

## Book Review: *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History*, by Jill Lepore

Review by John K. Chidester, originally composed for the Mount Vernon News on January 25, 2010

In the two years since Barack Obama's first State of the Union address, the Tea Party movement has mushroomed, grabbed a lot of press and claimed for its own the American Revolution and the Founding Fathers. But they're not the first ones to do that—not even the first to call themselves a Tea Party. Both the Union and the Confederacy claimed the principles of the Revolution as their own. Civil rights leaders of the 50's and 60's claimed to be the true sons of liberty, as did Southern segregationists. In her latest book, *"The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History,"* historian Jill Lepore presents a wide-ranging and thoughtful meditation on the political uses of the past, the Revolution as experienced (and interpreted) by those who lived through it and the forces that would reduce historical scholarship to a form of fundamentalism.

Lepore is a professor of American history at Harvard and a staff writer for the *New Yorker*. She was a Pulitzer Prize finalist for her previous book, *"New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan,"* and she won the prestigious Bancroft Prize for her other book, *"The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity."* She grew up in Boston and has a fondness for the Revolutionary period that shines from every page. She dates the origin of the Tea Party movement to Rick Santelli's "rant heard 'round the world" on CNBC ("Are you listening, President Obama?!") in February of 2009. Santelli contended that the Founding Fathers would have been appalled at the new administration's economic policies. In almost no time, tri-cornered hats and "Don't Tread on Me" t-shirts were popping up all over.

Both fascinated and disturbed by what she saw taking place, especially in her own native Boston, Lepore began attending Tea Party events and talking to some of its adherents, many of whom became suspicious and wary when they saw her scribbling copious notes. Throughout her book, she is gentle and respectful toward her newfound Tea Party acquaintances, but she minces no words. What she discovered was a diverse collection of concerned citizens, very individual in their perceptions, attitudes and even their understanding of the meaning of their movement, but all sharing a common narrative of American history that was short on many of the essential details and long on unsupported assumptions about who the Revolutionary Americans were and what they thought about their own enterprise.

While telling the stories of her encounters with Tea Partiers, Lepore treats her readers to tandem forays into American history, both Revolutionary and more recent, delving into the aspects of the Tea Party narrative that don't exactly match up with the known facts, and comparing that scene with the equally turbulent one in the late 60's and early 70's, when the lead-up to the American Revolution Bicentennial became the stage for yet another brouhaha over who owned the Founding Fathers. That time around, Lepore says, it was the political left who opted out of the conventional narrative and established the People's Bicentennial Commission and the TEA Party (in which the acronym TEA stood for "Tax Equity for America," a call for the elimination of tax breaks and loopholes for big business and the hyper-wealthy).

The resulting amalgam of personal reflection, recent and not-so-recent news headlines and deep historical scholarship makes for surprisingly pleasurable reading, especially for those of us who had forgotten how divisive and contentious the Bicentennial era got to be (what with Vietnam, Watergate, protests, riots and all the rest). Especially praiseworthy is Lepore's recounting of parts of our early history that many of us may not ever have learned. She quotes liberally (sorry, no pun intended), for instance, from the letters of Jane Mecom, Benjamin Franklin's ill-fated sister, whose

own view of the Revolution was tempered by her poverty and bad luck. She sketches out the heated dispute between John Adams and Mercy Otis Warren—once very good friends, but later enemies—over Warren’s three-volume history of the Revolution, in which Adams merited a scant four pages and Thomas Paine was a mere footnote.

While providing her brief but pithy survey of the Revolution and its aftermath, Lepore also critiques the professional historians, taking special issue with their well-known reluctance to draw conclusions about the past’s relevance to the present. It was that academic stand-offishness, she says, that opened the field to amateur historians—both at the time of the Bicentennial and today—to come up with their own counter-historical narratives and claims to special connections with our Revolutionary history.

Though it will almost certainly irk some (though not all) Tea Partiers, Jill Lepore’s “The Whites of Their Eyes” is vibrant, provocative reading that will open many eyes and invite plenty of debate. What’s not to like about that?