The Artist in Politics: Allan Ramsay and the Revolution in Pennsylvania

The history of Pennsylvania politics in the late eighteenth century is particularly notable for the contributions of expatriate Britons. Among them, the names of Joseph Priestley, Thomas Paine, and William Cobbett are prominent, and deservedly so. British influence, however, was by no means confined to those who came to these shores. Some, like Richard Price, Granville Sharp, and John Wilkes, never saw Philadelphia, but the prestige of their ideas suffered little or no diminution as a result. Whether at home or abroad, some Britons proved friendly to American claims, the denial of which led to the overthrow of the old colonial system and to the establishment of new forms of government.¹

One Briton whose possible contribution to Pennsylvania's Revolutionary politics has never been considered was by profession neither politician nor reformer, but an outstanding portrait painter, Allan Ramsay. Although he never visited Pennsylvania, he may have been a silent partner in the writing of the first constitution of Pennsylvania in 1776.

Historians are unanimous in considering this document the high point of "radicalism" during the Revolutionary era. They cite the reapportionment of seats to appease the rural areas, the extension of the suffrage to include all taxpayers, and the abolition of the old executive as convincing evidence in support of their contention. The grievances which produced this constitution are certainly to be found in the tensions arising from urbanism in Philadelphia, the largest city in the colonial empire proper. Another source of discontent was the conflict between seaboard and back country which was an outstanding feature of the politics of the colony.²

¹ See Walter P. Hall, British Radicalism (New York, 1912); C. B. R. Kent, The English Radicals (London, 1899); Raymond W. Postgate, That Devil Wilkes (New York, 1929).
The forms by which a new balance of political power was institutionalized have been assigned quite different origins by contemporaries and by historians. Testy John Adams blamed Paine, Benjamin Franklin, and a seventeenth-century Leveler theorist, Marchamont Nedham, for an excessively democratic form of government. A modern historian includes the names of three Philadelphians: Timothy Matlack, the Quaker; George Bryan, Irishman; and James Cannon, the teacher. Undoubtedly, many minds contributed to the large number of striking features of this constitution, but one of them, overlooked by Adams as well as by historians, was possibly Allan Ramsay’s.

We can forgive John Adams for not having entertained a suspicion that Ramsay might have been another influence, because with few exceptions he was known almost wholly as a portrait painter. Born in Edinburgh in 1713, the son of the well-known Scots poet of the same name, Ramsay studied portraiture in Rome. After his return to Britain in 1754, he rose to such heights of popular esteem that it is said that his portraits were preferred even to those of Joshua Reynolds. After 1766 he was a painter to the court of George III and enlisted Lord Bute as his patron. Before his death in 1784, he had painted Jean Jacques Rousseau, David Hume, Edward Gibbon and Lords Mansfield and Camden. He numbered among his close friends such interesting people as Adam Smith, Dr. Johnson, and Boswell.

If Ramsay’s vocation was painting, his avocation was politics, the more iconoclastic the better. While he was in London, the furor over the Wilkes case broke, the Bill of Rights Society was founded, and Granville Sharp and Major John Cartwright revived parts of the Levelers’ program of the previous century. As a result, the modern movement for suffrage and parliamentary reform got under way. Despite his profitable ties with court and oligarchy, Ramsay sympathized greatly with the reformers. He was no Dr. Johnson denouncing Americans as a race of convicts or British reformers as mere fanatics. Instead, he set to work to write five pamphlets dealing with

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4 Allan Nevins, *The American States during and after the Revolution* (New York, 1927), 150.
American and related themes. His contribution has been relatively neglected because not one of them was published under his real name, but under pseudonyms, including “Zero,” “Marcellus,” and “Britannicus.” His most influential work was revealingly entitled: *An Historical Essay on the English Constitution: or, an Important Inquiry into the Elective Power of the People, from the first Establishment of the Saxons in this Kingdom, wherein the Right of Parliament to Tax our distant Provinces, is explained, and justified, upon such Constitutional Principles as will afford an equal Security to the Colonists as to their Brethren at Home.* It was published in 1771, under the pseudonym of “Nathaniel F. Moore.”

The purpose of this work was to call attention to the degeneration of the rights of Englishmen since the Norman Conquest, a complaint at least as old as the Levelers and once again common. In Ramsay’s opinion, the purest democracy prevailed in England after the settlement of the Anglo-Saxons, who brought with them the democratic institutions of northern, as distinct from southern, Europe. All householders who paid scot and lot (equivalent to the payment of taxes) could vote to send a representative to the “Wittenagemot,” which was elected annually. All were treated alike, whether rich or poor, and to all was extended the fullest liberty.

The age of democratic felicity, Ramsay believed, came to an end with the Conquest and a conspiracy between “William the Bastard” and the Catholic clergy. In time, the Crown further undermined Anglo-Saxon institutions, even disfranchising all but forty-shilling freeholders in the counties. By failing to restore the purity of earlier times, the Glorious Revolution did not rise to its democratic opportunities. Ramsay was equally unsparing in his treatment of the landed oligarchy. He held it responsible for widespread bribery as well as for legislation during Queen Anne’s reign which imposed property qualifications for officeholders.

A return to the institutions of the remote past could be achieved, Ramsay argued, only by annual elections, a taxpaying qualification for voting, ballot elections, repeal of property qualifications for officeholders.

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7 Sabin does not give this pseudonym. It is printed on the title page of the copy in the Library of Columbia University, but not included in the copy owned by The Library Company of Philadelphia.
officeholders, and a more equitable scheme of representation. Only by these reforms could Englishmen recover their rights from king and aristocracy, rights derived not from nature, as Locke believed, but from history itself. He emphasized the recovery of lost rights rather than the demand for new ones. Furthermore, he denied that his plan was socially or economically subversive of vested rights. "THE POOR MAN'S ANNUAL ELECTIVE RIGHTS," he wrote in a passage reminiscent of Paine, "ARE THE RICH MAN'S BEST SECURITY." 8

When in the spring of 1776 the crisis in Pennsylvania reached its climax, Ramsay's work, though not his real or his pen name, was cited by writers in the Pennsylvania press who were interested in reform. Referring to the Essay, one writer stated his belief that Pennsylvanians were returning to the "beautiful fabric, contrived first in the German woods," the "real, original" English Constitution, rather than what it had become when "mangled and adulterated by the feudal system." 9

Shortly thereafter, another correspondent, also referring to the Essay, advised Pennsylvanians to restore the ancient institutions of England by allowing taxpayers to vote. 10 The following month, "An Elector" denied vigorously that he and his fellows were really revolutionary. Actually, he said, they were merely rejecting the "mutilated" constitution of Pennsylvania, which in turn had been modeled upon the mutilated form of its English parent. Their sole object, he concluded, was to restore the "simple Anglo-Saxon establishment." 11 One writer went so far in his enthusiasm to restore what had been lost, that he argued that Pennsylvanians should give up even the use of the word "county," because it was a Norman word and to this extent "a badge of slavery." 12

This last proposal was never accepted. Nevertheless, the evidence leads to the suggestion that Ramsay may have had some effect upon radical opinion in the colony. Although Ramsay's Essay was actually cited only a few times in leading Philadelphia newspapers of 1776, the work of no other writer then living, save Paine, was mentioned

11 *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 15, 1776.
as often. If this fact has any significance, it is perhaps reasonable to infer that Allan Ramsay sketched the major outlines of a form of government which Pennsylvanians of the Paine school found congenial. Admittedly, the evidence is wholly circumstantial, but it is a fact that the Constitution of 1776 embodied virtually every constitutional innovation which Ramsay sketched in his Essay.

One major exception should be noted. Ramsay wanted to preserve the empire by reforming the government of Britain and her colonies. He believed that if the government of Britain and her empire were made to conform to the Anglo-Saxon model, and if taxation were made uniform throughout, colonials would not have any reasonable cause for resentment against the maintenance of the imperial connection.

Nonetheless, the circumstantial evidence of Ramsay's influence upon Revolutionary politics is sufficiently strong to warrant the suspicion that he may be a figure of real importance in Pennsylvania's history.

Barnard College

CHILTON WILLIAMSON

13 This generalization is based upon an examination of files of the Pennsylvania Packet, the Pennsylvania Journal, the Pennsylvania Gazette. The Pennsylvania Ledger also printed the letter citing Ramsay which appeared in the Packet on Apr. 22. See also the Virginia Gazette, May 25, 1776.