

Still Irreplaceable after Thirty Years

GARY NASH'S *THE URBAN CRUCIBLE* is still almost as impressive as it was when first published in 1979. Nash's range is awesome, the depth of his research remains amazing, his principal arguments are still compelling, and his prose is graceful: New York artisans, he declares, "were tired of hearing the advice of aristocrats and their allies among the clergy that in hard times the proper remedy for a bare cupboard was prayer" (144). "Never in Pennsylvania history had the few needed the many so much" (286). Or, to give one more example, the Pennsylvania assembly "decided to send to England the only man they knew who could persuade a sphinx, Benjamin Franklin" (282).

I last read the unabridged version just over twenty years ago and had forgotten how lengthy that volume is—nearly two hundred thousand words by my calculation, not including the 111 pages of notes and the 32-page appendix. Hardly anybody still reads what had been the standard earlier books on Nash's topic, Carl Bridenbaugh's *Cities in the Wilderness* and *Cities in Revolt*.¹ As soon as *The Urban Crucible* appeared, I stopped recommending Bridenbaugh's volumes to my graduate students. I also assigned Nash to my undergraduates through the mid-1980s. At first the response was quite positive, but after Ronald Reagan's overwhelming victory in the 1984 election, Princetonians turned against the book and twice ranked it near or at the bottom of the list of works that I had put on my syllabus.

In my thirty-six years at Princeton, I disliked only one cohort of students—most of the undergraduates I taught between 1984 and 1987. Too many of them believed that with a Princeton degree they could sally forth and conquer the world, and they found Nash exasperating. As one of them complained in a course evaluation (I paraphrase from memory), how many times do we have to endure Nash's contempt for merchants or lawyers who rumbled through the streets of Boston, New York, or

¹ Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625–1742* (1938; repr., New York, 1971); Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743–1776* (1955; repr., New York, 1971).

Philadelphia in a coach and six? For these students, merely having been admitted to Princeton was, they assumed, their ticket to unlimited affluence. While teaching the U.S. survey in those years, I had great difficulty getting underclassmen to do the reading and sometimes dismissed my precept because, evidently, nobody had.

Then the stock market crashed in the fall of 1987, and the undergraduates sobered up. Although I have gotten along well with my students ever since, by then I had ceased assigning *The Urban Crucible* in my Revolution course and replaced it with Nash's essay in Alfred Young's *The American Revolution*, a piece that introduced readers to many of the themes in his forthcoming book.² But my graduate students continued to read *The Urban Crucible*, always with appreciation.

What did *The Urban Crucible* teach us? In my judgment, it was the most impressive contribution that the emerging "Neo-Progressive School" made to our understanding of the coming of the American Revolution. With great subtlety, Nash addressed the issue of class. In Boston, he showed, those who toiled for their livelihood engaged in more street violence than their counterparts in New York or Philadelphia, but they created no formal organizations of mechanics or artisans, and seldom did anyone claiming to be an artisan issue broadsides or public statements in any of the city's numerous newspapers. Laboring Bostonians, he affirmed, were "profoundly conservative in a cultural sense" (134). Longer than their fellows in New York and Philadelphia, they clung to the Puritan affirmation of the common good, a conviction that incipient class tensions were beginning to undermine in other ports. Yet, as Nash demonstrated more fully than anyone else ever had, Boston's economy had been experiencing serious difficulties since the early eighteenth century and was in deep trouble by the 1740s. The most conspicuous cause of the city's decline—its prerevolutionary population peaked in the early 1740s and then began to fall—was the disproportionate burden it had to bear in the Anglo-French wars from 1689 to 1763. Unlike others who had been studying population trends in colonial New England, Nash recognized that war became a major contributor to the pattern, creating perhaps a thousand Boston widows by midcentury, many of whom were impoverished. The wars sharply depleted the number of taxpaying citi-

² Gary B. Nash, "Social Change and the Growth of Prerevolutionary Urban Radicalism," in *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred F. Young (DeKalb, IL, 1976), 3–36.

zens and created a huge problem of poverty that the city could not cope with successfully. “Never since John Winthrop had landed in Boston in 1630 at the head of a dedicated band of Puritan immigrants had the expectations of life in America seemed so sickeningly unrealizable,” he insisted, “as in Boston in 1753” (184). By 1763, he declared, Boston had become the most heavily taxed community in the entire British Empire.

After this trenchant analysis, the only thing that surprised me in his account was that he never drew the most obvious conclusion. Why, we may ask, did Boston set the pace in violent response to British policies in each of the three imperial crises after 1763? Townsmen were enraged by condescending suggestions from Britain that no one in the colonies had made significant contributions to George II’s imperial victories.

Nash’s most interesting discovery about New York involves suffrage. A higher percentage of free residents could vote there than in Boston or Philadelphia. For Philadelphia, he developed a major paradox. Prior to 1765, the city’s mechanics had been less political than their counterparts in New York and Boston. During the Stamp Act crisis, the artisans were almost evenly divided, which spared the city from serious rioting. But by 1775, mechanics had settled their internal differences, created their own institutions, and had become a potent force in overthrowing the proprietary governor, the Quaker assembly, and—finally—George III. And the rhetoric of class resentment had become quite bitter. Artisans, complained one spokesman, were to the elite only “two-legged pack horses . . . created solely to contribute to the ease and affluence of a few importers” and “a kind of beast of burden, who . . . may be seen in a state but should not be heard” (365).

In rereading *The Urban Crucible* for the first time in more than twenty years, a new thought occurred to me. I am struck by how Palmerian the book is, even though I knew that Gary had studied with R. R. Palmer while at Princeton, where he earned both his bachelor’s degree and his doctorate. Between 1959 and 1964, Palmer published his two-volume *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*. He argued—quite convincingly, in my opinion—that the Revolution, especially in France, was a clash of two *rising* forces: the aristocratic reaction that saw nobles attempt to amass ever more power and privileges, and the growing egalitarianism of people in the middling and lower segments of society. Nash’s three cities were quite similar. Many of those at the top of society prospered in wartime—

through war contracts in Boston, through privateering in New York, and through growing commercial opportunities in Philadelphia. They invested their new wealth in mansions that seemed to get ever more elegant, found ways to entertain themselves in more exclusive settings, such as Philadelphia's City Tavern, and enjoyed displaying their affluence through coaches and liveried servants. As Nash pointed out, the grandest public buildings that they erected after 1763 were either prisons or institutions to house the rapidly growing population of the urban poor. In response, the language of resistance among the poor and modestly prosperous mechanics became angrier, more egalitarian, and, in New York and Philadelphia, more class conscious.

What made North America's situation different from that of France was Britain's intervention in the economy and politics of the colonies. The Stamp Act infuriated nearly all artisans and mariners, most lawyers, and most merchants, especially those who lacked close ties with the British government. Other than Martin Howard Jr. in Newport, Rhode Island, hardly anyone was willing to defend the measure in public. Of the principal colonial pamphleteers who wrote against the Stamp Act, James Otis Jr. in Massachusetts never did repudiate the crown (by the early 1770s even his friends thought he was probably mad); Pennsylvania's John Dickinson supported the colonial cause, often eloquently, but would not sign the Declaration of Independence; and Daniel Dulany refused to take an oath repudiating George III and supporting Maryland's war effort. Resistance to the Stamp Act was, in short, a poor predictor of what someone's position would be by 1776.

By contrast, the Townshend crisis came close to establishing how merchants would behave during the crisis of 1773–76. Merchants who made their living through direct trade with Britain, especially if they belonged to the Anglican Church, resisted nonimportation after 1767 and went disproportionately loyalist by 1776. By the early 1760s, merchants in the West Indian trade had thirty years of experience smuggling French molasses in defiance of the Molasses Act of 1733, had nurtured strong resentments against the Royal Navy, were much less likely to be Anglicans, and went disproportionately patriot. Nash could have been somewhat more explicit about this pattern, but clearly he understands it. Wealthy merchants, in short, faced the painful choice of supporting the Sons of Liberty at the price of alienating the British government or siding with Britain at the price of alienating most of their neighbors. Once

the fighting started in 1775, this option often meant deciding whether they preferred to be plundered ashore or on the high seas.

Nash's accomplishments have made *The Urban Crucible* indispensable to our understanding of why the colonists repudiated Great Britain only thirteen years after Britain's great victory over France. Does the book have any weaknesses? Not many, but let me cite one missed opportunity. Nash noted that the volume of shipping clearing the three northern ports did not drop significantly during the first two crises (366). But if we examine trade patterns, New York's imports from Britain fell almost 85 percent by 1769, a far greater drop than occurred anywhere else and made possible because the colony lacked alternative ports and because the Sons of Liberty could impose their will within New York City. This decline explains the greater eagerness of New York merchants than their Boston counterparts to abandon nonimportation as soon as possible after Parliament repealed all of the Townshend duties except that on tea in March 1770.

Are there any errors in *The Urban Crucible*? Very few for a narrative of two hundred thousand words. Nash reported that in 1721 James Franklin's *New England Courant* became Boston's second newspaper (456–57n41). The *Boston Gazette* had become the second paper in late 1719. He claimed that the lieutenant governor of Massachusetts was “promptly shot” in 1713 when he tried to stop rioters from preventing Andrew Belcher from exporting grain during a food shortage. Samuel Sewall's diary, almost the only source for the incident, merely claims that the man was “wounded” (77). The use of firearms almost never occurred in public protests, no matter how angry the crowd. The Treaty of Utrecht was signed in 1713, not 1714 (62). The Massachusetts legislature did not “publish its debates” after 1715, only its journals, which contained no debates (140). Anglo-French hostilities did not resume in 1748 (234). That happened in 1754, as Nash made clear elsewhere. Benjamin Franklin was not in England in 1753 (328); he went there in 1757, as Nash also declared on another page. John Adams was not “caught between Whig and Evangelical modes of thinking” (349). He was never an evangelical and became a lawyer, in large part, because he doubted the divinity of Jesus.

These are minor slips and in no way undermine any of Nash's central arguments. Even after thirty years, the book remains a triumph. But, in closing, I do wonder whether Nash accepts Benjamin Carp's judgment

that, beginning with the Revolutionary War, during which all three cities suffered occupation by the British army, these cities lost much of their political influence and never regained all of it after the peace. If so, the twelve years from 1763 to 1775, for all of their dislocations and upheavals, marked the summit of the political power of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia in all of American history, an irony still worth pondering.

Princeton University

JOHN M. MURRIN