

# Starving Memory: Joseph Plumb Martin Un-tells the Story of the American Revolution



Like so many wars in the distant past, the American Revolution narrates beautifully. There is a beginning—the Shot Heard ‘Round the World, April 1775—in which a once-reluctant and economically diverse populace beats its ploughshares into swords. There is a set of progressive middles, unfolding against now-hallowed spaces: Independence is declared in Philadelphia; epic battles are fought at Bunker Hill, at Saratoga, at Trenton, at Cowpens, at Yorktown. Armies traverse the countryside; territory is claimed and reclaimed. Diplomatic overtures are made, revised, rebuffed. Heroes—George Washington, Ethan Allen, the Marquis de Lafayette, Tadeusz Kosciuszko, Casimir Pulaski—rise to their various occasions; villains—King George, Lord Cornwallis, Lord North, Benedict Arnold, Banastre Tarleton—fall victim to their various fates. Running through it all are thematic leitmotifs: “No taxation without representation”; “Give me liberty or give me death.” Everyone remembers the Boston Tea-Party, and no one fires until they see the whites of the enemy’s eyes. And then, finally, there is a clear ending: Lord Cornwallis surrenders to George Washington at Yorktown in October 1781. The Peace of Paris, negotiated by John Adams and Ben Franklin in the fall of 1783, puts a formal period to the war and establishes the United States of America as an independent nation. There are many ways to tell the story—different personnel, different motive forces,

different perspectives on the ultimate outcomes—but the essential plot remains the same. The Revolution fits patterns that we recognize—the flows of conflict and resolution, of call and response, of change over time.

As devoted to such patterns as we are—they allow us to make sense of the past, to forge *history* from the unfathomable welter of time gone by—we must also recognize their essential artificiality; they are products of historiography, not intrinsic features of the events themselves. And they are not neutral or disinterested: different frames for events lead to different senses of the whole. They make the difference between “Revolution” and “Rebellion,” between “freedom fighting” and “terrorism.” In thinking about the familiar story of the American Revolution, then, we must follow the poet Amy Lowell and inquire seriously: “What are [these] patterns for?” One answer—increasingly clear in the recent advent of *Glenn Beck’s Common Sense*, Ron Paul’s anti-tax “Tea Parties” and other right-wing fever-dreams about the late eighteenth century—is that the narrative elegance of the Revolution slots neatly into (or emerges out of) persistent fantasies of American exceptionalism. The origin-story works so well—how could it have gone otherwise? How could the existence of the United States not have been logically—if not divinely—ordained? It is a short, bright line from conventional narrative histories of the Revolution to the largely triumphalist foreign and domestic policy of most of the last two centuries; varieties of American exceptionalism have provided cover for everything from the continuation of racial slavery, Indian removal, and anti-immigrant riots to the Cold War and the Bush Doctrine.

But not every story of the Revolution fits so neatly into such providentialist and heroic-nationalist narratives of the Founding. Joseph Plumb Martin’s *Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Dangers, and Sufferings of a Revolutionary Soldier*, first published in Hallowell, Maine, in 1830, offers both a counter-record of the facts of the War and a counter-method for relating them. Born in the Berkshires, near the town of Becket, Massachusetts, in the fall of 1760, and raised largely by his grandparents in Milford, Connecticut, Martin enlisted as a private in the Continental Army at the age of 15. He was present for many of the Revolution’s significant events. He saw action in the Battle of Brooklyn, the Battle of White Plains, the Battle of Kip’s Bay; he encamped at Valley Forge during the winter of 1777. Promoted to sergeant in a sappers and miners regiment near the end of the War, he helped to lay siege to Yorktown. Martin left the Army upon its dissolution in 1783 and settled a farm in southern Maine. He did not prosper, but he married and lived long enough to apply for a government pension (in 1818) of \$96 a year. He died, relatively poor and relatively obscure, in the spring of 1850.

If this version of Martin’s biography suggests a familiar arc of American heroism—the everyman who nobly sacrifices his youth for the sake of his country, his autobiography follows a rather less familiar one. As Martin says in his preface, this *Narrative* will

*give a succinct account of some of my adventures, dangers and sufferings during*

*my several campaigns in the revolutionary army. My readers, (who, by the by, will, I hope, none of them be beyond the pale of my own neighbourhood,) must not expect any great transactions to be exhibited to their notice. 'No alpine wonders thunder through my tale,' but they are here, once for all, requested to bear it in mind, that they are not the achievements of an officer of high grade which they are perusing, but the common transactions of one of the lowest in station in an army, a private soldier.*

Offering a corrective to the endlessly circulating stories of soldiering that center on elite virtue (as in Mason Locke Weems's biography of George Washington) and novel-ready derring-do (as in James Fenimore Cooper's novel, *The Spy*), Martin's *Narrative* recalls the real-life drudgery of an enlisted man. He finds heroism in the endurance of poverty, cold, hunger, boredom, confusion, and mismanagement; he shifts the terms and the burdens of American virtue from the gentry to the common folk.

But Martin's memoir does not merely question the grand narratives of the Revolution by speaking only to his "own neighborhood" or by recalling in plain language the lives and times of persons without political or economic capital—elements continually obscured by the cult of celebrity around generals and statesmen, by republican ideas of the ennoblement of the citizen-soldier, and by ideologies of American progress. More than just different plots with different perspectives, Martin's counter-stories work against the forms and conventions of *story* itself. For Martin, it seems that making sense of the war is a privilege accorded only to the higher-ups and to the historians: to tell a clear, sequential tale about the confusing, recursive, and unspeakable deprivations of soldiering would be to mischaracterize the soldier's experience entirely. For the sake of candor and for the sake of representing the powerless, Martin abandons not only conventional history but also the conventions of historical writing.

Such resistance is most visible in Martin's discussions of privation and plenty; the narrative, like Napoleon's army, marches (or fails to march) on the private soldier's stomach. In contrast to the breathless flows of other people's (Mercy Otis Warren's, David Ramsay's, and others like them) accounts of the war, Martin repeatedly breaks from recording sequences of events to dwell on non-linear, not-very-progressive anecdotes and sense-memories, especially those arising from being hungry. Hardly a paragraph goes by without a long and wistful discussion of the acquisition of a particular chicken, or a reverie about a jug of wine, or a rueful meditation on what it means to starve to death in the service of a nation that does not yet exist. In leaving the sweep of chronological organization and linear cause-and-effect to focus so intently on timeless and cyclical matters of the belly, Martin urges his readers to think of war as a state absolutely incommensurable with coherent storytelling.

Martin begins his recollections of the War with his own entrance into it: intrigued by stories of adventure and heroism that far outstrip life on his

grandfather's farm in southwestern Connecticut (not unlike Stephen Crane's Henry Fleming, in *The Red Badge of Courage*), the young Martin enlists in the Continental Army. His regiment departs for New York City, where it is to meet up with other troops for the purpose of defending the city from the gathering British armies. Martin's first taste of conflict is not long in coming—though it takes a somewhat surprising form:

*The soldiers at New-York had an idea that the enemy, when they took possession of the town, would make a general seizure of all property that could be of use to them as military or commissary stores, hence they imagined that it was no injury to supply themselves when they thought they could do so with impunity, which was the case of my having any hand in the transaction I am going to relate...I was stationed in Stone-street, near the southwest angle of the city; directly opposite to my quarters was a wine cellar, there were in the cellar at this time, several pipes of Madeira wine. By some means the soldiers had 'smelt it out.' Some of them had, at mid-day, taken the iron grating from a window in the back yard, and one had entered the cellar, and by means of a powder horn divested of its bottom, had supplied himself, with wine, and was helping his comrades, through the window, with a 'delicious draught'...*

There is more here than just the deep cynicism of ordinary soldiers imagining a battle already lost and acting accordingly. This scene sketches the relationship between personal appetite and political violence that runs through Martin's story. Specifically, the big story of the British invasion gives way to the immediate problem of satisfying the immediate desires of the belly. The fear of armed occupation translates immediately into a fear of starvation. The presence of the British army is a problem both military and commissary in nature; Martin's colleagues resist it the only way they can—by consuming whatever stores they come across. Notions of the sanctity of private property and liberal consent so often held up as central to the American cause are nowhere to be found; in the face of impending privation, the soldiers smell out wine and turn housebreakers. In a reversal of the swords-to-ploughshares image of the American soldier so dear to the Generals and the historians, the men even convert their tools for fighting into tools for gluttony: in a pinch, a decommissioned powder-horn makes a fine goblet or wine-funnel.

As Martin's anecdote rambles on, the significance of this crowd action becomes clear: the War is, quite literally, out of control—its chaos cannot be managed in or through the settled rules and narratives of the marketplace or the military hierarchy. When the cellar's owner catches on, he decides to make a virtue of the depredation; he opens the cellar doors and sells the wine to all comers at a dollar per gallon. The soldiers are far from impressed.

*While the owner was drawing for his purchasers on one side of the cellar, behind him on the other side, another set of purchasers were drawing for themselves, filling...flasks. As it appeared to have a brisk sale, especially in the latter case, I concluded I would take a flask amongst the rest, which I accordingly did, and conveyed it in safety to my room, and went back into the*

*street to see the end. The owner of the wine soon found out what was going forward on his premises, and began remonstrating, but he preached to the wind; finding that he could effect nothing, with them, he went to Gen. [Israel] Putnam's quarters...; the general immediately repaired in person to the field of action; the soldiers getting wind of his approach hurried out into the street, when he, mounting himself upon the door-steps of my quarters, began 'harangueing the multitude,' threatening to hang every mother's son of them.*

Denying the relevance of the owner's story about his right to sell his commodities, Martin and his friends take what they want without regard for long-held economic conventions. They act as "purchasers" while pointedly resisting the symbolic necessities of purchase (the consensual disbursement of money or letters of credit) and the stories (about the "value" of currency or reputation, about the alienability of property) that those symbols structure. The same sort of anti-narrative energy reveals itself in Martin's characterization of the ransacked wine-cellar as a "field of action," both for himself and his general. Applying the formal language of military theory and history to drunken riot, Martin sets new terms for success in battle—maximum wine, minimum payment—that no commanding officer could accept. His ironic report (just like his reported action) upsets the conventions of the historical record: heroism may be as simple as getting drunk without getting in trouble; military leadership may consist in threatening the rogues under one's command. Martin's reaction to his general officer's diatribe mixes awe, contempt, and a strong sense of the inconsequentiality of it all:

*Whether he was to be the hangman or not, he did not say; but I took every word he said for gospel, and expected nothing else but to be hanged before the morrow night. I sincerely wished him hanged and out of the way, for fixing himself upon the steps of our door; but he soon ended his discourse, and came down from his rostrum, and the soldiers dispersed, no doubt much edified. I got home as soon as the general had left the coast clear, took a draught of the wine, and then flung the flask and the remainder of the wine out of my window, from the third story, into the water cistern in the back yard, where it remains to this day for aught I know. However, I might have kept it, if I had not been in too much haste to free myself from being hanged by General Putnam, or by his order. I never heard anything further about the wine or being hanged about it; he doubtless forgot it.*

Instead of the hero-exhorter of Bunker Hill, Martin presents Putnam as a loudmouth buffoon—complete with ironically edified troops. The private worries enough about the possibility of a kernel of truth in the General's hangman-bluster that he ditches the stolen wine, but not so much that he won't take a healthy swig beforehand. As this abasement of Putnam begins to suggest, the meaninglessness of this breakdown in order—no one is actually hanged, the General forgets the incident entirely, and Martin moves immediately on to the next formless adventure—is itself richly meaningful. The false, enduring pieties of official "heroism" and military glory will not be allowed to stand in Martin's text; the tightly structured moral and ideological fable of the

great and just War must give way to the evanescence, raggedness and amorality of sensual remembrance.

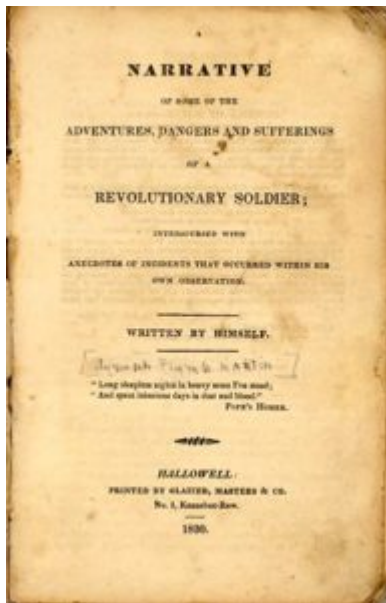


"Bill of Fare, for General Officers, P.M. 1st Division," Pennsylvania, 1828? Courtesy of the Broadside Collection at the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

When Martin turns to recounting more well-known scrimmages of the war, his narrative priorities remain consistent. Consider his account of what he calls "the famous Kipp's Bay affair, which has been criticized so much by the Historians of the Revolution." "I was there," he tells his readers, "and will give a true statement of all that *I* saw during that day." Martin's treatment of the occupation of Manhattan Island by the British (and the famously disorganized retreat of the Continental soldiers), like his shambling wine-battle anecdote, is both dilatory and food-centered. As the text focuses on the trials of the stomach, it resists assimilation into larger claims about the valor of the Americans.

*In retreating we had to cross a level clear spot of ground, forty or fifty rods wide, exposed to the whole of the enemy's fire; and they gave it to us in prime order; the grape shot and language flew merrily, which served to quicken our motions. When I had gotten a little out of reach of the combustibles, I found myself in company with one who was a neighbour of mine when at home, and one other man belonging to our regiment; where the rest of them were I knew not. We went into a house by the highway, in which were two women and some small children, all crying most bitterly; we asked the women if they had any spirits in the house; they placed a case bottle of rum upon the table, and bid us help ourselves. We each of us drank a glass, and bidding them good bye, betook ourselves to the highway again.*

This brand of nonchalance—bullets rarely fly “merrily” in the genres of the military history or the war memoir—is not, it seems, merely a consequence of Martin’s battlefield cynicism. It is, rather, further evidence of the psychological and ideological priorities of the enlisted man—priorities in conflict with the overarching themes of Revolutionary historiography. Martin emphasizes fellowship constituted through proximity and happenstance instead of through military designation—he doesn’t seem particularly broken up about losing his regiment, so long as his neighbor and this other guy are still around. More than this, he manifests little concern for the civilians that he finds: the women and children may be “crying most bitterly,” but their sorrows pale in comparison with Martin’s need for strong drink. It may be that the sympathy-for-countrymen that constitutes national feeling may lie at the root of the women’s gift of spirits (instead of, say, self-preservation in the face of three armed and uninvited guests), but an appeal to American solidarity is nowhere in evidence in Martin’s request. Putting his friendships and personal appetites—not his patriotism or his courage or his devotion to the American cause—as well as a kind of compulsory hospitality at the center of the story of his first battle, Martin works to un-write the myth of Revolution as a product of incipient nationalism: social affiliation doesn’t travel under the sign of an Americanizing ideology, but rather under the sign of bare life.



“Title Page” from *Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Dangers and Sufferings of a Revolutionary Soldier...* by Joseph Plumb Martin, Hallowell, Maine, 1830. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Soon after, Martin arrives at the site of a much larger battle: “When I came to the spot where the militia were fired upon, the ground was literally covered with arms, knapsacks, staves, coats, hats and old oil flasks, perhaps some of those from the Madeira wine cellar, in New-York; all I picked up of the

plunder, was a blocktin syringe [i.e. a syringe made from pure tin, not tin-plated iron], which afterwards helped me to procure a thanksgiving dinner." What for other tellers might be a particularly poignant scene of battlefield desolation—of the material sacrifices demanded by a love of liberty, perhaps—represents for Martin a means for promoting another meal. Intimate needs and the modes (perhaps inglorious; perhaps merely incompatible with strict notions of glory) by which they may be met take precedence over symbolic grandiosity or historical synthesis.

The first in-depth account of Martin's own fighting follows hard upon his depictions of the Battle of Kip's Bay. It begins with the sort of narrative description of an engagement that you might find in any other contemporary battle-memoir (as Mason Locke Weems's *The Life of General Francis Marion, a celebrated partisan officer in the Revolutionary War* [1809] or his *A history of the life and death, virtues and exploits, of General George Washington* [1800]).

*...In the forenoon, the enemy, as we expected, followed us 'hard up,' and were advancing through a level field; our rangers and some few other light troops, under the Command of Colonel Knowlton, of Connecticut, and Major Leitch of (I believe) Virginia, were in waiting for them. Seeing them advancing, the rangers, &c. concealed themselves in a deep gully overgrown with bushes; upon the western verge of this defile was a post and rail fence, and over that the forementioned field. Our people let the enemy advance until they arrived at the fence, when they arose and poured in a volley upon them. How many of the enemy were killed and wounded could not be known, as the British were always careful as Indians to conceal their losses. There were, doubtless, some killed, as I myself counted nineteen ball-holes through a single rail of the fence at which the enemy were standing when the action began. The British gave back and our people advanced into the field. The action soon became warm. Colonel Knowlton, a brave man, and commander of the detachment, fell in the early part of the engagement. It was said, by those who saw it, that he lost his valuable life by unadvisedly exposing himself singly to the enemy.*

Although his non-commissioned perspective is unusual, Martin otherwise performs perfectly the duty of the conventional historical witness: he lays out a coherent story in which he records terrain, marks important officers, acknowledges individual and collective bravery, aligns the enemy with inscrutable Otherness, and recognizes patriotic sacrifice. As he continues, however, Martin's relish for such conventionality begins to fade.

*The men were very much fatigued and faint, having had nothing to eat for forty-eight hours,—at least the greater part were in this condition, and I among the rest. While standing in the field, after the action had ceased, one of the men near the Lieut. Colonel, complained of being hungry; the Colonel, putting his hand into his coat pocket, took out a piece of an ear of Indian corn, burnt as black as coal, 'Here,' said he to the man complaining, 'eat this and be a soldier.'*



Again diverting his descriptive energies from the grand narratives of combat, of territory contested and lives lost, Martin lingers on the sensory experience of starving in the field. It is hunger that brings the “greater part” of these men together—and Martin “among the rest”—rather than ideological or political congruence. With his burnt corn, the Colonel reinforces the point: “Eat this and be a soldier.” To be a Continental is not necessarily to believe in the sovereign right of a people to govern themselves, nor to stand up for American freedom, nor to engage the enemy, nor to make sense of the events of the war (or even, it seems, to pay them much mind) but rather to starve or eat terrible food without complaint.

The recollection of this burnt corn episode spurs Martin further still from the story of his formative skirmish: upon returning to camp, he finds the “invalids” of his company to be “broiling...beef on small sticks, in Indian stile, round blazing fires, made of dry chestnut rails. The meat, when cooked, was as black as a coal on the outside, and as raw on the inside as if it had not been near the fire. ‘I asked no questions, for conscience’s sake,’ but fell to and helped myself to a feast of this raw beef, without bread or salt.” Martin’s prior descriptions of military engagement pale in comparison with his descriptions of the beef, its preparation, and its consumption; measured in terms of detail, the emotional (and extra-narrative) weight of the dinner far exceeds the emotional (and narrative) weight of the fighting. Only as an afterthought does he add the following: “We had eight or ten of our regiment killed in the action, and a number wounded, but none of them belonged to our company.”

Moments like this one proliferate: whenever the text threatens to fall neatly into a standard military story, Martin’s appetite drags it back out. One of his most piquant memories (the one that gets the “starving memory” appellation from which I take my title) is of the “rice and vinegar thanksgiving” of 1777. In Philadelphia, participating in the defense and eventual retaking of that city from the British, Martin watches the Army and its livestock waste away to nothing. Then, at long last, the new American government intervenes. Sort of.

*While we lay here there was a Continental thanksgiving ordered by Congress; and as the army had all the cause in the world to be particularly thankful, if not for being well off, at least, that it was no worse, we were ordered to participate in it. We had nothing to eat for two or three days previous, except what the trees of the fields and forests afforded us. But we must now have what Congress said—a sumptuous thanksgiving to close the year of high living, we had now nearly seen brought to a close. Well—to add something extraordinary to our present stock of provisions, our country, ever mindful of the suffering army, opened her sympathizing heart so wide, upon this occasion, as to give us something to make the world stare. And what do you think it was, reader?—Guess.—You cannot guess, be you as much of a Yankee as you will. I will tell you: it gave each and every man half a gill of rice, and a table spoon full of vinegar!! After we had made sure of this extraordinary superabundant donation, we were ordered out to attend a meeting, and hear a sermon delivered*

*upon the happy occasion.*

As in Martin's preface, we see the dissonance between the general officer's sense of the story of the war and the enlisted man's: the wicked irony of the small amount of rice and vinegar as an "extraordinary superabundant donation"—and as evidence of the "sympathizing heart" of the Army—makes the case clearly enough. Again, though, the structure of Martin's complaint is as important as its content: where Congress orders and declares, he defers and delays. His dashes and his rhetorical questions multiply out of narrative control. He pauses repeatedly, interrupting his story to embroider his ironies, to insert surplus phrases ("I will tell you"; "upon this occasion"), and to feign audience participation. In so doing, he not only heightens the impact of the rice-and-vinegar *dénouement* and suggests that Congressional policy is better suited to shaggy-dog jokes than to linear histories, he also recreates in miniature the experience of privation. The reader, just as Martin himself, must wait and wait for closure—the tale recapitulates in its halting narrative form the problem of fighting in the Revolution. As the grumbling stomach makes itself heard, the conventional claims of a Revolutionary American nationalism are indefinitely suspended; the exigencies of hunger-on-the-ground disrupt political theory and coherent historiography.

Martin's account of the Campaign of 1782 rehearses a new variant in the galaxy of deprivation and narrative false-starts. Lacking much else to do, Martin is sent with a couple of other men to track down a deserter in the New Jersey countryside. Martin prefaces his relation of this adventure with a promise of its exceptionality: "And now, my dear reader, excuse me for being so minute in detailing this little excursion, for it yet seems to my fancy, among the privations of that war, like one of those little verdant plats of ground, amid the burning sands of Arabia, so often described by travelers." This sense of an oasis of anecdote in the desert of smooth descriptions of undifferentiated daily horror rapidly dissipates: the intriguing (and progressive) processes of tracking a man and returning him "to his duty" are forgotten immediately. By way of beginning this little "story," Martin recalls

*One of our Captains and another of our men being about going that way on furlough [i.e., into New Jersey], I and my two men set off with them. We received, that day, two or three rations of fresh pork and hard bread. We had no cause to call this pork 'carrion' or 'hogmeat,' for, on the contrary, it was so fat, and being entirely fresh, we could not eat it at all. The first night of our expedition, we boiled our meat; and I asked the landlady for a little sauce, she told me to go to the garden and take as much cabbage as I pleased, and that, boiled with the meat, was all we would eat.*

Just as the "setting off" is immediately postponed to discuss the state of the provisions received and the problems of cooking them, there is no "movement" the next day—only the negotiation and preparation of side dishes. Whatever narrative promise the "expedition" holds is subordinated to thick descriptions of appetite, and to the niceties of eating and drinking. A day later and a few

miles down the road, Martin finds the same thing:

*In the morning, when we were about to proceed on our journey, the man of the house came into the room and put some bread to the fire to toast; he next produced some cider, as good and as rich as wine, then giving us each a large slice of his toasted bread, he told us to eat it and drink the cider, —observing that he had done so for a number of years and found it the best stimulator imaginable.*

Although there is a certain narrative progression—the bread turns into toast, the toast is distributed among the men, the toast is eaten and digested (with cider as a “stimulator” for the latter)—the story of the journey is deferred—they are always “about to proceed”—never actually proceeding.

Then, the punchline:

*We again prepared to go on, having given up the idea of finding the deserter. Our landlord then told us that we must not leave his house till we had taken breakfast with him; we thought we were very well dealt with already, but concluded not to refuse a good offer. We therefore staid and had a genuine New-Jersey breakfast, consisting of buckwheat slapjacks, flowing with butter and honey, and a capital dish of chockolate. We then went on, determined not to hurry ourselves, so long as the thanksgiving lasted.”*

That’s it. Although Martin’s recollections continue, the project of finding the deserter—of recalling the wayward man to the duties of “national” service—is now and forever absolutely abandoned. Instead, there is breakfast, recalled some fifty years after the fact with an enviable delight. The point here is clear: faced with choosing the potentially un-narratable joy of pancakes or the narrative pursuit of the overt ideological interests of his country, Martin opts for the pancakes.

It seems proper to conclude with some very brief speculations about the kinds of questions that Martin’s anti-narrative narrative can help us to ask—both about his historical moment and about our own. To do so, we should return to an apparently throwaway moment in the first lines of Martin’s memoir—one that’s not about being hungry, but that does tell us more about the potentially distorting nature of story-telling. “The heroes of all Histories, Narratives, Adventures, Novels and Romances, have, or are supposed to have ancestors, or some root from which they sprang. I conclude, then, that it is not altogether inconsistent to suppose that I had parents too.” Savvy enough to know that the memoirist is a literary character like other literary characters, and that the tale he would tell is subject to the rules established by other stories, Martin cultivates an ironic distance from his subject and underscores the artifice of his work. But there is more. Martin imagines a reader who may only suppose that a memoirist has parents because narrative convention insists upon it: parentage becomes a matter of literary formality rather than biology; only because other writers’ “heroes” had ancestors can Martin be said to have them himself.

In conjuring an audience for which the rules of fictional narrative are more immediately recognizable and count as surer argumentative proof than the empirical facts of the everyday, Martin neatly distills some of the stickiest problems of his past and our present. How do plot conventions, which reinforce our expectations of narrative coherence, disfigure or displace what we might think of (or wish for) as historical reality? Are stories—especially the ones that comprise historiography—in and of themselves a tool of entrenched and essentially conservative power? The links between nation-building, nationalism and traditional narration have been made clear enough over the years; might we fashion other modes of community or associative feeling in and through anti-narrative? Can we use counter-stories like Martin's to undo providential tales of American exceptionalism (which have served, after all, as elaborate rationalizations for imperialism abroad and socio-economic neglect at home) and to reimagine the United States? For Martin himself, answers seem to be forthcoming: with his emphasis on speaking to his "neighborhood" and on finding patriotism and community in lack, in hunger, in improvisation, and in comparative (if necessarily incomplete) expressions of personal feeling, he writes a life in which the expectations of nationalist myth fall away. For our lives during wartime, though—as we count the days past "Mission Accomplished" in Iraq and Afghanistan, as we deploy more troops and watch the numbers of killed and wounded on all sides edge up and up, as we wonder at our head of state carving a plastic turkey for another "rice and vinegar thanksgiving," as President George W. Bush did back in fall 2003—such questions remain uncomfortably open.

Compare Martin's account with Timothy Dwight Sprague's account of General Israel Putnam after the battle of Long Island.

## Joseph Plumb Martin

The men were very much fatigued and faint, having had nothing to eat for forty-eight hours,—at least the greater part were in this condition, and I among the rest. While standing in the field, after the action had ceased, one of the men near the Lieut. Colonel, complained of being hungry; the Colonel, putting his hand into his coat pocket, took out a piece of an ear of Indian corn, burnt as black as coal, 'Here,' said he to the man complaining, 'eat this and be a soldier.'

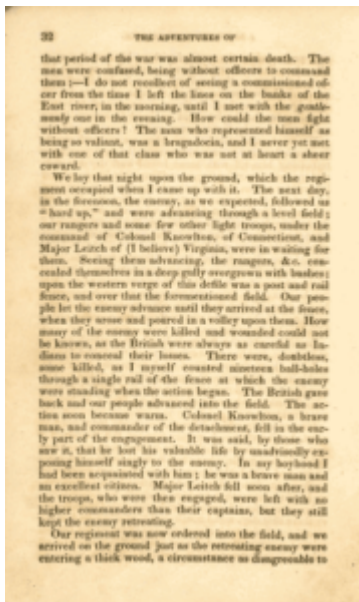
## Timothy Dwight Sprague

The British were "marching to intercept Putnam's retreat, and the enemy thus closing in upon him on each side. Putnam urged his men with all the vehemence of his natural ardor, increased by the perilous situation in which he found himself. Riding backwards and forwards in his impatience, he encouraged the soldiers, who were, in many instances, fainting from fatigue and thirst. A portion of the British army was already seen descending upon the right, and the

rear of Putman's [sic] division was fired upon. But his exertions saved them, and they slipped through just before the enemy's lines were extended from river to river."

For Sprague, as for most nineteenth-century historians of the Revolution, thirst, starvation and desperate fatigue in the ranks are quickly overcome by the "natural ardor" and the heroic efforts of a commissioned officer; Putnam's singular "exertions" and exhortations restore order and unit-coherence long enough for the Continentals to make their retreat. As is customary, the distribution of gallantry is minimal: one man on horseback "encourages"—that is, lends courage to—the ragged masses; no matter how many other actors are present, the story belongs to him alone.

Compare facsimiles of Sprague's and Martin's accounts.



Pages 32-33, Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Dangers and Sufferings of a Revolutionary Soldier ... by Joseph Plumb Martin, Hallowell, Maine, 1830. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

them as it was agreeable to us at that period of the war. We soon came to action with them. The troops engaged, being reinforced by our regiment, kept them still retreating, until they found shelter under the canopy of some of their shipping, lying in the North river. We remained on the bank ground till nearly sunset, expecting the enemy to attack us again, but they showed no such inclination that day. The men were very much fatigued and foot, having had nothing to eat for forty-eight hours,—at least the greater part were in this condition, and I among the rest. While standing on the field after the action had ceased, one of the men near the Line, Colonel, complained of being hungry; the Colonel, putting his hand into his coat pocket, took out a piece of an ear of Indian corn, burnt as black as a coal, "Here," said he to the man complaining, "eat this and leave to be a soldier."

We now returned to camp, if camp it was;—our tent held the whole regiment and might have held ten millions more. When we arrived on the ground we had secured provisions to go into action, we found that our hospitals, consisting of the sick, the lame, and the lary, had obtained some fresh beef;—where the commissaries found the beef or the men found the commissaries in this time of confusion, I know not, nor did I stop to ask. They were broiling the beef on small sticks, in Indian style, round blaring fires, made of dry chestnut tails. The meat, when cooked, was as black as a coal on the outside, and as raw on the inside as if it had not been near the fire. "I asked no questions, for conscience's sake," but fell as usual helped myself to a frisk of this raw beef, without bread or salt.

We had eight or ten of our regiment killed in the action, and a number wounded, but none of them belonged to our company. Our Line, Colonel was hit by a grape-shot, which went through his coat, waistcoat and shirt, to the skin on his shoulder, without doing any other damage than cutting up his epaulette.

A circumstance occurred on the evening after this action, which, although trifling in its nature, excited in me feelings which I shall never forget. When we came off the field we brought away a man who had been shot dead upon the spot; and after we had refreshed ourselves we

show in the furnace, spring upon his horse, and without going to his knees, galloped to Boston, and was gladly welcomed by the assembled militia—the only American army. His popularity and experience at once made him one of their leaders.

The battle of Bunker Hill followed. The story has been told, and the part which Putnam took in the glorious conflict, is so well known, that we do not venture to repeat it. Arms were now to decide the contest. Putnam was no more appointed major-general by the continental congress and was by Washington put in command of the centre of the army, leaving Boston.

In the condition of the army at that time, Putnam must have been a most useful man. The troops were active, little used to the fatigue of military labor and to the strictness of military discipline. They were engaged in a struggle for independence, a thing which does not flourish in camps; and they had been through their lives more accustomed to they laws than men. But Putnam's known courage and generosity, and his occasional losses, tended to reconcile them to the necessary discipline; while his readiness to share in the most laborious duties, encouraged them in their toil. The general had not forgotten the farmers, and Putnam was no more ashamed to plow with a redoubt, than he had been a year before to hold the plow-handle.

Upon the evacuation of Boston by Gen. Gage, Putnam was placed in command of New York, where he continued until the unfortunate battle of Long Island. Here there was room for the employment of his ingenuity in the construction of *shower-batteries* and similar contrivances, for the destruction of the channel of the Hudson. Under his direction various means of this kind were adopted for the purpose of preventing the British ships from ascending the North river, but with very little success.

After the loss of the battle of Long Island, the American forces were with commendable skill withdrawn by night to New York, and soon afterwards a part of the army was stationed at Kingsbridge, a part remained under Putnam's command in the city, and the remainder occupied the space between. In a few days, however, three British ships of war had moved up the Hudson to Honesdale, and Clinton, with scarcely any opposition, had landed several thousand men at Kip's bay, on the East river, about three miles above the city. Retreat was now unavoidable. The other divisions of the American army had moved to Harlem, and the only remaining route by which Putnam's could join them was by Honesdale. Clinton was marching to intercept Putnam's retreat, and the enemy thus closing in upon him on each side. Putnam saved his own with all the resources of his natural genius, increased by the peculiar situation in which he found himself. Raising his works and barracks in his impromptu, he encouraged the soldiers, who were, in many instances, fleeing from fatigue and thirst. A portion of the British army was already seen descending upon his right, and the rest of Putnam's division was

Pages 77-78, "General Israel Putnam," in the American Literary Magazine, Vol. II, No. 2, February 1848, New York. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.



## Further Reading:

Martin's text is available in an inexpensive trade edition, *A Narrative of a Revolutionary Soldier* (New York, 2001) and in a much more scholarly (though expurgated) form in *Ordinary Courage: The Revolutionary War Adventures of Joseph Plumb Martin*, ed. James Kirby Martin (Oxford, 2008). All quotations in this essay are from the former edition. Other recollections of the war for American independence include William Moultrie's *Memoirs of the American Revolution* (2 Vols. New York, for the Author, 1802); *Memoirs of General La Fayette* (New York, 1825), and Richard Henry Lee's *Life of Arthur Lee* (Boston, 1829). For an Irish analog to Martin's narrative, see Roger Lamb's twinned reminiscences: *Original and Authentic Journal of Occurrences During the Late War* (Dublin, 1809) and *Memoir of His Own Life* (Dublin, 1811).

For much more on the experiences of everyday soldiers in the American Revolution, see Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Williamsburg, Va. and Chapel Hill, N.C., 1979), Ray Raphael, *A People's History of the American Revolution* (New York, 2002), and Alfred F. Young, *Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution* (New York, 2006). John C. Dann's anthology, *The Revolution Remembered: Eyewitness Accounts of the War for Independence* (Chicago, 1980), offers an invaluable collection of veteran's narratives. On the relationship between historiography and narrative theory, see Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1990).

For more on the uses of the Revolutionary War and its heroes in cultural memory, see Michael Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1978), Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* (Boston, 2000), François Furstenberg, *In the Name of the Father: Washington's Legacy, Slavery, and the Making of a Nation* (New York, 2007), Sara

J. Purcell, *Sealed with Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia, 2002), and David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Williamsburg, Va. and Chapel Hill, N.C., 1997).

The radical disconnect between the chaotic experience of the field soldier and the careful order of the general officer or statesman is an all-too-familiar plot line: it structures Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, Pete Seeger's "Big Muddy," not to mention *Blackadder Goes Forth*, Hideo Kojima's *Metal Gear* video games, and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now!* Jon Krakauer's non-fictional account of the life and death of Pat Tillman, *Where Men Win Glory*, tracks the devastating lengths to which the U.S. government will go to preserve its narrative integrity.

This article originally appeared in issue 10.2 (January, 2010).

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