 of *Walt Disney Presents*; "Horses for Greene," Episode 8 (dir. Lewis R. Foster), first broadcast 15 Jan. 1961 as Episode 12 of Series 7 of *Walt Disney Presents*. The first major works on American women of the Revolutionary era were Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980); and Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1980).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817000391 Published online by Cambridge University Press

but rather the community of the Sons of Liberty. This group is seen as spanning class and supporting fellow Patriots, including Johnny when he is unjustly imprisoned and tried, and as working together to preserve the rights of members of their society. Leaders like Marion appear to embody the core values of the community rather than transcend them, and indeed leaders are dependent upon those who serve under them. For all his tactical brilliance, Francis Marion was portrayed by Disney as utterly dependent upon his mixed-race band of Patriot freedom fighters. The fourth episode, "Day of Reckoning," saw Marion dishevelled, unkempt and disoriented by the death of his nephew, young Gabe, and Joseph eager to avenge his son Toby: both young Gabe and Toby had been murdered by the Loyalist Amos Briggs. Marion and Joseph are protected – both from the British and their Loyalist allies and from their own murderous impulses – by the bravery and good sense of their comrades. Marion's second-in-command, Peter Horry, warns his leader, "General, you clean forgot about the war … S'pose I'm speaking like this to my friend and neighbour, not to my superior officer." Disney's portrayal of the Patriot community was likely linked to his abiding faith in the core values of an idealized American community, which has been noted by numerous scholars as being rooted in his Mid-western, populist-era upbringing, and his idealization of his hometown of Marceline as Main Street, USA in Disneyland.[46]

While Disney's American Revolutionary productions affirmed that the American Patriots were united in a just cause and that they would prevail, they nonetheless showed the violent tension and conflict between Patriots and Loyalists that characterized American society as a whole.[47] As such Disney's films aligned better with early twentieth-century Progressive histories, since the mid-twentieth-century Consensus and neo-Whig historians tended to focus on the ideological and political unity of the Patriots, largely ignoring the deep and violent divisions within Revolutionary-era American society. *The Swamp Fox* in particular provides a compellingly accurate sense of the conflict in the southern colonies as a hard and bloody civil war in which families were divided and communities torn apart. Disney's series was quite accurate in portraying this conflict as a civil war from which British forces were often absent.

British soldiers and American Loyalists were often portrayed by Disney in starkly different ways. While Loyalists could and did behave despicably, lying, murdering and ignoring the rules of war, British officers and soldiers were usually portrayed quite sympathetically. Although both the Loyalists and the British appeared as associated with slavery and racism, in their dealings

[46] See, for example, Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 70–72, 287–88; Schickel, *The Disney Version*, 48.

[47] Holdzkom, 184–85.

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with white Americans British soldiers generally behave properly and are respectful: when Johnny Tremain's young friend Rab Silsbee is guarding the first ships to bring tea into Boston port, British admiral Montagu walks past and after the two exchange pleasantries Montagu stops to show Rab how to hold his rifle properly. The encounter is more than polite, and shows each side to be respectful of the other. Throughout the movie and television series, Patriots seldom describe their opponents as the British, instead referring to the king's forces, the king's men, redcoats or those who remain loyal to the king. Perhaps inspired by the World War II alliance between America and Britain and subsequent Cold War cooperation between the two nations, Disney deemphasized the British as an enemy to the extent that he rarely named them. Those who fought against American Patriots were loyal to the king, or the king's servants, or Loyalists: rarely were they identified as British.

In both *Johnny Tremain* and *The Swamp Fox* Disney presented the British in far more sympathetic terms than he did the Loyalists. In the former, the Loyalist Jonathan Lyte and British admiral Montagu watch as disguised Patriots dump tea into Boston Harbour, and Lyte rages against the profits he has lost. Montagu appears to enjoy Lyte's discomfort, drily comparing him to the Patriots by asking, "Isn't it odd, those Indians appear to prefer principle to profit?" This British officer appears to respect the Patriots more than he does the Loyalist standing next to him. As the Patriots leave the ship they cheerfully shout, "Goodnight, Admiral!" and, smiling, he waves to them. Later in the film the Patriot and leading member of the Sons of Liberty Joseph Warren asks British commanding officer General Gage about the possible withdrawal of British troops from Boston. Gage responds, "I have lived in these provinces for too many years, sir, to enjoy the responsibilities which have now been thrust upon me." Reluctantly Gage concludes, "I am a soldier, sir, and must take my orders from the ministry in power," and Warren responds, "We have our duty; we cannot deny you yours." It is a remarkably civil and even amicable encounter, and Disney's British soldiers are presented as reluctant combatants in the war against America. Disney's presentation of British admiration for the American cause was surely as much about Cold War politics as about Revolutionary-era history, yet it gave movie audiences a remarkably pro-British and anti-Loyalist view of the American founding.

Even James Otis, the most articulate and inspiring of the Patriot leaders in *Johnny Tremain*, does not view the British as the real enemy. As the Sons of Liberty gather and prepare to confront the British soldiers bound for Lexington and Concord, Otis warns them, "The fatal shot will come, whoever is to pull the trigger. When it does then fight we must and fight we will. But for what do we fight?" Paul Revere answers, "To rid ourselves of these infernal redcoats," but Otis dismisses this response:

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> That's no reason for blood on our land, Paul. We've earned these redcoats. We shouted our treason in the press and the public squares for ten long years without hindrance. And did ever an occupied city receive better treatment than we in Boston have had? Where are the firing squads? The jails filled with political prisoners? The gallows erected for Paul Revere, Samuel Cooper, Sammy Adams, and Joseph Warren?

He asks again, why do we fight, prompting Samuel Adams to reply, "To end tyrannous taxation." Otis retorts that it must be something "more important than our pocketbooks." Predictably it is Johnny Tremain's reply, "The rights of Englishmen!" that excites Otis, who responds,

> Rights, yes, but why stop with Englishmen? Is the earth so small it can be room for only one people? Or can we here fight for men, women, and children all over the world? For this we can have war. That there should be no more tyranny … The battles we shall win over the worst in England will benefit the best in England until the end of time. Even as we shoot down British soldiers, we will be winning rights their children shall enjoy forever. And the peoples of the world. The peasants of France and the serfs of Russia shall see freedom rising like a new sun in the West.

It is a truly remarkable speech. Disney has created a narrative of the American Revolution in which British solders and their officers appear polite and restrained, making it hard to justify a war of independence against them. Only by articulating the struggle as a fight (alongside Britain, rather than against it) for universal human liberty can the conflict be justified. Otis suggests that the conflict is less about the present than about the future, and that the British are not the real enemy. Disney does not attribute blame for the first shots fired at Lexington Green, and indeed he shows both British and Patriot commanders strictly enjoining their men not to fire unless fired upon. In "The Liberty Story" he made this clear, stating, "And so to this day no one knows who fired the historic shot heard round the world." When a British soldier asks who fired first, his commander responds, "One of them, one of us, someone in one of those houses over there? I don't know. What difference does it make now?"

Comic *faux* cockney accents similarly made ordinary British soldiers likeable and far from threatening. The first episode of *The Swamp Fox* ends with a group of British soldiers captured and rendered harmless by the Swamp Fox and his men. Stripped of their uniforms, the British soldiers have skunk tails pinned behind them and are forced to march away in their underwear. No Britons and no Patriots have been killed, and the whole encounter seems more humorous than warlike. However, the episode ends with an announcer previewing the next episode about "the Tories, those Americans who remained Loyal to the Crown, betraying the cause for which the Continental armies fought so valiantly." This was "a vicious kind of betrayal," the announcer continues, "brother against brother, father against son."

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In a similar vein, the fifth episode of *The Swamp Fox* began with Disney himself targeting the Loyalists as the main obstacle to American independence:

> Working boldly to sabotage the struggle of freedom-loving colonists in the American Revolution, there was a minority group of Tories who opposed our young country's determination to win its independence. Still loyal to the Crown, the Tories cooperated fully with General Cornwallis and his redcoat army.[48]

In no uncertain terms, Disney presented Loyalists as the greatest threat to American independence. Later in this episode British general Cornwallis spoke to his junior officers about one of South Carolina's leading Loyalists, noting that "Townes is the rallying agent for all loyal American recruits, without whom I need not remind you we cannot possibly hope to win the war!" The Patriots agreed, and towards the end of the episode Marion echoed Cornwallis, remarking, "They can't win without Tory support."

Loyalist Americans such as Colonel Townes and Amos Briggs were presented by Disney as being far more malevolent, unprincipled and dangerous than British soldiers. The differentiation between British soldiers and their allies the American Loyalists is most apparent in "Tory Vengeance," the third episode of *The Swamp Fox*. Having captured Marion's nephew Gabe, Colonel Townes orders Amos Briggs to whip the young boy in order to torture him into revealing the Swamp Fox's hideout. The British officer Tarlton complains, stating,

> I do draw the line at beating and shooting innocent people. I told you that when your men killed that servant boy Toby … There's a certain code of ethics that the military tries to observe, sir. If you cannot follow that code I shall have to withdraw my dragoons and refuse any further military support.[49]

Once again, such treatment was a rather unusual representation of the War of Independence. Britain recruited tens of thousands of British troops, many Hessian mercenaries, allied Native American warriors and a very large naval force to wage war against the United States, yet Disney's films all but ignore this while focussing on the violent and deeply personalized domestic threat of Loyalists. Perhaps, as some scholars have argued, Disney's deep fear of internal Communist subversion as the greatest threat faced by Cold War America helped shape his desire to show Patriot communities confronting and overcoming the enemy within.[50]

While historians might disagree with Disney's neglect of the British military threat, his focus on the Loyalists constituted quite a profound insight, and one

[48] "Redcoat Strategy," Episode 5 (dir. Louis King), first broadcast 15 Jan. 1960 as Episode 15, Series 5 of *Walt Disney Presents*.
[49] "Tory Vengeance."
[50] See, for example, Watts, *The Magic Kingdom*, 204–27, 240–88; Holdzkom, 184–87.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817000391 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which was deemphasized by academics and in school textbooks of the mid-twentieth century. During the War of Independence many Americans rarely, if ever, saw large British armies and naval forces, and in the rural communities and plantations in which most Americans resided the conflict between Patriot and Loyalist militia was the war that they experienced at first hand. More often than not this was a civil war of guerrilla conflict between local militias rather than a war of well-regimented and well-trained armies in close formation, and both *Johnny Tremain* and *The Swamp Fox* make this guerrilla conflict the norm. In the former, this can be quite harrowing: while quite historically accurate, the ways in which Patriot militia men hid behind trees and fences as they shot down British soldiers who were retreating to Boston seems anything but glorious.

In his introduction to the second episode of *The Swamp Fox*, Disney celebrated the fact that the Swamp Fox's men "were not trained soldiers, they were citizens, patriots from farms and villages, fighting for a cause they believed in." Disney praised Marion's "guerrilla" strategy, even going so far as to claim that "many of the guerrilla tactics used by the commandos in the last war were originated by Marion and his men in the Carolina swamps." Introducing the fourth episode, Disney reiterated this point, referring to "the Swamp Fox and his band of ragged guerrillas."[51] In this period between World War II and the Vietnam War, viewers could easily identify with virtuous guerrilla warriors. Here again Disney was anticipating developments in academic history, for it was not until the later 1970s that the "new" military historians such as John Shy began writing about the War of Independence as a "hearts-and-minds war" in which the Patriot militias and guerrilla fighters played a vital role in preserving Patriot rule in any areas not occupied by British armies.[52]

Disney presents Marion's band in the South Carolina swamps as eighteenth-century American versions of Robin Hood and his men, using intelligence and trickery to out-manoeuvre and defeat British and Loyalist opponents. At the conclusion of the first episode, the trailer for the next episode referred to "the living legend of Francis Marion, the Swamp Fox, Robin Hood of the American Revolution, hero, patriot, guerrilla fighter."[53] Disney's analogies with Robin Hood were both frequent and significant. Most notably when he first presented excerpts from *Johnny Tremain* in "The Liberty Story," Disney gave the American Patriots' struggle for liberty

[51] Disney, introduction to "Brother against Brother"; Disney, introduction to "Day of Reckoning."

[52] John Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

[53] Announcer's comments in trailer for Episode 2 at the end of Episode 1, "The Birth of the Swamp Fox."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817000391 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a clear English lineage: "Behind our liberties there's an interesting story, a heroic tale that goes back to the days of Robin Hood." The camera shot of Disney speaking fades into footage excerpted from his film of Robin Hood which had appeared on television two years earlier.[54] As various scenes from "Robin Hood" appeared on screen, Disney continued speaking, describing King John's unjust attempts to tax the English people: "Finally they stood together and forced King John to sign a document that was one of the most important of all time." The camera shot returns to Disney himself, holding a copy of Magna Carta, which he linked directly to the American Bill of Rights, a copy of which he also showed viewers.[55]

Once again Disney can be seen as anticipating academic historians, notably Eric Hobsbawm's influential 1969 study of the historical reality and popular symbolic significance of "social bandits," legal outlaws who were popular heroes.[56] Like many filmmakers, Disney constructed his stories around popular myths and mythical figures, and his dramatizations of the American Revolutionary struggle were themselves part-historical and part-mythical vehicles for the expression of larger political ideas about the causes and nature of American independence. As Richard Slotkin has argued, while such myths may develop a nostalgia for an idealized past, nonetheless they become a useful means of imagining and articulating core beliefs and values.[57] Disney began his presentation of *Johnny Tremain* by using the myth of Robin Hood to create a tone, a feeling, among viewers. Yet at the same time Disney was contextualizing the American Revolutionary struggle in terms of English constitutional and ideological precedents and values, aligning his interpretation with that of the Consensus and neo-Whig historians of the post-World War II period. For Disney, myth could support what he conceived of as a larger truth, namely that the American Revolution was one of the most significant milestones in humanity's achievement of rights, liberty and self-determination.

Early twenty-first-century filmic representations of the American Revolution appear very different from Disney's of a half-century previously.

[54] *The Story of Robin Hood* (dir. Ken Annakin, 1952). This movie was then broadcast on television in two parts on 2 and 9 Nov. 1955 as Episodes 8 and 9 of *Walt Disney's Disneyland*.

[55] Walt Disney, "The Liberty Story."

[56] E. J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (Worcester: Trinity Press, 1969), esp. chapter 9, "The Bandit as Symbol", 109–115. For a survey of subsequent historical work on this topic see Graham Seal, "The Robin Hood Principle: Folklore, History, and the Social Bandit," *Journal of Folklore Research*, 46, 1 (2009), 67–89.

[57] Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 3–45. See also Martin J. Manning, "The American Revolution and Disney: Esther Forbes, *Johnny Tremain* and the Celebration of Liberty," in Kathy Merlock Jackson and Mark I. West, eds., *Walt Disney, From Reader to Storyteller: Essays on the Literary Inspirations* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2015), 92–99; Sussman, *Culture as History*, 9–11; and Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, 12–13.

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John Adams and *Turn: Washington's Spies* reflect more nuanced and subtle attempts to represent the past, and build upon a half-century of historiography that has transformed academic understanding of how the American War of Independence affected and was affected by all in North America – African Americans, Native Americans, rich and poor and men and women. Indeed, an awareness of the multicultural, multiracial nature of present-day American society helps shape what viewers expect from historical entertainment, which is perhaps seen most clearly in Lin-Manuel Miranda's Broadway musical *Hamilton*. The winner of a Pulitzer Prize for Drama, nominated for a record-breaking sixteen, and then winning eleven, Tony Awards, *Hamilton* is a hip-hop musical of the American Revolutionary era that incongruously features an ethnically and sexually mixed cast of actors performing as America's Founding Fathers.[58] These productions were all based upon recent historiography: *John Adams* was based upon David McCullough's Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of America's second president, *Turn* on a volume by Alexander Rose, and *Hamilton* on Ron Chernow's biography, which had won the George Washington Book Prize.[59]

It is clear that just as today's television and theatrical representations of the struggle for American independence are linked both to contemporary historiography and to the culture and beliefs of the society in which they are made, so too *Johnny Tremain* and *The Swamp Fox* were influenced by their time and its historiography as interpreted by Disney. Both Disney and the neo-Whig/Consensus historians regarded the American Revolution as an ideological rather than a social struggle. The Patriots rebelled not as radicals who were eager to transform their society, but as frustrated Britons who felt themselves unjustly denied their rights and liberties as British subjects. The major difference between the historians and the filmmaker, however, was that the latter presented this ideology in the context of a bitter and divisive war, focussing on the experiences of ordinary Americans, including working men like Johnny Tremain, African Americans like Oscar and Delia, and women like Mary Videau.

Morgan, the author of the mid-twentieth-century's best-selling history of the American Revolution, wrote a general history of the causes and progress of the conflict between Britain and its American colonies, and the birth of the new American nation and its republican form of government. Yet the long and bloody war at the centre of these events occupies only a brief

[58] *John Adams*, HBO mini-series (dir. Tom Hooper, 2008); *Turn: Washington's Spies*, AMC series (various directors, 2014–); *Hamilton* (dir. Thomas Kail, 2015–) opened at the Richard Rogers Theater in August 2015.

[59] David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Touchstone, 2001); Alexander Rose, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring* (New York: Bantam, 2006); Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875817000391 Published online by Cambridge University Press

chapter of ten pages. Bailyn and Wood scarcely mentioned the war at all, focussing instead on the ideology that motivated the Patriots and how it helped shape the government of the new American republic. The experiences of the ordinary Americans who fought and suffered in the war were largely absent from these works, as were African Americans and women. Bailyn devoted fourteen of his more than three hundred pages to slavery, but much of his focus was on the meaning of "slavery" in eighteenth-century British political theory. While he briefly chronicled some of the arguments of anti-slavery advocates, no African Americans appear as actors in the drama of the Revolution. African Americans do not figure in Wood's work either, and slavery does not even appear in the index to Wood's even longer work. Morgan listed no women in the index of his book while only Catherine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren appear in Bailyn's and Wood's indexes, not as protagonists but rather as historians of the events and ideas surrounding the American Revolution.[60]

The relative lack of references to African Americans and women as protagonists in and potential beneficiaries of the American Revolution is far from surprising in works of this era, and Morgan, Bailyn and Wood were focussed on the pamphlets, newspapers and correspondence in which they could trace the ideology and motivations of leading Patriots. However, historians' omission of ordinary Americans, African Americans and whites does draw into perspective the significance of Disney's development of black and female Patriots as prominent participants in the struggle for independence. While Disney incongruously ignored the racism of slave-holding southern white Patriots in *The Swamp Fox*, he did reimagine the War of Independence as a struggle in which white and black and male and female Americans participated. While Disney's was a grossly inaccurate history, it nonetheless acknowledged African Americans as both present and active in the Revolutionary moment, and this fitted the time in which these films were made as the civil rights movement gained popularity and respectability across American society.

Historical chronology was compressed or even ignored in Disney's representations of the War of Independence. *Johnny Tremain* is set in and around Boston, beginning in July 1773 and ending in April 1775, more than a year before the Declaration of Independence. As the film closed, James Otis cautioned, "Nothing is over. It's only a beginning, a kindling of the flame. Feed it, lads, as you fed it with your blood today." Yet the narrative arc has ended: Johnny Tremain and his associates had defeated the British force

[60] Morgan, *The Birth of the American Republic*; Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, "Slavery," 232–46; Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*. Bailyn included one other female name in his index, Silence Dogood, an early alias of Benjamin Franklin.

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sent to Lexington and Concord, with General Gage lamenting, "Yesterday we ruled over Boston, tonight we are besieged in it … We have been vanquished by an idea, a belief in human rights." At the conclusion of *Johnny Tremain* audiences must surely have thought that they had seen American independence secured. Otis's final comments may have been less about the American War of Independence than about the Cold War conflict America led in the later twentieth century: "It is the spark of liberty that you've touched afire. And its light must grow until every dark corner is vanished and it illuminates the world."

The larger point here is that Disney's American Revolutionary films are about securing rights and liberty, but they say little or nothing about creating a nation. There is no sense that a struggle to defend the colonists' rights progressed into a belief that these could be secured only by declaring independence, which in turn gave birth to a debate about how best to construct a polity dedicated to rights and liberty. In both *Johnny Tremain* and *The Swamp Fox*, the battle to secure liberty is presented in an entirely local context as the essence of the true American Revolution. Little or nothing is said of petitions to the king and Parliament, of alliance with France, or even of the actions of the Continental Congress in coordinating military action and the development of an American polity, let alone about the creation of a constitution for the new republic. In the second episode of *The Swamp Fox* Gabe Marion tells his brother Francis, "our war is right here in St. James's Parish."[61] For viewers, the struggle for American independence may have had national and international significance, but Disney sought to make what he saw as its essential character clear by representing it as a fundamentally personal and local struggle against injustice and oppression, often waged by neighbours. Like many historical films, Disney's American Revolutionary productions tended to individualize larger narratives, making the personal political.

Even with Walt Disney's introductory remarks about how the fight for liberty was ongoing, it is quite possible that viewers during the 1950s and 1960s failed to see Disney's late eighteenth-century Loyalists as analogous to Communists in mid-twentieth-century America. But they did see ideologically motivated Patriots, driven by a desire to preserve their natural rights and liberties, and this complemented the work of contemporary neo-Whig Consensus historians. Viewers saw, too, that the War of Independence was a bitter and violent civil war, in which ordinary men and women were active participants, and that some of these characters aspired to share in the rights and freedoms that the Patriots sought to protect in the new republic.

[61] "Brother against Brother."

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For all of the anachronisms and the failure to address slavery, Disney nonetheless communicated the divisive nature of the sociopolitical revolution which began in the 1760s and 1770s, factors which were all but ignored in the works of the academic historians of this era. Flawed and inaccurate as it may have been, Disney's American Revolution nonetheless communicated some essential truths about the conflict which created the United States, anticipating some of the concerns of historians of the topic from the late 1960s through to the present.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Simon P. Newman is Sir Denis Brogan Professor of American History at the University of Glasgow. He presented an earlier version of this essay at the annual conference of the British Association for American Studies in 2015, and is grateful for feedback from the audience. He would also like to thank Stuart Airlie, Ian Craven, Marina Moskowitz, the anonymous readers and Celeste-Marie Bernier and Bevan Sewell for their careful reading and suggestions for revision.

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