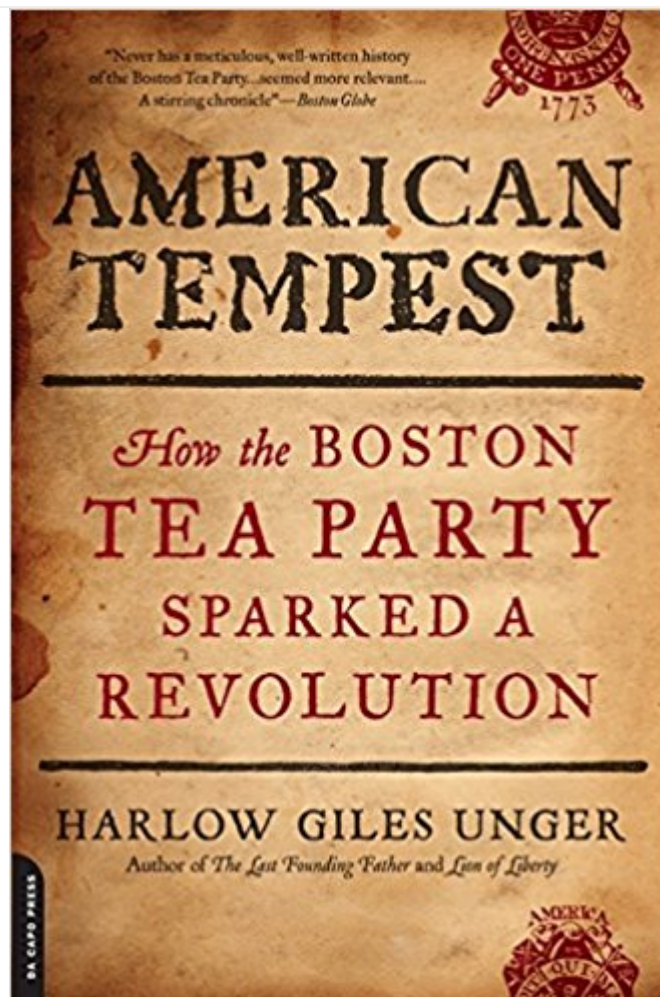


{essays in history}

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American Tempest: How the Boston Tea Party Sparked a Revolution



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Reviewed Work(s)

American Tempest: How the Boston Tea Party Sparked a Revolution. By Harlow Giles Unger (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2011). Pp. 259. Paper \$26.00. E-book \$16.00.

Adding another successful work to his expansive collection of historical narratives, Harlow Giles Unger delivers an exciting tale that surrounds the elusive, yet notorious Boston Tea Party. *American Tempest: How the Boston Tea Party Sparked a Revolution* offers a comprehensive overview of the events that transpired and the people that instigated the incident and its subsequent aftermath.^[1] Unger's work ultimately suggests that the Boston Tea Party ignited the War for American Independence, prompted the movement towards independence and inspired "the modern world's first experiment in self-government"—the creation of the American Constitution (12). The author's clever, commanding title immediately engages interested readers, but will most certainly leave the seasoned scholar with some questions regarding the author's interpretation and research decisions. Nonetheless, this entertaining and informative work presents an important contribution to the historiography of Colonial America for its discussion of a relatively neglected topic. Since the publication of Benjamin Labaree's seminal work, *The Boston Tea Party* (1966), scholarship dedicated specifically to understanding the Tea Party has declined. Alfred F. Young's *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* (1999) reenergized the infamous episode by examining those lesser-known historical actors that contributed to the affair. And most recently, Benjamin Carp's thorough study, *The Boston Tea Party and the Making of America* (2010), places the Tea Party in a global context. Yet, with the exception of these notable monographs, very little scholarship exists that places this monumental event at the center of the action.^[2] Thus, while Unger's work may incur strong reactions by trained historians, his work draws attention to a topic that continues to fascinate the American people.

In order to provide proper prospective, Unger traces events for three decades prior to the American colonies' rebellion against Great Britain. Important events as the Molasses Act, the Land Bank ordeal, and the

French and Indian War all happened during this time. Ultimately, these events set the stage for the final conflict by putting the majority of Bostonians on the defensive. Any new restrictions on trade and threats to political freedom just added fuel to the building fire. The author gives attention to the American Revenue Act and Stamp Acts, which Unger suggests inspired local Bostonians Samuel Adams and John Hancock to foment resistance through both violent and non-violent methods towards the perceived illegal and oppressive taxes. Peaceful resistance, according to the author, occurred by way of the Stamp Act Congress held in New York at the behest of the Massachusetts Assembly in response to Patrick Henry's fiery speech against the legality of the tax in the *Boston Gazette* (73). At the start of the meeting, strong opinions surfaced regarding the proposed course of action against Parliament, but moderate voices outnumbered those radical suggestions that called for "public protests and boycotts" (82). John Dickinson's famous "Declarations of Rights and Grievances of the Colonists in America" served as the basis for understanding colonial resentment towards the parliamentary legislation. Polite and submissive in its tone, the signers subsequently remained uneasy about signing the document despite, as the author states, the "obsequious whimper" written at the end of the document indicating the colonists' loyalty to the crown. Back in Boston though, crown retaliation did not discourage rabble seekers from engaging in violent forms of resistance towards the Stamp Act. An angry mob in Boston carried an effigy of the appointed stamp distributor, Andrew Oliver, through the streets, shouting, "Liberty, Property and No Stamps," and then proceeded to destroy his "beautiful estate" (74-75). Several weeks later, they forced him to make a public apology detesting the Stamp Act. This same mob destroyed the home of Thomas Hutchinson, forcing this prominent merchant and government official into exile, as well (77). Unger's account of the resistance efforts undertaken by Bostonians, in some respects, reads awkwardly. He spends a great deal of chapter seven openly condemning the acrimonious climate encouraged by Sam Adams and James Otis, but then appears to criticize the peaceful efforts put forth by the Stamp Act congress when delegates refrained from signing the petition (84).

Although more than half the narrative is dedicated to these earlier events, the author uses this space wisely by introducing those influential figures that supported – but also those that rejected – the resistance

efforts and the Boston Tea Party. Beginning with the rivalry between Thomas Hutchinson and James Otis, which ignited over a political appointment, chapter one thoroughly details their falling out and subsequent differing opinions that led both men to choose their respective sides during the conflict. Hancock, Adams, and the Sons of Liberty also receive equal but sometimes subjective coverage throughout the entire book. With these biographical sketches, the author offers a timeline of events that reveal divisive issues – taxes, but above all personal jealousies – that led these infamous Bostonians to draw the proverbial line in the sand between loyalty and patriotism. Eventually, the narrative reaches the climatic event and the latter portion of chapter eleven presents a minute-by-minute account of the dumping of the tea into the Boston Harbor.

Despite the book's engaging qualities, the narrative tends to follow the same path forged by earlier works and does not necessarily shed new light on how the Boston Tea Party sparked the American Revolution. Unger's accounting of these immediate events leading to the Tea Party is certainly necessary and useful, but seems quite short and anticlimactic given the intense and protracted buildup to the book's climax. The subsequent chapters focus on year one of the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence, and the final chapter offers informative insight on the post-revolutionary lives of those involved with the Massachusetts resistance movement.

Intertwined within the overall narrative, *American Tempest* provides colorful and descriptive biographical sketches of both patriots and loyalists for their contributions, or lack thereof, to the resistance movement and the Boston Tea Party – in particular, Samuel Adams, Thomas Hutchinson, John Hancock and James Otis. On balance, his portrayals are even-handed with the exception of Samuel Adams, of whom he is quite critical. While the author does acknowledge Adam's eloquent prose and commitment to the cause, his overall depiction is less than flattering, essentially suggesting that Adams was nothing more than a self-interested, mob-inciting beggar. In chapter five, the author lists the five Massachusetts delegates nominated to go to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia by stating: "Thomas Cushing, James Bowdoin, Robert Treat Pain, and John and Sam Adams – three merchants, a lawyer, and a bankrupt brewer" (176). Unger suggests that Adams

manipulated a young, impressionable John Hancock into participating in the resistance movement by playing on Hancock's insecurity regarding the continuation of his fortune. Further, Adams needed a "milch cow," as Unger claims, to finance this movement (81). Perhaps Adams was a manipulative person desiring to promote his interest, but Unger's position remains on shaky ground since his portrayal of Adams is based on loyalist accounts. Furthermore, while Adams certainly floated through the movement on the backs of others, his commitment to the cause and independence should be viewed as self-sacrificing, not one of self-interest. Perhaps further reading on Samuel Adams by his contemporaries and current scholars might provide greater depth in understanding this complex, yet important revolutionary figure.[3] On the other hand, his treatment of John Hancock may seem overly flattering to some readers – particularly since the author suggests that Hancock emerged as a successful, benevolent merchant-banker whisked into the world of wealth by extended family and forced into the resistance movement by the bullying, self-interested Sam Adams. Finally, the author offers a fair and sometimes sympathetic treatment of the Boston loyalists, Thomas Hutchinson and Andrew Oliver.

American Tempest succeeds in offering a short overview of the events preceding the American Revolution in a clear, readable narrative that will certainly excite those interested in popular history. The work would certainly benefit though, from a more careful citation of its sources as well as from a deeper engagement with current scholarship on the Boston Tea Party, John Hancock and Samuel Adams.

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[1] *The Last Founding Father: James Monroe and A Nation's Call to Greatness* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009); *Lafayette* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2003); *Lion of Liberty: Patrick Henry and the Call to a New Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2010).

[2] Ben Labaree, *The Boston Tea Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).; Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and The Tea Party* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999); Benjamin Carp, *Defiance of the*

Patriots: The Boston Tea Party and the Making of America (New Haven: Yale University, 2010).

[3] For examples of current scholarship on Samuel Adams, please see John K. Alexander, *The Life of an American Revolutionary* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC., 2011); Mark Puls, *Samuel Adams: Father of the American Revolution* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).



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