

Founding Others



Gary B. Nash. *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979. xix + 548 pages.

Re-reading by Shane White

I blame Gary Nash and this book for several years of my youth that went missing sometime in the early 1980s. It was not even as though I passed the time enjoyably, playing snooker or learning how to hit a draw with a three iron. Those years were misspent, alone, in a small, badly ventilated room with piles of photocopied tax lists, census schedules, city directories, enormous stacks of index cards, and a calculator that was rather bigger and heavier than the laptop computer I am now using. There are a few tables in the early pages of *Somewhat More Independent* (my thesis and first book) that I figure took the best part of two thousand hours to construct. If you allow that the average undergraduate works twenty hours a week, over say thirty weeks a year, then those tables involved slightly more work than a BA degree. The tables gave me material for about a dozen pages of text that I would estimate roughly one in a hundred readers managed to get through. And just to rub salt into the wound, I had a luxuriant crop of hair on the top of my head in those wasted years (there is a photo to prove it).

It is probably only fair to get a couple of things straight right from the start. Firstly, this is a book review and, consequently, is mostly about my work and my prejudices, with the occasional artfully revealed glimpse of my public persona. If you want to know about *Urban Crucible*, you should go away and read it; if you want to know about Gary Nash, I'd recommend Richard Dunn's fine memoir at the end of *Inequality in Early America* (Hanover, 1999).

Secondly, I should add that, to the extent that Nash manages to elbow his way into these paragraphs, I am hardly objective about him. Nash has long been a sort of hero of mine. Two decades ago, I was a young graduate student writing my dissertation on the end of slavery in New York, at the University of Sydney, an institution almost completely unknown in America. For me, American academe was the show, the big time—I have since learned that I had an outsider's inflated view—and I had no idea whether my work was good enough to cut it there. As a result of my admiration for *Urban Crucible*, I wrote Nash a begging letter asking him to look at my stuff. He read and commented on every chapter as they slowly emerged through the 1980s. Gary Nash's reputation for generously welcoming younger historians, and not just his own graduate students, is well deserved.

I was hardly the only young would-be historian whose fancy was caught by *Urban Crucible*. Indeed, there were a number of reasons why it was a book that

appealed particularly to graduate students. In many ways Nash was simply doing, admittedly at a very high level, what we were supposed to be doing when we wrote our dissertations. Nash was in total control of the historiography and was seemingly aware of everything written on or near his subject. He had also immersed himself in the sources and dirtied his hands plowing through any number of tax lists, inventories, newspapers, and account books. It sounds trite stated like that, but, then and now, a considerable number of historians, once they have made a name for themselves, publish books that are, to quote Nash, "written from the armchair, not the archives." A few don't even get out of the chair for their first book.

Nash's work did not just legitimate the idea of colonial urban history but it also took the investigation of the cities to the cutting edge of early American history, totally overthrowing the older genteel tradition associated mostly with [Carl Bridenbaugh](#). Where Bridenbaugh had rested content with description, *Urban Crucible* and some of Nash's articles from the 1970s provided a model of how crucial and previously unknown details of the lives of ordinary people could be extracted from dry-as-dust tax lists, account books, and the like, and used to tell a new story of how the colonial city worked. Graduate students as far away as Australia locked themselves off and tried to emulate his example.

But probably the most important factor in his appeal to graduate students was that Nash was clearly a scholar of the Left. He took seemingly intractable sources and made them reveal evidence of inequality and of class structure and class consciousness. Not only did he contribute, along with other young scholars, towards the disruption of the consensus school's benign view of colonial America but he also showed how the social and economic developments in the port cities in the 1760s and 1770s contributed towards the coming of the Revolution. Nash helped rescue the lives of ordinary New Yorkers, Bostonians, and Philadelphians from what E. P. Thompson called the "condescension of posterity" and the "waste bin of history"—it should be remembered that two decades ago every graduate student in history owned a well-thumbed copy of *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963)—and provided a counter to those who, following Bernard Bailyn and J. G. A. Pocock, seemed intent on reducing the American Revolution to an event in a rather narrowly defined intellectual history. Nash is still sometimes called a neo-Progressive, and there is a logic to that rather ugly label.

It was not only graduate students who were reading *Urban Crucible*. Nash's peers certainly took notice of the book as well. The Pulitzer Prize can throw up some very odd winners (witness 2003), but 1980 was a good year. *Urban Crucible* was one of the three finalists eventually losing out to Leon Litwack's *Been in the Storm So Long* (New York, 1979). There were also plenty of good reviews. According to a writer in the *TLS*, *Urban Crucible* was "one of the finest works on colonial America since the revival of interest that began some twenty-five years ago." As well a few historians writing for more specialized audiences liked the book. Raymond Mohl in the *Journal of American History* praised the

depth and breadth of Nash's research and thought the book "a major reinterpretation of urban life in eighteenth-century America."

Generally, though, *Urban Crucible* got a bumpier ride in the academic journals. Gerald Gunderson in the *Journal of Economic History* grudgingly wrote, "One *has* to admire the breadth of the scholarship and *some* of the insights which are derived from it" (my emphasis). Gunderson and Nash, it seemed, had rather different views of the way the world worked. As Gunderson alliteratively put it, there were other better explanations of a more pronounced class identification in this period than "Nash's cumbersome contrivance of class consciousness arising in poverty."

Marc Egnal in the *William and Mary Quarterly* thought *Urban Crucible* "a work of first importance," but spent most of his review detailing how he was unconvinced by "Nash's discovery of class consciousness," proclaiming that the half of the book dealing with "urban politics and lower-class ideology" was where the "work seems weakest."

Jack Greene, in the *American Historical Review*, thought Nash's conception of the social process "rather narrow," focusing as he did "very largely upon a single aspect of social development," to wit "the changing distribution of wealth." For all that, Greene did like the "rich detail" of Nash's complicated comparative argument about his three cities. In the last paragraph of the review, though, Greene dragged Nash over the coals for "regrettably perpetuat[ing] the antique and serious distorting myth, itself largely a Puritan artifact, of an early harmonious golden age from which there was a subsequent long-term declension." Greene concluded that *Urban Crucible* was "an obviously technical work that will be of interest mainly to scholars and students." Generally, it seems, the *Urban Crucible* appealed more to the next generation of historians than to Nash's contemporaries.

Going back, after nearly a quarter of a century, to look again at a book that you read as a graduate student can sometimes provoke what might be called the teddy-bear syndrome. The teddy bear that lives on in memory as being rich, dark brown, and shaggily massive turns out, when rescued from the attic decades later, to be anemic and disappointingly scrawny. With other books that you once thought wonderful, you know that reading them again will ruin them, that now you will undoubtedly see the origins of the appallingly complacent neoconservatism that emerged in the author's later work.

I am happy to report that *Urban Crucible* is no teddy bear, and also that I at least can discern no sign of Gary Nash's incipient mutation into a late-flowering neoconservative. For the most part, my reactions to *Urban Crucible* today are very similar to what they were twenty plus years ago (I still have four foolscap pages of single-spaced typed notes). The book is best on Philadelphia, very good on Boston, and weakest on New York, which just happens to be the city I know best. Urban women are almost absent from Nash's book; even in 1979 his claim that "it seems better to leave this task to

others" was lame. More surprisingly, he devoted little space to the role of slavery in the cities. Of course, there has been an enormous amount of work on all of these subjects since then, much of it in dissertations (and not a few of them have been directed by Nash). Based on my listening to conference papers and reading articles over the years, my sense is that if Nash were to update *Urban Crucible* now his footnotes would balloon in length to almost comical proportions, but he would not have to correct too much of what he wrote over a quarter of a century ago.

I should explain that last carefully written sentence and confess that, if I can possibly help it, I do not read American dissertations. Life is short and some time ago I realized that you had to draw a line somewhere. American Ph.D. theses, to borrow from the Australian vernacular, do not come within a cooee of that line. There is something mildly perverse about a genre that takes so long to complete, but is so unreadable. Typically, the newly bedoctored author then has to start all over again and spend at least another five years rewriting the thesis to make it fit for human consumption. One possible justification for some of the salaries reputedly paid to superstar professors at American universities is that, I imagine, they have to read a large number of dissertations.

What did surprise me was the amount of what now seems like almost old-fashioned political history that there is in *Urban Crucible*. I had no memory of this material, although my notes show that, dutifully, I did read it all those many years ago. *Urban Crucible* was written before almost all of us became cultural historians of one sort or another and before Al Young published his exquisite piece on George Robert Twelves Hewes (later reworked as *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* [Boston, 1999]). Reading Nash's book now, I craved more about the politics of everyday life and rather less about formal Politics. But this is highlighting little more than the fact that fashions change.

A few lines above I suggested there was little point in updating *Urban Crucible*, but there is room for a bit of recasting of the book. What I would like to see is Gary Nash, or someone of his skill, predilections, and prominence, writing a big book on the lives of ordinary city dwellers in the 1760s, 1770s, and during the Revolution, a book underpinned by the social and economic analysis of *Urban Crucible* but one also informed by the wonderful social and cultural history written since 1979. At the very least such a book might provide the American public interested in things historical with some sort of alternative to the seemingly endless celebratory studies of the founding fathers, brothers, mothers, and cousins.

In the end, then, *Urban Crucible* remains an important book. As far as I am concerned, Nash's finest piece of work is his next book, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), in many ways a natural and more cultural extension of his earlier work. I doubt that *Urban Crucible* has quite the impact it once had on me and others, but I hope that graduate students are still reading it.

I still can't hit a draw with a three iron. It doesn't matter much anymore. As retirement and pension loom, I mostly play old man's golf, plodding safely up the middle of the fairway. But there are still occasional moments when the gods smile, the juices flow, and the sweetly struck ball soars into the distance. It is on those glorious autumnal days that I am bedeviled by my inability to shape the ball's flight as needed, and it is then, too, that I cast my mind back to all those days spent poring over tax lists and census schedules when the time would have been much better spent learning to hit a draw. Sometimes as I gingerly poke around with a club looking for my ball in the snake-infested rough I curse the day that Gary Nash wrote this bloody compelling book.

Note: In 1986, Harvard University Press published an abridged version of *The Urban Crucible*, still in print, entitled, *The Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution*. xv + 241 pp. Cloth, \$53.50; paper, \$19.95.

This article originally appeared in issue 3.4 (July, 2003).

For a heinous sin he committed in a former life, Shane White has been sentenced, indefinitely, to being chair of the history department of the University of Sydney. In the few hours left after he has finished attempting to remake the world in his own administrative image, he tries to do a bit of reading and writing in African American history. *The Sounds of Slavery*, a book and a CD, co-authored with the unrelated Graham White, should be completed some time next year.