Robert Proud: A Chronicle of Scholarly Failure

In recent decades increasing attention has been focused upon the historical writing which took place in the years immediately following the American Revolution. Historians such as the Rev. William Gordon, David Ramsey, Justice William Smith, and Peter Oliver (to name only a few) have received considerable scholarly treatment. This movement generally has addressed itself to the most representative and widely read historians of the period. In the light of this predilection it is understandable that the career of Pennsylvania's first historian, Robert Proud, has received little attention. If there was an unrepresentative historian in this era it was this Philadelphia schoolmaster who claimed, with some justification, "that the wind always blew in his face." 1

Robert Proud was born on May 10, 1728, in Yorkshire, England. Little is known about his parents or the nature of his upbringing except that a tendency toward bookishness and a strong devotion to the Quaker faith were legacies of his childhood. During his later years he lamented to his brother about the numerous opportunities for a career in public life that he had shunned because of his attachment to scholarly pursuits. 2 Following the conclusion of his primary schooling he was sent by his family to a Quaker boarding school where his interest in classical studies was nurtured by the noted theologian David Hall. In 1750 he terminated his studies and set off for London. With the aid of a distinguished relative, Dr. John Fothergill, Proud was able to secure a position as a Latin tutor for several prominent Quaker families. The limited demands of his teaching position left him ample time to take advantage of the vast library resources which

1 "Extracts from the Bucks County Patriot of 1826," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography (PMHB), XXVIII (1904), 377.
were close at hand. During these years in London he also devoted a considerable amount of time to the study of medicine with an eye to serving both mankind and his personal fortune. This budding career was abruptly abandoned in 1759. Certain aspects of the medical profession had proved offensive to the large, gentle Quaker and he forswore any further attention to the works of Galen and Vesalius.

One of the perplexing questions for the few scholars who have devoted any attention to the life of Robert Proud concerns his motives for immigrating to Pennsylvania. In spite of thwarted medical ambition his position as a tutor provided him with a comfortable living and he was not devoid of prospects for future advancement. The most plausible explanation appears to be that he was frustrated by his status on the edge of fashionable society and that he was a victim of the restless spirit that talented men with untapped potential often manifest. Proud was also rumored to have been distraught over an unsuccessful love affair, but there is little evidence to document this story. In the momentous year 1759, when Quebec fell to the British forces under General James Wolfe and the outcome of the great struggle for empire was no longer in doubt, Proud began his life as a colonist in Philadelphia. Shortly after his arrival he founded a Latin grammar school for boys. In 1761, after two trying years, he closed his school and accepted a teaching position in the Friends School.

During the mid-eighteenth century, Philadelphia was recognized as the leading cultural center in colonial America. Yet the number of the city's intelligentsia was small and a man of Proud's classical erudition was welcomed into the best circles. He soon became a frequent visitor to the rich and varied library that had belonged to James Logan, where he rubbed elbows and exchanged ideas with the likes of David Rittenhouse, Joseph Galloway, and William Allen.

In 1770, after a decade of teaching, Proud made his first and last attempt to become a man of the world. He resigned his position and embarked upon a mercantile enterprise with his brother John. Perpetually unreliable and penniless, John proved to be a total incompetent. Nevertheless, Robert Proud might have sustained the partnership if the dislocations attendant with the Anglo-American
dispute and the handicap of his own inexperience had not wrecked the venture. From 1776 until the first decade of the nineteenth century he was saddled with the burden of settling the accounts of this ill-conceived endeavor.  

A lonely bachelor, "Proud was one of the last of the old school" wrote Charles W. Thomson, "I mean those who adhered to the dignified dress of our ancestors." In old-fashioned garb, and wearing a large, gray wig, he would stroll through the streets with his ivory-headed cane pointing the way. In addition to these more obvious eccentricities, his absent-mindedness proved sufficient to make him a local legend. During his first twenty years in Philadelphia he resided with no less than fourteen families. The frequency of his changes in residence reflected Proud's inability to integrate himself into the fabric of colonial society. During the early 1770's, while a boarder at the home of Anthony Benezet, he seemed to be on the threshold of making a suitable adjustment. Benezet was a former teacher at the Friends School and one of the most enlightened of the Quaker elders. His home was a refuge for Negro slaves, exiled Acadians, and Robert Proud. Under the influence of his host's liberalism Proud began to view the American cause in a more favorable light and to take an active interest in civic affairs. In 1771, he publicly criticized the city corporation for squandering one hundred dollars on a testimonial dinner for the new governor. Proud righteously asserted that the money should have been spent for public improvement. Three years later, the high-water mark of his departure from Augustan conservatism was reached when he praised the Sons of Liberty for faithfully upholding the Nonimportation Agreement. As the pace of the Revolutionary movement quickened and Benezet's influence subsided, Proud terminated his brief flirtation with an American point of view. Occasionally, in a fit of rashness, he would express his new-found hostility to the Patriots by writing satirical poetry. One

5 Despite his determination and perseverance he was unable to collect the majority of the debts owed to him. In a spirit of resignation he informed his brother, "My old debts are in the usual state, in which I have long expected they will ever remain. . . ." Robert Proud to John Proud, Jan. 10, 1790, Library Company of Philadelphia (LCP).

6 Thomson, 434.

such poem, entitled "Contrast," launched such a scathing attack upon the American cause that the editors of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* refused to publish it in 1775. These sentiments, coupled with his attempts to avoid compliance with the commercial restrictions of the Continental Association, made him suspect to the local committee of safety. Somehow he managed to avoid a direct confrontation with the Patriot committees, but, as he informed his brother, "I am almost Daily told I am in Danger, and threatened as a Person adverse to Popular Measures." With the outbreak of the Revolutionary War he abandoned all signs of anti-Americanism and entered into a monastic existence, which was to last for almost the full duration of the war. It was during this self-imposed period of seclusion that he turned his attention to writing *The History of Pennsylvania In North America*.

History was important to the Society of Friends; both the English Yearly Meeting and the Philadelphia Meeting maintained extensive manuscript collections with an eye to encouraging future historical writing. The first history of Quakerism was written by Gerhard Croese, a Dutchman. Published in 1695, the book was defective in both style and historical accuracy, notwithstanding the author’s access to Quaker archives. The next individual to attempt a history of the Quakers met with greater success. William Sewel, another Dutchman, gathered information and pondered over his history for almost twenty-five years; fortunately, the result justified the prodigious investment of time and effort. Published in London in 1722, his *History of the Rise, Increase and Progress of the Christian People Called Quakers* was an immediate success. A year later, the Philadelphia Meeting commissioned four prominent merchants headed by James Logan to handle the preparations for the publication of an American edition of Sewel's history. This work appeared in folio form from the press of Samuel Keimer, assisted by Benjamin Franklin, in 1728. Sewel's study dealt with the rise and development of English Quakerism down to the Glorious Revolution. Despite his unfamiliarity with English, his book was readable and, in the opinion of

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Robert Southey, was "an honorable exception to the generality of ecclesiastical Histories, which of all . . . books are most remarkable for falsehood." Several editions of the history were printed in both England and America to keep pace with the demand. The willingness of Pennsylvania Quakers to patronize historical works dealing with their Society was again manifested some years later when Dr. John Rutty’s *History of the Rise and Progress of the People Called Quakers . . .* (Dublin, 1751), was supported with numerous subscriptions.

Robert Proud’s interest in writing a history of Pennsylvania was apparently an outgrowth of his activities during the pre-Revolutionary period. In those years he discussed the need for such a work with members of the city’s intellectual elite but without any conception that he would some day assume the undertaking. Samuel Smith, the author of *The History of the Colony of Nova Caesaria or New Jersey*, published in 1765, recognized the need as well and had begun writing such a book. Death overtook him in 1776 while his manuscript was still unfinished. At this juncture a delegation of Quaker elders composed of James Pemberton, Anthony Benezet, and Nicholas Waln approached Proud with the suggestion that he complete Smith’s undertaking. He was assured that he would be properly rewarded for his labors.

Proud’s decision to accept the task was heavily dictated by economic considerations. Reeling under the strain occasioned by the failure of his business and without the steady income from his teaching position, the endeavor held forth alluring prospects of economic security. In the light of the munificent support that Pennsylvania Friends had extended to the works of Sewel and Rutty, he had good reason to trust that his recompense would be substantial. Proud was certainly prompted by more noble motives as well. Just as he cherished his scholarly sojourns into classical antiquity, he doubtless conceived of his historical task with similar relish. The opportunity to contrast the glories of Pennsylvania’s early years with the present

11 *PMHB*, LX (1936), 190.
12 Anthony Benezet's interest in historical writing may have been influential in arousing a similar interest in Proud.
13 "Notes on the Reception and Circulation of R. Proud’s Hist. of Penna among Friends; —An Address to such Men as it may properly concern,” LCP.
14 Powell, 108.
generation certainly provided added incentive. Moreover, the thought of becoming a pioneer historian must also have struck his fancy. In later years Proud contended that one of his major purposes was to preserve the valuable historical records of the colony “for some other more capable person thereafter, to contract and methodize. . . .”

In 1780 Proud returned from his stay with Benjamin Morgan in New Jersey, where he had devoted much of his time to historical pursuits, and resumed his duties at the Friends School. Throughout the 1780’s the declining state of his health, his renewed employment, and the burden of his debt collecting chores left him little time for historical writing. Concerning this protracted delay he hopefully confided to his brother, “but I am not entirely without Expectation, that, by the Will of Providence, some public use will yet arise from the Labour of my Privacy, not only to Posterity, but also some utility to Myself.”

The manuscript that he inherited from Smith consisted of a long chain of documents and letters woven together by a thin thread of historical narrative. In its published form, Proud’s History did not deviate from this basic format. He scarcely altered the sections devoted to provincial politics while rewriting other portions and adding several new ones. The finished product faintly reflected Proud’s Loyalist sympathies rather than Smith’s Patriot sentiments. In the introduction, Pennsylvania’s first historian espoused the utilitarian philosophy of history that was characteristic of the age. As he stated it, “by beholding the means, by which small things become great, and what formerly made the country happy, it might excite a similar conduct in posterity.”

His theory of government was Lockean in conception but without any inherent justification of revolution. Proud maintained that Pennsylvania was founded upon the principle of “rational liberty, with an equal participation of natural and civil rights and religious privileges” for all. It was largely as a result of these rights that Pennsylvania attained a degree of harmony and prosperity unmatched by the other colonies. Human nature was such

16 “Notes on the Reception and Circulation of R. Proud’s Hist. of Penna. among Friends.”
18 Ibid., 15.
that some men, regardless of the freedom and affluence the province enjoyed, sought to foment revolutionary change. Proud admitted "that a constant recurring to first principles, or, that a renovation, or melioration, to balance this decay," which plagues all societies, was often a necessity. Yet he condemned the artificial precipitation of revolution. For Proud, the American Revolution was by implication an example of man's perpetual foolhardiness.

The first of his two volumes commenced with an introduction devoted to the life of William Penn and the rise of Quakerism in England. Following this lengthy section, he began his consideration of the Pennsylvania Quakers. Although the Society of Friends was treated in a favorable light, it was consistently overshadowed by the exploits of Penn. In this instance Proud was an exponent of the great-man theory of history. The remainder of the work was characterized by a dry, lethargic style and a proclivity to skirt important historical events. Proud concentrated most of his attention upon the years from 1681-1725 and 1760-1770. He dispensed with the years from 1726-1760 in a twenty-five page chapter. A typical example of his lack of historical proportion was the one paragraph he accorded to the impact of the Glorious Revolution in America.

Proud devoted the major portion of his attention to political and religious matters, with only infrequent consideration of social and economic affairs. The best historical writing in his History appeared in the section dealing with the years 1760-1770. A more critical use of source materials was evident in his chapters devoted to topography, administration, and economic conditions. The two final chapters in this section, on Indian affairs and religion, were quite interpretive in character. He treated the Indians with an unusual degree of toleration and was outspoken in his condemnation of the white men for many of their afflictions. In particular, the massacre of the Conestoga Indians in 1763 elicited a spirited denunciation of the murderers and the society that condoned their sordid deeds. In his chapter on religion he manifested a moderate attitude toward religious diversity.

The interpretive flavor of the History was as bland as the author himself. Instead of offering any interpretation of the innumerable

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19 Ibid., 7. Nowhere did he make any direct reference to the American Revolution or its immediate causes.
documents and letters, he chose to let them speak for themselves. This practice could be condoned if the sources used were selected with a discriminating eye, but such was not the case. In a modern sense Proud's History was little more than a compilation of primary source materials. The factual errors in his work were numerous, yet it should be noted that he was perhaps more accurate than many of his contemporaries. Another malady which marred the histories of the period was plagiarism. The Rev. William Gordon, for example, was a master plagiarist, but Proud cannot be charged with such a practice.

Modern historians have only recently begun to appreciate the innumerable pitfalls between the writing and successful publication of a historical work in the early national era. Since the financial success of a book depended solely upon its public reception, most writers spent a considerable amount of time and effort in making it pleasing to the public. The procurement of a reliable printer and the establishment of a feasible marketing plan were also major problems. Yet the publication difficulties which confronted Proud were substantially different than those his fellow historians encountered. In the first place, no other American historian in the post-Revolutionary era compiled a history that was intended for so small an audience. A more appropriate title for his History would have included the word Quaker. His painstaking avoidance of the events leading up to the Revolution, as well as the War itself, made his work out of date fifteen years before it was published. William Proud sympathized with his brother's decision to omit any consideration of the Revolution, but he cautioned, "I am apprehensive this may circumscribe its sale as recent matters are the most generally acceptable. . . ."

Proud's singularity was not entirely disadvantageous. A Patriot historian writing on the provincial level, such as David Ramsey of South Carolina, faced numerous problems from which Proud's insularity shielded him. By virtue of the Patriotic sentiments expressed

20 In certain portions of his History quotations ranging in length from ten to thirty pages were quite common.
21 For example, Proud erroneously assumed that a majority of the first settlers in Maryland were Roman Catholics.
23 William Proud to Robert Proud, July 7, 1800, LCP.
in Ramsey's *History* the English market was virtually closed, while the histories of the Revolution on a national level were serious competitors. On the other hand, Loyalist historians found it was practically impossible to have their works published in the United States, and publication in England was not always the answer. Samuel Peters' *General History of Connecticut* so aroused the ire of Americans that it was publicly burned upon its arrival from London and subsequently banned in Connecticut.

From 1783 until 1790 Proud continued in his post at the Friends School, while maintaining the same semi-reclusive tendencies that had characterized his life during the Revolution. Aside from an occasional excursion to visit one of his friends in the Philadelphia area, his only other form of diversion was the regular correspondence he maintained with his brothers in England. The interest that John and William took in his activities and the sympathy they displayed for his misfortunes doubtless provided a great deal of comfort. The letters he wrote to his beloved brothers helped to dispel his loneliness and provided an outlet for his petty vanities.

In 1790, at the age of sixty-two, he submitted his resignation to the Board of Overseers at the Friends School, claiming ill-health and certain unwarranted criticism as the reasons for this action. He did not mention his intention to prepare his book for publication, although this appeared to have been one of his predominant motives. For the next several years he engrossed himself in this task. In 1793 he informed his brothers that he was considering the idea of publishing his work both in England and the United States. He had no intention, however, of inserting a Patriotic view of the Revolution to enhance its popularity.

His hope for an English edition was discouraged by his brother's investigation. John informed him that it would be more advantageous to have the work published solely in America. Ultimately, Proud made arrangements for publication with Zachariah Poulson, Jr., a Philadelphia printer. The original agreement provided for the print-

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24 The voluminous correspondence of the Proud brothers in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the Library Company of Philadelphia contains many perceptive observations concerning developments in Europe and America from 1770-1811. All three brothers displayed a conservative outlook which colored their treatment of most political and economic events.

25 Robert Proud to William Proud, Nov. 28, 1793, LCP.
of 2,000 copies in sheet form with Proud making an advance payment of $915. The number of subscribers proved to be very small, although such notables as Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and John Dickinson were among them. By the terms of the agreement the primary responsibility for disposing of the work fell on the author. This provision was ostensibly the result of Proud's financial situation and Poulson's reluctance to involve himself in such a risky venture. The sales of the History, Volume I appeared in 1797 and Volume II in 1798, priced at four or five dollars for the set, moved slowly. In addition to offering the volumes in Philadelphia, Proud consigned them to friends and booksellers in Baltimore, New York, Williamsburg, and Harrisburg. A shipment of several hundred copies was also sent to England where his brothers sought to dispose of them.

The massive size of the work (more than 1,000 pages), its plodding style, and its lack of relevancy all combined to restrain most prospective customers. William informed his brother that the unsaleability of the book in England was largely because "many Friends dislike the Plate of Pen's Head supposing it an unfair likeness also as was conspicuous conciseness in the Historical parts. . . ." For Proud, the reception that his literary efforts received was a bitter disappointment. In a long petition, addressed to the Yearly Meeting, he expressed his disillusionment. He accused the Quakers of perfidious conduct in their failure to support his History, which had been written with their encouragement and for their ultimate benefit. Admittedly it was defective in certain respects, but he contended that "this Work would not have been done, or accomplished, at all, or at least, still more defectively, and more confined to Partiality, should it continue Dependent on them as a Society. . . ." He maintained that it was the best of its kind in existence and should at least be valued for its educational possibilities. As a remedy for this "disgraceful" situation, he proposed that the Monthly Meeting assume the responsibility for disposing of the remaining copies, with a minimum guarantee of selling twelve copies each month. Proud argued that this would allow him to pay off his debts and that distribu-

26 The total amount received from subscribers was a meager $445. Zachariah Poulson's account sheet of The History of Pennsylvania in North America, HSP.
27 William Proud to Robert Proud, Sept. 4, 1801, LCP.
28 "Notes on the Reception and Circulation of R. Proud's Hist. of Penna among Friends."
tion of the work would be of substantial value to the Society. In conclusion, he appealed to Friends to honor their commitments, if for no other reason than to honor the memory of the founders of Pennsylvania. His impassioned address was politely ignored.

For another half-dozen years Proud continued to solicit purchasers, living in the meantime on loans from his brother William. In 1807 he concluded an agreement with John & Arthur Arch, London booksellers. They agreed to assume complete responsibility for disposing of the remaining copies with Proud receiving one half of the proceeds.

Engaged in his usual scholarly pursuits, and turning out poetry when the spirit moved him, Proud lingered for another six years until his death at the age of eighty-five in 1813. Few men have endured such a long life of continual reversals and disappointment. Poverty, neglect, and ridicule were the rewards for a potentially brilliant scholar who never was able to choose the winning side. His legacy was in the vast literature of discontent that he left: “The dissenting spirit, even one rooted in nothing more profound than weakness of character, always applies the check-rein to historians.”

The Loyalist accounts of the Revolution were almost entirely confined to historians of individual provinces. Prominent former colonial officials such as George Chalmers, Thomas Hutchinson, and Justice William Smith were not the only embittered Tories to indulge in this type of historical writing. Two clergymen, Alexander Hewat of South Carolina and Samuel Peters of Connecticut, also produced histories of their respective provinces. Proud’s claim to membership in this writers’ guild is certainly tenuous. Yet is is because of his personal beliefs rather than the interpretive character of his book that his inclusion may be accorded. In comparison with the historical works written by his five contemporaries, *The History of Pennsylvania in North America* was inferior in style, commentary, and coverage. A clear line of demarcation, however, can be drawn between the histories of Chalmers, Hutchinson, and Smith, and those of Hewat, Peters, and Proud. The former group displayed a more secular conception of history, plus a scholarly touch that enabled them to emerge as the most proficient historical craftsmen of the epoch.

29 Powell, 112.
neither Hewat nor Peters was guilty of the unimaginative scholarship that Pennsylvania's historian displayed.

Alexander Hewat's *History of South Carolina*, which was published in 1779, was originally compiled to acquaint England with the commercial advantages to be found in the South. Primary emphasis was placed on economic and political affairs, but his work also furnished an excellent picture of life in colonial South Carolina. The increasing dissatisfaction of the second and third generation colonials with British controls, and the growing spirit of self-sufficiency were considered by the Presbyterian Hewat to have been the major causes of the Revolution. Just as Proud apologized for the defective state of his work, Hewat also warned prospective readers, but his book turned out to be a success. His scholarly labor "produced a volume of would-be history that was used and re-used for a century and a half...."31

Samuel Peters' *General History of Connecticut* was the product of an angry man who had been rudely treated by the Patriots and was determined to gain revenge. Yet all the fervent Loyalism that this Anglican minister could muster did not extinguish his deep sense of attachment to Connecticut. In his preface he proposed to end the dominance of New England's historical writing by Massachusetts historians and to recount the true state of affairs. His analysis of the causes of the American Revolution displayed considerableobjectivity. In his estimation, the Revolution was the result of British errors. Republicanism would not have arisen in the colonies had it not been for British neglect.32 Over-all, his history provided a more balanced view of Connecticut than the Puritan historians had heretofore turned out, but, unfortunately for Peters, the inhabitants were not favorably disposed toward his account.

Some writers have attempted to place the blame upon Robert Proud for the poor quality of Pennsylvania historical writing in the nineteenth century, but the evidence hardly justifies such an accusation.33 Although his work remained the only history of Pennsylvania until the publication in 1829 of Thomas F. Gordon's *History of Pennsylvania From Its Discovery to 1776*, this state of affairs was not the result of its public acceptance. If anything, the unpopularity of

32 David Van Tassel, *Recording America's Past* (Chicago, 1960), 49.
33 John H. Powell was the apparent originator of this interpretation.
his work should have served as a warning to future historians to be more scholarly in their endeavors.

As a historian Proud was hindered by his isolation from public affairs and his antiquarianism. Plagued by ill-health and poverty, he found it more expedient to follow the pattern laid down by Samuel Smith's manuscript than to strike out on his own. Today, his work is rarely consulted, except as a source for certain otherwise unobtainable documents. Thomas Jefferson's incisive comment on the Virginia historian William Stith offers an equally fitting summary of Robert Proud: "He was a man of classical learning, and very exact, but of no taste in style. He is inelegant, therefore, and his details often too minute to be tolerable, even to a native of the country whose history he writes."34 Perhaps the supreme irony of Proud's life was that the erudition of such a devoted scholar should be absent from his sole published work.35

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34 Wish, 28.
35 Unlike the works of his contemporaries, Hewat and Peters, Proud's History has not been honored with the publication of a second edition. This factor, coupled with the limited number of copies published, has made The History of Pennsylvania in North America a relatively rare book. Copies of Proud's History are currently priced between fifty and one hundred dollars.