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# Reply to Critics

by Howard Fast

When a reviewer presumes to charge me — as Mr. Sterling North did in the *New York World Telegram and Sun* — with treasonable distortion of fact, I think he and all of his fraternity deserve to be answered. The question of who falsifies history is an important one, for this is an era of many historical novels, few of them good, and very few indeed which have more than a nodding acquaintance with fact. A tolerant attitude is adopted toward most historical novels — an attitude so tolerant, indeed, that the charge of historical manipulation comes as something of a shock; and the singular quality of it makes one wonder whether those who charge falsification are not far more disturbed by certain elements of truth.

As a matter of fact, the only novels published in America over the past decade which have been challenged as to historical content are my own. Most bitterly resented was and is my partisan position — in defense of the working class and the oppressed people of America. This is the position I have chosen — and on this ground I stand.

The strange and little-known narrative<sup>1</sup> I have told through the person of one Jamie Stuart, soldier in the Continental Army, would be neither justified nor tolerable if it were an invention. In the freest of literary worlds an author has no right to invent such happenings; and within our present literary surroundings, such a narrative inevitably must do battle with facts as well as fancy. If the background to Jamie Stuart's adventures were known widely, as it should be, an offer of proof would not be necessary. If the times were different, a few reference notes would do the job. As it is, a fuller explanation is needed.

Let me give a specific example of what I mean. John Hyde Preston's *Revolution 1776* was enthusiastically reviewed when it appeared in 1933. Here is how it treats the great revolt of the Foreign Brigades:

"All New Year's Day an ominous atmosphere pervaded the camp. Gaunt half-clad men wandered about sullenly in the snow, their cheek bones sticking out under their leathery skin, beneath those hollow eye sockets; and they muttered to themselves and to one another and looked furtively at the leaden sky. Wayne watched them with a despairing heart and after supper, to cheer them up, he gave every man an extra ration of rum. The rum was poured greedily down parched throats. The thick hum of voices grew louder. The soldiers gathered in little groups in the gloom, muttering and whispering, and now and then there was a guttural curse....

"Then, suddenly, about nine o'clock in the evening, the low rumblings outside became a howling riot.... Hoarse rum-throated cheers rose from the ranks. Guns and pistols went off, fired into the air.... The big column of half-drunken men began to move — slowly, cursing to the beat of a drum ahead.... The dogs were barking, the women screaming....

"Wayne, vibrant with rage and energy, brought out his lighthorse brigade and his few remaining troops of infantry, and ordered a pursuit. The maddened horde had set off on the lower road to Elizabeth, and Wayne's forces, dragging some howitzers behind in the dry snow, took the high foot-pass across the hills. They cut the rioters off at the fork, and Mad Anthony, standing in the stirrups of his black stallion, flourished his saber.

"The mutineers fell back. The voices died away, and there was only the sound of guns and sick groans in the darkness. Wayne and his faithful officers herded the rebellious regiments like cattle. A few stragglers escaped through the woods—and some died from hunger and freezing before they could reach their homes. The rest slunk back to their huts, lighted candles, and undressed slowly."

This was greeted as fine, popular historiography and not criticized at all from the point of view of accuracy. But let us just glance at a few surface trimmings:

1. The Light Horse were in Philadelphia, eighty miles away. They were not with Wayne nor under his command.
2. The "maddened horde," as Preston calls them, never took the road to Elizabeth. There was no high foot-pass across the hills.
3. Candles were as rare in that camp as hen's teeth.
4. And no one would be likely to die of freezing during the warmest winter thaw of the war.

However, these are only details, and a man who can invent the whole should not be reprimanded for inventing details as well. Where did Mr. Preston get his information and what prompted this gratuitous slander of brave men — so much in the style of today — who had fought tirelessly and well for five years? At the back of his book, Mr. Preston has gone to the trouble of rating all other historians of the period, much in the manner that movies are rated today. And there, top rating goes to Sydney George Fisher, of whom Mr. Preston says, "Fisher's style is muscular, balanced and often droll." So we go to Sydney George Fisher, and in his *True History of the American Revolution* (1903), we find the following concerning the revolt of the Pennsylvania Line:

"On January 1, 1781, thirteen hundred of them [the Pennsylvanians] stationed at Morristown marched for Philadelphia under command of three sergeants, with the intention of forcing the Congress to pay them.... By the greatest exertions of leading patriots, who met them at Princeton, the mutineers were quieted and prevented from reaching Philadelphia; but this was done by yielding to all their demands for discharge and pay."

Aside from cutting the number of men in half — and there is ample factual proof of how many there were — and aside from the implication that this army, which had carried the greatest burden of the war for five years, was unpatriotic, this is a straightforward account of what happened. Why, then, did not Preston adopt it?

Writing a hundred years ago, when Thomas Jefferson's opinion that "a little rebellion, now and then, is a good thing," was still not "un-American," Washington Irving was able to hold a much more objective point of view than most present-day historians. His observations on the Pennsylvania uprising are particularly interesting when we consider the uncritical worship he rendered to George Washington. For all that, he wrote at a time when some soldiers of the Revolution still lived and when the glory of the Pennsylvania Line had not yet been relegated to the scrap-heap of history. Of Wayne's attitude, Irving notes in his *Life of Washington*:

"Wayne was not 'Mad Anthony' on the present occasion. All his measures were taken with judgment and forecast. He sent provisions after the mutineers, lest they should supply their wants from the country people by force. Two officers of rank spurred to Philadelphia to apprise Congress of the approach of the insurgents, and to put it upon its guard. Wayne sent a dispatch with news of the outbreak to Washington; he then mounted his horse, and accompanied by

Colonels Butler and Stewart, two officers popular with the troops, set off after the mutineers, either to bring them to a halt, or to keep with them, and seek every occasion to exert a favorable influence over them."

Contrast this with Preston's contempt for men who forged, out of their endurance and courage, the beginnings of the United States of America. Throughout his "history" and many other modern studies, only the officers are treated as people worthy of any respect, and the men they led are constantly referred to as "dogs," "scoundrels," "rioters," and even "cutthroats." Of course, these armchair judges hardly ever pause to consider why such low elements should show a steadfastness of purpose — without pay, remember, without decent food or clothing, without any prospect of reward — unmatched in their times. Any serious military student of the American Revolution must admit that a central role was played by the eleven Pennsylvania regiments, while any objective study of the Battle of Yorktown must show that a considerable part in the ultimate surrender was played by the remnants of the foreign brigades, when, under the leadership of Anthony Wayne, they made a headlong charge upon a British army ten times their size and cut through them like a scythe, leaving dead on the field of battle fully half of those original foreign volunteers and regulars who remained.

One of the best modern historians of the American Revolution is Professor John C. Miller of Bryn Mawr. Unlike so many others, he is quite willing to face the fact that many of the Continental soldiers were foreign volunteers, and of the Midland troops, he says, "The Pennsylvania Line contained a higher proportion of foreigners (chiefly Scotch-Irish and English) than did the line of any other state; and a number of British deserters had been enlisted in the Pennsylvania ranks."<sup>2</sup> In context with this, he notes that a mutiny of the Connecticut line in 1773 had been "prevented by the bayonets of the Pennsylvania Line, which, fortunately for the Continental army, remained loyal." But even Miller, in discussing the January, 1781, mutiny says of the Pennsylvania Line, "A ration of rum was passed out to the men (on January 1) and they promptly got riotously drunk." As his reference for this, Miller quotes a letter from Washington; but it should be noted that Washington remained at West Point — and quite wisely — for the whole length of the rising, and that the bulk of his information came from Wayne, Reed and Lafayette, and Lafayette's fear and hatred of the Pennsylvania troops was near to the point of hysteria. Now this was a hard-drinking age, and a quart of rum at a sitting was not uncommon. But the records among the Wayne papers in the Pennsylvania Historical Society state that in the sixty days prior to the revolt only one ration of rum, of half a gill per man, had been served out. Rum was a regular part of the daily ration in the American as well as in the British Army at that time, and the amount each day per man was a full gill, or about four ounces. This was the common ration, and certainly it was not enough to make a grown man "riotously drunk"; but Wayne himself is evidence for the fact that on January 1, 1781, only half rations were available. Anyone who has ever lingered over a rum collins can give his own testimony as to the effects of two ounces of the liquor; yet in spite of this evidence, almost every historian tends to lay the major reasons for a revolt of such size and complexity, organized in advance with the greatest of care and skill, and carried off under arms almost without loss of life, to drunkenness.

Now it is very hard indeed to get at a clue to the actual character of the enlisted men. Literacy was so rare among the common men in the Midlands, native or foreign, that from the whole of the Pennsylvania Line only one apparently authentic account survives, *A History of the Life and Services of Captain Samuel Dewees*, who was an enlisted man, not an officer, when he served in the foreign brigades. This book appeared in 1844, and was written — edited, it is claimed — by one John Smith Hanna, and as sixty-three years had passed since the revolt of the Line, its accuracy is open to question. Aside from this, there are the host of books published in the first five decades of the nineteenth century and a considerable number of manuscript papers and letters. But all of these books are open to question; they are poorly written, full of homilies, and without exception contain no real people. In the Parson Weems tradition, they simply make the problem of investigation more difficult. The manuscript papers are better, but they rarely originate in the Pennsylvania Line.

Therefore, one is forced to draw the pieces from here and there and carefully put them together. Without question the whole will take shape according to a particular point of view. Let me illustrate what I mean.

You will find in *The Proud and the Free* a part of Jamie Stuart's narrative which concerns the two British agents, Mason and Ogden. Here is how the story was told by Washington Irving:

"The two spies who had tampered with the fidelity of the troops were tried by a court martial, found guilty, and hanged at the crossroads near Trenton. A reward of fifty guineas each was offered to two sergeants who had arrested and delivered them up. They declined accepting it; saying they had merely acted by order of the board of sergeants. The hundred guineas were then offered to the board. Their reply is worthy of record. 'It was not,' said they, 'for the sake of or through any expectation of reward, but for the love of our country, that we sent the spies immediately to General Wayne; we therefore do not consider ourselves entitled to any other reward but the love of our country, and do jointly agree to accept of no other.'"

This is Bowzer, of the Committee of Sergeants, to Wayne, and Irving is willing to accept the simple dignity of their position. Remember that these men were paupers; and that fifty guineas gold was more than their pay for a year — if the money in which they were paid had its face value. Actually, when they were paid, it was with money worth little more than the paper it was printed on. Strange actions for these "villains," as Wayne frequently called them.

A most interesting commentary on this is contained in a letter written by Joseph Reed to George Washington. Even though Reed crowed with glee at having saved the hundred pounds Wayne had so thoughtlessly promised, he wrote, ".... A large reward having been offered to the sergeants for the fidelity in this respect, they declined it in a very disinterested manner and in terms that would have done credit to persons of more elevated stations in life..."<sup>3</sup>

And contrast this with the actions of Lieutenant John Bigham of the 5th Regiment of the Pennsylvania Line, who, in August of 1780 "was sent by the Council from Philadelphia with 14,068 dollars to pay bounties due recruits in the Line, but never arrived with it. When he was afterwards cashiered he frivolously claimed he had spent the money for necessary charges on the road to camp."<sup>4</sup>

In case one is unfamiliar with antique military language, to be cashiered is to receive a dishonorable discharge. Evidently, when one came from the "more elevated stations in life," the punishment did not exactly fit the crime. It is at strange odds with the hanging in May, 1780, of James Coleman of the Eleventh Pennsylvania, who, near to starving, left his encampment in a temporary desertion to seek food. Though he was proven to be a good soldier with a heroic record, his execution was deemed necessary.

With the above in mind, one can see that the truth of what actually happened in the Pennsylvania Line in January of 1781 is not easy to arrive at. The major credit for this task belongs to one of the finest and most scholarly historians of our colonial period, Carl Van Doren, and his amazing book, *Mutiny in January*.

When the Pennsylvania Line expelled its officers and created the Committee of Sergeants to govern itself, the British almost literally suspended every other operation in order to win over these foreign brigades. In the offers they sent out, not only with Mason and Ogden but through every channel they could command, they promised the rebels everything but the throne of England. They rolled out a great plush carpet, with gravy bowls on every hand, and said, "Walk into our parlor." The Pennsylvania men told them to go to hell and be damned. There is no indication from any source that even one of the soldiers concerned in the revolt ever raised the question of going to the enemy. The British themselves — and their intelligence was so good that they made better accounts of the revolt than our side could provide — admitted this somewhat bitterly, and, at the conclusion of his journal on the mutiny, the British General De Lancey wrote:

"This day a Captain [William Bernard Gifford] of the 3rd Jersey Regiment, who I had corresponded with came over to us. He confirms the information of yesterday...

"He says they [the Pennsylvania troops] have shown no intention of coming to us, but on the contrary declared that should the British interfere, they would take up arms to oppose them as readily as ever."

Since then, historians have been at a loss to understand why the foreign brigades were more antagonistic toward the British after their revolt than before it, and why they took the somewhat unprecedented step of handing British agents over to Wayne to be hanged; and this bewilderment was shared by most of the highly placed Pennsylvania officers. None of them understood what life itself so amply demonstrated, that the action of the Pennsylvania troops was a step that carried the Revolution forward, not backward. For the moment, the fate of the American Revolution was literally placed in the hands of and under the leadership of those participants whose needs were most urgent — in the revolutionary sense — and who would thus be least ready to compromise. The fact that they could not maintain themselves in that position for more than a few weeks is very interesting, for it must be remembered that they surrendered their power and that it was not taken from them.

They could not maintain themselves because they could put forth no revolutionary program that was either basically different from or better or more satisfying to their needs than the program of the Continental Congress and of Wayne and his fellow officers.

No matter how far the officers had departed in practice from the principles of the Declaration of Independence, they still subscribed publicly to that program — and to the program of the Confederation. And the soldiers themselves had no better program than this and were historically unable to formulate one, since in 1781 the Declaration of Independence and its associated documents embodied the most advanced political program possible in America. In their revolt, they stepped beyond the progress of history and into a future still unmade. From this they had to retreat, for the essence of the Revolution was a compact and unity between the various classes in America at the time; and if this were smashed, the Revolution itself would have perished. Thus, in surrendering, the Committee of Sergeants acted less from choice than from the strong pressures of necessity.

An indication of the precise nature of this revolt is contained in two aspects of it, for which we have a good deal of evidence: the sudden increase of discipline and self-imposed restraint, which added up to the highest enlisted man morale of the war, and the reception of the rank and file troops by the population of New Jersey.

First of all, consider the number of men involved. Practically every authority on the subject places the number of men who revolted anywhere between a thousand and fifteen hundred. But Anthony Wayne himself, supervising the dissolution of the Line in Trenton on January 3, states explicitly that 2,400 men were then present to be discharged or retained. Since this is based on an official count which he himself undertook, and since it would be wholly to his interest to understate rather than overstate the number, 2400 must be accepted as a minimum. One must recognize what a tremendous organizational task the revolt presented. The word "riot" cannot be used in connection with this, for such a movement of men and equipment could only have been carried out if the great majority of the men were involved — and involved on the basis of the highest sort of self discipline. Carl Van Doren quotes an observer, an officer, as remarking of that first night, "'They went off very civilly to what might have been expected from such a mob.'"

And of the second day of their march, he has this to say:

"They left Vealtown early on Tuesday morning. Cornelius Tyger, a loyalist who was at Pluckemin about eight miles away, stood and saw them all march by .... 'They were in very high spirits. They marched in the most perfect order and seemed as if under military discipline.' They had what he thought a vast number of wagons."

This is clearly an army on the march and no mob. General Oliver De Lancey of the British army, coordinating his intelligence reports, substantiates this view. Many more such references are available, but I will quote only one other, on which the incident of the chicken in my book is based.

"An admiring spy," writes Carl Van Doren, "reported to the British that 'the Pennsylvanians observe the greatest order, and if a man takes a fowl from an inhabitant he is severely punished.' The behavior of the troops on the march was so good that the people of the district, who had suffered from the marauding of British, Hessian, loyalist and rebel soldiers, at once felt friendly and sympathetic toward these honest mutineers."

The factor of consciousness is always belittled by spokesmen for reaction, who would, as Kenneth Roberts does in *Oliver Wiswell*, turn the revolutionists into a mob of ignorant and murderous hoodlums. But their conduct in January, 1781, refutes these charges completely. They were men who knew very well what they were fighting for — and indeed there is no other explanation for their consistency in the struggle.

The foreign brigades were composed, for the most part, of the following national groups, given in order of numerical importance: Irish, Scottish, English, German, Negro, Jewish and Polish. But even this breakdown cannot be wholly relied upon, since the surviving regimental lists leave much about these men unsaid. We know that less than five percent were farmers or peasants, excluding former slaves. The rest were laborers and artisans, professional soldiers, sailors, deserters from the British army and navy, clerks, etc.

It is pathetic how little we know about them. In *Mutiny in January* there are detailed accounts of the actions of the officers as well as an extraordinary description of intelligence and counter-intelligence; but of what went on among the men of the Line, there is almost nothing at all, and Van Doren admits quite frankly the difficulties of obtaining such data. For this reason, the core of Jamie Stuart's narrative had to be a reconstruction, not from thin air, but from all the bits of information I had been able to gather about the men of the Pennsylvania Line since I first began to write of them, some fourteen years ago. That I colored this information according to my own beliefs, I do not deny; it could hardly be otherwise; but I have tried faithfully to understand these men and to depict the forces that motivated them; and I have always tried to link the trends of their time with the trends today. After all, they are not so far from us — only a moment in the great panorama of human history — and they are by no means strangers.

Now a word must be said of the occurrences at York and the conduct of Anthony Wayne. Whether the horrible affair at York happened as I have described it in my story is something no one can determine today. There are in existence at least five versions of the incident at York, and each varies from the other. Three versions give an account which is substantially that in *The Proud and the Free*. The semi-official records surviving tell of a court martial at York, wherein six men were condemned to death and four executed, which is more or less what Wayne's accounting of the incident to Washington is.

However, Lieutenant Colonel William Smith Livingston, in a letter to Colonel Samuel Blatchey Webb, gives the following account:

"There has been a mutiny in the Pennsylvania Line at York Town [Pennsylvania] previous to their marching. Wayne like a good officer quelled it as soon as twelve of the fellows stepped out and persuaded the Line to refuse to march in consequence of the promises made to them not being complied with. Wayne ... begged they would now fire either on him and them, or on those villains in front. He then called to such a platoon. They presented at the word, fired, and killed six of the villains. One of the others, badly wounded, he ordered to be bayoneted. The soldier on whom he called to do it, recovered his piece and said he could not, for he was his comrade. Wayne then drew his pistol and told him he would kill him. The fellow then advanced and bayoneted him. Wayne then marched the Line by divisions round the dead and the rest of the fellows are ordered

to be hanged. The Line marched the next day southward, mute as fish."

Too many of the accounts introduce the same note of horror for this to be entirely an invention. In his memoirs, Samuel Dewees goes into the executions at York in great and horrible detail. In his account, only six men are involved. Leonard Dubbs, a drummer in the Sixth Pennsylvania, gives a somewhat similar account and places Jack Maloney as the central figure. My own problem was to make to appear logical a frightful incident almost beyond logic.

As for the role of Anthony Wayne in this affair, history has given him a place of honor and there is no reason to disturb it. He was a very young man when all this occurred, and if he was hard and to an extent cruel, he was also brave and loyal — which all too many of his fellow officers were not. Faced with the disintegration of his army, a process he could not relate to cause, as a wiser man might have, he acted promptly and mercilessly. Enlisted men were a little less than human to him, as they have been to so many officers since the first army took the field of battle.

There are a few more points I wish to make before I conclude these notes. Several contemporary accounts mention a Williams as the leader of the revolt. But he remains shrouded in mystery, and we do not even know his first name; the only two of the Committee of Sergeants whom I could reconstruct in any manner as living persons were Bowzer and Maloney, and therefore I gave them leading roles. I also took the liberty of pre-dating the revolt of the Jersey Line, so that it might be an integral part of the events described. All of the songs used are authentic and were taken from old books and manuscripts. In the summer of 1783, the foreign brigades were permanently demobilized, and the few men who were left were swept up by the great postwar surge of the young nation — and thereby disappeared from our sight. What happened to them or to the hundreds of others who were once part of the line, no one will ever know. Some, perhaps, went back to their old trades; some, without kith or kin or tie to hold them, must have gone west on the expanding frontier; some went to sea, and undoubtedly some returned to the life they knew best, the army. However it was, they left no trace of themselves; and one can imagine them, as the years went by and every summer militiaman became more and more of a hero, they spoke less and less of what they had seen or done. Their strange revolt had now become a mutiny and was discussed scornfully by students of such things, and their hopes and dreams were locked away in their own hearts. Simple men, working men most of them, unable to read or write, they took their places in the mass of the American people — and there something of them must remain, to come to life once again and to fight again for the vision of freedom this land once gave to the world.

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## NOTES

1 *The Proud and the Free*. This novel was reviewed in *Masses & Mainstream* last month.

2 *Triumph of Freedom*. Boston, 1948.

3 Joseph Reed papers, New York Historical Society.

4 Carl Van Doren, *Mutiny in January*. New York, 1943.

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*Thanks to Steve Trussel, creator of the fabulous [Howard Fast Home Page](#), for corrections to this text*

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