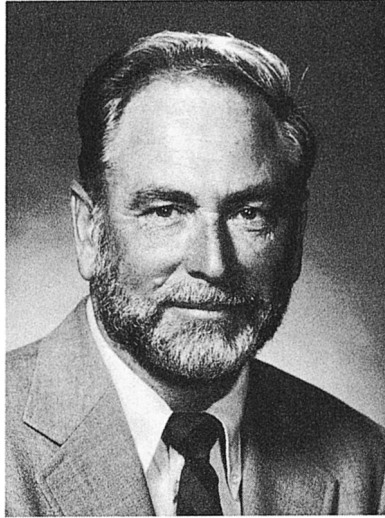


The Lamp of Experience



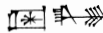
Trevor Colbourn



THE LAMP OF EXPERIENCE

Whig History and the
Intellectual Origins of the
American Revolution

Trevor Colbourn



LIBERTY FUND

Indianapolis

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First published in 1965 by the University of North Carolina Press

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Colbourn, H. Trevor.

The lamp of experience : Whig history and the intellectual origins of the
American Revolution / Trevor Colbourn.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 978-0-86597-158-5 (cloth). — ISBN 978-0-86597-159-2 (pbk.)

1. United States—History—Revolution, 1775–1783—Causes. 2. Statesmen—
United States—Books and reading—History—18th century. 3. Great Britain—
History—Study and teaching—United States—History—18th century. 4. Great
Britain—Politics and government—Historiography. 5. United States—
Intellectual life—18th century. I. Title.

E210.C58 1998

973.3'11—DC21

97-3351

LIBERTY FUND, INC.

8335 Allison Pointe Trail, Suite 300

Indianapolis, IN 46250-1684

03 15 16 17 18 C 6 5 4 3 2
15 16 17 18 19 P 6 5 4 3 2

For Douglass

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*Preface to the Liberty Fund Edition:
1943 and All That*

Much has happened in the more than thirty years that have passed since *The Lamp of Experience* was first published by the Institute of Early American History in 1965. Many who helped shape that volume have passed on—notably, Douglass Adair (to whom *The Lamp of Experience* was properly dedicated), Lyman Butterfield, Julian Boyd, Dumas Malone, Millicent Sowerby, Edwin Wolf II, and John H. Powell. It is a depressingly long list. But this new edition allows for the confirmation of earlier acknowledgments and obligations and also permits some brief reflections on the strange history of a book about history.

Born in Australia (his parents were there at the time), the author was educated in England (European diplomatic history with the late William Medlicott) and secured his graduate degrees in Williamsburg and Baltimore. In Williamsburg, at the College of William and Mary, a young assistant professor named Adair introduced a much younger exchange student named Colbourn to Thomas Jefferson and took seeming delight in asking questions only the questioner could answer. Certainly migration to Baltimore was not an immediate solution: Colbourn's arrival at The Johns Hopkins University in 1949 coincided with his discovery that the Hopkins colonialist, Charles Barker, had decided to abandon his study of the American Revolution for *Henry George* (1955), also a conservative revolutionary to be sure. But the late Charles Barker was a generous spirit who readily agreed to the creation of a very informal advisory committee for his errant graduate student, which soon included Douglass Adair, Dumas

Malone, Lyman Butterfield, and Adair's very scholarly friend, Caroline Robbins. All were generous with their time and all knew Jefferson rather well. The outcome, spurred by the incentive of reemployment at Penn State in 1953, was a doctoral dissertation on Thomas Jefferson's use of history. In turn this dissertation generated a paper given at the American Historical Association convention in 1955, which in turn led to an article in the 1958 *William and Mary Quarterly*.

What next? Lyman Butterfield thought the author's approach to Jefferson had promise but needed substantial expansion. And so the subject of Thomas Jefferson provided the material for chapter 8 and the seed for the further inquiry that became *The Lamp of Experience*. Such growth owed much to the encouragement provided by Caroline Robbins, who allowed the author a summer in her extraordinary private library. Shelf after shelf of the writings of her seventeenth- and eighteenth-century "Commonwealthmen" illustrated the relevance of England's Real Whigs for the leaders of the American Revolution. Frequent visits to the Library of Congress's Rare Book Room and a year combing the shelves of the Library Company of Philadelphia reinforced that message.

Thus far the emergence of *The Lamp of Experience* was far from unusual except for the time taken by its author in writing it. Perhaps his colleagues were too patient. Certainly there were other studies under way and other books already published that advanced the understanding of the intellectual origins of the American Revolution. Some books seem to await the appearance of other books before they take shape. This is particularly true for our understanding of the era of the Revolution, for which 1943 emerges as a seminal historiographical turning point. In the midst of World War II the United States had good reason to celebrate the bicentennial of the birth of Thomas Jefferson and laid plans for the publication of *all* the available papers of that great spokesman for democracy. Begun by Julian Boyd and Lyman Butterfield, this ambitious project has outlived both men. Butterfield, to be sure, deserted Jefferson for the Adams family and

editing on a less comprehensive scale. He did, however, live to complete his *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams* (1961) and his *Adams Family Correspondence* (1963) and to see similar projects emerge as a tribute to most of the Founding Fathers.¹

Plans were also laid for a unique catalog of the magnificent private library Jefferson sold to the Congress in 1815. In charge of this noble enterprise was a battle-axe of an Englishwoman, Millicent Sowerby, who, like her one-time colleague, Ed Wolf, was a rare-book specialist. Wolf later took charge of the Library Company of Philadelphia and made Benjamin Franklin's collection into an available and very special resource for students of eighteenth-century America. Millicent Sowerby pursued her task with deliberate speed (1952–59) but rewarded her impatient admirers with so much more than an inventory of Jefferson's greatest library: she told us when he acquired his books and, if possible, what he thought of them. This was, wrote Douglass Adair in his *William and Mary Quarterly* review, "a bio-bibliography," and "a marvelous guide to the intellectual world of Jefferson."

Caroline Robbins was the other willful Englishwoman who made very special contributions to our understanding of the intellectual world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Sometime Chair at Bryn Mawr College, she is still justly venerated for her pathfinding *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman* (1959), dedicated to her famous brother.² Both *The Lamp* and Bernard Bailyn's *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* appeared six years later, and both were enormously indebted to Robbins and her writings on the "Commonwealthmen." Even Jonathan Clark, whose interpretations of the ma-

1. For example: George Washington, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, John Marshall, Benjamin Rush, Benjamin Franklin, and James Wilson; not included is Aaron Burr or, as yet, John Dickinson. The *New York Times* provided the down payment on the *Jefferson Papers*.

2. (Lionel) Lord Robbins, author of *The Blueprint for Higher Education in Post-War Britain*.

terial do not always agree with those of Robbins, concedes in *The Language of Liberty* (1994) the “meticulous scholarship” exhibited by his compatriot. Well he might.

But 1943 offered more than a new commitment to the American past in the form of plans for the publication of the Founding Fathers’ papers and the identification of their books. It was also the year that saw several additional happenings of historical consequence: Columbia University published Adrienne Koch’s doctoral dissertation, “The Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson”; Merle Curti successfully made the case for the larger world of ideas in his *The Growth of American Democratic Thought*; and his friend Ralph Henry Gabriel signed off on the extraordinary doctoral dissertation submitted by the young Douglass Adair at Yale, “The Intellectual Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy: Republicans, the Class Struggle, and the Virtuous Farmer.” Curti’s book remains very much in print, but, strangely, the Adair manuscript long remained just that, a manuscript. Strangely, because the list of interlibrary borrowers could well be mistaken for a “Who’s Who” among early American historians. Indeed, Adair offered that as his excuse: “Everyone who should read the book has already borrowed it from Yale.” Instead of creating more reasons for celebrating 1943, such as revising his dissertation for publication, Adair devoted more and more of his considerable energies to his relationship with The College of William and Mary as cosponsor of the *William and Mary Quarterly* (from 1946 to 1955). This was an association that brought fame to both Adair and the college.

It is tempting to suggest that the Adair–*William and Mary Quarterly* alliance accounts for much of the new scholarship that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. This would be an exaggeration—Irving Brant’s first *Madison* volume appeared as early as 1941—but Adair influenced many by commissioning articles from such other talented colleagues as Peter Laslett, Adrienne Koch, and Jack Pocock and by writing quite a few himself.³ Caroline Robbins was the best-known partner in

3. See Trevor Colbourn, ed., *Fame and the Founding Fathers* (N.Y., 1974), v–vi.

his exploration of “English Classical History,” and theirs was indeed a remarkable scholarly liaison. Few studies of early American history published during these two decades lacked an acknowledgment of the assistance given by Adair. The late Page Smith remarked of Adair, “I have never known anyone who was so much a source of ideas and inspiration to others.” Smith’s outstanding biography of James Wilson (1956) confirms Adair’s contribution. So do Robbins’s book on the Commonwealthmen and Elisha P. Douglass’s book *Rebels and Democrats* (1955), a splendid study that probably appeared before its time and failed to secure its due attention. The list is long.

Another very special study of political ideas appeared as early as 1953. Clinton Rossiter’s magnificent *Seedtime of the Republic* arrived six years before Robbins’s publication and anticipated many of Robbins’s, Bailyn’s, and Colbourn’s conclusions. They all seem to agree that the leaders of the American Revolution were “conscious conservatives.” Rossiter was arguably the first to make that case. According to one reviewer, *Seedtime* was a welcome guide to pre-Revolution intellectual history but was guilty of overload—Rossiter sought to provide too much information. That strange complaint did not apply to Rossiter’s excellent treatment of Richard Bland, Jonathan Mayhew, or Benjamin Franklin. Rossiter, a Cornell political scientist and a fine historian, later gave us *1787: The Grand Convention* (1966) before taking his own life—as did Adair but for very different reasons.

Of course there is some danger in suggesting any one year (1943) as the turning point in our acquaintance with the American Revolution. As our absorption with the extraordinary quality and quantity of the new studies descended on us by the end of World War II, we ran the risk of overlooking contributions made by earlier scholars—such as Moses Coit Tyler—nearly a century ago. It was Tyler who asserted the Revolution was “pre-eminently . . . caused by ideas” and enabled Robert Middlekauff three decades later to remind his colleagues that “the intellectual history of the American Revolution has long received study.” Actually Adair was not only among the first to challenge the then prevailing view of Charles A. Beard and Frederick

Jackson Turner but was also among the first to consider the classical legacy of the Founding Fathers and their inheritance from the seventeenth-century English republicans. There were few like Tyler a century ago, like Carl Becker seventy years ago, or like Randolph G. Adams and Charles H. McIlwain, who made 1922 a rather fine year for the history of ideas.

Randolph G. Adams earned his doctorate with a dissertation that argued for the ideological origins of the Revolution. In his *Political Ideas of the American Revolution* (1922) he actually claimed the colonists explored their rights as Englishmen, an idea also considered by Charles H. McIlwain. Indeed, McIlwain attempted a constitutional justification for the Revolution. But neither study matched Becker's success, possibly because Becker gave so much more attention to ideas even if he overstated his case for John Locke. Just ten years later Becker gave us his classic *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, wherein he depicted history as a subject to substantiate the perfectible nature of man.

Other contributing new studies at this time included Benjamin Wright's *American Interpretations of Natural Law* (1931) and Charles Mullett's *Fundamental Law and the American Revolution* (1933); both were preceded by Vernon Louis Parrington's *The Colonial Mind* (1927). Parrington was a progressivist and an enthusiast for Turner's frontier thesis but had little grasp of the ideology of the colonial leadership. And yet "the philosophic mind" meant something to Parrington, and he sensitized a generation to the possibilities of intellectual history.

Perhaps Gilbert Chinard, a French scholar, was best attuned to such opportunities. He busied himself producing biographies of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams (1929 and 1933, respectively). More significant were his editions of Jefferson's *Commonplace Books* (1926 and 1927). Chinard's transcription of Jefferson's law notebooks furnished the first public glimpse of the Virginian's sustained interest in feudalism, law, and history. Twenty years later Marie Kimball, perhaps Jefferson's ablest biographer (before Dumas Malone in 1948),

was able to demonstrate the political relevance of Jefferson's note-taking—and when and where it took place. Indeed, Chinard and Kimball were among the first to suggest the significance of Jefferson's reading and the British Real Whigs, later explored by Clinton Rossiter and Caroline Robbins.

Where have such endeavors brought us? We now have books by several generations of historians who have shed new light on our Revolutionary past and who have illumined aspects of British history that relate to America's past in ways never previously appreciated. Many of the principal contributors to our once new perspective have died, retired (not usually early retirement), or found new challenges. John (Jack) Pocock, a student of the late Herbert Butterfield at Cambridge, has retired, thereby deserting Jack Greene at Johns Hopkins. Bernard Bailyn has most reluctantly retired from Harvard. Gordon Wood remains at Brown, having impressed many with *The Creation of the American Republic* (1969) and surprised many more with his second book, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1992). Edmund Morgan has yet to stop writing—or halt—new editions of *The Birth of the Republic*. Caroline Robbins is happily still with us but ailing. Pauline Maier's splendid *From Resistance to Revolution* (1972) is still available, thanks to a new (1992) edition from W. W. Norton. It was Norton that published *The Lamp of Experience* in a paperback edition (long unavailable) and *Fame and the Founding Fathers* (1974), the collection of Adair articles edited by Trevor Colbourn and enhanced by a contribution from Caroline Robbins and Robert E. Shalhope, "Douglass Adair and the Historiography of Republicanism." Shalhope also wrote "Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography," which appeared in the *William and Mary Quarterly* in 1972. Both articles are unusually enlightening; however, an Englishman, Colin Bonwick, may have provided the best update on just where these new studies have brought us. His book *The American Revolution* (1991), although brief, is remarkably encompassing and current in its scholarship.

Robert Middlekauff (now back at Berkeley), widely applauded for *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763–1789* (1982), was one of the generous reviewers of *The Lamp of Experience*. In that review he noted how Becker and Morgan to some extent “placed American thought in the long tradition of natural rights.”⁴ He noted also how Caroline Robbins “demonstrated the persistence of a seventeenth-century revolutionary tradition as expounded and amplified by the ‘Real Whigs.’” The author, Middlekauff noted, chose to extend and amplify suggestions made by Caroline Robbins; indeed, “He has done much more.”

Middlekauff went on in the review to describe what he meant by “much more.” He describes the reconstruction of colonial tastes in history (ancient, medieval, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century), which “must have been a difficult job demanding patience and energy.” He shows how Americans “used the past selectively to illustrate contentions about political principle and rights.” He does this so well that to read further “is to become convinced.” Middlekauff concluded by praising the author’s research (“so thorough”), judgment (“so balanced”), and craftsmanship (“so excellent”). This is, says Middlekauff, “a balanced and clear-headed book.”

The author is hardly likely to disagree with such sentiments but is tempted. The putative confession goes as follows: problems of causation remain difficult for historians; *The Lamp of Experience* tried to avoid the contention that a colonist adopted a particular political position because he read a particular book. But the author remains persuaded that the history read by the Revolutionary generation at the very least made it easier for them to take on an apparent revolutionary posture—no, not posture, for that does not suggest conviction. The Revolutionary leaders were men of substance—propertied,

4. Robert Middlekauff, review of *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution*, by H. Trevor Colbourn, *Indiana Magazine of History* (March 1966): 90–91.

educated. They *read*. And what they read made it easier for them to become rebels because they did not see rebels when they looked in the mirror. They saw transplanted Englishmen with the rights of expatriated men. They were determined to fight for inherited historic rights and liberties.

Trevor Colbourn
President Emeritus
University of Central Florida

Preface to the 1965 Edition

The American Revolution has never wanted for attention, but important chapters of the intellectual history of the Revolution have yet to be written. The political philosophy of the Revolutionaries is familiar; their historical justification for independence is not. The eighteenth-century American colonist was born into an environment formed by history as well as philosophy, and for many, history afforded an argument more persuasive, more tangible.

Persuasion was important. Americans were not eager to separate from their mother country. "No man was ever more warmly attached to the Hanover family," confessed George Mason of Virginia, adding that "few men had stronger prejudices in favor of that form of government . . . or a greater aversion to changing it." And John Adams agreed that "revolutions are no trifles. They ought never to be undertaken rashly." Independence was for most a last resort, the final move in defense of traditional English rights now put in jeopardy by a sovereignty-mad British administration.

This study seeks to explore some colonial concepts of the rights of Englishmen to which they laid claim; it explores the sources of such concepts and the historical perspective such sources afforded. The reading habits of the Revolutionaries disclose a remarkable devotion to the study of English history. Books—library books—are in themselves an important species of source material, frequently as revealing as personal correspondence and potentially more honest than a diary aimed deliberately at posterity. Obviously a library catalogue, taken alone, can be a deceptive document: few people have read all the books on their shelves, and ownership of an unread book means little. But in association with other evidence, such as notes, margi-

nalía, citations, recommendations, repeated purchases, books can be evaluated; and then, by reading them, one can re-create the perspective of an earlier age.

The history books read by the Revolutionary leaders did not supply their motivation for political action. The dangers of implying such causation are painfully obvious. The most that can be claimed is that the character of their reading, their particular preferences and comments on them, do inform powerfully on their political thought and final action. Carl Becker once observed that "generally speaking, men are influenced by books which clarify their own thought, which express their own motives well, or which suggest to them ideas which their minds are already predisposed to accept." Even within these limits, the historical reading of eighteenth-century American colonists illuminates much of their political conduct toward the mother country they studied so assiduously.

Americans shared with certain English contemporaries common attitudes toward history and its relevance to England's political, moral, and constitutional condition. Both the colonists' ideas of the past and their employment of those ideas contribute substantially to our understanding of the Revolutionary generation.

The obligations incurred in preparing this study are too numerous to list in detail. But I am particularly indebted to my patient wife, Beryl, John H. Powell, Douglass Adair, James Morton Smith, Russel Nye, Robert H. Ferrell, and Alexander R. Butler for editorial and organizational suggestions. In addition Caroline Robbins and E. Millicent Sowerby have been extraordinarily generous with their time, counsel, and friendship. The assistance furnished by Julian P. Boyd, Lyman H. Butterfield, and Edwin Wolf 2nd has been invaluable. Research has been assisted by generous grants from the Institute of Early American History and Culture, the Library Company of Philadelphia, and the Pennsylvania State and Indiana Universities.

Portions of chapter 8 appeared in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 15 (1958); portions of chapter 6 derive from the Boyd Lee

Spahr Lecture at Dickinson College, November 1958 (published in *Early Dickinsoniana*, Carlisle, Pa., 1961), and the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 83 (1959). I am grateful to the Adams Manuscript Trust for permission to print the history listings in John Adams's 1790 catalogue.

Bernard Bailyn's first volume of *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-1776* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965) came to hand as this study went to press; the relevance of his brilliant introductory essay and his superbly presented pamphlets will be widely appreciated.

H. T. C.

My Notion of a Whig, I mean of a real Whig (for the Nominal are worse than any Sort of Men) is, That he is one who is exactly for keeping up to the Strictness of the true old Gothick Constitution.

—Sir Robert Molesworth, Preface to François Hotman,
Franco-Gallia (London, 1711)

. . . naked Rights are thin and metaphysical Notions which few are Masters or Judges of.

—William Atwood, *The Lord Holles his Remains*
(London, 1682)

I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and that is the lamp of experience. I know of no way of judging the future but by the past.

—Patrick Henry (1775)