

Pultizer Historian: Contributions of Alan Taylor to American history

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Abstract:

Alan Shaw Taylor (17-06-1955) is an American historian and scholar who is the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation Professor of History at the University of Virginia is a specialist in the early history of the 'United States', and Taylor has written extensively about the colonial history of the United States, the American Revolution and the early American Republic.

Joseph Pulitzer's [10-04-1847 to 29-10-1911] life story is an intriguing one as he faced numerous hardships before he could find success in life and donated most of his fortune for the promotion of knowledge. Born in Hungary, he made his way to the United States as a young man. He sought to serve in the Army during the American Civil War. He enlisted for a year in the Lincoln Calvary before making his way to St. Louis where he worked odd jobs and learned as much as he could studying at the Mercantile Library. It was there that a chance encounter put him in front of the editors of the German-language newspaper of the area, 'the Westliche Post'. In 1892, Pulitzer offered Columbia University's president, Seth Low, money to set up the world's first school of journalism. The university initially turned down the money. In 1902, Columbia's new president Nicholas Murray Butler was more receptive to the plan for a school and journalism prizes, but it would not be until after Pulitzer's death that this dream would be fulfilled. In 1917, Columbia organized the awards of the first Pulitzer Prizes in journalism. The awards have been expanded to recognize achievements in literature, poetry, history, music, and drama. Pulitzer left the university \$2,000,000 in his will. In 1912, the school founded the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. This followed the Missouri School of Journalism, founded at the University of Missouri with Pulitzer's urging. Both schools remain among the most prestigious in the world.

Alan Shaw Taylor (17-06-1955) is an American historian and scholar who is the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation Professor of History at the University of Virginia is a specialist in the early history of the 'United States', and Taylor has written extensively about the colonial history of the United States, the American Revolution and the early American Republic. He has received two Pulitzer Prizes [1996 and 2014] and the Bancroft Prize in 1996, and was also a finalist for the National Book Award for non-fiction. In 2020 he was elected to the American Philosophical Society. Taylor is among a generation of historians committed to the revival of narrative history, incorporating many historical methods (political, social, cultural, and environmental, among others) to understand humans' experiences of the past. Taylor is best known for his contributions to microhistory, exemplified in his *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (1996). Using court records, land records, letters and diaries, Taylor reconstructed the background of founder William Cooper from Burlington, New Jersey, and the economic, political and social history related to the land speculation, founding and settlement of Cooperstown, New York, after the American Revolutionary War.

Born in Maine, Portland city of Oregon state on June 17, 1955, Alan Taylor attended Colby College and graduated in 1977. After serving as a researcher for historic preservation in the United States Virgin Islands (1977-79), he pursued graduate study at Brandeis University, receiving his PhD in American History in 1986. Alan Taylor was born in West Buxton, Maine, and grew up in Windham, graduating from Bonny Eagle High School. He decided to apply to liberal arts schools, and Colby accepted him. There he took a history class from Harold Raymond, and from then on he took every Raymond class he could. After a postdoctoral fellowship at the Institute of Early American History and Culture (Williamsburg, Virginia), he taught in the history department at Boston University from 1987 to 1994. Since 1994, he has been a professor at the University of California at Davis, where he teaches courses in early North American history, the history of the American West, and the history of Canada. At present, he is a faculty at University of Virginia and active in teaching and researching on modern American history. During his span of three decades of research career, Taylor has authored several books: *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors: The Revolutionary Settlement on the Maine Frontier, 1760-1820* (1990); *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early Republic*, (1995); *American Colonies* (2001); *Writing Early American History* (2005); *The Divided Ground: Indians, Settlers, and the Northern Borderland of the American Revolution* (2006); *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies* (2010); *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia* (2013).

Almost everyone praises education, but consensus dissolves over who should pay for it. This dilemma runs deep in our history, back to the founders who led the American Revolution and designed a more participatory form of government, known as a republic. They declared that Americans needed more and better education to preserve their state and national republics from relapsing into tyranny. A governor of Virginia, William H. Cabell, asserted in 1808 that education "constitutes one of the great pillars on which the civil liberties of a nation depend." More than a mere boon for individuals, education was a collective, social benefit essential for free government to endure. Those founders worried that their 13 state republics, loosely tied in a new union, were vulnerable to internal divisions and external manipulation. They lived in a dangerous world dominated by empires and

kingdoms run by monarchs and aristocrats who inherited and guarded their wealth and power. In European history, previous republics had been short-lived and usually small: cantons or city-states such as Pisa and Florence. How then could an immense and growing union of diverse states sustain a form of government that had always failed in the past? The American political experiments seemed especially threatened by contentions over balancing power between the states and the nation and between the regions: North and South, East and West. In addition to the North-South division that would nearly destroy the union during the 1860s, 18th-century Americans feared a violent split between the old states east of the Appalachians and the new settlements emerging in the vast watershed of the Mississippi River. Lacking a strong national identity, the people of 1787 identified with their states and distrusted outsiders. That pervasive distrust, rather than any common sense of nationalism, led the founders to craft the federal union as a “peace pact” meant to avert wars between the states.

The Civil War of 1812 sheds light on the tangled origins of the relationship between the United States and Canada. In a world of double identities, slippery allegiances, and porous boundaries, the leaders of the young American republic and the British empire struggled to control their own diverse peoples. Soldiers, immigrants, settlers, and Indians fought in a northern borderland to determine the fate of a continent. Americans were divided anew, between former Loyalists and Patriots, fighting alongside native peoples defending their homelands. Serving in both armies, Irish immigrants battled one another, reaping charges of rebellion and treason, while dissident Americans flirted with secession and aided the British as smugglers and spies. After fighting to a standstill, the Americans and the British were forced to coexist. Taylor concludes that, by ending in a stalemate, the War of 1812 provided assurance that both sides needed – that they could survive each other’s presence on a shared continent, and could settle later border disputes without recourse to another war.

In 1996, Alan Taylor's *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York: Knopf, 1995) won both the Pulitzer Prize in History and the Bancroft Prize. The riveting story of James Fenimore Cooper's father and the town he carved out of the post revolutionary frontier, *William Cooper's Town* explores the founding of Cooperstown, New York, by William Cooper and its representation in his son's third novel, *The Pioneers* (1823). Combining extensive archival research with vivid narration, Taylor charts the rise and fall of one of early America's most intriguing characters, revealing the economic and environmental consequences of land development in the Mohawk Valley and exploring the social and political changes that followed the Revolutionary War. In an interview, Taylor states what motivated him to write *William Cooper's Town* and shares his view “Well, I began with James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Pioneers* (1823). In the mid-80s, I was teaching for a couple of years at the College of William and Mary, and I taught a course on narrative history and historical fiction. All of the texts I used somehow bore upon the era of the American Revolution. I decided to use *The Pioneers*, and I just was entranced with the novel, especially with its concerns about environmental history, about the intersection of social structure and political power with how the environment is used and abused. So I wanted to understand the context: where was James Fenimore Cooper in the 1820s? Where was this coming from? The novel is set in the 1790s in upstate New York--frontier America, a place I'm quite dedicated to trying to understand in that particular time. Further reading of literary critics indicated that Cooper was drawing very much on memories of his own childhood in Cooperstown, and especially memories of his father, Judge William Cooper. So this got me quite intrigued, because I had read a little bit about William Cooper, especially a vivid capsule description of him in David Hackett Fisher's *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), and I thought he would be quite an interesting man to know more about.” Taylor rarely seems impressed by his own research feats. One of the more intriguing, in *William Cooper's Town*, invokes an analysis of Cooper's electoral popularity as the town spread. By analyzing 1 9th-century voting record (, -voters' preferences ,, -ere then public), Taylor shows that the farther from the village a voter lived, the less likely he was to support Copper. Asked about that discovery, Taylor said it was no big deal.

In January of 1997, Taylor expressed interest in the new history project during the Bicentennial celebrations at Hartwick College in Oneonta, New York, where the papers of William Cooper are housed. The following are selected portions of that interview, in which Taylor discusses the genesis and success of *William Cooper's Town*, reflects on the character of his principal subject, and discusses his methods of researching and writing history. “The historical imagination works best, surely, when it takes us beyond the self, beyond personal and contemporary limits and into the lives of people who have been rendered alien by the passage of time.” Alan Taylor, the author of “*American Republics: A Continental History of the United States, 1783-1850*,” has been named the winner of the New-York Historical Society’s 2022 Barbara and David Zalaznick Book Prize, which is awarded each year for the best work of American history or biography. The book, published by W.W. Norton, takes a capacious view of the period between the end of the American Revolution and Congress’s failed efforts to pass compromise bills over slavery to stave off the looming Civil War. It looks beyond the familiar great men and geographical boundaries, depicting the expanding country as an “always-imperiled” nation built on “an unstable foundation of rival regions and an ambiguous Constitution.” Taylor, a professor at the University of Virginia, is a two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize for history. His previous two books, “*American Colonies*” and “*American Revolutions*,” which took a similarly wide-angled and nuanced view of the nation’s beginnings, have been scholarly touchstones in the escalating political battles over American history. When the book *William Cooper’s Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* appeared in 1995, it deftly combined social history, biography, and literary analysis to explore the business and political career of James Fenimore Cooper’s father and the development of the western-New York frontier region of Otsego County. *William Cooper’s Town* won the Bancroft and the Pulitzer Prizes for history. The book charts the rise and falls of the elder Cooper’s financial and political fortunes and examines how these impacted the literary ambitions and career of his son. It also describes the shifting political landscape as the nascent nation developed and then redefined ideals of republican gentility and democratic power.

A shrewd land speculator, William Cooper rose from humble origins as a wheelwright in colonial Pennsylvania to become the dominant landlord, presiding judge, and U.S. congressman of his new county in upstate New York. Becoming rich and influential, William struggled to remake himself as a gentleman, ruling as a benevolent father over a harmonious and deferential community, and imprinting his vision upon the land and its settlers. In the 1790s ambitious rivals exploited the democratic language of the Revolution and the social flux of the frontier to undermine the judge's power, and a rapid succession of family crises and disappointing investments troubled Cooper's last years. During the decade after his death in 1809, the family wealth dissolved when his children could not cope with a growing tangle of debts. In the face of dispossession, James Fenimore Cooper, the youngest son, became a novelist in a bid to regain his family's lost property and to achieve a new position as the nation's cultural spokesman. Taylor makes it clear that in a rapidly changing nation William Cooper's development of Cooperstown and his son's creation of the village of Templeton in *The Pioneers* were different stages of a common effort, over two generations, to create, sustain, and justify a wealthy and powerful estate. Both sought that unity of social, economic, political, and cultural authority idealized in colonial America but at odds with the legacy of the American Revolution. William Cooper's *Town* combines biography, social history, and literary analysis. By breaching the barriers that separate political, social, and literary history, Taylor reveals the interplay of frontier settlement and narrative-making in the early American Republic. He examines how Americans resolved their revolution through the creation of new property, new power, and new stories along their extensive frontier. Taylor replied to a question of criticisms of the stories he told in his books has been their 'overabundance' of detail as "Well, I would say it's essential. That's what I do. You know, the devil's in the details. But I also think getting some sort of visual take on the past fascinates me, trying to get a mind's-eye vision of these people and this place. And I work this out by writing it. And so for that reason there's a very high level of detail in there. When I read other historians' work, I often have a sense of disappointment that there is insufficient detail, that there's insufficient appeal to the mind's eye. Too much is taken for granted. I'm not saying that of all historians, but most histories do not have the level of detail that I would like to read, and so I'm writing very much the sort of books that I would like to read in the assumption that there are many people out there who would like to read this kind of history. But it's not to everybody's taste. People who like a strong central argument reiterated throughout the whole text--they're going to find that wanting in my work. It's a weakness, but it's a choice I've made. There are multiple arguments that I'm trying to weave together in the course of a book rather than one central argument, although I think I did a bit better job in this book than in the previous one of ultimately emphasizing one of the arguments that I'm working through in the book, so that it is there in every chapter."

In a prodigious display of historical research, Taylor has drawn on nearly a thousand books and articles, listed in his 55-page bibliography. Because he has expanded the chronology of the Revolution into the 19th century and has included so much beyond the well-known headline events, he has some difficulty fitting everything in. He often packs so many incidents into each paragraph, with actions succeeding and crowding in upon one another, that there is no space to expand and develop any one of them. Consequently, they tend to get bunched up and leveled, and the narrative often comes to seem unusually compressed and flattened.

Taylor's work, *'The Divided Ground: Indians, Settlers, and the Northern Borderland of the American Revolution'* (2006) explored the history of the borders between Canada and the United States in the aftermath of the American Revolution, as well as Iroquois attempts to keep control of some lands. His book *'The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies'* (2010) also addressed this borderland area and strategies pursued by various groups. The War of 1812 has also been characterized as a continuation of the Revolutionary War. In this story of a frontier village in the early American Republic, Alan Taylor explores the lives of Judge William Cooper and the novelist James Fenimore Cooper....father and son. As frontier speculator, landlord, and politician, the father played a leading role in the conquest, resettlement, and environmental transformation of the early nation. Drawing upon his childhood memories of the New York frontier, the son created the historical fictions that made him the most popular, influential, and controversial American novelist of the early nineteenth century.

In 2014, Taylor was awarded the prize second time for "The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772-1832" is a Pulitzer Prize-winning non-fiction book about the history of slaves and slavery in Virginia, with an emphasis on the War of 1812 and was published by W. W. Norton & Company in 2013. The slaves of Virginia were the internal enemy of Taylor's title, and he opens their story with the War of Independence. In November 1775, months before Jefferson drafted his famed declaration; British officers in Virginia had begun promising freedom to slaves who escaped from their rebellious owners to enlist with His Majesty's forces. Because black Virginians knew the surrounding countryside much better than the invaders, escaping slaves became a crucial resource for the British war effort. Soon the British were emancipating entire slave families who took advantage of the American Revolution to claim their freedom in Canada or the Caribbean. Taylor tells this familiar story well and uses it to introduce readers to his two major themes. "The Internal Enemy" tells the story of about 3,000 enslaved Africans from the Chesapeake region who escaped slavery by fleeing to the British and helping them to wage war on the United States during the War of 1812, said Taylor, who taught at the University of California, Davis for about 20 years before joining University of Virginia's faculty. "The book sets that story in the context of the shifting nature of slavery after the American Revolution," he said. The Pulitzer announcement says, "Drawn from new sources, Alan Taylor's riveting narrative re-creates the events that inspired black Virginians, haunted slaveholders, and set the nation on a new and dangerous course." "Alan Taylor has always been interested in public history and writing for the layman, not just the scholar," O'Shaughnessy said. "He has succeeded in making an important methodological breakthrough in the discipline with his ability to integrate modern social history – the lives of ordinary people – into the grand narrative of political, military and economic history."

But for the rest of the enslaved of Virginia, Mr. Taylor shows, the revolution was a calamity. Runaways recovered from the British were sold. Twenty-three slaves escaped Jefferson's Monticello, and he sold all six that he managed to reclaim, principally to punish them for disloyalty. Even more havoc was wrought among slave families when the newly minted Americans discarded the old British laws governing the inheritance of property, abolishing primogeniture and entail. As property that could now be divided among multiple heirs, slave families were suddenly split asunder. The sale of slaves increased after the revolution, with at least 100,000 Virginia slaves sold between 1790 and 1810. The system of slavery emerged stronger after 1776; slaves and their families were more vulnerable. During the War of 1812, Virginia's slaves subscribed to the old adage, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. *Drawing upon memories of the Revolutionary War, they were alert for opportunities to run to British lines and liberty. Roughly 2,400 slaves escaped during the three years of war, and it is on this relatively unexplored exodus that Mr. Taylor trains his eye. Slaveholding Virginians loathed the British for encouraging the runaways, which was not only potentially economically ruinous but also perceived as a direct attack on their homes and way of life. Whites lived in a constant "cocoon of dread" of slave revolt. Slaves were their "internal enemy," their presence making planters a fretful, panicky bunch, quick to resort to terrible violence to defend their world. This skittishness clouded the judgment of the masters and blinded them to the basic fact that slaves weren't seeking revenge but, rather, equality and opportunity. "Blacks," says Mr. Taylor, "wanted to be American citizens rather than to murder them." This was what the British understood, and they believed freed slaves fully capable of functioning responsibly in civil society—albeit only as members of the lower rungs.

The war resulted in liberty for thousands of Virginia's slaves and their families. The British transported the bulk of refugees—almost 3,000 of them—to the barren soil of Nova Scotia, the Royal Navy's principal North American base, where the former slaves and their families eked out a living. Here they pondered the meaning of their liberty and explained it in letters to their erstwhile masters in Virginia. Bartlet Shanklyn wrote to his: "When I was with you I worked very hard and you neither gave me money nor any satisfaction but since I have been here I am able to make Gold and Silver as well as you." Or, as Jeremiah West wrote to his former Virginia master from Halifax in 1818: "Thank God i can enjoy all comforts under the flag of old England and Here i Shall remain." Jack Ditcher, a slave implicated in an insurrection plot in 1800, summed up the sentiments of many when he declared, "We have as much right to fight for our liberty as any men." A major legacy of the Revolution, he concludes, was the emergence of a society dominated by ordinary middle-class white men, the very people he has most criticized as patriarchal, racist and genocidal. In Taylor's mind their victory seems to have come at the expense of others. By focusing on common white men, he maintains, the Revolution worked against blacks, Indians and women. The question raised by Taylor's book is this: Can a revolution conceived mainly as sordid, racist and divisive be the inspiration for a nation?

Taylor is highly regarded as a historian who has reshaped how fellow historians and the general public look at the topic. Halliday described him as a pioneer in "microhistory," which examines particular episodes, places or small groups of people so that broader meanings become apparent. Halliday said Taylor has also broken ground in conceiving early American history as part of a global story, especially around the Atlantic Ocean. "It is a story about forces and actors at work all around the Atlantic," Halliday said, "such as the competition of multiple European empires in, for and around North America; the commerce in human lives brought forcibly from the west of Africa; contacts among multiple cultures as they traded, conducted political negotiations, intermarried and so on. Truly great writing about the American past, like Alan's, reveals just how deeply embedded we are and always have been in the world around us." Politically, the last years of the 18th century were a critical time for the largely untried democracy, a watershed in the lurching transition from government dominated by wealthy patricians to the more freewheeling politics played out by competing parties, and William Cooper was right in the middle of it. Condescendingly styling himself as "Father of the People," the arch-conservative Cooper parlayed his wealth into political influence, winning election as a judge, then to the State Senate, and finally to the U.S. Congress. For a time, the huge Federalist majorities that Cooper produced made Otsego County the pivot of New York state politics, and a factor even in national elections. "As historians redeem the places and peoples previously dismissed as marginal, as peripheral, we can perceive the truth that every region is in the center of some wider network of human exchange of people, goods, and cultures," Taylor writes. "We start to perceive a fuller North American history where borders are invitations rather than walls."

Taylor picks up where Morgan left off. (And like Morgan, Taylor wears his sophistication lightly.) He shows how some of the most libertarian consequences of the revolution actually deepened Virginia's attachment to slavery. For example, Virginia leaders abolished the aristocratic practice of bequeathing estates to the eldest son and entailing plantations so that they could never be sold out of the family line. The result, Taylor shows, was not only the accelerated decline of the old First Families of Virginia and the breakup of their estates, but also the dispersal of slave ownership much more broadly among ordinary whites. Freedom and economic opportunity in Virginia came to depend more than ever on the continued enslavement of blacks. The revolution taught white Virginians something else. Their slaves could not be trusted, precisely because they took seriously Jefferson's appeal to human equality and universal freedom. This is Taylor's second theme. The slaves, resenting their bondage more than ever, became the internal enemy of their masters' nightmares. Jolted by the escape of thousands of their slaves to the hated British, many whites began to wonder if they weren't sitting atop a powder keg that could explode at any moment into slave rebellion. Prominent planters dreamed up schemes of gradual emancipation to be followed by the colonization of blacks somewhere beyond the borders of the United States. They sincerely wanted all men to be free, but they just as sincerely wanted all Americans to be white.

Taylor writes locally but thinks globally. He does not doubt, for example, that the British were sincerely committed to freeing Virginia slaves, but he also knows that British imperialists were learning from their experience how to use emancipation as a moral justification for their own projects of colonial expansion. Indeed, it's hard not to be dazzled by the ease with which Taylor

moves from the lives of individual slaves, to the history of a large planter family, to the fault lines of Virginia politics, to the national debate over slavery in the western territories, out into the Atlantic world to the history of the British Empire. Taylor is not the first historian to suggest that the War of 1812 was a turning point in U.S. history, but the direction he sees America turning is not the familiar one. The war did not awaken a unifying American nationalism or usher in an "era of good feelings." On the contrary, Taylor argues, it left an embittered legacy of sectional animosity. New Englanders had never much liked the war and were in no hurry to help Virginians keep their black workers enslaved. Southerners came away from the experience deeply suspicious of their Northern countrymen. This sectional conflict would explode into national politics with the Missouri crisis a few years later. But the tension would not be resolved until another war, an immense and brutal Civil War, finally broke the powerful and disfiguring link between slavery and freedom in the United States.

In the past two decades, Mr. Taylor has established himself as one of our leading historians of the Early Republic, with a particular mastery of the social, economic and political intricacies of daily and national life. But he is also a gifted writer, and one committed to narrative history. His main focus here is the War of 1812, but he admirably contextualizes it with a brilliant account of slavery in Virginia during and after the Revolution. He sets out to explore the "causes, course, and consequences of the flight by slaves to join and help the British" during the war years of 1812-15 in an effort to "reveal the social complexities of slavery in Virginia from the American Revolution through Nat Turner's revolt in 1831."

Alan Shaw Taylor is the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation Professor of History at the University of Virginia. A specialist in the early history of the United States, Taylor has written extensively about the colonial history of the United States, the American Revolution and the early American Republic. Taylor has received two Pulitzer Prizes and the Bancroft Prize, and was also a finalist for the National Book Award for non-fiction. In 2020 he was elected to the American Philosophical Society. Contributing to the anthology *Our American Story* (2019), Taylor addressed the possibility of a shared American narrative and offered a skeptical approach, arguing, "There is no single unifying narrative linking past and present in America. Instead, we have enduring divisions in a nation even larger and more diverse than that of 1787. The best we can do today is to cope with our differences by seeking compromises, just as the Founders had to do, painfully and incompletely in the early Republic."

Three things stand out in Taylor's work that will assist me in teaching history as a narrative. First, the explanation of race relations developing in the English colonies fills in some possible cause and effect. Reading this book gives me some ideas about how things went from early land ownership by some blacks in Virginia (Trotter, *The African American Experience*) to the horrors of chattel slavery. Second, this book added to the argument presented by Diamond in *Guns, Germs, and Steel* by illuminating the common elements in the demise of Native American resistance and equal trade. It goes far beyond Pontiac's Rebellion and Red Shoes; many other examples of resistance or temporary equal-footing ended with the wearing away of skills under the influence of European-produced guns. The pervasive move toward reliance on goods only available through alliances with Europeans carries lessons for today's technological world as well. Third, the cause and effect story of early America becomes much more sensible when events in the Eastern Hemisphere are not ignored. Taylor introduces enough about European events to provide a starting point for adding to this dimension of the story. Well, people ask to interview me, which they never did before. I get invited to give many more public addresses than before. I get invited to write two books, and people offer you better advances for your books than before. It's quite striking what the difference a prize or a couple of prizes--especially the Pulitzer--will do to people's perception of who you are and what your capabilities are. I don't think I'm any better or smarter a historian than I was the day before the Pulitzer, but it just puts you on a lot of other people's radar screens, puts a certain certification on you that you didn't have before. In the list of 'multiple Pulitzer Prize winners', Taylor is one of five authors to have twice been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for History.

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