

The background of the cover is a detailed, light-colored map of the Atlantic Ocean. The map shows the outlines of North and South America to the west and Europe and Africa to the east. Labels for 'ATLANTIC OCEAN', 'WESTERN OCEAN', 'NORTH AMERICA', 'SOUTH AMERICA', 'AFRICA', and 'EUROPE' are visible. The map is oriented with North at the top.

# TO BEGIN THE WORLD OVER AGAIN

*How the American Revolution Devastated the Globe*

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE WORLD THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION MADE

We have it in our power to begin the world over again.

—Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*

Revolutions have never lightened the burden of tyranny; they have only shifted it to another shoulder.

—George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*

In 1779, after a month-long journey across Europe, through the Mediterranean Sea, across the Sinai Desert, and down the Red Sea, after weeks on a crowded ship in the storm-tossed Indian Ocean, Eliza Fay arrived on the sun-kissed shore of Malabar in south India. The tropical tranquility that greeted Eliza and her husband Anthony after their trying ordeal was, however, a mirage. With war spreading from the Atlantic to the subcontinent, the British embassy had fled, leaving Eliza and Anthony at the mercy of William Ayers, an English convict and one-time soldier now employed by the ferociously anti-British Sultan of Mysore. As Ayers escorted the pair to prison, Eliza Fay must have wondered just how she had come to such a pass. In the years to come, tens of thousands of captives and refugees—Muslims, Hindus, and Indian Christians as well as countless British, French, and Indian soldiers—would ask themselves similar questions. The answer lay not in Malabar, but in an unexpected source: the American Revolution.

On May 18, 1781, Micaela Bastidas stood in the square in Cuzco in a pool of her own sons' blood defiantly awaiting her fate. Her rebellion against the Spanish Empire had failed and so now, as her husband Tupac Amaru II, co-leader of the uprising, looked on in horror, it was her turn to face the executioner. At least she would be spared the awful sight of what the Spanish had planned for her husband. After her death he would be pulled apart by horses, then quartered and beheaded, his limbs sent across Peru as symbols of Spanish vengeance. With her death, and the death of her husband, an indigenous rebellion would end, but a spark had been lit and a pair of martyrs had been born. Their fates too were rooted in the struggle for American independence.

In 1810, Britain's first Indian restaurant, the Hindoostane Coffee House, opened its doors in George Street in London. Entering the establishment, patrons might well have thought themselves transported to the Orient itself. Reclining on bamboo-cane sofas, guests gazed upon walls covered with rich paintings of Indian landscapes and scenes of Indian life. As the aroma of curries and seasoned rice wafted in from the kitchen, the scent of Indian herbs and spices mixing with the fragrant tobacco of the ornate hookahs lining the floor of the smoking room, 'India gentlemen', Britons who had lived and worked in India, must have harkened back to their previous lives half a world away.

With Britain's ever-expanding empire and its growing involvement in the affairs of the subcontinent, it was perhaps no surprise that such an establishment might grace the crowded streets of the imperial capital. Its proprietor, however, was no British nabob newly returned from plundering the crumbling empires of the east, no British soldier hoping to recreate the sights, smells, and tastes of his formative years, no British merchant hoping to expand his interests from shipping spices to cooking with them. Instead, as an advertisement in *The Times* made clear, the restaurant was owned and operated by Dean Mahomet, a Muslim Bengali soldier from Patna and his Irish Protestant wife. The more literary among the advertisement's readers may well have recognized the proprietor's name. Nearly two decades earlier, the very same Dean Mahomet had been involved in another first, becoming the first Indian to publish in English when his *Travels* were released in 1793. How did Mahomet come to find himself opening England's first curry house, publishing the first English-language book

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by an Indian, and marrying the daughter of an Irish Protestant? Once more the War for American Independence had intervened.<sup>1</sup>

Nearly two centuries later, on a cold January day in 1988, two men stood in solemn ceremony over a grave in the churchyard of St. John's church in Eltham in south-east London. One of the men standing before the headstone was the parish priest, whose predecessor had conducted the burial service nearly two hundred years before. The other had come much further to stand in the winter chill contemplating events now centuries old. His name was Burnum Burnum, an athlete, actor, and activist of Wurundjeri people, and he had made the pilgrimage from his native Australia to retrieve a body and right an injustice. A few days earlier, to mark the bicentennial of Britain's first colonization of Australia, he had planted a flag on the white cliffs of Dover and issued a proclamation full of biting, tragic humor. In mocking parallel of British actions in 1788, Burnum Burnum announced that he was claiming Britain on behalf of Aboriginal people and that though Britons would henceforth see Aboriginal figures on their money and stamps "to signify our sovereignty over this Domain," he could promise that "we do not intend to souvenir, pickle, and preserve the heads of 2,000 of your people or to publically display the skeletal remains of Your Royal Highness" as the British themselves had done.<sup>2</sup>

But now, as he stood before the resting place of a fellow native Australian, his righteous humor was gone, replaced by sadness tinged with indignation. On the simple headstone were inscribed the barest of facts about the young man it memorialized: "In memory of Yemmerawanyea a Native of New South Wales who died the 18th of May 1794 in the 19th year of his age." Newspapers at the time gave little more detail. The *Morning Post* reported that "one of the two natives of Botany Bay, who came over with Governor Phillip, is dead: his companion pines much for his loss." It was Burnum Burnum and many of his countrymen's hope that two hundred years after the British first began their penal colony at Botany Bay, the body of Yemmerrawannie might at last be returned to his native shores. But there would be no symbolic homecoming for Yemmerrawannie, no peaceful rest, no symbolic righting of colonial wrongs, for unbeknownst to priest and activist alike, by 1988 there were no bones beneath the headstone in Eltham churchyard. Yemmerrawannie's body had been lost. How had this young man of the Eora people come to be buried in a

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churchyard in suburban London, a symbol of Britain's imperial sins? Here too, the roots of this modern tragedy lay not just in the Pacific, or even in London, but in the aftershocks of the American Revolution.<sup>3</sup>

The American Revolution is blessed with some of the most dramatic, most soul-searing stories and images in all of history: Paul Revere riding through the night-black streets of Massachusetts to warn his fellow Americans that the British were coming to seize their arms; The Sons of Liberty creeping aboard a British ship disguised as Native Americans to cast its cargo of over-taxed tea into Boston Harbor; George Washington and his ragged band of Continental soldiers freezing, but surviving, at Valley Forge; General Cornwallis and his defeated British army playing "The World Turned Upside Down" as they surrendered to Washington's victorious army at Yorktown. These tales of daring deeds and noble sacrifice have a tendency to crowd the mind, overshadowing other less well-known stories and images of the Revolutionary War beyond America's shores.

Most previous accounts of the American Revolution have by and large restricted their attention to the thirteen colonies that declared independence from Great Britain in 1776. In so doing they have limited their focus to the stone that caused the splash rather than the waves and ripples that radiated out from its epicenter, the quick, sharp, shock rather than the enduring reverberations. This stubbornly national focus has largely obscured the wider ramifications of America's struggle for independence. Stories like those of Micaela Bastidas, Dean Mahomet, and Yemmerrawannie provide a unique window onto a world at war and the new world that war created. These stories are no less important to the story of the American Revolution, no less a part of its history, but they are largely forgotten, disconnected from the more stirring, glorious, triumphant tales of Washington and Jefferson, Bunker Hill and Yorktown.

As compelling as these heroic stories are, limiting our focus to the familiar, even comforting, tales of the American Revolution not only skews our understanding of what was in fact a global crisis, but also molds our understanding of America's national history in dangerous ways. The idea of American exceptionalism, of the United States as a uniquely moral and chosen nation, in many ways began with the revolution itself and has been forged and strengthened by



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the telling and retelling of the familiar stories of that mythic birth. The portrayal of the American Revolution as a noble movement that created an incomparably just, enlightened society has long been the cornerstone of such ideas. But while the popular belief in America's unique status has at times provided a welcome sense of unity, it has had pernicious effects as well. In an increasingly globalized world, a stubborn adherence to the idea of American exceptionalism has helped create a narrow, jingoistic worldview and a selfish pursuit of American interests above all else. In order to undermine such a solipsistic isolationism in foreign affairs we must complicate and challenge the lazy idea of America's exceptionalism, and to do this we must complicate the story of its foundational moment.

In recent years historians like Gary Nash, Carol Berkin, Holger Hoock, and Alan Taylor have begun to undermine the simplistic narrative of the American Revolution, highlighting forgotten stories of women, Native Americans, and African Americans, and exposing the contradictions and hypocrisies of our founding. Though such accounts provide an important corrective, they do not entirely upend the myths of America's conception. They still allow us to believe that though the founding fathers were flawed and imperfect in many ways, and though the blessings of the revolution were not shared equally among the inhabitants of North America, the goals and ideals of the revolution remain an example of America at its best, as it sought to be. Indeed, even those accounts that aim to explain the wider, international story of the American Revolution have largely failed to adequately complicate the story of American exceptionalism.<sup>4</sup>

From Justin du Rivage and Nick Bunker we have learned that the American Revolution had global, imperial causes, that the outbreak of war in North America had as much to do with developments in Europe and Asia as it did with events in the American colonies. C.A. Bayly, P.J. Marshall, and Maya Jasanoff have similarly expanded our understanding of the consequences of the war for the British Empire. Despite these pathbreaking contributions, however, most accounts of the revolution's international impact have still dealt solely with its place in the wider Age of Revolutions. Important works by R.R. Palmer, Lester Langley, Janet Polasky, and Jonathan Israel have certainly broadened our horizons and helped to situate the American Revolution within a shared Atlantic context, but by focusing exclusively on the ideological facets of the American

struggle for independence and that struggle's role in shaping similar revolutions in France, Poland, Haiti, and South America, such histories have not only neglected much of the world, but have often reinforced and reified the belief in America's unique legacy as the first swelling of a global democratic wave.<sup>5</sup>

While such works are admirable and often invaluable, unraveling the ideological threads of the American Revolution does not alone reveal the entire picture. Many of its most important legacies had little to do with ideology, with the words and writings of the sainted founders or the government they created. Examining the revolution from a truly global perspective, both geographically and thematically, forcefully reveals the often tragic interconnectedness of the world, compelling us to contemplate ourselves in an entangled world rather than as an isolated, exceptional chosen people. Removing the blinkers of a narrowly national political point of view opens new horizons of understanding, allowing us to realize the most urgent lesson taught by America's founding moment: American actions have, and have always had, unforeseen, unimagined global consequences. Only when we examine the global impact of the American Revolution through a wide range of both political and personal perspectives can we discover a unique and long overlooked window into the thousands of men, women, and children, individuals of all social, economic, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, who had their worlds turned upside down by global war. Their stories, their struggles and successes, their lives and their deaths are the very lifeblood of the full story of the American Revolution. When we decenter the story of the War for American Independence and take a wider view, our understanding of the revolution and its place in world history is fundamentally transformed.

It becomes clear that though the war began in Massachusetts, it did not end with the surrender of a sword at Yorktown or the scratch of a pen in Paris. Instead, a local protest over taxes in a remote corner of North America would end on the streets of Dublin, the mountains of Peru, the beaches of Australia, and the jungles of India. In the increasingly interconnected world of the eighteenth century, an American spark would ignite an unexpected flame that would consume the globe, leaving in its wake a new world and an altered balance of power. The birth of a new nation in the west would sow the seeds of collapse for millennia-old civilizations in India, Australia, Africa, China, and the Middle



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East, and help speed the rise of the great powers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: America, Russia, and Great Britain. The American Revolution was a war within, between, and over empires, and when the smoke cleared, new empires would emerge and old empires would be forced to fundamentally change or face a steep decline.

The shots fired at Lexington and Concord in April 1775 echoed across the globe from the Atlantic coast to the English Channel, from Central America and the Caribbean to Africa, India, and Australia, heralding a new world that none could have predicted and few could have imagined. Advocates of revolution in America and in Europe had hoped that the uprising in the colonies would create a global movement, a revolution without borders. But if revolutionary fervor did indeed become international, the true consequences of the revolution without borders, its remaking of institutions and reshaping of lives across the world, were not what anyone expected. A revolution in favor of liberty in one corner of the map initiated a reactionary revolution in the wider world, inflicting new suffering and new restraints on people for whom freedom and independence were not available. In the empires of France, Spain, and Britain, the hard lessons learned from the American Revolution were rigorously applied, inaugurating an authoritarian counter-revolution that stabilized and expanded Britain's empire while fatally weakening France and Spain. The Age of Revolutions was not simply the child of the enlightened ideals of the American Revolution, but also of the fear, financial crisis, and authoritarian reaction brought by the American War.

Perhaps the most miraculous thing about the American War when viewed holistically is not that America won, but that, given the global scope of the conflict; the numerous powers arrayed against it in America, Europe, and Asia; the rioting, unrest, and threats of invasion at home and in the empire, Britain and its empire were not destroyed entirely. Not only did Britain avoid utter ruin, more than any of its rivals it emerged from the war well positioned to pursue global imperial supremacy. Far from teetering on the brink, the post-war British Empire, and commitment to it, was strengthened by the refashioning that the American crisis necessitated. The American Revolution thus did not delay Britain's imperial rise but was instead crucial to it. The expansion of Britain in the nineteenth century was in fact predicated upon Britain's loss in

the American Revolution. The war forced Britain to think about its empire in new, more centralized, hierarchical, authoritarian ways, allowing Britain to tighten its grasp both at home and in its far-flung possessions. Britain's survival of the French Revolution and the wars it spawned owed much to the counter-revolutionary measures it had already undertaken in the years between 1776 and 1789. At the same time, the loss of the American colonies transformed British conceptions of empire. The American War gave Britons scope to reimagine their empire—once viewed by many corrupt, indecent, and unethical—as a noble harbinger of national honor, morality, and civilization. The imperial confidence that fueled Britain's global expansion in the nineteenth century would not have been possible without the experience of the American War.<sup>6</sup>

While the British Empire was internally stabilized, the American War destabilized Britain's primary rivals in Europe, Asia, and the Americas. France's pyrrhic victory bankrupted the nation and put it on the path to revolution. Spain's triumph came at the cost of dissension and division within its American possessions, sowing the seeds of insurrection and blunting its attempts to revive its empire. During and after the war, Austria, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire became too focused on eastern Europe to disrupt Britain's expansion in Asia. In India too, once vibrant, expansionist powers like Mysore and the Maratha Empire were fatally undermined by the American Revolution, missing their last best chance to prevent British domination. Defeat in the American War thus paradoxically strengthened the British government in Britain, Ireland, and India, expanded the empire in Asia, Africa, and the Pacific, and everywhere undermined their chief rivals for global imperial hegemony.

If measured by the goals of 1775, when Britain still hoped to retain its North American colonies, Britain's eventual defeat may well have seemed a failure. But in hindsight, from the perspective of Britain's nineteenth-century rise to world dominance, the war was a smashing success, a confirmation of British preeminence in the face of its most challenging threat. Britain had been buffeted on all fronts, by the combined power of all its major rivals in Europe, the Americas, and Asia, and yet, while it lost some troublesome possessions in the Atlantic, it had fended off the challenge, secured its supremacy of the oceans, solidified its grasp in the Caribbean, expanded its interests in India, Asia, Africa, and the Pacific, and dealt a serious, in some cases fatal, blow to its rivals. The

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American Revolution, for all its importance for the United States, was also, perhaps as importantly, a British victory and a world disaster.

Though very much the story of how Britain won the American Revolution, *To Begin the World Over Again* is not simply a triumphalist narrative of British victory against the odds, not a story of plucky British daring to place alongside tales of the Spanish Armada or the Battle for Britain. Instead, in a world of empires and imperialism, Britain's gains in the American War came with dire consequences for people in Britain and around the globe. Hidden in the shadows of the more familiar stories of military clashes and imperial contestation, countless lives and institutions were fundamentally altered in ways that reverberate to the present day. For the vast majority of Earth's inhabitants, who did not give a damn about a civil war in British North America or the ideas and ideals that inspired it, the American Revolution was a disaster: not the birth of a new world, but the death of the old and familiar. For indigenous peoples in South America, India, Australia, Africa, and the Crimea, it marked the beginning of a steep decline. For the old empires of Spain, China, the Ottomans, and the Dutch, it spelt the curtain call from the grandest stage of world powers. For India and Ireland, it was the last real shot for independence on their own terms until the middle of the twentieth century. For France it would usher in an age of chaos and blood. Ironically, only in America, Britain, and Russia were the results remotely positive.

The American Revolution thus certainly remade the world, but not simply through its ideals. In most accounts of the American Revolution, battlefields and debate halls, noble generals and enlightened politicians crowd the scene, providing a veneer of haloed respectability to what was in reality a nasty, bloody, confused and chaotic era. However, in the shadows of these well-worn settings and familiar figures, ordinary people had their worlds turned upside down. The violence of this imperial civil war—which stretched from kings and congressmen to paupers and felons, from Boston and Philadelphia to London, Calcutta, and Botany Bay—was one of the defining features and most important legacies of the global American Revolution. *To Begin the World Over Again* tells these forgotten personal stories for the first time, demonstrating how the individual and the institutional, the local and the global, were irrevocably intertwined. The geopolitical and economic aftermath of the American Revolution

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is well known, if passionately argued over and deeply contentious. The wartime experience of the wealthy, the well-educated and well-heeled is often discussed and easily illustrated in the countless diaries, books, newspapers, and letters that proliferated in the final decades of the eighteenth century. The voices of the poor, the struggles and triumphs of the common man and woman are, as always, nearly silent. But they can be heard, if faintly, through a close and careful reading of the archives. Here, hundreds of heart-rending accounts reveal the sheer scale of the consequences of war across the world. The imperial American Revolution altered forever the lives of everyday people, ravaging communities and sending thousands of individuals to new homes in distant lands, to opportunity, to ruin, to prison, and to the gallows. While one set of people struggled to free themselves from the bonds of empire, men and women like Micaela Bastidas, Dean Mahomet, and Yemmerrawannie found themselves bound, incarcerated, and exiled, struggling to survive in the world the revolution created. These are their stories.