

APPENDIX B

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Book Reviews

An essential part of the historian's profession, book reviews represent an assessment of the writing of other historians. Writing book reviews is also a good way to train yourself in understanding how the discipline of history works. Such writing is often complicated and demanding. Reviewers do report on the content of the book, but they also evaluate the work by discussing matters such as the author's logic and organization, evidence and conclusions, and sometimes even the writer's style.

Reviewing as a Special Form of Writing

While writing a book review does require many of the same writing skills we have discussed in this book, it is also a special form of historical writing. You are expected to engage with the historical ideas of another author, to report on and evaluate them, and to present your conclusions to other historians. Such an effort will draw you into debates about historical subjects. That is why many students are asked to write book reviews in their history classes. But keep in mind there are several types of book reviews; for convenience, we refer to them as popular, academic, and scholastic reviews.

Popular reviews are generally written for publications intended for an informed readership, such as the *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *The New Republic*, the *New York Review of Books*, or other widely circulated magazines. Some newspapers, such as the the *New York Times* and the

Washington Post, also carry similar reviews in some of their editions. Occasionally popular reviews range far and wide, often extending beyond the contents of the book to issues which it raises in the reviewer's mind. Thus some popular reviews take the form of extended essays on particular subjects, which either include the topic of the book or books under review or even occasionally narrower aspects of that topic. While these are frequently very interesting essays, they do not always offer very practical models for the types of reviews you may be asked to write.

Two other types of book reviews are more important as guides to your own writing. The first, which we call *academic* reviews, usually appear in professional journals such as *The American Historical Review*, the *Journal of World History*, or *The Historian*. These are frequently much shorter than popular reviews—often little more than five hundred words—and are generally intended for a scholarly audience. On occasion, historical journals may also publish one or two longer “review essays” that more closely approximate what we have termed popular reviews. But for historians, these review essays frequently focus on the important scholarly issues raised by the book or books the reviewer is considering. We suggest that you look at the book reviews, and review essays, in historical journals and also at the H-Net Reviews Web site, <http://www.h-net.org/reviews>; these will give you some idea of the way historians generally prepare and present book reviews.

As an example of an academic review, intended for a professional audience of historians, here is a review written for the *Journal of American History* by historian Edward Countryman:

The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution. By Alfred F. Young. (Boston: Beacon, 1999. xx, 262 pp. \$24-00, ISBN 0-8070-7140-4.)

“Gem-like” is one of the highest terms of praise in Alfred F. Young's vocabulary. I have heard him apply it only twice. Almost two decades ago he published a gem-like extended essay called “George Robert Twelves

Hewes: A Boston Shoemaker and the Memory of the American Revolution” in the *William and Mary Quarterly*. The essay won that journal’s annual best-article prize. Now, as part of an ongoing project about the intertwined themes of revolutionary Boston and historical memory, he has turned that essay into a book.

Part I of *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* reprints the original essay, broken now into twelve short chapters and slightly amended in the light of Young’s thinking since 1982. Part 2 considers how the shoemaker Hewes became a living subject of historical memory in his very old age and how the events in which he took part emerged as an iconic part of revolutionary historical imagery. Taking as his subject what ought to have been obvious (but, as so often happens, was not obvious at all), Young notes the more-than-coincidence of the emergence of the term “tea party” to describe the destruction of the East India Company’s tea in December 1773 and the emergence of Hewes as one of the party’s/ destruction’s hallowed veterans six decades later.

It seems unlikely that a revolution-era specialist is unaware of Young’s original essay, but a summary remains appropriate. Influenced by the work of E. P. Thompson and Carlo Ginzburg, Young set out to explore the Revolution’s meaning in the life of one very ordinary man, who proved under close examination to be extraordinary. Hewes was a “nobody” all his life, until, in very old age, he had his Warholian moment of celebrity. He was born poor in Boston, lived poor there and in New York State, and died poor. There is no little irony in the fact that after the Revolution his loyalist brother Shubael, not he, acquired the honorific “gentleman” to put after his name. But in experiential terms Hewes was rich. He moved from shaking with fear at the very thought of being in John Hancock’s house to facing down arrogant officers (British and American alike) and talking on equal terms with George Washington. If life brought Hewes disappointment in material terms, it taught him a great deal about equality.

Young’s long-term project has been to recover a revolutionary American Revolution. But, like Thompson, he never has allowed perspective to turn into wishful thinking. He demonstrates that the destruction of the tea was an entirely revolutionary act and that Hewes lived a revolutionary life. He also shows how the late-life fame of Hewes served conservative political purposes. That need not have been so. Other possibilities for historical memory existed, and the life of Hewes could have made good sense within the framework those possibilities provided.

“Definitive” is not in my professional vocabulary. But this elegant book does deserve the description

gem-like. The popular success it already enjoys suggests that a public that is hungry for history that is both good and accessible recognizes that point.¹

You can recognize Professor Countryman's admiration in this review. But you also get a real sense that the reviewer has understood the purpose as well as the historiographic context of the book he is reviewing. Reviews you may be asked to write in one or more of your courses should bear some similarities to this example; we refer to these class assignments as *scholastic* reviews. They are generally longer than most academic reviews but are also intended for a more scholarly audience—your instructors and fellow students. In some ways, they are much more like the “review essays” we mentioned above which sometimes appear in scholarly journals. Your instructor may provide very specific instructions about what should appear in such a review; if so, heed them. But here are some general guidelines that should help you in writing better book reviews no matter what your specific instructions may be.

1. **Read the book!** That may seem self-evident, but it remains perhaps the most important advice about writing a book review. Now and then even professional historians don't read the books they review in journals. You can see their errors when outraged authors write to protest; occasionally you will find such communications in historical journals. Don't let that happen to you! If you find and read one or more academic reviews of the book you have been assigned or have selected to review, you may learn a great deal. But that is not a substitute for reading the book and making your own judgments. Also remember this: Fundamental honesty requires for you to say if you take something—ideas or quotations—for your book review from a review someone else has written. Our cautions about plagiarism apply to book reviews as well!
2. **Identify the author, but don't waste time on needless or extravagant claims about**

her or him. It is a cliché to say that the author is “well qualified” to write a book; such a comment adds little to your review. You may write briefly about the author’s background and experience, perhaps the work he or she put into creating the book you are reviewing. But don’t belabor the point.

- 3. Always give the author’s major theme or thesis, his or her motive for writing the book.** What is your assessment of that theme or thesis? Read the book thoughtfully. Always read the introduction or the preface. Students in a hurry may skip the introduction, thinking they are saving time. That can be a serious mistake. Authors often use introductions to state the reasons that impelled them to write their books. Indeed, we recommend you read the preface, the introduction, and the last chapter of a book before you read the complete work. Few writers can bear to leave their books without a parting shot: they want to be sure readers get the point! Reviewers should take advantage of that impulse.

Some of our students object to our advice that they read the last chapter first. We remind them that history books are not novels, and good history books—as well as shorter essays—almost never have surprise endings. By reading the last chapter, you see where the author is heading as you read the entire book. And always remember the terms “theme” and “thesis” are not quite the same as the subject. The subject of the book may be the biography of Winston Churchill, prime minister of Great Britain during World War II. The theme or thesis, however, may be that Churchill was a great wartime leader but a poor interpreter of the postwar world.

- 4. Summarize, but only briefly, the evidence the author presents in support of the thesis.** Do not fall into the habit of writing a summary of the book as if you were writing

a report rather than a review. This approach seldom can be translated into a successful book *review*. Don't try to report every interesting detail in the book. Leave something for readers to discover on their own. But it frequently is a good idea to recount some interesting incidents. Tell a story or two from the book. You may also wish to consider the types of evidence the author has used and particularly the effort to rely upon primary sources.

5. **Consider quoting a line or two here and there in your review to give the flavor of the text.** Quote selectively but fairly. The prose of the author you review may help spice up your own review. But avoid long chunks of quotation. You must show your readers that you have absorbed the book you review.
6. **Avoid lengthy comments about the style of the book.** It is fine to say that the style is good, bad, interesting, or tedious. If a book is especially well written or if it is incomprehensible, you may quote a sentence to illustrate a good or bad style, but don't belabor the point. Generalizations such as, "This book is interesting," or "This book is boring," do little to enhance your review. If you do your job in the review, readers can tell whether you find it interesting or boring. And remember, if you are bored, the fault might be in you rather than the book. An Ancient History professor at the University of Tennessee, when one of us said reading the Greek philosopher Plutarch was boring, declared sternly, "Mr. Marius, you have no right to be bored with Plutarch." Both of us agree he was right.
7. **Don't feel compelled to say negative things about the book.** If you find inaccuracies, say so. If you disagree with the writer's interpretation here and there, say that too, giving your reasons. However, you should avoid passionate attacks on the book. Scholarship is

not always courteous, but it should be. Reviewers who launch savage attacks on books usually make fools of themselves. Remember, too, that petty complaints about the book may also make you look foolish or unfair. Do not waste time pointing out typos unless they change the meaning the author intends. Always remember that every good book has flaws. The author may make some minor errors in fact or some questionable judgments. Even so, the book may be extremely valuable. Don't condemn a book outright because you find some mistakes. Try to judge the book as a whole.

8. **Review the book the author has written.** You may wish the author had written a different book. You might write a different book yourself. But the author has written *this* book. If the book did not need to be written, if it adds nothing to our knowledge of the field, if it makes conclusions unwarranted by the evidence, say so. But don't review the book as if it should be another book.
9. **Try to bring something from your own experience—your reading, your thoughts, your reflections, your recollections—to your review.** If you are reviewing a book about early twentieth-century China, and if you have been fortunate enough to have traveled in China, you may bring your own impressions to the review of the book. Try to make use of a broad part of your education when you review a book. If you have read other books in other classes that are relevant to this class, say something about those books in your review. If you know facts the author has overlooked, say so. But avoid writing as if you possess independent knowledge of the author's subject when in fact you have taken all you know from the book itself. Don't pretend to be an expert when you are not. Be honest.

A SAMPLE STUDENT REVIEW

The following review, also of Alfred Young's *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, was written by a student. Consider how this review differs from that of Professor Countryman and also how it touches on many of the same points.

A Common Man and the American Revolution

A Review of Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution*

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History 4037: The American Revolution

Professor Dale Schmitt

Alfred F. Young's 1999 book, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, allows him to express his views on the American Revolution and the position that a common man would take during this time. The book is divided into two sections; the first part traces the life of George Robert Twelves Hewes, and the second half deals with the impact of the revolution concerning the town of Boston and how this relates to George Robert Twelves Hewes. The book gives a clear insight about what it would have been like to be a common mechanic in Boston during revolutionary times.

Alfred F. Young spent close to twenty years working on *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*. Young became interested in the American Revolution when he was a graduate student at Columbia University. He obtained his doctorate at Northwestern University, where specialized in American history. Young then taught in several different universities in Connecticut, New Jersey, and Illinois. Since 1990, he has been a senior research fellow at the Newberry Library. The predecessor to Young's book was an essay published in the *William and Mary Quarterly* in 1981. The success of the essay in the academic community spurred Young to give a second life to the essay and to make *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* accessible to a broader audience.

The book begins by introducing the reader to George Robert Twelves Hewes. He is first presented through the two major biographies written about him in 1834 and 1835. Both of these two books describe him to be the last surviving participant in the Boston Tea Party. These two biographies are significant because they

are the first recorded instances in which the destruction of the tea was called the Boston Tea Party. James Hawkes and Benjamin Bussey Thatcher, the original two biographers, “sifted” through the memories of the old man, ninety-three at the time, to retrieve the reminiscences and feelings from sixty to eighty years earlier.

George Robert Twelves Hewes was born in 1742 to a poor tanner in Boston. He was the sixth of nine children, but only three older brothers and one younger brother survived childhood. Hewes was a very active boy and frequently got into trouble. The violent punishments he received as a child formed in him a very kind mind that did not want to see anyone harmed. Because there was no one to help pay for his apprenticeship in a respectable profession, Hewes was apprenticed to a shoemaker, which was considered one of the lower mechanic jobs that one could acquire.

Hewes was involved in three of the most significant acts in late colonial and revolutionary Boston: the massacre, tea party, and tarring and feathering John Malcolm. In the massacre, Hewes was an unarmed protester who caught James Caldwell after James was injured. Hewes chose to observe the events of the massacre without becoming a participant. However, Hewes was actively involved in the tea party and was one of the “semi-invited” men who destroyed the British East India Company’s tea. He was given a slightly elevated rank on the ships by the Sons of Liberty due to his ability to whistle loudly. While on the ship, Hewes believed that he helped to throw a chest of tea overboard with John Hancock. Further, one might go so far as to say that Hewes was partly responsible for the tarring and feathering of John Malcolm. Malcolm threatened to beat a small boy with a cane for running into him. Hewes stopped Malcolm and Hewes was then clobbered over the head by Malcolm. The mob then proceeded to strip Malcolm and tar and feather him. Ironically, when Hewes awoke from his forced slumber, he ran after the mob attempting to cover Malcolm’s naked body with a blanket.

Hewes became well known for his long name and short stature. Only 5’10”, he was too short to enlist in the military. However, Hewes later became involved in the militia, serving for a total of twenty months in a variety of capacities. During the time of his militia service he was married to Sally Sumner, a wash-woman, who produced for him sixteen children. As a militia seaman, Hewes was supposed to have opportunities to make money—through buccaneer activities—to help support his wife and family. However, he made very little money on these voyages because the captains cheated him and would not pay him or give him his share of the bounty. Hewes was a poor man for most of his life and had to be supported by his children in his elder

years.

The second portion of the book focused on the entire town of Boston and how the public viewed each of the major events. Young emphasizes public remembrance of the revolution and how the memory was shaped in the public mind. The controlling bodies of the city forced much of Boston to forget the events of the revolution by only emphasizing particular events and forcing many holidays to go uncelebrated. Individual people and actions were erased from memories and all that was remembered was that George Washington saved the nation.

Alfred Young's biography of George Robert Twelves Hewes is very well written and allows the reader to easily follow along. The writing style that Young uses made the book seemingly enjoyable to read and allowed the reader to stay focused on the book. The reader actually became involved in Hewes's story, wondering what Hewes was going to do next. Young avoided verbose sentences and presented his points in a very simple manner.

Most readers know about the examples Young uses in the book. This prevented the reader from becoming overwhelmed with dates, events, and people. Commonly, historical writers assume that the reader has a well-developed knowledge on the subject, leaving the average reader lost in an abyss of names. Young avoids this dilemma by simplifying his explanations of the revolutionary acts mentioned in his book.

Young, however, throughout the beginning of the book draws extensively from the other two biographies written about Hewes. The quotations from Thatcher's and Hawkes's biographies on Hewes seemed excessively long and frequent. It becomes so excessive that the reader may consider reading the other biographies as opposed to spending time with Young's summation of the other books.

The most powerful aspect of the book is its explanation of how the lower class citizen in Boston reacted to the "legendary" events surrounding the Revolution. This is significant because there is very little documentation about the concerns of simple people during the Revolution. The problems with money, illness, and having a successful business are all addressed in Young's book. The reader becomes aware how challenging it was to support a family on a meager income. Young also explains to the reader alternative ways of making money that were necessary to survive, such as fishing for the soldiers and working for the militia.

Alfred F. Young's book was very educational and helpful. The book could explain details of the revolution to the average person without causing mystification or confusion. *The Shoemaker and the Tea*

Party was an outstanding biography and analysis of the events in Boston before the official beginning of the revolution as well as how the city reacted after the revolution. Young's book clearly shows what revolutionary life was like for the common, poor man—the mechanics, as they were called—and to what extent the common people would have been involved in riotous demonstrations.

THINGS TO NOTICE ABOUT THESE REVIEWS

In comparing the two reviews presented here, first consider what they have in common. Notice how both focus on some details about the personal life of the subject of this biography and how they recognize the efforts of the book's author to place his subject in a larger historical context. Which of the reviews deals most with the details of the person who is the subject of the book? And which is more concerned about the historiographic place of the book itself in the study of American history? Can you recognize some of the differences between an academic review and a scholastic review from studying these two examples?

As you make these comparisons, think about the key questions below. You might also use them to advantage in examining the book reviews that you write.

Writer's Checklist

- 4 Have these reviewers given evidence they have read the book?
- 4 Is the main theme or thesis of the book adequately identified?
- 4 Are both the evidence and the argument used to support the central thesis of the book clear?
- 4 Is the writing style of the book's author appropriately considered?
- 4 Would quotations from the book help in giving the readers of the reviews a better sense of the writing style?
- 4 Are the judgments of the book both temperate and sound?
- 4 Is the book being reviewed the book that was written?
- 4 Has either reviewer succeeded in bringing something personal to the review?

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- 1 Edward Countryman, review of *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, by Alfred F. Young, *Journal of American History*, 87(2000): 648–649.

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