

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Late 18th Century : National Identities: Patriots, Promoters, and Pretenders (1776-1837)

In the sixty years or so from the Revolution to the 1830's, autobiography in the United States became closely identified with the new nation. It was used to defend and promote the goals of the Revolutionary War. It enabled Americans to invent (or reinvent) themselves as the citizens of the new nation, at once defining themselves and defining it. After the war, autobiography helped to promote the settlement of the frontier, describing the country and the people. In turn, it also helped Indians justify their opposition to settlement. At the same time, however, autobiography was criticized by many people as a vain and deceitful kind of writing that modest, respectable folks should shun.

The association of autobiography with the Revolution might be said to have begun with Benjamin Franklin. He started writing his *Autobiography* in England in 1771, having already foreseen "a total disunion of the two countries," (1) and foreseen his life as an anticipation of revolution and a preparation for it. The story of a young man's rise to wealth and fame by his own virtue and industry, combined with the mutual support of fellow tradesmen, was a new one- and potentially a very unsettling one for established orders. His pride in his achievement, while masked by a seemingly simple modesty, was even more unsettling. People had once been ashamed of humble origins, as John Adams noted in his *Discourses on Davila*. As Franklin went on to write in 1784 and 1788-90, that is just after the Revolution, he took pride in his success and advised later generations on how they, too, could become civic leaders by promoting useful improvements through voluntary associations.

An even more forthright identification with the Revolution occurs in Thomas Jefferson's *Autobiography*, written in 1821, when Jefferson was seventy-seven. Focusing on the writing of *The Declaration of Independence* and then on his efforts, early in the war years, while he was in the Virginia House of Burgesses, to abolish primogeniture and to separate church and state, his autobiography clearly reveals its author's sense that the Revolution was the great event of his life, and that these were the deeds for which he wanted and expected to be remembered. Without the Revolution, Jefferson might have been merely a scholarly and inventive Virginia gentleman. Because of it, however-because he helped to make it-he could conceive of himself in a much larger and loftier sense: as an American, a national leader, a spokesman for independence and liberty, and as therefore, a man whose biography and autobiography would be historically important.

Yet Franklin and Jefferson were by no means the only people of this time to achieve these "national identities," this sense of themselves as citizens and representatives of a new nation and as spokesman and spokeswoman for it, whether by their own or someone else's designation. Their friend, associate and occasional critic and rival John Adams showed a similar sense of history when, in Philadelphia in 1775 to attend the Continental Congress, he entered a stationery store and bought the letter book in which he would keep copies of all his future correspondence. Before, he had been simply a hard-working lawyer from Braintree and Boston, Massachusetts. On election to the Congress, he became a person with a historical destiny. He now needed to keep copies of his letters, for they performed official business and were valuable historical documents. Meanwhile, from his and his wife Abigail's longstanding love of each other's letters, which were not just signs of their mutual affection but a means of refining and expressing their sensibilities, he and she went on saving their private correspondence, too. Her letters informed him of the sacrifices women were making in the war and taunted him that independence and freedom would be for women as well as men. Later, her letters from Paris to her family back home gave her explicitly American reactions to French houses, housekeeping, and manners. Sometimes offended, sometimes amused, she always stood up for her native land.

Soldiers and seamen also wrote autobiographical accounts of their war-time experiences. Men such as Ethan Allen, who had been British captives, had stories to tell of the atrocities they witnessed and of how their faith in the American cause sustained them during months of hunger and sickness. Allen's *Narrative* was particularly inspiring to other patriots because it also told of his astonishing victory at Fort

Ticonderoga and his even more amazing boldness during his two and one half years in captivity. His *Narrative* mythologized him as a symbol of "Yankee" determination and courage. Its publication in 1779 was a critical move in the war for the hearts and minds of the American people that was being fought in newspapers and pamphlets.

Other autobiographies of the Revolution would not be published until many years later, for there was simply not the money, the place, or the time and interest to print every person's letters of diaries during the war itself. One account must have seemed more or less like another. But, retrospectively, their significance grew. The nation grew and prospered, and it honored its past and its heroes at Fourth of July celebrations, militia musters, and grand patriotic occasions like the anniversary visit of General Lafayette in the 1820's. Publication of an ancestor's diary, sometimes privately and sometimes in the proceedings of a newly founded state or local historical society, became a combined act of patriotism and family piety. The first editor of the *Letters of Mrs. Adams*, for example, was her grandson Charles Francis Adams, who published them in 1840. In doing so, he also corrected her spelling and grammar and standardized her punctuation. The autobiographies of ones revered ancestors were being not just preserved for posterity but polished for it.

A unique further expression of this retrospective honoring of the heroes of the Revolution was the collection of still more of their stories during the 1830's as a part of their pension applications. As John C. Dann wrote in his introduction to a small selection from the thousands of these applications, the 1832 pension act was the first in which the federal government undertook to provide for all the veterans, not just those of the Continental Army or those who were disabled or poor. However, records of these men's service were missing and incomplete, so the aged veterans had to go to their local courtrooms and present sworn testimony about the battles they had been in, their units, officers, and the times and places where they had served. This was in Dann's words, "one of the largest oral history projects ever undertaken." (2)

It literally paid men to tell their stories of their service to their country; in effect, it paid them for composing their national identities. The American concept of self now had governmental approval.

Not all the post-Revolutionary autobiographers were so honorable, however. Another, less desirable effect of the Revolution-from official or respectable standpoints-was a change in manners that diminished respect for authority and encouraged some men to cloak their own unruliness in patriotic colors, while also celebrating their private deeds as they might not have done before. Thus rogue narratives like Stephen Burrough's *Memoirs* (1798) and *A Narrative of the Life, Adventurers, Travels, and Sufferings of Henry Tufts* (1807), which once would never have been published or would only have been published after re-writing by a minister or another member of the colonial establishment, were now written in the first person and became popular books. Burroughs had rebelled against his strict father, a Presbyterian minister, as the colonies had revolted against Great Britain-or so he claimed, using the same familial metaphors that had been used by defenders of the Revolution. (3) When he engaged in counterfeiting, he argued (like Benjamin Franklin promoting the printing of paper currency) that he was actually serving the public good by increasing the money supply. When he was sent to jail, he complained that he was being enslaved and held against his will. The more society punished an ingenious rationalizer like Burroughs, the more he could bend the rhetoric of the Revolution to make himself a hero and a martyr. (4)

Such men thus took to autobiography as their organ of self-justification and self-advertisement almost as readily as they took to crime! Autobiography was simply an extension of the same posturing and imposturing they were already engaged in. And the guardians of the new American republic did not like it, any more than they liked the crimes.

A vivid sense of this conservative reaction against revolution and, by implication, against autobiography can be had from reading John Adams' extensive digressions on emulation his *Discourses on Davila*. Written in 1789-90, the first year of the new American federal government, in which Adams was Washington's vice-president (and also the first year of the French Revolution), the *Discourses* were Adams' warning to Americans against the dangers of excessive liberty and egalitarianism. Specifically, he saw the French abandonment of inherited titles and aristocratic rank as unleashing, instead of

productively channeling, the powerful human instinct “to be observed, considered, esteemed, praised, beloved, and admired.” A well-ordered state channeled this “instinct of emulation,” as Adams called it, following Aristotle and other philosophers of government, so that men could gain fame and receive honors in accordance with their service in war or statecraft. Inherited titles, while not necessary or desirable in the United States, had been the French way of perpetuating the memory of its great men and so preserving social order. Without them, Adams feared, people would rush to gain fame by any means at hand—through crime, great wealth, usurpation of power, flattery, and deceit. The implicit immorality in autobiography, Adams might have gone one, was that it too, might encourage men towards boasting, lying, and an emphasis on sensation and scandal. True achievement should be recognized and rewarded by other men and by the state and those one served. Praising one’s self led to chaos.

The further importance of the *Discourses* to autobiography is that, paradoxically, they illustrate the very satisfaction and pride which Adams and other founding fathers took in the public recognition they received. The councils, town meetings, and congresses of the revolution and early republic, as Hannah Arendt argued in *On Revolution*, were the American equivalent of the Athenian *polis*. The right and glory of a free man was participation in the government of his town or state and then being recognized for what he had said and done. Thus, early American autobiography, as we have been saying, emphasized one’s service to various public bodies: Franklin’s Philadelphia, the army, Jefferson’s Virginia, the new nation. The intensity with which the Adams family valued this civic service and the emulation given and gained from it underlies a lot of the ironies and despair in *The Education of Henry Adams*, with Henry’s portrait of himself as a “failure.”

The early American dislike of boastful and scandalous autobiography also shows up in the very low opinion Americans had of Rousseau’s *Confessions*. The first American edition of this landmark in the history of autobiography was published in New York in 1796, and it was almost universally condemned. The book demonstrated, wrote Samuel Miller, a Presbyterian minister and member of the American Philosophical Society, that Rousseau’s life was “an unnatural compound of vanity, meanness, and contemptible self-love, a suspicious, restless temper, bordering on insanity, and a prostration of every principle of duty, to his own aggrandizement and gratification.” (5) Before 1789, Americans had admired Rousseau. His ideas and sentiments helped justify their revolution. But after the French Revolution and the reign of terror, the larger number of Americans “accounted [him] erratic and intolerant, foolish and indiscreet.” (6) His character was seen to be symptomatic of French excesses, and, as this character was most visible in the *Confessions*, this text (as well as Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther*) seems to represent the dangers of egotism and sentimentalism. Some Americans, like Nathaniel Hawthorne and the families he addressed in his early children’s stories, even had reservations about Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography. Franklin was a great man and his book an exemplary tale, but did he have to be so cunning—and so smugly satisfied with himself? (7) Federalist Americans remained wary of the ego.

The conservative reaction against autobiographical vanity did not affect the writing of narratives of captivity, travel, and life on the frontier. The first two were already well established, and the third kind would become immensely important to the post-war opening of the West and the new national identities that would develop around the West and its settlement.

John Filson’s life of Daniel Boone, told in the first person as if it were Boone’s autobiography, was the earliest and most influential of these new frontier narratives. Yet it is also part captivity narrative and part war memoir. In it, Boone tells of repeated battles with Indians and being held captive from January to June, 1778. He is taken on “an uncomfortable journey, in very severe weather” all the way to Detroit and then held in Chillicothe (Chillicothe, Ohio) for several months. But unlike the Puritan captives, Boone becomes quite well adjusted to Indian life. They “entertained me well,” he says, and soon adopted him “according to their custom, into a family where I became a son, and had a great share in the affection of my new parents, brothers, sisters, and friends.” Boone quickly reassures his readers of his greater loyalty to white Kentuckians: he escapes and goes to warn Boonsborough of an impending Indian attack. But his temporary adoption by the Indians has made him a still better scout and woodsman. He is not just a frontier adventurer; he straddles the frontier, as a spokesman for both sides of it and as someone who can put Indian skills into the service of the new settlers.

This willingness to learn from the Indians and even to respect them at times, while still keeping bright a vision of the eventual triumph of "civilization," made Boone an archetype for many later autobiographers, biographers, and novelists. James Fennimore Cooper's Leatherstocking is derived from Boone (along with a hunter from near Cooperstown whom Cooper had known as a boy), and spurious "autobiographies" of frontier heroes like Davy Crockett filled the newspapers and sporting magazines of the 1830's. The reading public was strongly attracted to the frontier type (in its proliferating manifestations), and resourceful writers searched for more people who might embody it. In the Genesee Valley of New York, James Everett Seaver, a school teacher, interviewed Mary Jemison, who had lived among the Seneca for forty years, and in 1824 he published the *Narrative* of her life. Seaver wanted to make her sort of female Boone and an example of how the refinements of white womanhood endured in spite of long exposure to savage life. But Jemison had her own agenda too, and at moments her praise of the Seneca and what she learned from them also come through. As Annette Kolodny has said, *The Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison* is a "fascinating store of historical information" and also "an inconsistent, often perplexing document." (8) It is not nearly so well known as the other autobiographies mentioned here, but it is an important one, just the same, and a good one to read alongside these others.

Beyond the frontier lay the Indians themselves, and as they ceased to be a threat to white expansion (or could be absorbed symbolically by a border figure like Boone), they became all the more interesting and useful as symbols and historical relics. In 1832, Samuel Gardner Drake, a Boston antiquarian, published a *Biography and History of the Indians of North America*, which in the next twenty-five years went through ten revisions and re-publications. Benjamin Thatcher, another Bostonian, published a similar collection, *Indian Biography*, which was nearly as popular. Such encyclopedias contained brief biographies of scores of famous chiefs, as well as captivity narratives, speeches, anecdotes, and histories of Indian wars. The form of the life of a famous chief was very conventionalized. His tribe had once been a "powerful, warlike nation"; it was met and corrupted by white men; its land was purchased or lost in war; the chief rallied the people to resist; but he failed and now the tribe was almost extinct. Although repetitious, such stories had tragic grandeur, and the focus on the life of the chief gave them more immediacy and drama. His life embodied tribal experience and customs, which were difficult to understand and interpret, in a seemingly verifiable individual account. The individual noble Indian was also more appealing than a confusing heterogeneous group of people. Meanwhile, the very repetition of the stories made them confirm one another; collectively, they all accounted for "the vanishing Indian."

Some editions of Thatcher's and Drake's books even used the word *autobiography* alongside biography. Calling a story an "autobiography" was a way of claiming greater authenticity for it (the same strategy used with the spurious "autobiographies" of Davy Crockett). The less true a "life" was, the more the necessity to call it an autobiography, as a way of claiming authenticity. (The same continues to happen with spurious works like *The Autobiography of Howard Hughes*, which might better have been called an unauthorized biography by Clifford Irving, and *The Education of Little Tree*, which was purported to be by a Cherokee named Forrest Carter but was actually by a white Southerner named Asa Earl Carter.(9))

There were authentic Indian autobiographies in this period, however, and we can now see that they anticipated later Indian autobiography. In 1831, William Apess, a man of mixed Pequot and white ancestry, published *A Son of the Forest*, in which he told of being raised by foster parents, serving in the War of 1812, and eventually coming to prize his Indian heritage. In 1833, Black Hawk, the Sac leader who had become the sentimental hero of the Black Hawk War, even though the enemy and loser, dictated his autobiography, through an interpreter, to a frontier journalist, using the opportunity to defend himself and tell his side of the story. Thus, at the very moment that white Americans were using autobiography to define their national identities, Apess and Black Hawk were using it to define a revived or preserved tribal identity-or ethnic identity, as we might call it today.

At nearly the same time, Carolyn Kirkland, using the pseudonym of Mary Clavers, published an autobiography about her and her husband's pioneering experiences in Michigan. It was considered improper for a lady to write and even more so for her to use her own name, just as some aristocratic gentlemen had once thought it beneath their dignity to attach their own names to their books and pamphlets. (10)

Controversy was demeaning, especially with social inferiors. It was also more gentlemanly to appear not to have to write, to be a dabbler and amateur, with the result that, following Washington Irving, the sketch had become a favorite upper-class (or pseudo-upper-class) literary form. The sketch mixed fact and whimsy, observation and fantasy, while the author's persona (or even more evasively, the pseudo-author's persona) was supposedly someone too light and frivolous to take seriously. The pseudonym also was a way of escaping the onus of vanity that was attached to autobiographical writing.

All of these conditions make it very difficult with respect to some of the writings of this period to distinguish between autobiography and fiction and between biography and autobiography, and to impose other later definitions. The American novel was new, and it often imitated autobiographies as a way of making the story seem more real and of making it (or pretending to make it) less sensational and scandalous. Novelists then as now drew on personal experience, but they went much further than novelists today in saying that they were writing to warn and advise their young readers-another way of passing the personal and societal censors who felt that novels misrepresented reality and wasted time. With one hand, therefore, "Mary Clavers" apologized for her "straggling and cloudy crayon sketches," acting modest and self-effacing, while, with the other, she wrote that these sketches "of life and manners in the remoter parts of Michigan" had "the merit of general truth of outline." The apology and the claim for truth appear in the same sentence, as if the "crayon" had been passed from one hand to the other.

Yet whether she was a novelist or autobiographer is finally secondary to the fact that in writing of her frontier experience she, too, had adopted a new national identity. For her generation, the frontier was now the main locus of personhood and nationhood, as the Revolution had been for most members of the generation before. And her confidence that her generation before. And her confidence that her generation wanted to hear about it from a woman's standpoint demonstrates that it wanted not just to settle the frontier but to domesticate it, to make it refined and a place for people with education and manners. Autobiography had taken Americans through revolution, had endured conservative reactions against it, and had gone on to help populate and refine the frontier, even while providing the dispossessed victims of the frontier with a place to publish their apologies and defenses.