



Homegrown Terror: Benedict Arnold and the Burning of New London

by Eric D. Lehman.

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Interest in the Founding Fathers has surged since 2000, as manifested in books,¹ television shows,² and even an award-winning Broadway musical.³ It is not surprising, then, that the failed Founding Father, Benedict Arnold, too, is getting some attention.

Born in Norwich, Connecticut in 1741, the son of a drunken father and poverty stricken mother, Arnold was apprenticed to the Lathrop apothecary, where he flourished and was eventually offered ownership of the business. He refused, instead getting a loan to start his own apothecary in New Haven. In the years before the Revolutionary War, Arnold expanded his business interests to merchant shipping and became a Freemason and a captain in the local militia. As tensions mounted with the British, he joined the Sons of Liberty and expanded his ties to local families, many of whom later suffered from that connection. Once the war began, Arnold quickly joined the patriot cause, fighting with distinction at Ticonderoga, Quebec, Lake Champlain, and Saratoga. In the process, he made many loyal friends, including George Washington, Silas Deane, Richard Varick, John Lamb, Jonathan Trumbull, and Nathaniel Shaw. These men defended him against critics and sought recognition for his services from the Continental Congress. They continued their support right up to the moment they learned of his betrayal and, in some cases, beyond.

Eric Lehman (Univ. of Bridgeport) persuasively shows that Arnold's life did not follow an inevitable road to treason: his fateful decision reflected a common feeling among Americans serving the patriot cause, especially as the war dragged on. In addition, wounds sustained at Quebec and Saratoga cost Arnold his prestige and chances for promotion. This left him angry and disaffected, even though his friends tried to cheer him up during his convalescence: Connecticut governor John Trumbull celebrated him with a parade in his hometown New Haven.

When he rejoined Washington's army, Arnold was appointed military governor of the recaptured city of Philadelphia, but his experience there only soured him further. Many Philadelphians resented his bad temper and accused him of war profiteering. And, too, his relationship with a beautiful young Tory named Peggy Shippen, whom he eventually married, caused many to doubt his loyalties. Shippen made an acquaintance of British major John André (later hanged as a spy) during the British occupation of Philadelphia. It was through her that he began to correspond with Arnold about committing treason. In the end, Arnold settled for £20,000 and a generalship in the British Army in return for plans to capture West Point and George Washington. Before the plot could be carried out, however, André was captured and Arnold fled to British protection at New York City. Word of Arnold's betrayal

1. E.g., David McCullough, *John Adams* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2001); Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (NY: Penguin, 2004); Joseph Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (NY: Knopf, 2000) and *His Excellency: George Washington* (NY: Knopf, 2004); Gordon Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (NY: Penguin, 2004).

2. E.g., *TURN: Washington's Spies* (AMC Studios, 2014–present), *Sleepy Hollow* (Fox, 2013–present).

3. *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2015), for which Ron Chernow was the historical consultant.

spread quickly, leaving his friends broken-hearted and dismayed. Many called his act not only treason but “parricide.” This word could then denote the killing of countrymen, not only a parent. For this reason, Lehmen suggests Arnold’s treachery was in fact equivalent to domestic terrorism.

Arnold’s actions as a general commanding British forces in Virginia were even more “parricidal,” since he was attacking former friends like Thomas Jefferson and Marquis de Lafayette, who lamented: “I would give anything in the world if Arnold had not shared our labors with us, and if this man, whom it still pains me to call a scoundrel, had not shed his blood for the American cause” (98).

Arnold further compounded his parricide by his actions in Connecticut. On the morning of 6 September 1781, he landed at New London and systematically burned the city to the ground. Civilian homes, even those of friends like Nathaniel Shaw, were not spared. Then, local patriot defensive forces under William Ledyard, a childhood friend of Arnold’s, were overwhelmed at Fort Griswold as British soldiers marched to burn Groton. Ledyard tried to surrender, but was killed and most of the fort’s defenders were massacred. Arnold’s attacks on his New London neighbors and at the Battle of Groton Heights were two of the deadliest engagements of the Revolution.

Meanwhile, Washington abandoned the New York siege and marched south, trapping Cornwallis at Yorktown with the help of the French fleet and Jean-Baptiste Rochambeau’s land forces. When Cornwallis was forced to surrender six weeks after New London was burned, many said Ledyard’s sacrifice there “gave us Yorktown” (164). For Lehman, the wanton attack on his onetime home makes Benedict Arnold a homegrown terrorist. He had not just betrayed the trust of former neighbors and friends in Connecticut, he had struck out at them with his sword.

Homegrown Terror is neither the best nor the worst book about Benedict Arnold. Adopting a prosopographical approach, Lehman, a professor of creative writing,⁴ vividly traces the lives of Benedict Arnold and several contemporaries from their childhood in Connecticut through their experience of the Revolutionary War. Though he sees Arnold’s scheme with Major André as an atrocity of war, Lehman argues that his actions as a British officer in Virginia and then Connecticut were the true betrayals of his character and made him not just a traitor, but a terrorist. His purpose is to discern what motivated Arnold to strike at his own hometown.

I am not convinced that the author has proved his point. He insists Arnold’s actions made him not just “a national villain” and a traitor, but a homegrown terrorist, a highly charged designation for present-day American readers. But this ignores the fact that Arnold—at the time a British officer—was simply following orders in Connecticut and Virginia. British general Henry Clinton had been ordered to hold New York City and raid the coastal areas of the American colonies, which was exactly what Arnold did. Burning and destroying property was a commonplace of the Revolutionary War. But Lehman does not call other British commanders terrorists, not even Banastre Tarleton, one of the most hated British generals of the war. In short, his portrayal of Arnold *specifically as a terrorist* is more presentist than reasonable. He does usefully distinguish “traitor” from “terrorist,” but glosses over Arnold’s position as a British commander acting under orders of his superiors.

Other weaknesses of Lehman’s book include the jejune review (in his introduction) of the relevant historiography of the American Revolution and Benedict Arnold. While this defect may stem from his almost exclusive reliance on primary source materials, it makes it difficult to place his work within the context of the existing literature in the field. The book also lacks good maps; the several included period maps give little accurate sense of locations, especially battlefields, under discussion in the text.

4. And prolific author of books about life in Connecticut; see his Amazon Author Page – www.miwsr.com/rd/1608.htm.

These criticisms aside, Eric Lehmen's engaging biography of Benedict Arnold and his world may be put to good use in undergraduate survey courses and even upper-level classes. It will encourage students and general readers to contemplate the destruction and tribulations of war, the motives for becoming a traitor, the meaning of "terrorism," and just why the Continental Congress failed to acknowledge Arnold's commitment to the patriot cause, among other things.