Rejuvenating the Revolution? Roundtable on Turn: Washington’s Spies

A Historian’s Take on AMC’s *Turn*

In telling the story of the American Revolution, academic historians and

Hollywood filmmakers have a troubled history. Both parties have attempted to bring the founding of the American republic to life for a contemporary audience, but rarely have they agreed on how best to accomplish this. There has been no shortage of directors who have ignored the advice of their historical consultants or of historians who have criticized a film's most trivial anachronisms. A clever work of satire, the 1986 film *Sweet Liberty* captured the dynamics of this dysfunctional relationship. The film's protagonist, Michael Burgess (ably played by Alan Alda), is a college history professor who sells the movie rights to his prize-winning study of the American Revolution to the director Bo Hodges (Saul Rubinek). Thrilled that his life's work will be captured on the silver screen, Professor Burgess eagerly welcomes the production crew to his sleepy Southern college town only to learn that Hodges intends to adapt the book as a bawdy comedy targeted at a teenage audience. Horrified, Burgess confronts Hodges to demand an explanation. Clearly amused at the historian's discomfort, Hodges proclaims the three principles of a successful Hollywood blockbuster: "defy authority, destroy property, and take people's clothes off." Nonplussed, Burgess retorts, "What does that have to do with American history?" Blinded by the demands of their respective disciplines, Burgess and Hodges fail to see their common mission. Both the historian and the filmmaker must to do more than merely relate an accurate narrative of the period's events. They must make the past relevant to the present. Done well, both academic history and historical cinema have the potential to breathe new life into familiar stories. Each can rejuvenate the Revolution.

Making the American Revolution meaningful to a twenty-first-century audience is exactly what the cast, crew, and producers of AMC's new television series *Turn* have set out to accomplish. Promising to tell "the story of America's first spy ring," *Turn* speaks to a post-9/11 audience intrigued by the workings of global espionage and raised on a diet of political violence served up by CNN. *Turn* is a product of its time. Though historians often disparage historical interpretations driven by a presentist agenda, few would deny that the questions we ask of the past are shaped by the world we live in today. The producers of *Turn* and academic historians have this in common: neither can escape viewing the past from the perspective of the present.

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Turn's implicit argument, that the American Revolution was far more violent, more terrifying, more contested, and more uncertain than we usually imagine when we picture George Washington crossing the Delaware or Thomas Jefferson drafting the Declaration of Independence, falls in line with a recent trend in the historical literature that depicts the birth of our nation as a brutal and divisive struggle. *Turn* portrays an embryonic America torn apart by political discord. The conflict raging in the small Long Island town of Setauket, where much of the series is set, is presented as a microcosm of the larger conflict.

Like all American colonists, Setauket's denizens must confront the fraught questions of political and family allegiance in a time of turmoil. One cannot help but think of the stark divisions between blue and red states in contemporary America. To drive this point home, as well as to increase the dramatic tension, the protagonist Abraham Woodhull (Jamie Bell) lives in a house divided. Abe's father, Richard (Kevin R. McNally), a socially prominent judge, and his wife, Mary (Meegan Warner), are firm supporters of the crown. Abe's own loyalties, which he strives to conceal from his family, end up reluctantly, though resolutely, with the Revolutionaries. As the series unfolds, Abe struggles to maintain his principles in a morally ambiguous world. His allies on the Patriot side, Benjamin Tallmadge (Seth Numrich) and Caleb Brewster (Daniel Henshall), are not above committing atrocities in the name of the "glorious cause," and his British opponents, most obviously Major Hewlett (Burn Gorman) and Ensign Baker (Thomas Keegan), are capable of integrity and humanity. This is not the traditional story of America's nobility and virtue in the face of Britain's barbaric brutality most recently showcased by the 2000 film *The Patriot*. What's not for a historian to love?

As is often the case, the devil is in the details. Errors in chronology and costuming are easily overlooked because the show succeeds at capturing the spirit of America's tortuous path to nationhood, but it fails epically in its responsibility to the very real people who walked that road over 200 years ago. Like many historical dramas, *Turn* uses a combination of actual historical individuals and fictional characters in its cast. In a recorded discussion with faculty from the College of William & Mary in February 2015, the producers of *Turn* lauded their efforts to portray the experiences of little-known revolutionaries like Woodhull and Tallmadge rather than the usual parade of Founding Fathers. They are pleased to be doing "history from the bottom up." While household names like George Washington and Benedict Arnold are present, the show's principal players are men and women long obscured by the cobwebs of history. Perhaps it is because of this obscurity that the producers felt entitled to take such great liberties with the lives of these individuals: liberties that would undoubtedly expose the producers to a defamation of character suit were the people portrayed in the series still alive.

Actor Samuel Roukin, who portrays John Graves Simcoe on Turn: Washington's

Spies, addresses the audience at William & Mary's "Television, History, & Revolution" from William & Mary news video. Courtesy of the College of William & Mary.

Some of these liberties are harmless, perhaps even necessary. The real Hewlett, for instance, was an American, born and bred on Long Island, not the posh Englishman Burn Gorman personifies. In fact, a regiment of American Loyalists, not British regulars, garrisoned Setauket throughout the war. Green-coated Americans fighting blue-coated Americans might easily confuse the lay viewer, however. The producers' decision to anglicize Hewlett and his troops is justifiable on the grounds of narrative clarity and does little to misrepresent Hewlett, a man who was historically dedicated to the British Empire. Depicting an adulterous relationship between Abe Woodhull and Anna Strong (Heather Lind) is more questionable. Woodhull, who was a single man during the war, was ten years Anna's junior. There is no evidence that the married mother of six had a romantic relationship with Woodhull. Yet, the demands of drama are paramount. The romance between Abe and Anna is a crucial component of the show's narrative arc. In a work of historical fiction, creative liberties will be taken. *Turn* does not purport to be a work of documentary history after all.

Artistic license, however, is no excuse for the series' portrayal of British Captain John Graves Simcoe (Samuel Roukin). In the show's pilot episode, viewers are introduced to a tall, foppish, effeminate, but unmistakably sinister Englishman destined to be a thorn in the side of the would-be hero Abe. It is no surprise that the producers of *Turn*, aiming primarily at an American audience, wanted a British antagonist. Simcoe is that and more. He is for *Turn* what William Tavington was for the *Patriot*: a British officer of unspeakable cruelty and devilish cunning. Roukin has described the character he portrays as "basically a sociopath," and not without reason. *Turn*'s Simcoe is a predator. He sexually menaces Anna, brutally beats Abe, stabs an American spy in the throat at a dinner party, hangs an innocent man, and murders a Loyalist soldier in order to bolster his reputation among his men. These are but a few of his more egregious acts. But Simcoe is no mere brute. His is a calculating and clever embodiment of evil, born of hatred. According to AMC's website, "John Graves Simcoe is a born attack dog who harbors an intense dislike for most colonists." That dislike—or better yet, loathing—manifests itself in his scheme to assassinate Abe's father and frame the Patriot-leaning Reverend Nathanial Tallmadge (Boris McGiver) for the shooting. When Abe foils his plan, Simcoe is livid. During a prisoner-exchange negotiation with Patriot forces, Simcoe defies Major Hewlett's direct orders and callously executes Caleb Brewster's uncle in front of his nephew. Although Hewlett has him arrested, Simcoe escapes court martial, languishing for a time as a clerk in the quartermaster's department, before being promoted to command of the Loyalist Queen's Rangers regiment. The British high command appears largely unconcerned by Simcoe's brutality.

The real John Graves Simcoe did none of these things. The son of a decorated naval officer who died during the British campaign to capture Canada in 1759, Simcoe was a twenty-three-year-old Eton- and Oxford-educated lieutenant when war erupted in Massachusetts in 1775. Though he lamented "the dreadful scene of civil war" that had engulfed the colonies, the young officer was eager to prove an effective soldier. Like many of his fellow British officers, Simcoe believed that the colonists had been led astray by Whig demagogues and that force alone could bring about an "effectual reconciliation" between the king and his colonists. There is no doubt that Simcoe was what historian Stephen Conway has dubbed "a hard-liner:" an officer who thought rebellion deserved to be punished. In a letter to his mother, he referred to the rebellious colonists as "infatuated wretches" and hoped for their "inevitable destruction." Yet his zeal to suppress the American rebellion did not translate into unrestrained brutality toward American soldiers or civilians. He approved of his commanding general Sir William Howe's orders to protect the property of the people of Boston and to spare the town from flames upon the army's departure in 1776. A man as deeply committed to his God as his King, Simcoe strongly disapproved of harming the helpless. When he discovered that some of his soldiers were disinclined to take prisoners in battle because Simcoe had forbidden them to confiscate their captives' watches, Simcoe reversed his policy. Human life was more important than private property. This is hardly the portrait of a sociopath.

Paradoxically, the likely culprit behind this case of cinematic slander is the historian behind the series: Alexander Rose, the author of the popular history *Washington's Spies*, upon which *Turn* is based. To Rose, a Cambridge University-trained historian of twentieth-century Britain, "Simcoe exemplified the worst aspects of the British army." The evidence supporting this claim is tenuous, to say the least. Rose points to the Queen's Rangers' occupation of Oyster Bay during the winter of 1778-79 as proof of Simcoe's "wanton brutality." In Rose's words, Simcoe "stripped Oyster Bay bare of wood" and "sacrilegiously converted" the Quaker meetinghouse into a storeroom. Simcoe's troops did occupy Oyster Bay that winter, and no doubt they seized buildings and other supplies for purposes of defense and firewood, but this was common practice among eighteenth-century armies. The Continental Army would have behaved no differently, except perhaps promising the buildings owners' reimbursement in worthless Continental currency.

Most erroneously, Rose claims that "Simcoe made his presence felt" in Oyster Bay by apparently overseeing—or at least condoning—the whipping of a townsperson. Following Rose's footnote leads to an obscure local history that relies on a nineteenth-century source as evidence of this incident. The source, Henry Onderdonk's *Documents and Letters Intended to Illustrate the Revolutionary Incidents of Queens County* (1846), records excerpts from a number of eighteenth-century documents but omits documentation for this particular incident, in which the author narrates the arrest of "a respectable young man, John Weeks," for failing to give the correct countersign when challenged by a sentry. Weeks was "seized, tried, and sentenced to be whipped." His punishment

was interrupted only by the “frantic appeals of his mother and sister.” The problem is that even according to this undocumented nineteenth-century account, Weeks’s arrest occurred before Simcoe and his Rangers reached Oyster Bay. The contingent occupying the town was the Loyalist regiment Fanning’s Corps, a “rude and ill-behaved” unit, in the estimation of the nineteenth-century historian. It is hard to imagine how Simcoe could have made his presence felt in the town when he was not even there. It is equally difficult to fathom why Rose would cite a twentieth-century local history to ascribe culpability to Simcoe for this alleged incident when he cites Onderdonk’s work elsewhere in his book. An ungenerous reviewer might assume bad faith.

John Graves Simcoe by John Wycliffe Lowes Forster. This portrait depicts Simcoe as the first Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada. Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.

Though the event is not depicted in the show, the real John Graves Simcoe did have an altercation with the Woodhull family. In late April 1779, Loyalist John Wolsey, who had been released recently from a Patriot prison, informed Simcoe of Woodhull’s career as a rebel informant. Intent on apprehending the suspected spy, Simcoe and a party of his Rangers descended on the residence of Abraham’s father, Judge Richard Woodhull. The judge, who historically was a Patriot rather than a Loyalist sympathizer, became the hapless victim of his son’s clandestine activities when Simcoe’s men failed to discover Abe. According to a letter that Abe later wrote Tallmadge, Simcoe, eager “to make some compensation for his Voige [voyage] … fell upon” the Judge “and Plundered him in a most Shocking Manner.” Rose’s interpretation of this event was that Simcoe personally “beat up Abraham Woodhull’s father.” An alternate reading of the source suggests that Simcoe sought financial compensation for the expedition and permitted his men to seize items of the judge’s private property. British troops plundering inoffensive American civilians was in and of itself a “Shocking” act of cruelty discouraged by the prevailing European rules of war,

but it was a far from uncommon practice during the conflict.

Plundering was one thing; physical assault was entirely another. Had Simcoe personally beaten a fellow gentleman—and an elderly one at that—he would have faced official censure, if not court martial and dishonor. Moreover, Abe would certainly have been more explicit in his letter had that been the case. When New York Loyalist Edmund Palmer "fell upon" a Mr. Willis, who was an "old Gentleman," American Major General Israel Putnam informed Washington that Palmer "abused, beat, & left him, to appearance dead." Abe's letter is silent on his father's status after the raid. It is highly unlikely that Judge Woodhull experienced such treatment at the hands of Simcoe. During a similar raid in 1778, Simcoe had personally protected the improbably named American Colonel Thomas Thomas, "a very active partizan of the enemy," from his "irritated soldiers" who wanted to revenge the death of one of their comrades. If Simcoe or his troopers had brutalized Judge Woodhull, rather than merely plundered him, the Patriot press would have had a field day. Instead, the raid failed to make the news.

This is not to suggest that the real Simcoe was a softy. During his raids in New Jersey, Simcoe and his Rangers regularly burned barns and even private dwellings belonging to suspected Patriots. A Frenchman visiting Canada after the war was struck by Simcoe's persistent "hatred … against the United States" and his "boasting of the numerous houses he had fired during the unfortunate conflict." In 1779, the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* claimed that Simcoe's "exploits have generally been marked with acts of the most inhuman barbarity." To the governor of New Jersey, William Livingston, Simcoe was "a consummate savage." Seeking to exploit Simcoe's raids for propagandistic purposes, both the author of the piece in the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* and Livingston—who was a skilled propagandist often writing under the pseudonym Adolphus—painted Simcoe as a barbarian: someone beyond the pale of the civilized world. Rose, and by extension the producers of *Turn*, have accepted uncritically the Patriot propagandists' interpretation of Simcoe.

The historical Simcoe, despite his firm belief that the stick was a better inducement for loyalty than the carrot, was no murderer. The Duke of Northumberland, who knew him well, claimed that Simcoe was "brave, humane, sensible, and honest." Even Simcoe's arch rival, American cavalry commander Colonel Henry Lee, described Simcoe as "one of the best officers in the British army" who "was a man of letters, and like the Romans and Grecians, cultivated science amid the turmoil of camp." To Lee, Simcoe was "enterprising, resolute, and persevering." It is hard to imagine an American officer endorsing someone who regularly murdered Patriot soldiers and brutalized civilians. *Turn*'s portrayal sullies the memory of an officer who, though inveterately opposed to American independence, served his king and cause with honor and vigor.

Turn's depiction of Simcoe is not only unjust to a man who would go on to be one of the founders of modern Canada, it is regrettable in its predictability. Roukin gives us the classic cliché of a sexually aggressive and cruelly

sadistic aristocratic English villain. The viewer instantly recalls the English lord who rapes newly married women under the guise of the law of *Primae Noctis* in *Braveheart* (1995) and Tim Roth's repulsive interpretation of rapist and murder Archibald Cunningham in *Rob Roy* (1995). *The Patriot*'s William Tavington, while not a rapist, does delight in burning innocent men, women, and children alive. All three characters accomplish their evil deeds with a smirk and a hint of an aristocratic lisp. But these characters are works of fiction. Though potentially inspired by historic characters, they bear fictional names. Their nefarious deeds require no documentation. Simcoe, on the other hand, was real. He and his Queen's Rangers operated on Long Island and raided Setauket. Abe Woodhull considered Simcoe an especially dangerous foe, even wishing him dead. The opportunity to create a sophisticated, complex, zealous, and contemporarily relevant antagonist was thrown away on Roukin's Simcoe. In the end, *Turn*fails most spectacularly by failing to live up to its potential for originality, squandering its chance to rejuvenate the Revolution by resorting to a tired trope. This unfortunate decision tarnishes an otherwise plausible and entertaining historical drama.

Further Reading:

For the relationship between historians and Hollywood, see Robert A. Rosenstone, "Inventing Historical Truth on the Silver Screen," *Cinéaste* 29:2 (Spring 2004): 29-33 and Melvyn Stokes, *American History through Hollywood Film: From the Revolution to the 1960s* (London, 2013), especially chapter 1: "The American Revolution."

The February 3, 2015, discussion among the producers, cast, and advisors of *Turn* and faculty members from the College of William & Mary, entitled "Television, History, & Revolution," can be viewed in full here.

For a brief biography of the real Major Hewlett, see Todd Braisted, "Lieutenant Colonel Richard Hewlett: The Loyal-est Loyalist," *Turn to a Historian*, April 27, 2015.

For information on the relationship, or lack thereof, between Abraham Woodhull and Anna Strong, see Rachel Smith, "Abraham Woodhull and Anna Strong Revisited," *Turn to a Historian*, April 6, 2015.

The interview in which Samuel Roukin characterizes Simcoe as "basically a sociopath" can be found here.

Find AMC's official biography of the character John Graves Simcoe here.

For historical biographies of John Graves Simcoe see William R. Riddell, *The Life of John Graves Simcoe, First Lieutenant-Governor of the Province of Upper Canada, 1792-96* (Toronto, 1926), Mary Beacock Fryer and Christopher Dracott, *John Graves Simcoe, 1752-1806: A Biography* (Toronto, 1999), and Alan

Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies* (New York, 2010), chapter 2.

For Simcoe's letter to his mother in which he mentions "the dreadful scene of civil war," "an effectual reconciliation," "infatuated wretches," and "inevitable destruction," see John Graves Simcoe to Katherine Simcoe, Boston, June 22, 1775. Transcribed in Riddell, *The Life of John Graves Simcoe*.

For Stephen Conway's description of some British officers as "hard-liners," see Stephen Conway, "To Subdue America: British Army Officer and the Conduct of the Revolutionary War," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 3rd ser., 43 (1986): 381-407.

For Simcoe's approval of Howe's policy of protecting civilian property and refusing to burn Boston upon the army's evacuation, see John Graves Simcoe to Katherine Simcoe, Boston, March 13, 1776. Transcribed in Riddell, *The Life of John Graves Simcoe*.

For expressions of Simcoe's religious faith, see John Graves Simcoe to Katherine Simcoe, Boston, June 22, 1775. Transcribed in Riddell, *The Life of John Graves Simcoe*, and John Graves Simcoe to Katherine Simcoe, Boston, March 13, 1776. Transcribed in Riddell, *The Life of John Graves Simcoe*.

Simcoe's decision to reverse his policy on plundering enemy prisoners can be found in *Simcoe's Military Journal: A History of the Operations of a Partisan Corps, Called the Queen's Rangers …* (New York, 1844).

For Alexander Rose's claims that "Simcoe exemplified the worst aspects of the British army," engaged in "wanton brutality," "stripped Oyster Bay bare of wood," and "sacrilegiously converted" the Quaker meetinghouse into a storeroom see Alexander Rose, *Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring* (New York, 2006).

For an example of Continental troops seizing private property, and General Washington's opposition to it, see George Washington to the Board of War, Valley Forge, January 2-3, 1778. Founders Online, National Archives (last update: 2015-03-20). Source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 13, 26 December 1777-28 February 1778, ed. Edward G. Lengel (Charlottesville, Va., 2003).

See also George Washington to Colonel Armand-Charles Tuffin, marquis de La Rouërie, Wilmington, September 2, 1777. Founders Online, National Archives (last update: 2015-03-20). Source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 11, 19 August 1777-25 October 1777, eds. Philander D. Chase and Edward G. Lengel (Charlottesville, Va., 2001).

In his narration of the whipping of John Weeks, Rose chose to cite Frances Irwin, *Oyster Bay in history; a sketch by Frances Irvin. With notes by Clara Irvin* (Oyster Bay, New York [?]: 1963 [?]). Henry Onderdonk's recounting of the alleged incident is very clear that Simcoe and his Queen's Rangers were not

present at the time. Henry Onderdonk, *Documents and Letters Intended to Illustrate the Revolutionary Incidents of Queens County …* (New York, 1846).

Abraham Woodhull's account of Simcoe's raid on his father's house appeared in Samuel Culper to John Bolton, June 5, 1779. George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4. General correspondence, 1697-1799, which can be accessed via a keyword search here.

For Rose's interpretation of the raid see Rose, *Washington's Spies*, 129, 163.

General Israel Putnam's description of Edmund Palmer's alleged plundering and beating of a "Mr. Willis" in July 1777 can be found in Major General Israel Putnam to George Washington, Peekskill, NY, July 19, 1777, Founders Online, National Archives (last update: 2015-03-20). Source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 10, 11 June 1777-18 August 1777, ed. Frank E. Grizzard Jr. (Charlottesville, Va., 2000).

For Simcoe's protection of Colonel Thomas from his "irritated soldiers" see *Simcoe's Military Journal*.

The Frenchman who visited Simcoe in Canada was François-Alexandre-Frédéric La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt. His account of Simcoe's hatred for the Americans can be found in *Travels through the United States of North America, the Country of the Iroquois, and Upper Canada …* (London, 1800).

For the *Pennsylvania Evening Post*'s claim that Simcoe's "exploits have generally been marked with acts of the most inhuman barbarity" see *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, November 6, 1779.

For Livingston's description of Simcoe as "a consummate savage" see Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812*.

For more on Livingston's career as a Patriot propagandist see *The Papers of William Livingston* Carl E. Prince, Dennis P. Ryan, Pamela B. Schafler, and Donald W. White, eds., 5 vols., 2:3-6 (Trenton, N.J., 1979).

In a letter to Captain Joseph Brant, the Duke of Northumberland described Simcoe as "a most intimate friend of mine." Northumberland thought Simcoe was "possessed of every good quality which can recommend him to [Brant's] friendship. He is brave, humane, sensible, and honest." Northumberland to Captain Joseph Brant. September 3, 1791. *Simcoe's Military Journal*.

For Colonel Henry Lee's recollections of Simcoe see Henry Lee, *Memoirs of the War in the Southern Department of the United States* 2 vols., 2:8 (Philadelphia, 1812).

Abraham Woodhull confessed to Benjamin Tallmadge that had he not "fear of Law or Gospel, [he] would certainly [kill Col. Simcoe], for his usage to me." Samuel Culper to John Bolton, December 12, 1779. George Washington Papers

at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799: Series 4. General correspondence, 1697-1799.

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