

**HISTORY
OF THE RISE, PROGRESS
AND TERMINATION OF THE
AMERICAN REVOLUTION**





MERCY OTIS WARREN

**HISTORY
OF THE RISE, PROGRESS
AND TERMINATION OF THE
AMERICAN REVOLUTION**

**interspersed with Biographical,
Political and Moral
Observations**

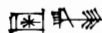
I N T W O V O L U M E S

by Mrs. Mercy Otis Warren



**EDITED AND ANNOTATED
BY LESTER H. COHEN**

VOLUME I



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Foreword

MERCY OTIS WARREN (1728–1814) was the most formidable female intellectual in eighteenth-century America. In an era dominated by giants, she honorably may be numbered among the intellectuals of the second rank: those, for example, who served in colonial or state legislatures, the Continental Congress, and the Constitution-ratifying conventions and those who publicized the revolutionary cause through their writings.

Between 1772 and 1805, Warren published at least five plays¹—three political satires and two verse tragedies—a collection of poems, a political pamphlet warning of the dangers of the proposed Constitution, and one of the two most important contemporary histories of the American Revolution. Beginning about 1770 she became a prolific letter writer, entering into a kind of literary apprenticeship in one of the century's more interesting genres—the “familiar letter”—and leaving to us a legacy of more than a thousand pages of correspondence devoted to a variety of political, cultural, economic, and social themes.

Warren's *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* was the culmination of her literary career. Through it she satisfied a powerful urge to fuse her personal and public convictions. It served as a means to unite her ethical, political, and philosophical concerns; it joined her personal religiosity with her ideological commitments; and it provided a vehicle for a female intellectual to be useful in a republican culture. For forty years Warren worked to develop the habits of mind and a style of writing that would satisfy these requirements. She thought it her principal responsibility as a

¹ She published “The Adulateur” in 1772, “The Defeat” in 1773, and “The Group” in 1775. “The Sack of Rome” and “The Ladies of Castille” appeared in her *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous* in 1790. Her authorship of “The Blockheads: or, The Affrighted Officers” (1776) and “The Motley Assembly” (1779) is a matter of some controversy, though she very likely wrote neither. There is no reason to believe that she wrote “*Sans Souci*, alias Free and Easy; or, An Evening's Peep into a Polite Circle” (1785), which she referred to as a “little indigested farrago” in a letter to her son George. See Franklin, Introduction; Fritz, pp. 226–227.

poet, playwright, and historian “to form the minds, to fix the principles[,] to correct the errors, and to beckon by the soft allurements of love, as well as the stronger voice of reason, the young members of society (peculiarly my charge), to tread the path of true glory. . . .” Several years later she observed that “The Ladies of Castille,” which would be published with her collected poems in 1790, was created by a writer “who wishes only to cultivate the sentiments of public and private virtue in whatsoever falls from her pen.”² These letters reveal that she found in writing a way to integrate private and public roles: the traditional role of mother—the young were “peculiarly my charge”—and the less conventional ambition to be a woman who gave voice to the central principles and values of the political culture.

Warren’s major literary and political aims—to form minds, fix principles, and cultivate virtue—characterized her writings from the beginning. Her satirical plays—“The Adulateur,” “The Defeat,” and “The Group”—are memorable chiefly as representative examples of early American political satire³ and as well-timed propaganda.⁴ Her

² MOW to Winslow Warren, November 20, 1780 and September 1785, MOWLB, pp. 254–257, 313–316.

³ See Walter J. Meserve, *An Emerging Entertainment: The Drama of the American People to 1828* (Bloomington, Ind., 1977); Gerald Weales, “‘The Adulateur’ and How It Grew,” *Library Chronicles*, 43 (1979), pp. 103–133; Edmund M. Hayes, ed., “Mercy Otis Warren: ‘The Defeat,’” *NEQ*, 49 (September 1976), pp. 440–458; Cheryl Z. Oreovicz, “Mercy Otis Warren and ‘Freedom’s Genius,’” *University of Mississippi Studies in English*, new series, 5 (August 1987).

⁴ Warren published the three satires between 1772 and 1775, when popular agitation against the Crown, stimulated by the Boston Massacre (March 5, 1770), had deflated into sullen resentment by the failure of the nonimportation movement, then surged toward a crescendo with Parliament’s passage of the Coercive Acts in May, 1774. In 1773 the long-suspected conspiracy between British administration and high Massachusetts officials—notably Governor Thomas Hutchinson and his brother-in-law, Lieutenant Governor Andrew Oliver—appeared to be exposed. The Hutchinsons and the Olivers had become fixtures in numerous lucrative political offices in Massachusetts, giving rise to James Otis, Jr.’s protests against plural office-holding. And letters that Hutchinson and Oliver had written to England were discovered and published in Boston. What exquisite personal satisfaction Warren must have felt in revealing the deceitful characters of “Rapatio” (Hutchinson) and “Limput” (Oliver), when it was they (it was commonly, if erroneously, believed) who had blocked James Otis, Sr.’s succession as chief justice of the Superior Court when Samuel Sewall died in 1760! See Waters, 118–125; Bernard Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974); Ellen E. Brennan, *Plural Office-Holding in Massachusetts, 1760–1780: Its Relation to the “Separation” of Departments of Government* (Chapel Hill, 1945).

poetry, long neglected, is now being taken seriously by scholars. That she was committed to poetry as an art and as a vehicle for political and didactic themes is evidenced by the dozens of poems that, until recently, remained unpublished and by her numerous, careful revisions of her work.⁵ But the best of Warren is her prose, and the best of her prose is her *History*.

In historical narrative Warren found the medium which, better than poetry or satire, satisfied her urge to be both an artist and a political and moral force. In her *History* she sustained the republican persona that she had been developing in her letters since the 1770s.⁶ And here she joined more successfully than ever the themes that lay at the center of her concern. These themes involved both her conception of history and her understanding of the proper role of the historian in a republican order.

Warren viewed history in terms of three fundamental conflicts: a political conflict between liberty and arbitrary power; an ethical conflict between virtue and avarice; and a philosophical conflict between reason and passion. The three were consistent with one another: History revealed a continual struggle between liberty, virtue, and reason against the blind pursuit of power, luxury, and passion. Beyond being mutually consistent, liberty, virtue, and reason were, for Warren as for many of her generation, necessary to sustain a republic. Liberty without virtue and reason to guide it led to licentiousness; virtue without reason and liberty to energize it led to passivity and quietism; and reason without liberty and virtue to focus it led to abstraction and cynicism. The need for all three animating principles demonstrated why republics had proven to be so fragile.

Warren sometimes characterized the three conflicts in the starkest terms, suggesting that she viewed history as a vast morality play—not unlike “The Sack of Rome,” which she had based on Joseph Addison’s “Cato” (1713)—in which simple, industrious, virtuous, liberty-loving republicans courageously resist the encroachments of

⁵ See Emily Stipes Watts, *The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945* (Austin, Tex., 1977). Watts argues that “In whatever literary form Warren wrote, she had but one theme: liberty. In her farces and history, it was national and political freedom. In her poems, it was intellectual freedom. In her anti-Federalist pamphlet, it was individual freedom” (p. 39). See also Patti Cowell, ed., *Women Poets in Pre-Revolutionary America, 1650–1775: An Anthology* (Troy, N.Y., 1981); Edmund M. Hayes, ed., “The Private Poems of Mercy Otis Warren,” *NEQ*, 54 (June 1981), pp. 199–224; Oreovicz, “Mercy Warren and ‘Freedom’s Genius.’”

⁶ See my “Mercy Otis Warren: The Politics of Language and the Aesthetics of Self,” *AQ*, 35 (Winter 1983), pp. 481–498.

kings, despots, and mannered aristocrats who care only to gratify their baser passions. While, for Warren, history may have been easy enough to categorize into strict oppositions, its *outcomes* were neither obvious nor inevitable. If history revealed any consistent tendency, it was that arbitrary power, corruption, and irrationality tended to defeat enlightened principles. That was why most of the world remained enslaved. "Ambition and avarice," she wrote, "are the leading springs" of history, whereas "virtue in the sublimest sense, has an influence only on a chosen few," and "the guidance of reason . . . operates too little on the generality of mankind."⁷ Faced with those who lusted for power and self-aggrandizement, most people in the history of the world submitted, too ignorant, cowardly, or despairing to resist.

There were, of course, exceptions to this grim scenario, the most conspicuous of which in the modern world was that of the American colonists who, according to Warren, manifested the kind of virtue and commitment to liberty only rarely witnessed in history. Warren "trembled for the events of the present commotion," she wrote in 1774; she believed that "there must be a noble struggle to recover the existing liberties of our injured country" and that no one could predict how the struggle would turn out. In retrospect, however, she was able to conclude: "Reduced nearly to a state of nature with regard to all civil or authoritative ties, it is almost incredible, that the principles of rectitude and common justice should have been so generally influential" among the people. From the Stamp Act to the introduction of a standing army in Massachusetts, from the nonimportation agreements to the Coercive Acts, and finally from these tensions to a state of war, "it must be ascribed to the virtue of the people . . . that they did not feel the effects of anarchy in the extreme."⁸ The American Revolution was a signal victory over "an ungrateful, dissipated" Britain, a nation which had fallen into "barbarism" and internal corruption and whose "republican opinions and . . . freedom . . . had been on the wane" since the first Stuart.⁹

Yet despite the triumph of liberty, virtue, and reason on *this*

⁷ *History*, I: 2 (p. 3 of this edition); MOW to John Adams, December 1786, in MOWLB, p. 197; *History*, I: 216 (p. 118 of this edition).

⁸ MOW to Hannah Winthrop, 1774, in MOWLB, p. 70; *History*, I: 227, 147 (pp. 124, 81 of this edition).

⁹ MOW to Janet Montgomery, November 25, 1777 and MOW to John Adams, August 2, 1775, in MOWLB, pp. 41–42, 153; *History*, III: 399 (p. 678 of this edition). See my "Explaining the Revolution: Ideology and Ethics in Mercy Otis Warren's Historical Theory," WMQ, third series, 37 (April 1980), pp. 200–218.

occasion, Warren was not confident and surely not complacent about the long-term prospects of the Revolution. On the contrary, when she drafted her *History* during the 1780s and '90s, she wrote in a mood of profound concern. The new nation seemed to be manifesting the same dreaded signs of decay that had characterized the decline of all earlier republics: political partisanship that would undermine revolutionary unity; financial insolvency that threatened the continued existence of government on all levels; social rivalries that could destroy stability; and, above all, moral and political degeneration that substituted private passion for enlightened self-interest and that eventually would make a mockery of a "republican" culture.

As early as 1780, she wrote to her friend John Adams, wishing for his speedy return from Amsterdam, where he was negotiating loans and a treaty. "We need the steady influence of all the old republicans," she wrote, "to keep the principles of the revolution in view." "The truth is," she added to her son Winslow, then in Europe, America has "deviated from the principles, manners, and spirit, that instigated to an opposition to Britain" and that were essential to the success of the republic. By 1786 she believed the revolutionary venture might fail entirely. Here were the new states, "emancipated from a foreign yoke," a long and bloody war finally ended, "with the liberty of forming our own governments, framing our own laws, choosing our own magistrates, and adopting manners the most favourable to freedom and happiness, yet sorry I am to say I fear we have not virtue sufficient to avail ourselves of these superior advantages." Instead, she wrote a year later to Catharine Macaulay, republicanism and independence "are nearly dwindled into theory." Republicanism was "defaced by a spirit of anarchy," while independence was "almost annihilated . . . by a kind of public gambling, instead of private industry."¹⁰

Events in Warren's personal life no doubt intensified her feelings of melancholy and heightened her sense of widespread public decline. Before her *History* went to press, three of the five Warren sons had died. Charles died of consumption at the age of twenty-four in 1786; the favored Winslow, seeking to avoid a lawsuit for moneys owed, joined General Arthur St. Clair's ill-fated expedition against the Miami Indians and died in battle in Ohio in 1791 at thirty-one; and the youngest, George, died in Maine at the age of twenty-four. Her oldest

¹⁰ MOW to John Adams, December 28, 1780; to Winslow Warren, December 18, 1782; to John Adams, December 1786; to Catharine Macaulay, August 2, 1787, in MOWLB, pp. 183; 279–281; 195; 22.

son, James Jr., a naval lieutenant, returned from a mission to France in 1779, crippled for life with a shattered right knee that he suffered when the *Alliance* encountered two English sloops. Moreover, her husband James, distinguished for his service as speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, president of the Provincial Congress, and commissary general in the Continental Army, had, incredibly, become politically suspect to the ruling Hancock forces in Massachusetts. James's sympathy for the Shaysites in 1786, his frequent laments about public corruption, and his moderate antifederalism placed him outside the growing federalist mainstream. Even John Adams, a long-time friend, found his views increasingly obnoxious. Though James was elected lieutenant governor in 1780 (to serve in a Hancock administration), he declined the post and sank into undeserved obscurity.

Although these private events added to Warren's gloom, they should not be allowed to overshadow her public vision or to depreciate her broader understanding of national affairs. In her fifties and sixties when her *History* was taking shape, Warren was seventy-seven when it was published, and her commitment to her role as a historian had long since developed into a public as well as a personal one. At the heart of that commitment was the complex of motives that she had mentioned in her letters to Winslow and implied in her letters to John Adams and Catharine Macaulay. Writing history was less a means of edification than a mode of exhortation. Narrative was a political and ethical performance, calculated to instill in a new generation a vigilance toward their liberties and to animate responsibility for their actions. History also provided an opportunity to define the terms—literally, the vocabulary—with which people could properly discuss politics and history.¹¹

In short, history was "philosophy teaching by examples," as Lord Bolingbroke had written; it "inculcates images of virtue and vice," and its proper task was to train people, especially young people, in "public and private virtue."¹² This was the eighteenth-century version of the classical "exemplary theory of history," which swept the Revolutionary generation of historians and which accorded perfectly

¹¹ See my "Explaining the Revolution" and "Mercy Otis Warren: The Politics of Language and the Aesthetics of Self."

¹² Bolingbroke quoted in Isaac Kramnick, ed., *Lord Bolingbroke: Historical Writings* (Chicago, 1972), p. xvi. Warren evidently read Bolingbroke. See MOW to Winslow Warren, December 24, 1779, in MOWLB, pp. 242–243.

with Warren's understanding of her proper role.¹³ If she frequently painted history in blacks and whites and with broad strokes, creating simple moral oppositions wherever possible, she did so in order to make utterly clear to the rising generation that the struggle never ended.¹⁴ She stated the lesson plainly near the end of the *History*. Once corruption begins among individuals, it will, left unchecked, become systemic. If that should ever happen in America, she exhorted, "let some unborn historian, in a far distant day, detail the lapse, and hold up the contrast between a simple, virtuous, and free people, and a degenerate, servile race of beings. . . ."¹⁵

But, Warren lamented, that "far distant day" already had arrived, and something had to be done to reverse the decline. While a few "old republicans" sought political or constitutional remedies for the disease ailing the body politic, Warren turned to the word, for historical narrative had the power to redeem.

* * *

Warren's ambition to be useful was no accident. For four generations before her birth on September 14, 1728, the Otises had served in town and colony offices, reaching as high as the Massachusetts House of Representatives and the Governor's Council. Her father had been Speaker of the House. Mercy Otis entered the world, the third child and first daughter of James and Mary Allyne Otis, with all the family's privileges: wealth, social prestige, and political power; she added to these intellect and energy, and she made the most of her gifts.¹⁶

When Mercy Otis married James Warren in November 1754, two of the most prominent families in provincial Massachusetts were joined. The two families had taken similar routes to fortune and

¹³ On the exemplary theory, see George H. Nadel, "Philosophy of History Before Historicism," *History and Theory*, III (1964), pp. 291–315; Lester H. Cohen, *The Revolutionary Histories: Contemporary Narratives of the American Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1980), pp. 188–192.

¹⁴ See my "Creating a Useable Future: The Revolutionary Historians and the National Past," in Jack P. Greene, ed., *The American Revolution: The Unfinished Agenda* (forthcoming).

¹⁵ *History*, III: 336–337 (pp. 645–646 of this edition).

¹⁶ For Otis family history, I have relied on Waters, Fritz, and Mary Elizabeth Regan, "Pundit and Prophet of the Old Republic: The Life and Times of Mercy Otis Warren, 1728–1814" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, 1984); for Warren family history, I have used, among others, Mrs. Washington A. Roebling, *Richard Warren of the Mayflower and Some of His Descendants* (Boston, 1901), as well as such sources as Sibley's *Harvard Graduates*.