

Howard Fast's American Revolution

Neil L. York

Howard Fast wanted to set the record straight about the American Revolution. He spent over a half century trying, but with what success it is hard to say. As a novelist, he used fiction to correct what he feared the reading public erroneously accepted as fact. "The more I studied the American Revolution," he explained to me in 2000, "the more I realized that most of what has been written about it are lies."¹ A year later he was no less emphatic. Most history—as academic historians write it—is a lie, he repeated, and what those historians have written about the revolution "is the biggest lie of all."² An academic historian by trade, I was neither surprised nor offended by his view and could at least take solace that I was not a literary critic. "A critic is a eunuch working in a harem. He watches it, but he can't do it," Fast once huffed. As if that characterization were not dismissive enough, he added that "critics are very often failed writers and, like failed priests, they hate religion."³

When commenting on academic historians and literary critics, Fast stayed true to form: passionately irascible when he felt that is what it took to make his point. The reaction of most academic historians and literary critics has been to either belittle Fast as an indiscriminately prolific hack or ignore him altogether.⁴ It is a response at once peevish and parochial: peevish, because Fast was once widely read, with perhaps one hundred million copies of his books translated into a dozen languages floating around the world—more than virtually any academic historian or literary critic can claim; and parochial, because Fast's writings tell

us something important about the shaping of historical memory as well as the danger of moralizing about the past.

Fast treated historical “facts” as grist for his populist mill. The truth, as he told it, could not be contained within the documentary bounds that confined historians. By the time Fast died in 2003, he had produced over eighty books, some under a pen name, and hundreds of short stories, essays, plays, screenplays, commentaries, and reviews. Among those are nine novels, one work of nonfiction, and various briefer pieces set in the American revolutionary era, the first appearing in 1933, the last in 1994. Over those six decades Fast’s view of the revolution—what Fast deemed the *true* revolution, that is—changed very little, hardly at all, compared with his own personal political odyssey that carried him into the Communist Party and then back out again. He was convinced that what he saw as the ultimate justification for American political independence remained invisible to Americans of his generation. For them, the passage of time had smoothed over rough edges, minimizing the pain and suffering of those who sacrificed their all in the great cause. Fast wanted to recover the lost passion, the human reality of a nation at war, the tragic no less than the glorious.

He tried to connect the revolution to higher American ideals, implicitly to stress that founding a nation had to be the means to an end, not an end in itself. Political independence needed to bring with it a social leavening so that the quest for the American dream would not become a nightmare for the poor and dispossessed. His readers, he realized, might have had some vague sense of the greatness of George Washington, a greatness in which he too believed. But for him the most important story lay with faceless, nameless common folk, heroes and heroines whose tales were forgotten if ever recorded, and, more often than not, were never recorded at all.

He created fictional characters and placed them in historical settings, individuals as archetypes to teach lessons to what he deemed a historically ignorant nation. There was nothing florid in his imagery, nothing flowery in his prose. His characters spoke plainly, the vernacular of Fast’s own age projected back into the eighteenth century. Though his heroes and villains did not divide neatly along class lines there was still something more noble about the sacrifices made by those who had the least, because in a sense they gave the most. And when they suffered, Fast made their suffering serve an underlying social purpose. He wanted readers to ask themselves how justifiable a war could be if it did not improve conditions for the common man. He hoped his readers would come to see, as he had long believed, that eliminating such inequities was the goal of all genuine revolutions. He spent much of his literary career finding different ways to make that same point.

From beginning to end, Fast wrote as both moralist and ethicist. His excursions into the past were taken for didactic purposes, a mode of writing mastered by Plutarch and practiced by others ever since. Fast was insistent: a writer is an artist whose only obligation is to tell the truth as he sees it, not as readers expect or prefer.⁵ That meant he could make inferential leaps, reading into his

sources—the “material,” as Fast put it—what no one else might find. “Long ago, I lost my faith in anyone’s objectivity, including my own,” Fast confessed.⁶ But then he had not seen it as his task to carry “objectivity” into his historical writing anyway. His heroes were as predictable as his villains and the lessons to be learned remained constant. Life is hard, death comes too quickly, too brutally for too many, and yet there is grace for those who find meaning in seemingly small things. Such is Fast’s blending of the existential and romantic.

Fast envisioned himself as a literary pioneer, joining others before him who had decided to create a true American literature—of the people, by the people, and for the people, as it were. “Good books,” he stressed, “arise only from life—and here in America, historically and constantly, they arose from the democratic tradition that marked each stage of the people’s battle for freedom and a better life.”⁷ He thought Mark Twain never more effective as a writer, never more truly American, than when he spoke through Huck Finn about social injustice. Fast wanted to do the same in his novels, using the fictional to comment on the historical. He could thereby play the role of social critic—to him far more important than being the writer as stylist.

For Fast the real Americans were those who had been downtrodden and oppressed, members of the working class who succeeded against all odds, or failing to get ahead, lived and died invisibly to those with wealth and power. When he recounted tales of his hardscrabble, New York City youth it was as part of an autobiographical iconography designed to explain why he believed and behaved as he did. He wore proudly his sociologically disadvantageous label: son of an immigrant Ukrainian Jew, trying to make his way in a literary world where he would always in some sense be an outsider. Many of Fast’s critics, missing those connections, confused cause with effect: his advocacy of socialism over capitalism evolved from his early years of abject poverty, not his later reading of political theorists. Besides, his love of storytelling made him prefer Jack London and George Bernard Shaw to Karl Marx or Friedrich Engels.⁸ Similarly, his joining the Communist Party came from personal experience with perceived injustice, reinforced by his reading of larger events in the early 1940s, and not a sudden conversion to party dogma—though, once converted, he came to believe earnestly before falling away, disillusioned by the brutality of Stalin’s regime.

Fast had already made his mark as a writer before he became controversial as a communist. He set his first novel, *Two Valleys*, published when he was just eighteen, in the revolutionary era. It left barely a ripple in the book trade pond.⁹ By contrast, *Conceived in Liberty* made a splash six years later—his “break-through” novel, as Fast recalled it.¹⁰ It appeared in 1939, as Europe once again plunged into conflict, but the seed had been sown earlier, in the Spanish Civil War. “I was deeply involved emotionally in the Spanish struggle,” he reminisced, confessing too that he was “filled with guilt for not volunteering to serve” the cause of freedom there,¹¹ as republicans fought a losing battle against fascism fronted by Franco and backed by Hitler and Mussolini.

A road trip that he and his wife Bette made to Valley Forge provided the inspiration for his linking of American past to European present. It was the first of many rambles that he took across the landscape, in a search for the forgotten past—in a search, too, as a psychohistorian might argue, for himself. After the Valley Forge pilgrimage, Fast created the character of Allen Hale, a young continental soldier, to act as the narrator of his tale. Hale, like two other characters in Fast's later revolutionary era novels—Jamie Stuart in *The Proud and the Free* and Evan Feversham in *The Hessian*—acted as Fast's proxy. Through each of them, he became observer of and commentator on the revolutionary scene that he created.

Conceived in Liberty opened in December 1777 as exhausted, starved, nearly naked men—more “rabble” than army—began their winter at Valley Forge. It was a grim spectacle: men too tired to march crumpled onto the frozen ground and died where they lay; a deserter desperate to return home froze to death in the snowy waste; another soldier survived the march only to be devoured by wolves when he fell asleep on sentry duty; many resented their better-clothed, better-fed officers, and for some the resentment extended to their commander, General George Washington; seemingly all dismissed the Continental Congress as uncaring and inept.¹² Fast even borrowed from Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* to have the living compete for the boots of the dead, but in a starker scene than the one painted by Remarque.

Yet through all of this Fast's hero, Allen Hale, remained true to the cause. Fast made him the personification of the common man caught up by forces he neither understood nor controlled, who nevertheless distinguished between the evil that flowed from circumstance and evil that came by design. As much as he resented an insensitive congress and cruel officers, Hale encountered those who won his grudging respect: an aristocratic Alexander Hamilton who nonetheless did his best to defend the accused at a court martial; a George Washington in stoic anguish over the plight of his men; a Baron von Steuben who trained them, respected them, and restored their pride, even as he cursed them. Almost despite himself and without clearly knowing why, Hale re-enlisted. He fought bravely at Monmouth courthouse, where the Americans proved to the British that they were still in the contest and that they would not be beaten again. They were now an army, a rabble no more.

Because Fast saw human nature as a constant, with the big issues of life unchanged by either place or time, he researched—when he researched—to illustrate a point he had already decided to make, whether it be earlier books like *Conceived in Liberty* or later efforts like the more famous *April Morning*.¹³ He did not approach the historical past as it is commonly taught: form a hypothesis, test it against the evidence, reshape it as required. The result of that approach, he feared, would be historical writing that satisfied the requirements of form without delivering on the vital function—telling essential truths about the human condition. He was therefore only interested in the particular as it reflected the universal. His dialectic was not in the practice of the craft, with thesis confronted

by antithesis to be reworked as synthesis; rather, he was interested in the perpetual clash of justice and injustice, the contrast of want amidst plenty, the contest of personal aspiration against social limitation, the easier choice of resignation or harder one of hope.

Sometimes he did research and when he did it could be thorough; other times he did almost none if he felt that his instincts, aided by a little background reading, were enough. All their talk of sound methodology notwithstanding, he suspected that many academic historians worked the same way, whether they could admit it to themselves as well as to others—or not.

Fast often had multiple writing projects in hand simultaneously, a literary juggling act where he lavished as much as a year on one book and just months, even weeks, on another. The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor caught him in the final stages of *The Last Frontier*, focusing on the tragic fate of the Plains Indians—a book that, initially, he wrote from what he considered to be the Natives' perspective, then, with rejection from one publisher, recast from what he saw as the White perspective for another. While the manuscript moved through production, he fired off two new revolutionary era novels: *Haym Salomon* and *The Unvanquished*.

The subject of one plodding biography, Haym Salomon had otherwise been all but forgotten. Because of a dearth of sources that first attempt at a life and times approach had been more times than life. Fast did no digging to turn up new sources. Nor did he attempt a different view. Salomon's earlier biographer had depicted him as an "unfaltering patriot" and a "devout Jew."¹⁴ So did Fast. Fast likewise continued the theme of Salomon as a Polish immigrant drawn to the New World because of the promise of freedom there. America, "a whisper that ran through Europe," had become "his goal and his dream." With time he decided that it could not fulfill its destiny as "the only land of hope" unless it was free of the British empire.¹⁵

The theme of devotion and sacrifice in the Salomon saga is even more evident in *The Unvanquished*, which *Time* would tout as "the season's best novel about war"¹⁶—for a nation at war. Although Fast cautioned that there are no perfect "parallels in history," he also believed it was possible for Americans to learn that, just as they had overcome great odds to win a war once before, they could do it again. In a new edition released at the war's end he asked readers to recall what they had been up against, borrowing from Churchill as he did so, perhaps in appreciation for the London edition that had also sold well—an irony of sorts, since the foe Americans fought in that earlier conflict had been British.

For many years I had in mind that I would like to do a book in which George Washington was the central character, but neither the form nor the story of the book became apparent until December 1941. If you remember, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, things were very black, not only for us, but for all of the civilized world; high, wide and ugly, the fascist walked

across the stage, and for the moment, it seemed to many that all of the earth would be his. The future was not apparent to us then, and the only perspective for democracy was blood, sweat and tears.¹⁷

The Unvanquished opened with the disastrous New York campaign of 1776 and closed with Washington re-crossing the Delaware in a desperate attempt to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Fast did not give readers a Washington who was a born military genius. Far from it. His appointment as commander-in-chief had been for political reasons, which he knew all too well. A year had passed and still he distrusted himself as he awaited the British assault on New York. He could not be sure where or when it would come. Even if he guessed correctly, he could not be sure he could stop it. To some New Englanders, he was still an untried aristocrat, “a stupid, heartless Virginia fox hunter.”¹⁸ Doubts nagged him, sleeplessness accentuated his pockmarked face, his thinning hair, his ungainly movements—a man not yet comfortable in his own skin. Again and again he was maneuvered; again and again his men were outfought, driven off Long Island, then Manhattan, and eventually across New Jersey. But through it all Washington learned and won the respect of men like Henry Knox and the nameless continentals who would form the backbone of his army. Thus Washington led his men on to glory at Trenton where, as Fast put it, “the stamp of George Washington is indelibly and forever set upon America—and for the good.”¹⁹

As Fast described Washington’s retreat across New Jersey, he inserted Thomas Paine as a preacher of the American revolutionary sermon. Explicitly Paine would call Washington an American Fabius, with the Virginian emulating that Roman general’s tactics against Hannibal. On a deeper level, Paine revered Washington as an American Moses, with the Delaware serving as his Red Sea. As he trudged across New Jersey with the retreating army, “Paine was thinking he would die gladly for the man or kneel on the ground he walked,”²⁰ Fast wrote melodramatically in his full-length biography of Paine two years later. Paine, even more than Washington, was the logical culmination of Fast’s exploration of the American revolutionary era at this point in his life.

Like Haym Salomon, Fast’s Paine crossed the Atlantic with the hope of a new beginning in the one place that seemed to promise such things. But it took more than a simple change of address for him to begin life anew, and that transformative event came on 19 April 1775 with the fighting at Lexington and Concord, whereupon “a crack shone in the wall against which he had been battering his head.”²¹ As penman of the revolution—as advocate of social *revolution*, not just political change—Fast’s “Citizen Tom Paine” leapt ahead of his fellow patriots. Franklin, like Jefferson, had been reluctant to insist upon independence as the only political solution to the problem of empire. They were even more reluctant to press on to a reconstitution of society in the new United States and make equality more than just a creed. Disappointed by a United States that seemed to be content with political independence while avoiding social change, Paine



Figure 1: Howard Fast in 1943. Courtesy of Bettmann/CORBIS.

went to France and found that there too he was eventually out of place because he called for more change than even the leading proponents of change were willing to risk. A revolutionist who put cause above nation, he in effect became the man without a country. He re-crossed the Atlantic, but without really going home when he returned to the new nation he helped form. He found himself ignored when not rejected, too unorthodox in his religious beliefs, too radical in his social ambitions, to be accepted, the restless revolutionary who ultimately found no rest.

Did Fast see in Paine some of the same feelings that engulfed him during World War II? When he wrote of Paine having gone off to serve as a common soldier in the war of independence with his “comrades”²² in arms, perhaps he was thinking of how he had decided to join the Communist Party as a foot

soldier in his own war. Until that moment, he had been busy at the Office of War Information, writing pro-allied tracts. With victory against Germany and Japan in sight, and with rumors circulating that Fast had joined the Communist Party putting his government position in question, he resigned to be more fully engaged in this larger struggle. The Russians, “who clawed out the belly” of the Nazi “beast,” struck him as perfect partners in building this brave new world.²³ Still attached to an idealized view of the Soviet Union first shaped when Stalin aided the republicans in civil war Spain, he saw party membership as a way of taking a stand for democratic revolution around the globe.

Frustrated with the slow spread of democracy in his own country, convinced that capitalism perpetuated invidious class distinctions, Fast turned toward the Soviet Union as a better example of how to pair social progress with economic growth. Within a decade he would reconsider that view. He and others like him, he later admitted, had been naive. “We were dedicated to the brotherhood of man—as we saw it—with no knowledge and no prescience of what would be revealed about Stalin and the Soviet Union.”²⁴ But leaving the Communist Party because of Soviet system barbarities did not mean he would ever renounce Thomas Paine’s egalitarian creed, which had drawn him to it in the first place. The revolutionist’s personal foibles notwithstanding, Fast thought Paine “a good man and a great man—one who will be remembered long after those who attacked and slandered him are dead and forgotten.”²⁵ Paine “spoke in the name of reason—and his voice is still important, fresh, and startling,” Fast wrote in an introduction to *The Rights of Man*. He hoped that “with each generation of youth, hundreds of thousands” would “rediscover Tom Paine, a man whose mind was unfettered and unafraid, who dreamed bold dreams and who shattered icons of ignorance and superstition.”²⁶

For Fast, Thomas Paine embodied revolutionary ideals in a way that George Washington never could. Paine pulled himself up from nothing; Washington, by contrast, had all the advantages of an aristocratic upbringing. Fast no doubt saw parallels between his own experience and that of Paine. Washington would always be more distant because, for all his contributions to the patriot cause, he still stood for a privileged order that the war for independence had not displaced. True revolution required a social and political leavening that had yet to occur, even in Fast’s own America. Seeing no reason for complacency when reality fell so far short of the ideal, Fast determined to stay engaged in what he saw as the higher American cause and that required agitation rather than national self-satisfaction. In that sense, Fast’s American revolution was unending, a quest for the holy grail of true equality.

Fast was prompted to take on the Paine persona in a series of “Crisis” essays because eleven Party members who ran afoul of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) had been imprisoned.²⁷ Fast had had his own run-in with HUAC, and he was eventually sentenced to serve ninety days for contempt because he refused to name names in a hearing before that committee. What rankled more was that he was being informally silenced, blackballed and

blacklisted, so that it was difficult for him to find a publisher who would stand by him, all of his popular success to that point seemingly counting for nothing. Branded a "subversive" by Attorney General (and future Supreme Court justice) Tom Clark, for a time he was even banned from speaking at Columbia University and the City College of New York.²⁸

Increasingly cut off from the publishing world, he brought out *Spartacus* at his own expense and had the satisfaction of seeing it go rapidly through many editions, a popularity culminating in a film version ten years later, with Kirk Douglas cast as the Thracian gladiator who led men and women enslaved by Rome in a heroically futile rebellion. Dalton Trumbo, himself blacklisted by Hollywood for a time, reworked the book into a screenplay and kept the basic message intact.²⁹ No doubt in Fast's mind, writing about George Washington and Spartacus was all of a piece, with both men joined as heroic leaders in the endless struggle for freedom, even though separated by an ocean and nearly two thousand years.

With a stridency that went well beyond the zeal that usually marked his writing, Fast argued in opinion pieces wherever he could that truth was at stake. Class consciousness was discouraged in capitalist America, to the detriment of all Americans, he contended, and social awareness suffered as a consequence. Truth, when spoken, was too often interdicted by the same forces that produced HUAC.

Literature has always been a most precise reflection of the society which produced it, and in a society rent by contradictions, strangling in its own economic chaos, and looking fearfully to a hideous world war as a possible solution, a great deal of that society's literature will quite naturally be far from healthy. The literature, creative and critical, of America is sick, deeply sick; only a great progressive upsurge can cure it.³⁰

Thus he wrote *Spartacus*, not long after he had been made, in his eyes, a political prisoner of the state. Thus too *The Proud and the Free*, penned just before he served his time at a fenceless federal prison in the West Virginia countryside. Because Fast wrote *The Proud and the Free* during his years in the Communist Party there have been those, then and since, who think that this book was different from Fast's other revolutionary era novels. Certainly some critics reviewed it as if it were a communist tract for the times. Actually it is much more than that. Its message, even its tone, is in keeping with what had come before and anticipated what would come after Fast's movement into and out of the Communist Party. It reflected Fast's attachment to certain ideals that transcended any political affiliation, including his unsuccessful run for Congress in 1952 as a candidate for the American Labor Party, an organization that conservatives dismissed as a communist front.

The similarity between Fast's 1939 *Conceived in Liberty* and *The Proud and the Free*, eleven years later, begins with the narrator's voice, Jamie Stuart performing the same role in the latter as Allen Hale had in the former. Stuart is one of Fast's more compelling characters. He told his story retrospectively, looking back at age eighty on events nearly sixty years before. By then he had been living comfortably for decades as a successful lawyer in his hometown of York, Pennsylvania, where he had been orphaned in his youth and soon after apprenticed to a cobbler. Setting his leather apron afire, he ran off to fight the British and at age seventeen enlisted in the 11th Pennsylvania regiment. Looking back, he was determined to recall his years under arms "in a truthful way; for I know of no one else but myself who remembers what took place in those old and trying times, and the story is one which should not be forgotten." Even if "the meaning" of it all had become "more and more difficult to grasp," writing his tale was somehow cathartic.³¹

For Fast, the 11th Pennsylvania became a sort of revolutionary era melting pot, marked by its ethnic diversity. Stretching the association, Fast wrote of the 11th as one of the so-called "foreign regiments" because most of the men in it were immigrants or the sons of immigrants, a polyglot mix of Irish and Scots, Dutch and Germans, even a smattering of Poles, Jews, and Blacks. By the end of 1780 they were decimated, verging on exhaustion. They had fought desperately, often losing; they suffered from poor diet and insufficient clothing; they had gone months without pay. Many of them, Jamie included, had signed up for the duration of the war or three years—whichever came first, they had thought, but by now they had served nearly twice as long. Understandably there were those who just wanted to go home, to what, they might not even know. Resenting officers who treated them badly and who did not suffer nearly as many privations, the men began to murmur. Encamped in their northern New Jersey winter quarters, on New Year's Day 1781, they decided they had had enough. A twelve man committee of sergeants, with Jamie as chair, resolved to take their grievances all the way to the Continental Congress. "We are the Revolution—we are!"³² Fast had them exclaim in exasperation, many of them feeling that the Declaration of Independence had been made a mockery by the uncaring and greedy on their own side, politicians and generals who had nothing but disdain for the common man.

Officers tried to prevent the men from the 11th and the other regiments of the Pennsylvania line from leaving camp to begin their march on Philadelphia, where they intended to deliver their petition to congress. They were over two thousand strong and the officers had no chance of stopping them. A few did try; at least one was slain—to Jamie's chagrin, because the sergeants had wanted to avoid bloodshed and charges that they were murderers as well as mutineers. Powerless to stop them, General Anthony Wayne and the other officers watched as the troops, led by their sergeants—the "Citizen-soldier Guard"—headed south in good order, under the relatively new flag of stars and stripes. Wanting only to feel "proud" and "free,"³³ they looted no houses, ransacked no barns and stole no

livestock. Local farmers, seeing the men in their tattered brown coats and torn, yellowed, canvas pants, some with strips of cloth around their otherwise naked feet, took pity on them.

They marched south toward the Delaware River and Philadelphia beyond, while their officers trailed behind impotently, until they reached Princeton. There the enlisted men stopped to talk with Wayne and a hastily dispatched set of emissaries from congress. Spies sent by the British to lure the soldiers to their side became the war's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern when the men from the Pennsylvania line turned the hapless two over to prove their loyalty to the cause. The officers hanged the spies, a bargain was struck, and many of the enlisted men finally turned for home, while some, amazingly, re-enlisted.

Jamie, his emotional and physical wounds still unhealed, found that there would be no welcome for him back in York. He had momentarily become a cynic, no longer believing in God, much less the revolutionary cause. But like Fast's character Allen Hale from *Conceived in Liberty*, he put aside his resentments and re-enlisted. He went on to serve through Yorktown and was the only one from his old unit to survive the war. Fast closed with Jamie wondering if the time for greater social justice would ever come. Had he and those who stood with him in January 1781 been premature? If the time had not been right then, when would it be?

Not too soon, God willing, Jamie Stuart. Not before the time is ripe, and then, God willing, we will know the road we take. We are like a seed that ripened too soon, too quick, for we were planted within the gentry's own revolt, and we grew a crop they fear mightily and neither they nor we knew how to harvest it. That will take knowing, Jamie Stuart, that will take learning. Be patient. The voices are quiet this moment, but they will rise again. Be patient.³⁴

With these lines, Fast underscored class consciousness and exposed social fissures that have always made mainstream Americans uncomfortable, and particularly so during this newest red scare. But in terms of larger interpretations, Fast had said nothing new. He invented characters and dialogue; all else he extrapolated from the historical record or drew from or was inspired by Carl Van Doren's *Mutiny in January*, to this day the standard account.³⁵ Fast had tremendous respect for Van Doren, who had written ringing endorsements of both *The Last Frontier* and *The Unvanquished*. In a sense, Van Doren was simply returning the favor. Fast had reviewed Van Doren's *Mutiny in January* for a New York newspaper when it appeared in 1943, congratulating the author for telling difficult truths that in the telling had made him proud to be an American. It may have been Van Doren himself who encouraged Fast to fictionalize the account. That Fast already had his conclusion in mind before committing himself to writing the book was evident in his review of Van Doren. He looked at the mutiny

as essentially a tragedy, men rising up in a good cause but with no clear social goal in mind. “The forces that made the mutiny did not go away,” he declared. “The revolution in America was not consummated; it flared up with Jefferson, with Jackson, with the abolitionists—again and again.” That revolutionary flame remained lit, he concluded; “it’s still burning today.”³⁶

Fast’s finding Van Doren a kindred spirit of sorts, even a mentor, is not surprising.³⁷ Van Doren was a man of letters at a time when such men had some standing in American culture, their preferences carrying weight with the reading public. As Benjamin Franklin’s Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer Van Doren also proved that he could master a complex subject and impress his academic peers. True, with his Columbia PhD and years teaching at the university, he had blue-blood ties. Van Doren taught literature, not history, he preferred writing to teaching, and he believed that historical fiction was a perfectly valid way of approaching the past. In his foreword to *The Last Frontier*, he praised Fast for writing “a work of art,” with scenes being “re-created” and the dead being brought back to life.³⁸ “Reading” *The Unvanquished* was “the next best thing to having been on the scene at the time,” he wrote approvingly a year later.³⁹

Although Van Doren considered himself “incurably passionate,”⁴⁰ his passion stopped short of Fast’s social activism. He paired an unswerving commitment to the life of the mind with a bemused detachment from life. Where Fast saw the need to plunge in, sleeves figuratively when not literally rolled up, Van Doren stood back to observe and comment. He did not deploy a novelist’s inventions in his *Mutiny*, and he stayed within the historical writing conventions of his generation. He did careful research in both printed and manuscript sources, he made cause and effect connections tentatively, and he did not psychoanalyze motives.

His iconoclasm notwithstanding, Carl Van Doren was always welcome in literary circles; Howard Fast was not. Van Doren died as *The Proud and the Free* went to press in 1950 but there is no reason to think that he would have liked it any less than he liked Fast’s other historical novels. Kind words from him could only have helped because some reviewers—not all, but enough to offend a sensitive author—thought that Fast had had a change for the worse since writing *The Unvanquished*, that he had ulterior motives because of his communist political affiliations. For the twelve years that Fast remained a member of the party, he was also suspect and his message would be too. The politically detached Van Doren never suffered Fast’s guilt by association problems. In the eyes of some, Fast was a communist first, a novelist second. Fast never saw it that way, though his enthusiastic defense of the party in his early years of membership helps explain the suspicions he raised in some circles.

In a “Reply to Critics” of *The Proud and the Free* that reads like the retort an academic historian might make to critics within the profession, Fast justified his interpretations. He argued on the basis of his use of sources and the existing historiography, including Van Doren’s book. Perhaps if the author had been someone other than Fast, the counter-argument might have worked. There

is nothing particularly outrageous, for example, in Fast's portrayal of General Anthony Wayne and academic historians writing since Fast gave us a Wayne who did resent the mutineers, an unflinching disciplinarian who condoned summary justice and drumhead courts-martial of enlisted men.⁴¹ But Howard Fast was Howard Fast the communist, who made his case in the pages of *Masses & Mainstream*, a publication of the left, not a scholarly journal, not a magazine of middle America.

Time passed, memories faded, judgments softened. When Fast left the Communist Party, he caused more of a stir among party members who felt he had abandoned them than he did among those who condemned him for joining in the first place. Fast lived long enough to write a new foreword for the reissue of *The Proud and the Free* fifty-two years after the first edition appeared. He kept the same dedication: "To the memory of the brave men of the Pennsylvania Brigades, and of their still unrealized dream." Tipping his hat to Van Doren, who "tracked down the facts and figures," he jabbed at his critics, now gone. "I tell the story here as a novel, but the facts are true," he asserted unapologetically.⁴² He could not resist adding that a book like this still proved necessary because American history was taught as poorly then as it had been when he first wrote it. In between, he had written others that had the same corrective object in mind.

With *The Crossing* in 1971, he returned to themes developed and events first recounted in *The Unvanquished*. As in *The Proud and the Free*, he built his novel's narrative on another author's historical foundation. In this case the author was William Stryker, a breed of "gentleman historian" once common and now almost extinct. Stryker's 1898 account of Washington's victories at Trenton and Princeton has enjoyed a long shelf life and a recent reprinting—ironically enough—because of Fast's success with a film version of *The Crossing*.⁴³ Although Fast staged scenes and composed dialogue, he did not create any lead characters to act as his surrogates: no Allen Hale from *Conceived in Liberty*; no Jamie Stuart from *The Proud and the Free*.

His Washington was still the Washington of *The Unvanquished*, and Fast used the early chapters of *The Crossing* to recapitulate the 1776 campaign leading up to Washington's re-crossing the Delaware. Stryker had organized the first part of his book in similar fashion and there is very little to distinguish his view from that of Fast. Stryker's Washington was the indispensable man; so too in Fast's. Stryker noted the irony of captured Hessians staying on and making an adopted home of the "infant republic" they had tried to crush; not surprisingly, given his championing of the true United States as an immigrant nation, so did Fast. The heroes of both tales were those common Americans who suffered and sacrificed, who persevered and "fought for the liberty in the 'hour that tried men's souls.'"⁴⁴

Withal, David Hackett Fischer, one of the more recent academic historians to write about the Trenton and Princeton campaign, did not think much of Fast's book and even less of Fast's screenplay for the film based on it.⁴⁵ Sure enough, some of the more dubious aspects of Fast's book became even more suspect in the film, which often happens when stories are moved from the printed page to

celluloid. A few scenes were complete contrivances, with no basis in the record. Fast thereby played into the hands of those who warn against the dangers of “Hollywood history.”⁴⁶

In *The Crossing*, Fast had gone far astray from his more carefully crafted *April Morning*, completed a decade before.⁴⁷ *April Morning* stands as Fast’s most commercially successful revolutionary era novel, garnering a respect denied *The Crossing* in either of its incarnations, and probably with good reason. “Personally I like it better than most of my work,” Fast told an interviewer a few years after its publication in 1961. Indeed, it is “as good a book as I have ever written, as nearly perfect a book as I could ever hope to write.”⁴⁸

The rite of passage motif is an essential component in all of Fast’s revolutionary tales but none, before or after, employed it as didactically as *April Morning*. Just as in his other books, Fast mixed the fictional with the historical, the line separating the two being somewhat blurry—for the reader, perhaps even for the author. Fast created Adam Cooper of Lexington, Massachusetts, to tell the tale. It revolves around the events of 19 April 1775 that led to the revolt that ultimately produced the revolution. Then fifteen years old, Adam doubted his father’s god and resented being treated as a boy when he considered himself a man. His father Moses was, fittingly, a figure out of the Old Testament, physically and intellectually intimidating, a patriarch who brooked no opposition at home and held the respect of his neighbors by sheer force of will. Although a militia captain, he had no desire to fight the British. Having dedicated his life to resisting ignorance and superstition, he wanted to believe that reason could prevail, that imperial disputes could be resolved peaceably.

His faith in reason was misplaced. Reluctantly he mustered with the other militiamen that fateful morning and became the first to fall, two musket balls shattering his chest. He and Adam had reconciled before walking together to the green, the father standing by as the son signed the militia roll. Moses had had a premonition that he would die but he did not flinch from his duty—nor did Adam, who fought on through the day, until the British had been driven back to Boston.

The symbolism was apparent enough: Moses, who would never see the promised land of an independent nation, free of tyranny; Adam, the new man then on his own in a hard world. If there was to be a garden he would have to make it. Obvious as this all may be to most adults, some of the younger readers in Fast’s intended audience may have missed it. All subtlety was cast aside in the ham-fisted television version a quarter century later. Screenwriter James Lee Barrett kept the basic rite-of-passage story: Adam, the boy who became a man, the personification of the new nation. But he otherwise got carried away.⁴⁹

April Morning had become a staple in middle school and home school curricula long before the film version, and so it remains to this day.⁵⁰ Like *Conceived in Liberty* its birth was serendipitous, once again the result of a road trip. Although Fast had done a few short pieces on revolutionary New England,

April Morning came about because I was visiting Sturbridge Village and bought a facsimile of the newspaper that was printed in Worcester, Mass., the day after the battle of Concord and Lexington. While I was driving back to New York my wife read it to me, and we found ourselves in tears just from listening to the accounts of these men in the newspaper, because they were different from any history I had ever read. I decided to write the story of that day just from the newspaper. I never opened a book.⁵¹

Some teachers worry that *April Morning* would be a stretch for their students and are therefore reluctant to assign it. *The Hessian*, if they consider it for classroom use, poses many more complications. It is Fast's other favorite among his revolutionary era novels, written eleven years after *April Morning*. "Once in your lifetime you're given the right to do a perfect book," he said of *The Hessian*. "It's the one thing I've ever done that came out exactly as I dreamed it should."⁵²

Fast turned once more to first-person narrative. Evan Feversham, who acts as narrator, may have been the character dearest to Fast's heart, the closest to seeing the world as Fast himself saw it. Fast conjured him as a British-born and educated physician, emigrating to Connecticut in the decade before the fighting erupted. There he married a local woman and tried to settle into his new life. He was a lapsed Catholic among zealous Protestants, a man of the world among simple farmers. Their thin soil, he suspected, was matched by their thin skin. Despite his social prominence he never fit in, making life awkward for him in the local neighborhood and even in his own household with his wife Alice, who could be as baffled and hurt by him as he was by her. He fought for three years as colonel of a continental regiment, "not because I love the colonies but because I hate the damned English, who put my father to death for no other reason than that he was a Catholic."⁵³ A wound in the thigh left him with a painful limp, his natural skepticism reinforced by the horrors of war.

Abraham Hunt, prominent as the local "squire," stood in stark contrast to Feversham, cocksure of his beliefs in God and country. He too had fought in the war, but he had seen less of it and the lessons he learned about duty and honor were different from those carried away by Feversham. That they would butt heads appeared inevitable. The catalyst for their confrontation came when a party of Hessians waded ashore from a British ship in Long Island Sound. Encountering an addled youth that the commanding officer decided was a spy, the Hessians hang him. Before they could return to their ship, they were ambushed by the local militia led by Squire Hunt. All were killed but Hans Pohl, the drummer boy who, though wounded, escaped and was given refuge by the Heathers, a local Quaker family. Feversham had urged Hunt to let the soldiers go, to not shed any more blood, but Hunt felt compelled to retaliate. The Heathers approached Feversham surreptitiously and asked him to help the young Hessian, who had carried no weapon, only his drum. His father had been among those slaughtered

in the ambush. Feversham warned the Heathers that they had saved the boy only for him to be hanged, that the local people would have their vengeance, making their efforts noble and yet hopeless. Even so, he envied them their simple belief in God's love and in the decency of their fellow men. They hoped to smuggle Hans away. Feversham decided that he ought to help, but the boy was captured before they could act.

The stage now set, Fast played out his tale in court. Feversham agreed to defend the boy, with Hunt acting as prosecutor. Feversham was eloquent but unpersuasive. Hunt was fair in his own way—a puritan in which mercy could not displace justice. Hans Pohl, sentenced to hang, faced death bravely. Sally Heather, the Quaker girl who offered her heart, comforted him as he awaited his fate and became a woman as she did, wiser about the world but still holding onto her faith. Feversham, torn by conflicting emotions, fearing that his life had become a “desolate wasteland,”⁵⁴ could do nothing more to save Hans or help Sally. He paid for a stone to mark the graves of all the Hessians, which the townsfolk consented to place in their churchyard. Afterward, sitting among the Quakers in their simple meetinghouse—among them, but not as one of them—Feversham was at a loss, confounded by life, neither atheist nor believer, idealist or cynic.

Had Fast stopped with *The Hessian*, it would have been easy to say that this last was the best of his revolutionary era novels—the most thoughtful, the most complex, the most literate even though among the shortest. But after having left the revolution for twenty years, he returned with *Seven Days in June*, a cranky book by a then cranky author. Choosing the battle of Bunker Hill as backdrop, Fast made his usual claim that he stuck “as closely to the known facts as possible,”⁵⁵ a claim that could only embarrass him because his grasp of the facts was much too weak. In *The Proud and the Free*, he had had Carl Van Doren's *Mutiny in January* to guide him; for *The Crossing*, he had had William Stryker. Instead of turning to an accomplished writer like Richard Ketchum to lay his historical foundation, he apparently decided to rely more on instinct and whatever knowledge he had picked up along the way.⁵⁶ Neither served him well.

What Fast contrived is simply implausible. The three British generals as Fast depicted them—Gage, Howe, and Clinton—were caricatures, with Gage simpleminded, Howe and Clinton oversexed, driven by their libido and little else. Deciding that the historical record had been bowdlerized over the centuries, Fast sprinkled expletives throughout, sure as he was that the real men on both sides spoke coarsely and crudely—this, even though there is no hidden cache of unexpurgated documents revealing what he took to be their true profane side. Little matter, Fast apparently decided; he knew the truth even when the record was a lie.

The old jibe about writers who do not let facts get in the way of a good story is instructive here. That Fast was a novelist rather than a historian reinforced a tendency to give play to the imagination. It did not, however, cause the tendency; all writers must allow it if they are to create a narrative. There is nonetheless a crucial difference: because historians are less likely to reduce their sources to

mere “material,” as Fast commented dismissively, they are less likely to stack one imaginative invention upon another, until it is no longer possible to tell what originated with the writer and what is drawn from the sources. Any historical novel “is inescapably a contradiction in terms,” commented historian Mark Carnes, in attempting to be “a nonfictional fiction; a factual fantasy; a truthful deception.”⁵⁷

When Fast’s *Seven Days in June* appeared as a paperback in 2001, seven years after its initial publication, it had been retitled *Bunker Hill*. “Very little history enters history books as it really happened,” Fast warned his readers, “and in the thousand or so legends and stories of what happened on Bunker Hill during a week in June of 1775, there are only shadows of truth.” Calling his version of events a “reconstruction of history” he also conceded that “like any book of fiction, it can only try to give the reader an approximation of what had really occurred.”⁵⁸ But because Fast left the jaundiced text of his original edition unchanged, the book has little to offer, except as an example of historical imagination run wild.

Few of us would disagree with the assertion that, at least in theory, bad history is worse than bad fiction, since a historian’s truth claims tend to carry a greater burden than the truth claims of a novelist, even among those who do not see the literary forms involved as fundamentally different. At the same time, on a more practical level, if more readers take their understanding of the past from fiction writers like Howard Fast than from academic historians, perhaps a misleading novel poses a bigger problem—particularly when the author insists, as Fast often did, that the “truth” of the past can be separated from invented characters, scenes, and dialogue.

Fast claimed more than just being able to stay true to the “spirit” of the past; indeed, he claimed a transcendent understanding of the human condition. Occasionally he took an almost perverse pride in not doing research, as if to prove to the academic historians that he could write a compelling tale about higher, universal truths, even if he was sketchy on the details. Academic historian Michael Kammen recognizes the important role that Fast and writers like him play in educating Americans. “We can never fully know the intricacies through which a society weaves a knowledge of its origins and development,” Kammen cautioned, “but we are likely to learn more from the gossip of popular culture than from the gospel of academe.”⁵⁹ Most academic historians are lucky to be read by the thousands; Howard Fast was read by the millions. Fast quite likely knew the difference between what he found in the record and what he contrived – likely, not definitely, because he subsumed all within his world view, his master artifice. General readers, lacking even his limited knowledge, were completely at his mercy. He blended all into an indistinguishable whole, perhaps in his own mind as much as that of his readers.

Fast was no great stylist, his characters, with rare exceptions like Jamie Stuart in *The Proud and the Free* and Evan Feversham in *The Hessian*, were rarely well-developed, and he was unabashedly utilitarian in his use of the past to teach lessons for the present. The same could be said of Plutarch and every

other writer who has reached back didactically in order to stretch readers ahead moralistically. No doubt part of Fast's appeal was his search for, even his creation of, Plutarchian archetypes placed in an American setting. He wanted his readers to believe that, if given a chance, people could make their own destiny, that they had the moral capacity to improve themselves and society. For Americans to be true to their better selves, they had to close the gap between ideal and real; they had to keep the poor from becoming the downtrodden and prevent the rich from concentrating all power in their hands. The War of Independence qualified as a good war because there were Americans, even then, who professed a belief in that cause. Thomas Paine had been the ideological standard bearer for the revolutionary generation; Fast tried to be the standard bearer for Americans of his own generation.

Ultimately Fast ceased to believe in the possibility of our waging another good war. "To so many of us, World War Two was a crusade against evil, and we enlisted in it with a sort of religious dedication," he reflected ruefully.⁶⁰ Subsequent wars in Korea, Indochina, and the Persian Gulf whittled away that belief. He condemned all three conflicts, a condemnation that he joined with frustration over spreading environmental destruction and continued human degradation.⁶¹ And yet he never stopped playing the moralist, never stopped believing that his writing made a difference in shaping the national memory, and that therefore he had a social obligation to tell Americans the truth as he saw it. The result, he hoped—when hope did not give way to despair—would be a better nation, closer to its highest ideals.

Caustic as he could be, he resisted becoming a cynic and perhaps that helps explain his onetime appeal to popular audiences. Nonetheless, he had begun to lose his readership well before he died. For whatever reason, the themes he emphasized and the characters he created no longer resonated with the public. Perhaps his brand of historical fiction had become outdated; perhaps his style of literary populism was too quaintly strident; or perhaps it was something else entirely. Literary fame, after all, can be fleeting. Whatever readers had found appealing about Fast from the 1930s into the 1970s seems to have faded away by the 1990s.

Frederick Douglass once observed that reform only comes through struggle—even in the United States, a nation supposedly committed to social progress.⁶² Howard Fast shared that view. He dedicated *The Last Frontier* to his father, whose life had been one of unremitting toil, and shorter because of it. Even so, Fast remembered a man "who taught me to love not only the America that is past, but the America that will be."⁶³ Fast's critics often thought him naive, for having joined the Communist Party at all, if they leaned toward the political right; for having abandoned it the way he did, if they were somewhere to the left.⁶⁴ For those many more of his readers who were in the middle, Fast was the curmudgeon who was also the innocent, one who believed in spite of so much around him that said he should not.

Howard Fast turned the past into a morality play, with a certainty about right and wrong that many readers once found convincing. Thomas Paine had been direct with his audience; so was Fast with his. "What they call patriotism down there in Washington stinks to high heaven of brainlessness, racism, greed, fear, and hatred of the common people," he growled from his home in Old Greenwich. Real patriotism, he declared, "applies to true love of one's country and a code of conduct that echoes such love."⁶⁵ A onetime communist who prospered as a capitalist, a life-long socialist who became rich writing about the poor, Howard Fast considered himself a patriotic teller of historical truths to the end.⁶⁶

Notes

1. Written to the author by Fast in a letter of 30 August 2000, author's files. "By and large," he added, "all of history is a lie, woven through with threads of truth."

2. Stated by Fast in (an unrecorded) conversation with the author in Fast's Old Greenwich home, 4 May 2001.

3. From Martha Smilgis, "Howard Fast's Many Sides: A Born-Again Yankee, Blacklisted Best-Seller" *People*, 7 April 1980, 76.

4. Even so, Fast's *Freedom Road* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1944) was first published with an endorsement by the noted historian W. E. B. Du Bois. M. E. Sharpe reissued it in 1997 with praise by Eric Foner of Columbia, an equally distinguished historian. They looked past Fast's literary inventions and his heavy-handed staging, as he closed his tale with the slaughter of freed Blacks and their White friends by White racists on 19 April 1877, a date chosen not just to mark the end—and moral failure—of Reconstruction, but as a counterpoint to 19 April 1775, that date thereby symbolizing freedom for some Americans but not for others. See too n.18, below, for two other academic historians who have recognized Fast's importance. It is also notable that the Princeton University historian, R. R. Palmer, urged the historical profession to make room for writers like Fast. See his presidential address to the American Historical Association, 28 December 1970, in the *American Historical Review* 76 (1971): 1-15. Two other academics who take Fast seriously are Daniel Traister, in "Noticing Howard Fast" *Prospects* 20 (1995): 525-541; and Andrew Macdonald, *Howard Fast: A Critical Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996). Granville Hicks's "Howard Fast's One-Man Reformation" *College English* 7 (October 1945): 1-6; was one of the first thoughtful pieces on Fast as a historical novelist. Michael Kammen alludes to some of Fast's Revolutionary War work in *A Season of Youth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), and notes Stanley Meiser's criticisms in "The Lost Dreams of Howard Fast" *The Nation* 30 May 1959: 498-500. Meiser tied Fast too tightly to his Communist Party affiliation to explain his historical thinking. Fast talked about himself at length in the mid-1990s for the *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* (30 vols, Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1984-1999), 18:167-187, and Fast's entry for the online version of the parent publication, *Contemporary Authors*, was updated in October 2003, and then again in November 2005; he had died in March 2003.

5. See Fast's 1964 interview with Roy Newquist, printed in Newquist, ed., *Counterpoint* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964), 180-85.

6. Howard Fast, *Being Red: A Memoir* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 27. For this book and *The Naked God* (see below, n.64) as confessionals see David Seed, "The Ex-Communist Memoirs of Howard Fast and His Contemporaries" *Prospects* 24 (1999):605-624.

7. Howard Fast, "American Literature and the Democratic Tradition" *The English Journal* 36 (February 1947): 55-60; quotation from 59. See too the "round table" prompted by Fast's piece in the June 1947 issue, on 321-25, which included a response by Fast. Fast's essay also appeared under the same title in *College English* 8 (March 1947): 279-84.

8. Fast, *Being Red*, 43-44 for London, 46 for Shaw.

9. Howard Melvin Fast, *Two Valleys* (New York: Dial Press, 1933).

10. *Ibid.*, 71, for "breakthrough;" Howard Fast, *Conceived in Liberty* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co. 1939). Fast's "A Man's Wife," a story about George and Martha Washington and the suffering at Valley Forge, appeared in the *Ladies' Home Journal* (February 1939), 11-13, 62-63, at approximately the same time, a fairly typical phenomenon in Fast's writing career. Fast wrote dozens of magazine pieces with historical themes, pieces that anticipated by years some of his full-length books. See, for example, "Journey to Boston," *Masses & Mainstream* 2 (November 1949): 28-41, which touches on the fighting at Concord over a decade before Fast wrote *April Morning*. A dozen essays gathered together and published as *Patrick Henry and the Frigate's Keel* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1945) prompted a reviewer in the "Teacher's Section" of the *Mississippi*

Valley Historical Review 32 (1945): 103 to comment that “at times Howard Fast may be an inferior historian, but he always is an excellent novelist.”

11. Fast, *Being Red*, 143.

12. Uncomfortable as Fast’s emphasis on class distinctions might have made some readers, later scholarship has shown that the continental army did indeed reflect class lines, with officers often coming from a higher socio-economic background than their men, and with those enlisted men being subjected to harsher discipline. For the former see James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, *A Respectable Army* (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, 2nd ed., 2006), and Charles Patrick Neimeyer, *America Goes to War: A Social History of the Continental Army* (New York: New York University Press, 1996); and for the latter, Harry M. Ward, *George Washington’s Enforcers* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006).

13. See Fast’s “History in Fiction” *New Masses*, 18 January 1944, 7-9. Fast did not care for the label “historical novel,” which he felt got the emphasis wrong. He pointed to abolitionists as an example of what interested him in American history and what he hoped to accomplish in his “story-telling” as a novelist.

As to why I write about the past—my books give answer. These great and splendid forgotten men did not live and die so that all they did might be traduced and falsified; they lived and fought and died so that we might inherit and use the things they built. And the same type of scoundrels as opposed them then oppose men of good will today. It all becomes one; and the great tradition we fight for today is the same tradition they sustained and handed down to us.

14. Charles Edward Russell, *Haym Salomon and the Revolution* (New York: Cosmopolitan Book, 1930), xiv.

15. Howard Fast, *Haym Salomon* (New York: Julian Messner, 1941), 18 and 24, resp.

16. Fast’s book was one of five reviewed briefly in “How to Go to War in a Hammock” *Time*, 13 July 1942, 88, 90, 92; quotation from 88.

17. Howard Fast, *The Unvanquished* (New York: Modern Library, 1945), from the foreword (page unnumbered). The original 1942 edition by Duell, Sloan and Pearce had no foreword. At the end of the book (316 in both editions), Fast noted briefly that his favorite Washington biographer was Rupert Hughes. Hughes, along with W. E. Woodward, is usually characterized as a debunker of Washington myths and thus, for some, more polemicist than biographer. For Fast as a revisionist historian in his own right, Hughes performed the useful task of deconstructing Washington so that Fast could reconstruct him along his own interpretive lines.

18. *Ibid.*, 53. The book was reissued in 1997 (hardbound and paperback) by M. E. Sharpe as part of a series called “American History Through Literature,” edited by Paul Finkelman. A second academic historian, Howard Rock, wrote the introductory comments (xi-xxvii), which were, overall, quite sympathetic to Fast.

19. *Ibid.*, 313. Fast’s admiration for Washington did not diminish over the years. “I love and admire the man,” Fast wrote in an op-ed piece for the *New York Observer*, 8 May 1989, reprinted in idem, *War and Peace* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), 235.

20. Idem, *Citizen Tom Paine* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943), 145.

21. *Ibid.*, 37.

22. *Ibid.*, 130, 176, and elsewhere. Fast also wrote a two-act play version of his book, staged at the Williamstown Theatre Festival in June-July 1985, with actor Richard Thomas playing Paine. It was performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., the following year. In an afterword to the printed text of the play, *Citizen Tom Paine* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 113-117, Fast argued for Paine’s superiority to Edmund Burke as a political philosopher.

23. Fast, *Being Red*, 83.

24. *Ibid.*, 138.

25. Howard Fast, ed., *The Selected Works of Tom Paine* (New York: Carlton House, 1945), 338.

26. Howard Fast, ed., *Rights of Man* (New York: Heritage Press, 1961), xvi.

27. “The Crisis” appeared as a three-page flyer, in three separate numbers, published by the Civil Rights Congress in New York City in 1951.

28. *The New York Times*, 14 December 1947, sec. 4, 2e. The schools denied that they were censoring free speech; rather, they claimed that they were merely withholding permission to speak while Fast’s contempt conviction in the HUAC case was under appeal. New York University did not join the ban, allowing Fast to speak there. Fast turns up briefly in David Cauter’s *The Great Fear* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978).

29. Howard Fast, *Spartacus* (New York: published by the author, 1951). B. J. Whiting reviewed this book and eleven other historical novels in the academic journal *Speculum* 28 (1953):527-54. He saw Fast’s casting of Spartacus as hero and Romans as villains as nothing new, and suggested this irony: that the closest counterpart to the totalitarian Roman state as portrayed by Fast was Stalin’s

Russia, causing Whiting to wonder (sarcastically?) if Fast was in some way trying to undermine the Soviet system, not support it.

30. Howard Fast, *Literature and Reality* (New York: International Publishers, 1950), 7.

31. Howard Fast, *The Proud and the Free* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1950), quotations from 4, 6, and 8. A London edition, published by Bodley Head, followed in 1952, the front jacket flap proclaiming: "Mr. Fast deals, as he always does, with the underside of events, the ordinary men of which history is composed. His honesty and sincerity, his outstanding skill as a storyteller, and his human sympathy are here given particular scope in a work of unusual intensity and power." Bodley Head had a half dozen of Fast's historical novels in print at this same time. Interestingly, Fast's reputation in Britain seems to have been relatively unaffected by Cold War politics.

32. *Ibid.*, 39.

33. *Ibid.*, 178. See the five demands made by the Pennsylvania line and given to Anthony Wayne on 4 January 1781, with his response that same day, in *The Papers of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1959, 204 reels microfilm), Item 152, Washington Letters, 9: 443-46 (reel 170).

34. Fast, *Proud and Free*, 306. A final chapter follows which acts as an epilogue, with Fast (through Jamie) tracing the lineage of the Continentals of that generation to the Abolitionists of the next.

35. Carl Van Doren, *Mutiny in January* (New York: Viking Press, 1943). John A. Nagy's *Rebellion in the Ranks* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2007) adds precious little to the tale.

36. Fast's review appeared as "Plain Men in the American Revolution," *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review*, 4 April 1943, 1-2, quotation from 2. Fast, who had first met Van Doren socially, had written to him on 20 March 1942 that he had "never thought of writing" about the mutiny himself—which leaves the impression that Van Doren had suggested that he do just that. This letter, along with a half dozen others from Fast to Van Doren, are in the Carl Van Doren Papers, Princeton University Library.

37. Fast remembered Van Doren fondly as a mentor in our conversation of 4 May 2001.

38. Howard Fast, *The Last Frontier* (orig 1941; repr. New York: Press of the Readers Club, 1942), ix-x, for Van Doren's foreword. Fast thanked Van Doren profusely: "I don't know what I did to deserve such an introduction. It's wonderful; a perfectly splendid tribute I in no way deserve." Letter of 15 July 1942, in the Van Doren Papers.

39. *Idem*, *Unvanquished*, from the back jacket cover. The book's "reception has been more than any young man has a right to expect," Fast wrote to Van Doren on 13 July 1942. "And believe me. So much of it is due to your stamp of approval." Van Doren Papers.

40. Van Doren on himself, in his autobiographical *Carl Van Doren* (New York: Viking Press, 1945), vi.

41. See Neimeyer, *America Goes to War*, 130-58, which essentially follows Paul David Nelson, *Anthony Wayne: Soldier of the Early Republic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 115-31 on Wayne and the "mutineers."

42. Howard Fast, *The Proud and the Free* (New York: ibooks, through Simon & Schuster, 2002), printed in paperback only. From "An Introduction," not paginated. This book, along with *Conceived in Liberty* and *The Unvanquished*, had already been released under one paperback cover as *The Call of Fife & Drum* (Secacus: Citadel Press, 1987).

43. William S. Stryker, *The Battles of Trenton and Princeton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1898); reissued as a paperback by The Old Barracks Association of Trenton, New Jersey, in 2001. Howard Fast, *The Crossing* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1971). Willard Wallace, a popular historian respected by academics, called this a "fascinating little book" in the *American Historical Review* 77 (1972): 202. The film version was released in 1999 by Arts & Entertainment Television. Brian Taves's combined review of "The Crossing" and "The Patriot" for the *American Historical Review* 103 (2000): 1439-1440 was too easy on both films.

44. Stryker, *Battles of Trenton and Princeton*, "infant republic," 216, and "fought for the liberty," iii.

45. David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 445-46, although it is interesting that Fischer is far more forgiving of the artistic license Emanuel Leutze exercised in his famous painting "Washington Crosses the Delaware" than he is Fast's in *The Crossing*.

46. For which see Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); David Slocum, "Telling Ghost Stories: Reflections on History and Hollywood" *American Quarterly* 50 (1998): 175-82; and Neil Longley York, *Fiction as Fact: "The Horse Soldiers" and Popular Memory* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2001).

47. Howard Fast, *April Morning* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1961). Fast insisted on having rifles around (127), although there is no evidence that any of the Massachusetts militiamen fighting the British that day used them. Likewise for Bunker Hill, despite his depiction (see n. 55 *infra*).

48. From the 1964 interview with Roy Newquist in Newquist's *Counterpoint*, 183.

49. "April Morning," a Samuel Goldwyn Company/Hallmark production (1987). Twenty years earlier John Ford had been interested in doing a film version, as he had been, before that, in *The Last*

Frontier; the result might have been a better production. See Joseph McBride, *Searching for John Ford: A Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 646-647, 687-688.

50. There is even a "Curriculum Unit" for the original book version of *April Morning*, produced in 1997 by The Center for Learning, based in Rocky River, Ohio. Nearly three decades before then prep-school teacher Elizabeth Collamore, "False Starts and Distorted Vision in *April Morning*" *The English Journal* 58 (1969): 1186-88 had warned other teachers to be careful in using the book, whose "signs" could be difficult for students to read "correctly." Even so, she felt the challenge worth it. Samuel S. Wineburg's intriguing study of "Historical Problem Solving: A Study of the Cognitive Processes used in the Evaluation of Documentary and Pictorial Evidence" *Journal of Educational Psychology* 83 (1991): 73-87 drew on *April Morning* to explain how students arrange historical "facts."

51. As told to Wendy Smith, "The Fast way to prolific, populist prose" *Chicago Sun Times*, Sunday magazine, 22 February 1987, 27.

52. *Ibid.* Also see Traister, "Noticing Howard Fast," 536. Maxine Seller and Andrew Trusz, "High School and the American Revolution" *The History Teacher* 9 (1976): 535-55, recommended both *April Morning* and *The Hessian* to teachers wanting their students to read fictional accounts (547). Also see the enthusiastic endorsement of *The Hessian* in the *English Journal* 62 (1973): 1444-1445.

53. Howard Fast, *The Hessian* (New York: William Morrow, 1972), 17.

54. *Ibid.*, 81.

55. Howard Fast, *Seven Days in June* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1994).

56. Richard Ketchum, *Decisive Day: The Battle of Bunker Hill* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974).

57. Mark C. Carnes, *Novel History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 14.

58. Howard Fast, *Bunker Hill* (New York: ibooks, through Simon & Schuster, 2001), unnumbered page.

59. Kammen, *Season of Youth*, xv.

60. Fast, *Being Red*, 24.

61. See, for example, Fast's preface to his editorial pieces from *The New York Observer* collected as *War and Peace*, notably those from 22 October 1989 (on 22) and 17 June 1991 (29).

62. Douglass was emphatic on this point in his speech of 4 August 1857 at Canandaigua, New York, printed in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass* (5 vols., New York: International Publishers, 1950-1975), 2: 437.

63. Also see Fast's comments on his father in Alan Ward and Alan Filreis (edited by Thomas J. Sugrue), "A Conversation with Howard Fast, March 23, 1994" *Prospects* 20 (1995):520-521.

64. See "An Exchange with Howard Fast" *Mainstream* 10 (March 1957):29-47, for criticism from the left, a magazine where Fast had often published his essays. When Fast explained in *The Naked God* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1957) why he left the Communist Party, Hershel D. Meyer, *History and Conscience* (New York: Anvil-Atlas Publishers, 1958) criticized him for being naive. Fast admitted as much later when he wrote *Being Red* (see n. 6, above), at least when it came to his view of the Soviet Union in the 1940s. He would also later note that the anger that he felt when he wrote the first book had eased somewhat by the second, "rage" characterizing the first, "reflection" the second (see Ward and Filreis interview with Fast, n. 62 above). Even so, "naive" in his hope that the future could be better if people found their better selves is not the same as believing that right would always prevail and that life does not require difficult choices, including learning how to compromise without compromising oneself. Fast's hero in *The American* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1946), Governor John Peter Altgeld of Illinois, is portrayed as a complex man who grappled with preserving his idealism while making his way in the real political world—a portrait that Fast could not have painted, had he been truly naive. Alan M. Wald's "The Legacy of Howard Fast" *Radical History* 17 (1983): 92-101 gives a good idea of how difficult it is to locate Fast's true place in American letters, given his political passions and his mix of the commercial with the ideological.

65. From Fast's contribution to a section of *The Nation*, 15/22 July 1991 on what constitutes patriotism, 88. "The United States is above all things an invention, the most significant social invention in history," Fast commented two years later. "We are a new kind of country, a new process of human society, and what is good about our way of life outweighs the bad," quoted in *The Baltimore Sun*, 13 January 1993, 15A, reprinted from Fast's local Greenwich newspaper.

66. Though Fast did see the irony in the source of much of his wealth, as he told Ken Gross for "Howard Fast" *People*, 29 January 1991, 75-79. Gross closes his commentary on Fast's odyssey from poverty with this image of the best-selling author: "The tenements of New York City have become crack houses, the left has withdrawn into a spoor state, publishers bid on his books, Hollywood beckons. And worst of all, he says between clenched teeth, only half-joking, 'I am beloved.' And rich."