

Early American History Through Literature

by Rea Berg

"The creation of the United States of America is the greatest of all human adventures. No other national history holds such tremendous lessons, for the American people themselves and for the rest of mankind. It now spans four centuries, and, as we enter the new millennium, we need to retell it, for if we can learn these lessons and build upon them, the whole of humanity will benefit in the new age which is now opening."¹

The words of the renowned British historian, Paul Johnson, remind us as Americans that the story of our country is a good story and one worthy of retelling. Despite our many foibles as a nation and a culture, what occurred on the eastern shores of this rich land in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was remarkable in the annals of human history. The confluence of the streams of spiritual freedom birthed in the Reformation, the revival of Greek and Roman philosophical thought in the Renaissance, and the advance of civil and social notions in the Enlightenment allowed a full flowering of religious and civil liberty to be realized here.

Since many of us are products of an institutionalized educational system where this remarkable story has been blandly presented through the pages of standardized textbooks, it is not surprising that we often approach teaching our country's history with dread rather than enthusiasm. Fortunately, there is a wonderfully simple remedy for this malady that is guaranteed to inspire even the most reluctant student of history. Here it is: *teach history through literature*. As Pulitzer prize-winning author David McCullough advises about teaching history: "Tell stories."²

The story of America's founding really begins in England when the King of England held complete sway over the civil and religious lives of Englishmen. State-mandated religion meant that if you were English you worshiped at the Anglican Church, whether you liked it or not. But that didn't set too well with certain folks who had found, through the light of the Reformation, that freedom of conscience was a personal thing. A few of these folks rebelled against that particular form of tyranny and followed their hearts and their God to America. We know them today as Pilgrims, Quakers, and Separatists. Their stories have all the elements of the best tales—dangerous escapes by night, treachery, betrayal, imprisonment, deprivation, a long and often terrifying journey by sea, sometimes loss and death, but eventually freedom.

For the youngest historian, *Pilgrim Stories* by Margaret Pumphrey is a classic based upon the true stories of the Pilgrim children themselves. Suffering religious persecution in England, the Pilgrims immigrate to Holland, where they build comfortable lives amidst the friendly Dutch people. But the English mothers and fathers sense that their faith is calling for something more from them. They make the difficult decision to leave comfort behind and brave the unknown terrors of the sea and the wilderness shores of America in order to build new lives. Their story is the stuff of legends, but this legend is true.

The Landing of the Pilgrims by James Daugherty tells the Pilgrim tale for the intermediate historian and recounts in marvelous detail the childhood of young

William Bradford, whose faith at age 15 inspired him to remarkable deeds. When William announced his decision to leave the church of his fathers and become a Separatist (an offense for which citizens were being hung), his relatives threatened, pleaded, and warned him of the folly of his actions. Bradford calmly replied, "To keep a good conscience and to walk in such Way as God had prescribed in his Word is a thing which I must prefer before you all, and above life itself."³ This brave young man went on to become a Pilgrim father, judiciously and benevolently leading the colony at Plimoth for more than thirty-five years.

The World of William Penn by Genevieve Foster explores the wide sphere of the humble Quaker, William Penn. From the courtyards of the Sun King to the royal chambers of Charles II, Penn was a "Friend" of kings and princes, scientists and Native Americans. A member of the Royal Society, Penn knew Edmund Halley and Isaac Newton. He met Peter the Great while the Czar was visiting London and introduced him to Quaker ideas. As the founder of Pennsylvania, Penn treated the Native American tribes with dignity and respect and by his integrity established the longest standing peace treaty between European settlers and Native Americans. His commitment to religious freedom became a cornerstone of American democracy.

George Washington's World by Genevieve Foster was one of the first children's books to present a geo-political history *horizontally*. By this method, the author focuses on a central figure, in this case, Washington, and like an actor on the world stage, presents the other characters that were impacting events in the arenas of literature, science, religion, philosophy, music, and of course, politics. Looking at history through this lens enables students to understand what the beliefs, motivations, and forces were that moved men and nations.

The period measured by the life of George Washington—1732 to 1799—was one of revolution and change in many parts of the world as Enlightenment thinking took hold in the minds of men. When George was a young man, Benjamin Franklin was the most well-known American, Louis XV was on the throne of France, and George II was king of England. Father Junipero Serra had just arrived in Mexico to work with the Panes Indians. Mozart and Bach were writing their immortal music, and Voltaire warred with his pen against Ignorance, Injustice, and Superstition. The young nobleman Lafayette watched the feisty American colonies with fascinated interest as they stood up to Mother England when she sought to tax them unfairly. James Cook was sent by the Royal Society of London to Tahiti, where their team of astronomers might observe a total eclipse of the sun and thereby accurately measure the distance between the earth and the sun. These are just a few of the wonderful narratives explored by Foster in her Newbery Honor Book of 1940. Prolifically illustrated with intriguing line drawings and detailed timelines, Foster's telling of the life story of George Washington does justice to the man it celebrates.

For the youngest student of American history, the tale of America's Founding Father is delightfully told in the work ***George Washington*** by Ingri and Edgar Parin D'Aulaire. This author/illustrator couple believed young children deserved well-written and well-researched texts accompanied by beautiful artwork, so that every encounter with the written word was also visually stimulating, thus encouraging a love of beauty in a child's mind. Their limestone engraved lithographs gave their works the quality of an art print and earned them the distinction of elevating the children's picture book to an actual art form. Their biography ***Benjamin Franklin*** reflects the curiosity and charm of America's most well-loved founder, inventor,

statesman, and diplomat. **Pocahontas** by the D'Aulaires tells the almost mythic tale of the daughter of Powhatan and her abiding friendship with the enigmatic Captain John Smith and the first colony at Jamestown, Virginia.

The middle reader will enjoy the delightful work of James Daugherty (noted above) in his biography **Poor Richard** and even more so in his rendition of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in **Of Courage Undaunted**. With Daugherty's muscular illustrations and his deeply passionate attachment to America's founding period, readers will be challenged, inspired, and thrilled by the stories of these men and women (the Indian guide Sacajawea plays a major role) as they faced the challenges that history presented to them.

The above recommendations are just the beginning of a treasure trove of worthy children's books that will bring America's story to life, for you and your child. Ultimately, that is the power of story, and America's story is one worthy to be told again and again. Look for the May issue, in which I will identify the best children's books for teaching the American Revolution.

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Endnotes:

1. Johnson, Paul. *A History of the American People*. New York: Harper Collins, 1997, p.4.
2. McCullough, David. "Knowing History and Who We Are." Hillsdale, Michigan: *Imprimis*. April 2005, p. 4.
3. Daugherty, James. *The Landing of the Pilgrims*. New York: Random House, 1950, p. 8.