

3-26-2011

The “French Traveller,” Patrick Henry, and the Contagion of Liberty

Joshua F. Beatty
SUNY Plattsburgh, jbeat003@plattsburgh.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.plattsburgh.edu/lis>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Beatty, Joshua F. “The ‘French Traveller,’ Patrick Henry, and the Contagion of Liberty.” Paper presented at the Virginia Forum, Lexington, Va., March 26, 2011.

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ SUNY Plattsburgh. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library and Information Technology Services by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ SUNY Plattsburgh.

The “French Traveller,” Patrick Henry, and the Contagion of Liberty

Joshua F. Beatty (SUNY Plattsburgh)

This paper was presented at the Virginia Forum in Lexington, VA, on 26 March 2011. Please do not cite without permission; first contact the author at jfbeatty@gmail.com

Abstract: In 1921 the *American Historical Review* published the journal of a “French traveller” describing his trip to Britain's North American colonies in 1765. From the West Indies, the traveler sailed north to the North Carolina coast and journeyed overland to New York. Over those nine months he broke bread and drank wine with a cross-section of the colonies’ wealthiest and most powerful men. The journal is unusual in two ways. First, it was written in English and yet found in a French naval archive. With its detailed descriptions of colonial port cities and their defenses, the journal was apparently written by a spy for Britain's greatest rival. Second, it contains the only extant eyewitness account of the debates in Virginia's House of Burgesses over the Stamp Act. These debates and the set of resolves that emerged served as a spark for resistance to the Stamp Act throughout Britain's North American colonies — and yet we know little about the drama played out in the Capitol that day. The traveler never revealed his identity within the pages of the journal. Neither the editor of the *AHR* copy nor later historians could connect the journal to a known historical figure. This paper, then, will reveal the identity of the “French Traveller,” reevaluate what the journal tells us in light of the author's identity, and examine the implications on our understanding of how the Virginia House of Burgesses and their resolves ignited colonial resistance to the Stamp Act.

In 1921 the *American Historical Review* published a recently-discovered document, a traveler’s journal chronicling a 1765 trip through the American colonies. Normally such a document wouldn’t have been considered important enough to warrant sixty pages over two issues in the *AHR*. But this particular journal had two things going for it. First, it contained the only eyewitness description of the debate over the Virginia Resolves in the House of Burgesses. The Burgesses’ argument over how to respond to the Stamp Act featured Patrick Henry’s star turn and the resulting resolves became a rallying point for the colonists from New Hampshire to Georgia.

Second, the journal was found in a French naval archive and contained evaluations of the defenses of each of the major ports between North Carolina and New York. Combined with the writer's musings on the colonists' questionable loyalty to Britain, the implication was clear: the traveller had been a spy in the service of France.

Unfortunately, the journal had no name attached to it — there was no way to determine who the author was. It was assumed by the editor for the *AHR* transcription that the writer was a Frenchman. And there the matter sat for eighty years or so, until Rhys Isaac pointed out that that did not make a lot of sense, for the simple reason that the journal was in English. Why would a Frenchman be writing this long journal in a second language, especially if it were to be sent back to France? Rhys believed the author was an Irish Catholic, citing certain peculiarities of language that matched up with an Irish accent. But he could not find a matching name either.

Now, the traveller mentions many, many members of the colonial gentry in his journal. Surely it would be possible to find their papers in various archives and search through them for correspondences with the journal? If the "French traveller" listed the people he met at a dinner party, and one of those people mentioned meeting someone at the same party not mentioned by the traveller, and if this coincidence was repeated — surely that would be strong circumstantial evidence for the traveller's identity?

At the same time Rhys was thinking about this issue I was doing research on the Stamp Act crisis and visiting archives in the same places the traveler had written about. Del Moore of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation had, at Rhys's request, begun compiling a list of the people mentioned in the journal and where their papers might be archived. I had begun the same research and when I traveled to New York and Philadelphia to do my research I brought both lists with me.

I want to talk about the journal a little more. The traveller began writing in late 1764 in the Caribbean. Embarking from Havana he sailed northwards. Accompanied by one servant, he disembarked at Beaumont, North Carolina. He traveled northward to New York, stopping for extended periods in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. On the way, he described the economies of each town he visited — the main industries of each area, with an eye towards their export trade. He dined with some of the wealthiest merchants of those colonies as well as with governors and lieutenant governors. He gambled with William Byrd III, to whom he took an instant dislike. He attended a ball at the Governor's Palace in Virginia — sparsely attended due to tensions over the Stamp Act. He made fast friends with the Maryland merchant James Christie and explored much of Virginia with him. In Maryland, he spent two days with the Jesuit Father George Hunter before introducing himself to a circle of Christie's friends, including Joseph and Samuel Galloway and Charles Carroll of Annapolis (the elder Charles Carroll). The time he spent in Maryland — with fellow Catholics and Catholic sympathizers — was by far the best part of his trip, a seemingly endless round of visiting, dinner parties, and tavern debates with men of similar social status, mercantile expertise, and political/religious sympathies. In particular, he recalled the Galloways' hospitality as fine: "Nothing can be equal to the Civilities I received from these Gentlemen," he wrote.

Time in Philadelphia and New York followed, in which he again mixed with merchants and high colonial officials. John Watts of New York and Robert Morris of Philadelphia are of particular note here. The diary's last entry is on September 7, 1765, merely a note of one more dining engagement.

So, now, two hundred and forty years later here I am in New York trying to suss out the French Traveller's identity from these clues. The traveler had been treated by a New York doctor,

whose record book was held at the New York Historical Society. But the pages on which our traveler would have been listed had been destroyed. The papers of John Watts had, perhaps, a tantalizing clue but no more than that.

On my last day in New York I stopped at the New York Public Library. There was one more set of papers I wanted to examine, those of Maryland's Samuel Galloway. I was given the box; I opened the folder for 1765 and 1766. And there, on the top of a sheet of paper slightly larger than the others, halfway into the folder, was a name I recognized — a name John Watts had mentioned.

I remember being calm. I read through the documents one by one, in order. I came to that document. It was a letter, written in June 1766, written in Williamsburg and addressed to Samuel Galloway. The writer thanked Galloway for all the hospitality he'd shown him the previous year. He was not stinting in his praise — he acknowledged “the many civilities & favours I received from you during my stay in your Province,” sentiments echoing those of the French Traveller. And, finally, he was sending the letter to Galloway by way of their “mutual friend” James Christie — a man with whom the French Traveller had become close companions. At this point I knew we had our man.

The name of the writer was not French — Rhys's intuition there had been correct. Yet it was not Irish, either. Instead, the name was Scottish: Charles Murray.

Charles Murray. So, who was Charles Murray? Why was he traveling through the colonies? And why was a Scotsman spying for France?

Charles Murray was a wine merchant, representing a firm based in London and Madeira. Murray was born in 1733 or 1734, a younger son in an old Borders family. His father, John Murray of Philiphaugh, was a heritable member of Parliament as Sheriff of County Selkirk, while his mother Eleanor was the daughter of Lord Basil Hamilton.

By the time we meet Charles in 1765, he was in his early thirties and employed by Scott, Pringle, Cheap & Co. of London and Madeira, a firm whose named partners were also scions of old Borders families. It was while he was a wine merchant that he traveled through the colonies. This journey through Britain's North American possessions, making contacts and cementing networks, was a standard part of the career of young Madeira merchants.

In 1771 Charles Murray was named British consul to Madeira. The next year he married Elizabeth Scott, daughter of the recently-deceased head of his firm. And with that joyful union came the 15,000 pounds Elizabeth had recently inherited. The Murrays split their time between Madeira and London. In Madeira Charles Murray built a large mansion house, Quinta do Monte, known for its great terraced gardens. In London the couple lived in a well-appointed house on Bedford Row. Later in his career Murray, though retaining the post of consul, gave over many of his duties to a vice-consul and retired from Madeira to Lisbon. Murray remained consul until 1800 and died in Lisbon eight years later.

There are very few documents by or about Charles Murray in the archives, but from the 1765 journal and what other writings there are we can gain some hints as to his personality, his likes and dislikes, and perhaps begin to understand the motives behind his career as a spy for France.

Murray seems to have been concerned with civility and decorum to an extent unusual for even the eighteenth century. He was protective of — even defensive about — his place in society and the material success he'd earned. In one incident soon after his marriage to Elizabeth Scott, Murray discovered that Elizabeth's free-spirited younger sister intended to secretly marry an itinerant musician within the hour. He dashed out of the house and ran through the streets of London, arriving in time to stop the wedding — and, one presumes, protecting his family's honor as well as the 15,000 pounds that was the second daughter's half of the inheritance.

Murray was a Catholic, and seemingly a devout one, going out of his way while in America to meet with Jesuit priests and other Catholics, and tarrying in Maryland with those of the same creed. He held an affection for the Scotch-Irish settlers of the backcountry counties, while simultaneously disapproving of “presbyterians” — a term that for Murray included both Scotch-Irish self-identifying Presbyterians as well as the Congregationalists of New England. Backsliders from Catholicism came in for particular vitriol, and especially the Maryland proprietors.

This identification as Catholic and disdain for ex-Catholics seems to be at the heart of Murray’s self-identity and of his sympathies with France rather than Britain. It seems, perhaps, the fervor of a convert — which would make sense given that his father and older brother, members of Parliament both, were not Catholic.

Scorning Britain and yet journeying through its colonies during an imperial crisis, Murray could not help but listen to complaints about the Stamp Act and its implications. He heard Virginian tavern-goers threatening to rebel, even to ally with France, if the Stamp Act should be enforced. And he saw even moderate Marylanders admit that, if they had to choose sides, they would take up arms against Britain.

Murray envisioned what a revolution might entail. He saw that a foreign power, like France, could not hold the colonies even if they came to the aid of a revolution. But there was a restive population of Irish, German, and Dutch indentured servants throughout the colonies, ethnically distinct from the English majority, who would rise to the banner that offered them freedom. And in a different document, Murray proposed to incite a slave revolt in the Southern colonies with the aid of Maryland’s Catholics and Jacobites. And he believed even the English colonists would follow a strong leader — an “Enterprising man” Murray called him — into independence.

My guess is that Murray, the Catholic convert whose quarrel with England seems a matter of religion, was thinking of a particular person — Charles Edward Stuart.

Now, to say that Murray was a Jacobite is not to imply that there was any particular grand pro-Stuart conspiracy in 1765, merely to say that he was a young man whose imagination may have run away with him. Further, even Charles Stuart had apparently contented himself with a pampered life in exile at this point.

So Charles Murray had an interest in fomenting colonial unrest. He thought that many of the colonists could be turned towards France — in particular his Maryland Catholic friends, but others as well, like the Virginia tavern-goers who said “let the worst Come to the worst we’ll Call the french to our succour.”.

As he traveled through the colonies, he was a man with a tale to tell. And tell it he must have, at taverns and dinner parties. He’d seen that moment when the Virginia House of Burgesses declared opposition to the Stamp Act. He’d heard Patrick Henry walk up to the line of treasonous speech.

And Henry’s behavior echoed stories that the colonists and Murray already knew. That winter, Isaac Barré— a hero of the Seven Years’ War — had spoken against the Stamp Act in Parliament. His impassioned speech was described in newspaper accounts, and one account in particular — published and republished across the colonies — evoked the drama of the moment. Barré spoke “with eyes darting fire, and an outstretched arm, ... with a voice somewhat elevated, and with a sternness in his countenance, which express'd, in a most lively manner, the feelings of his heart.” And like Henry, Barré had purposely treaded close to the line of treason before stepping back, saying “prudence forbids me to explain myself any further ... The people there are as truly

loyal, I believe, as any subjects the King has: But a people jealous of their liberties, and who will vindicate them, if they should be violated; but the subject is too delicate, I will say no more.”

So too Henry: a man portraying himself as reserved, but finally outraged by unconscionable threats to liberty, to the point of breaking the conventions of normal speech. It was a performance in every sense of the word, and like all good performances it drew upon familiar narratives. Those who’d thrilled to newspaper accounts of Barré’s performance would hear its echo in Henry’s.

Now, the stirrings of Revolutionary spirit have been described using a particular medical metaphor. Bernard Bailyn, for example, used the title “The Contagion of Liberty” for one chapter of *Ideological Origins*. And the colonists used this metaphor as well. For example, a South Carolina writer in December 1765 noted that it was not just in his colony that the public offices and courts were closed: “the Contagion has extended itself to Georgia, so that the whole Continent is now in the same Circumstance...”

Contagions, though, do not spread of themselves. They require an agent to carry and transmit the disease — a vector, in medical terminology. The “contagion” of resistance to the Stamp Act spread, we know, through the dissemination in print of the Virginia Resolves and other documents defending colonists’ rights. But it also was transmitted, like any disease, through face-to-face communication, time spent in shared quarters, communal drinking and feasting.

To return to where we began, with Charles Murray and his journey through the colonies: After visiting Williamsburg he traveled through Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New York. He stayed at taverns and drank in their common rooms. He dined and did business with the mercantile and political elites. As Murray conversed, he could say that he himself had seen the great debate in the House of Burgesses. He could have described it in the dramatic terms he used in his

journal — recalling the tension between Henry and the Speaker as Henry walked perilously close to treason. These words, these actions — Henry as the sympathetic man, stirred beyond reason to passionate behavior — would have resonated with an eager audience, primed on the stories of Isaac Barré and, later, the words of the Virginia Resolves as printed in the northern newspapers. The French Traveller has always been thought of as an eyewitness to important events. But Charles Murray was far more: he was a participant. By telling his stories of dangerous words and heroic deeds throughout the colonies. Charles Murray was himself the vector of contagion for the colonists' revolutionary fever.