

Stories of Independence: Identity, Ideology, and History in Eighteenth-Century America. By PETER C. MESSER. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005. 268 pages. \$39.00 (cloth).

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Stories of Independence is an original and erudite study aiming to deal with the complex “relationships between history, identity, and ideology in the republican tradition of eighteenth-century Anglo America” (3). More specifically, its goal is to show “how historians’ efforts to craft a distinct American identity contributed to the formation of a unique vision of republican politics” (3) in eighteenth-century America. The author resists the view that sees “the writings” of these “historians as the product of the eccentricities of a few men and women” (181), arguing rather that the “evolution of history writing over the course of the eighteenth century illustrates how identities grounded in perceptions of history produce ideologies,” which in turn shaped and directed “political thought and discourse” (182).

After reading and analyzing more than fifty American histories, the author asserts that provincial historians were accorded the crucial role of transforming American identity and furnishing ideological sources for resisting imperial rule. Their histories, he argues, “offered readers new identities as distinct peoples” within the British Empire and supplied “the crucial component for transforming resistance to unpopular imperial policies into a revolution” (3). After independence these identities “provided the context for a distinct vision of republican polity and republican politics” (3) in the new American Republic. The book thus traces “the development of American identities and then how those identities merged with republican ideology to create a uniquely American vision of republican politics” (12).

Messer begins with Robert Beverley’s *History of the Present State of Virginia* (1705), “the first history to be written in that self-consciously assertive style that reacted to the creation of the Board of Trade and the more invasive empire that subsequently emerged” (12). Like Beverley, other historians attempted to “balance the empire’s interests with those of the colonies,” producing a “distinctively provincial vision of history,” which in turn “produced identities that reflected the colonists’ growing pride in their communities as distinct from the empire as a whole” (13). Given that “the distinctly American vision of republican politics had its origin in provincial identities that emerged over the course of the eighteenth century,” the first chapter, “Autonomous Communities within an Empire,” attempts to show how the “authors of these identities” created them in the context of their overall goal “to reconcile their own increasingly mature communities with the increasingly complex and intrusive British empire” (17). The reference is, for example, to Thomas Prince’s *Chronological History of New England* (1736), John Callender’s *An Historical Discourse on the Civil and Religious Affairs of the Colony of Rhode Island* (1739), William Stith’s *The History of the First Discovery and Settlement of Virginia* (1747), and Samuel Smith’s *The History of the Colony of . . . New Jersey* (1765). Their common attempts to write the “narratives of autonomous communities” (45) resulted in various “interpretations of the past” that “laid the foundations for provincial identities” (17), thus marking “a significant moment in the development of social and political thought in America” (44).

Not everyone in colonial America embraced the provincial vision of history along with its provincial identities. An opposing imperial vision “portrayed colonial communities as dependent on Parliament and royal government for their long-term stability and success” (13). Where provincial historians adopted “the Scottish vision of history as a narrative of progress and improvement over time, imperial authors embraced the Whig vision of history as a struggle to overcome the dangers of self-interest, passion, and false consciousness” (47). Thomas Hutchinson’s three volumes of *The History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay* (1764, 1767, 1828), Messer argues, were written by an imperial historian who developed an “imperial identity that located the shared experiences and

symbols around which colonists could build healthy communities in the institutions and goals of the empire” (45).

During the era of the American Revolution, these two different visions of the past—the provincial and the imperial, the first associated now with the patriots and the second with the loyalists—came into conflict. The evolution of provincial history to patriot history is best exemplified in Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* (1776), which “used provincial identities in crafting a Revolutionary republican ideology that transformed protests against Parliamentary policies into a movement for independence” (13). There was also at that time an “evolution from imperial history to Loyalist history,” which stressed “the stable institutions of imperial government” (68). Most important in terms of the author’s main thesis, “identities developed in the provincial histories . . . provided an essential context for how Americans understood” and explained the Revolution as well as “republican ideology” (73).

Messer’s last chapters deal with the early Republic, “examining how, in the years following independence, provincial identities and Revolutionary ideology shaped historians’ efforts to craft narratives of the nation’s past that would encourage and promote republican sensibilities among its citizens. This effort began with Jeremy Belknap’s *History of New Hampshire* (1784) and concluded with John Marshall’s *Life of George Washington* (1804–1808)” (13). These and other works of the time identified “the Constitution as the republic’s foundation” and viewed it as representing “the final evolution of republication ideology” (169) in the age of the American Revolution. In other words “authors now argued that the Constitution—and not the contentious political process that produced it—represented the defining element of the republican experience in the United States” (169).

Messer’s central contention—historians wrote and crafted a distinct American identity that contributed to the formation of a unique vision of republican politics and identities grounded in perceptions of history produce ideologies that shaped and directed political thought and discourse—should not be dismissed altogether: there are many such examples in early and modern history. For example, during the second half of the sixteenth century, the rise of apocalyptic historical writings in England led to the formation of a unique apocalyptic tradition that greatly contributed to the formation of singular English Protestant identity, as can clearly be seen in the enormous influence of John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* (1563) on English thought and imagination. Foxe’s book became almost the Bible of Protestant England and was ordered to be placed in churches where everyone might have access to it. Yet this cultural significance is clearly not the case with regard to the historical works discussed in the present study. There is no clear proof for the author’s central assertion about the close and essential link between history writings and the formation of American identity or between stories of independence and the creation of the American self. Readers do not know what was the real influence of the various histories discussed in the present study, how many people read them, and how they read and used them. Readers do not even know whether people indeed read these histories at all, let alone how they influenced their mental world, formed their identities, and influenced their republican polity and politics. The author simply assumes this influence to be the case. To answer these questions, one might turn to the genre of the history of the book, for example *The Culture of Print*, edited by Roger Chartier, or *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, edited by Hugh Amory and David D. Hall.¹

It is clear that the author is dealing with Enlightenment narratives of history that were, as J. G. A. Pocock puts it, “both a historiography of state and a historiography of society.” For

¹ Roger Chartier, ed., *The Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton, N.J., 1989); Hugh Amory and David D. Hall, eds., *A History of the Book in America*, vol. 1, *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, 2000).

Enlightenment historians history was primarily political, social, and educational and much less theological and religious, as described in the studies of Philip Hicks, *Neoclassical History and English Culture*, Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment*, and the various essays included in *Civil Histories*. Messer's stories of independence are thus related primarily to civil histories. Yet, in eighteenth-century America, there was another important mode of historical thought, namely religious, or sacred, ecclesiastical history, as revealed most notably in Jonathan Edwards's *History of the Work of Redemption* (1774). For a long time, historians have acknowledged the great influence of religious thought on the formation of American identity before, during, and after the American Revolution. Why then exclude from the present study the effect of religious belief on the formation of American identities and histories during the eighteenth-century, something that stands in clear contrast to the work of scholars including Nathan O. Hatch, Ruth Bloch, Harry S. Stout, and Jon Butler.²

Nonetheless *Stories of Independence* is an inventive and thought-provoking study. Messer's serious and systematic treatment of these works constitutes an important step in understanding the rise and development of a unique mode of American historical thought as well as its contribution to the formation of social and political behavior in America.

² J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2, *Narratives of Civil Government* (Cambridge, 1999), 2. For Enlightenment historians' work, see Philip Hicks, *Neoclassical History and English Culture: From Clarendon to Hume* (Basingstoke, Eng., 1996); Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge, 1997); Peter Burke, Brian Harrison, and Paul Slack, eds., *Civil Histories: Essays Presented to Sir Keith Thomas* (New York, 2000). For works including religious beliefs, see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven, Conn., 1977); Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756–1800* (Cambridge, 1985); Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York, 1986); Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990).