
By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER | Posted: Sunday, March 1, 2015 12:00 am

Bernard Bailyn, an emeritus professor at Harvard University, is the dean of historians of the American colonial and Revolutionary experience. In more than 20 books, written over a span of 60 years, Bailyn has vastly enriched our understanding of the ideological origins of the American Revolution; the role of the Loyalists in that conflict; and the peopling of British North America in the 17th and 18th centuries.

“Sometimes an Art” collects nine of Bailyn’s public lectures and published essays. They provide variations on familiar Bailyn themes. Two essays present “the losers” — Americans who stood by Great Britain in the 1760s and ’70s — as thoughtful, rational individuals struggling to adapt to the political innovations concerning power and liberty that were remaking the Atlantic world. Bailyn speculates about the role of “provincialism” in creating the conditions that produced the Scottish Enlightenment of the 18th century, featuring the transformational insights of David Hume and Adam Smith about causation and capitalism.

And he compares patterns of immigration, cultural contact, and settlement in two British peripheries, America and Australia.

Bailyn’s methodology is informed by his conviction that history, “never a science, sometimes an art, is essentially a craft.” And that the greatest challenge for all historians involves “recovering the contexts in which events take place.”

Drawing on Herbert Butterfield’s 1931 classic, “The Whig Interpretation of History,” Bailyn points out that historians cannot divest themselves of their own assumptions to be able to fully enter into their subjects’ sense of possibilities and limitations or their ordinary and unremarkable commonplaces. Historians cannot erase their knowledge of what happened; they must combat a tendency to select the elements “in a once indeterminate situation that appear to have led to a future outcome.” And they must
deal with the possibility that to explain contextually can and often will be interpreted as excusing immoral behavior.

That said, Bailyn believes that historians can set events in their contexts while “retaining the capacity for moral judgments that do not warp the narrative and the conviction that change, growth, decline — evanescence — is what history is all about.”

Bailyn has, of course, challenged the presentist economic interpretation of Charles A. Beard and others in the early 20th century by taking seriously the view of Revolutionary leaders that officials of the British government were conspiring to deprive the colonists of their liberties, even though “we now know of the bumbling inefficiency” and inconsistency that characterized His Majesty’s minions.

And Bailyn insists, far more controversially, that historians ought to be able to describe as serious and sometimes sincere, the efforts of Americans, including Thomas Jefferson, to address the problem of human bondage and the related issue of racial difference in a theoretically free and egalitarian society, without evoking bitter condemnation.

After all, Bailyn concludes, history should deliver both a study and a story: “what the struggles were about, where we have come from,” and “extend the poor reach of our own immediate experience into other lives, accurately portrayed, that have gone before.”

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_Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University._