

Faces

by DAVID MCCULLOUGH

We have no photographs from the Revolutionary War, nothing to give us the look of those who served in what they called The Glorious Cause. Later, much later, in the nineteenth century, a number of ancient Continental Army pensioners did sit for their pictures, but unless you know, they could be almost any old men of another time.

We have no way to see what they and their generation looked like as young recruits, no way to see their faces, as in the haunting, little daguerreotype portraits from the Civil War.

Faces are important to me in trying to understand and write about the people of other days. I need to know what they looked like. It's a point some may not care about especially, but I do.

Nor is it possible to get a sense of the slaughter — of the Revolution at Bunker Hill or Brooklyn — the way one can in the searing views taken by Mathew Brady and other photographers after Antietam or Gettysburg.

There are not even sketches or paintings of Washington's army in camp or on the march, nothing done on the scene to convey the human reality of the struggle. No artist-correspondents

covered the Revolution as Winslow Homer covered the Civil War, and such dramatic renditions as we have of the horrific conflicts of the war — John Trumbull’s *The Battle of Bunker Hill*, for example — were all done after it was over. Masterful they are in their way, but their way is the very stagy European manner then in fashion for “history paintings.”

With no photographs to take us there, and only paintings that make it look like a costume pageant, the Revolutionary War has seemed less real, less human, infinitely more remote than ever it should be. For real it was, and human they were, those who marched with Washington. The whole story was wonderfully, painfully human.

It lasted eight years. It was our longest war except for Vietnam. The cost in life was dreadful. On a per capita basis, it was our bloodiest war, second only to the Civil War. Twenty-five thousand Americans were killed, which to us, our senses numbed by the statistics of modern wars, may not seem excessive. However, 25,000 lives in 1776 was one percent of the population of the thirteen states of 2,500,000. One percent of our population today would be more than 3,000,000 dead to achieve American independence.

Of course, it was not a war for independence only. The bold promises of equality and of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” set forth in Jefferson’s ringing preamble to the Declaration of Independence made The Glorious Cause more glorious still. Yet in hard reality such noble ideals would have amounted to little more than words on paper without the men who did the fighting.

So how do we know them, without photographs, with nothing but stagy paintings to look at, no film clips, no recorded voices. How do we know what they thought of their endeavor and the “times that tried men’s souls.” How can we know what they looked like?

The answers are in what they themselves said in pocket diaries where the handwriting can

be every bit as impossible to fathom as one might expect, given the conditions under which so many of the entries were made — in letters, letters home, letters from home, and in memoirs, military records, orderly books, official reports, official correspondence, newspapers. And because so much that was written has survived (on the good, durable eighteenth century rag paper), we can and do know quite a lot.

In the research for my book, *1776*, I worked with more than seventy diaries, in addition to several thousand letters. A diary kept by Jabez Fitch, a Connecticut farmer turned soldier, is a perfect treasure, and I love the letters of a Massachusetts lieutenant, Joseph Hodgkins, a former cobbler, to his wife Sara, and hers to him. The letters of George Washington, both private and official, during the relatively brief periods covered by my book, number nearly a thousand!

And the faces?

We know they looked very different from the way we do. Life was considerably harder on people in that vanished time. Life beat them up in ways we hardly even think about any longer, and it showed in their faces — in missing teeth, scars, defective eyes. There were no dentists as we define the term, let alone orthodontists or cosmetic surgeons. Birth defects, childhood injuries, smallpox, and the standard wear and tear of everyday existence left marks plain to see.

We would be taken aback by what they took as a matter of course. They, by contrast, would find us overall terribly bland looking, untouched by real life, like a lot of hot house plants.

Some of the best, most vivid accounts of their appearance, even the way they talked, are to be found in the deserter notices posted in public places or printed in the newspapers. From these we know, for example, that seventeen-year-old George Reynolds from Rhode Island “carried his head something on his right shoulder,” and that Thomas Williams, an immigrant,

had a "film" in his left eye. Simeon Smith, "a thin-spined fellow, about 5 feet 4 inches high, had on a blue coat and a black vest, a metal button on his hat, black long hair, black eyes, his voice in the hermaphrodite fashion." Mathias Smith had "a younger look in his face," and was "apt to say, 'I swear! I swear!' And between his words will spit smart." John Daby, on the other hand, was a "long hump-shouldered fellow, a shoe maker by trade, drawls his words, and for comfortable says comfable." Daby was also described having "a green coat, thick leather breeches, slim legs" and missing "some of his fore teeth."

After the war, like Washington, a number of his prominent officers sat (or stood) for their portraits in full uniform. Those of Nathanael Greene confirm that he was as robust and handsome as so often described, and Henry Knox, with his ample girth and double chin, looks, even in uniform, every inch the big, jovial Boston bookseller he had been before the war. But in none of these paintings do the officers look as young as they were in 1776. Greene was 33 when made a general; Knox, 25 when he signed up to serve in the artillery. George Washington, when he took command at Cambridge was all of 42.

Nor do the portraits show that Greene had a spot in one eye and walked with a permanent limp, the result of a childhood accident that today would disqualify him from service, and that very nearly did then, too. Knox had had two fingers on his left hand blown away by a hunting accident, Washington's face was scarred by smallpox, but their portraits show none of that.

Nor would anyone know from looking at John Trumbull's "history paintings" or the portraits he did (including his self-portraits), that Trumbull, because of a childhood accident, had the use of only one eye.

What the faces remind us is that young as they were, they had already seen a lot of life, hard work and hardship. They knew from life on the farm or on board ship or as an apprentice

wheelwright or blacksmith, how to do a host of things we know little or nothing about, and this stood them well as soldiers. They knew about weather, they knew about horses and guns, they knew how to make do with whatever was at hand. And they knew about death. Rare was the recruit who hadn't already seen someone die.

Some were too young and too small to be called men. John Greenwood, who wrote one of the best accounts of life in the ranks, was 16 but looked younger and was small for his age. Little Israel Trask was just thirteen. A few others weren't men at all. Molly Corbin of Pennsylvania had joined the army with her husband and was at his side during the Battle of Fort Washington. When he was killed, she stepped in to load and fire a cannon until she herself fell wounded.

Not all were heroes, and, tough as they were, thousands suffered terribly from cold and hunger. At times as much as a third of the army was sick. Soldiers worried over families at home caught in the grips of inflation, shortages of all kinds, epidemic disease. And none of them, soldiers or those at home, knew what the future had in store. “Posterity who are to reap the blessings will scarcely be able to conceive the hardships and sufferings of their ancestors,” wrote Abigail Adams.

American soldiers by the thousands gave up, quit, deserted or defected to the enemy. Thousands more, when their enlistments were up, marched away knowing how greatly they were needed at home and feeling they had done their part.

On December 1, 1776, during the long retreat across New Jersey, 2,000 of Washington's men, their enlistments ended, marched away, leaving only a bare 3,000 or so to carry on.

With the winds and cold of winter coming on, the men were in rags. Many who were without shoes marched with their feet wrapped in rags. Still, they would not quit, and at the end

of December, when all enlistments were up, the greater part of these same soldiers signed on again. The sudden surprise victory over the Hessians at Trenton only a week before had rescued morale as nothing else could have. All the same, these were men who had no illusions about war and what lay ahead.

The painter Charles Willson Peale, who had only recently taken his place with the army as one of a Philadelphia militia unit, described Washington’s troops as looking as wretched as any men he had ever seen. One in particular, Peale recorded in his diary, had almost no clothes. He was in rags, “his beard long, and his face so full of sores that he could not clean it.” Indeed, so “disfigurd” was the face that Peale failed at first to realize he was looking at his own brother.

In a way they were all our brothers as well, and none, let us never forget, was a figure in a costume pageant.

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Author photograph by William B. McCullough

Cover portraits: Charles Willson Peale. *George Washington*. 1787. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. General Henry Knox by Charles Willson Peale, from life, c. 1784; and General Nathanael Greene by Charles Willson Peale, from life, c. 1783 courtesy of the Independence National Historical Park

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DAVID MCCULLOUGH

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

David McCullough, whose #1 bestselling book, *1776*, is to be published in paperback this summer by Simon & Schuster, has been called "a "master of the art of narrative history." His books have been praised for their exceptional narrative sweep, their scholarship and insight into American life, and for their literary distinction.

In the words of the citation accompanying his honorary degree from Yale, "As an historian, he paints with words, giving us pictures of the American people that live, breathe, and above all, confront the fundamental issues of courage, achievement, and moral character."

Author of *John Adams*, *Truman*, *The Johnstown Flood*, *The Great Bridge*, *The Path Between the Seas*, *Mornings on Horseback*, and *Brave Companions*, he has received the Pulitzer Prize twice (in 1993, for *Truman*, and in 2001, for *John Adams*), the Francis Parkman Prize, and the Los Angeles Times Book Award, and has twice won the National Book Award.

For his work overall he has been honored by the National Book Foundation Distinguished Contribution to American Letters Award, the National Humanities Medal, the St. Louis Literary Award, the Carl Sandburg Award, and the New York Public Library's Literary Lion Award. None of his books has ever been out of print.

In a crowded, productive career, Mr. McCullough has been an editor, essayist, teacher, lecturer, and familiar presence on public television—as host of Smithsonian World, The American Experience, and narrator of numerous documentaries including The Civil War and Napoleon. He is a past president of the Society of American Historians. He has been elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and has received 31 honorary degrees.

A gifted speaker, Mr. McCullough has lectured in all parts of the country and abroad, as well as at the White House, as part of the White House presidential lecture series. He is also one of the few private citizens to be asked to speak before a joint session of Congress.

Born in Pittsburgh in 1933, Mr. McCullough was educated there and at Yale, where he was graduated with honors in English literature. An avid reader, traveler, and landscape painter, he lives in West Tisbury, Massachusetts with his wife Rosalee Barnes McCullough. They have five children and fifteen grandchildren.

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