

# A tribute to Gordon S. Wood (1933-2026), historian of the American Revolution

Tom Mackaman and David North  
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A tragic accident has brought to an end the life and career of one of the United States' major historians. Gordon S. Wood died Sunday at the age of 92, hours after being struck by a car while walking through a grocery store parking lot in East Providence, Rhode Island. He died later that day at Rhode Island Hospital—less than one month before the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the commemoration of the revolution whose history he had spent a lifetime studying.

It speaks to the degradation of democratic consciousness, intellectual life and culture in the United States that Wood's death, apart from scattered and superficial obituaries placed on the inside pages of newspapers, has gone largely unnoticed. The country's foremost historian of its own founding has passed from the scene, on the very eve of the semiquincentennial, with hardly a ripple in official public life.

Within the historical profession, however, Wood's death is deeply felt as a tragic loss. Several of his colleagues, reached by the *World Socialist Web Site*, conveyed their admiration and grief. Carol Berkin, professor emerita at Baruch College and the CUNY Graduate Center, wrote that Wood's work "was the starting point, even for those of us who focused on the economic or social origins of the struggle for independence." James Oakes, also of CUNY, noted that "Wood was committed to the proposition that the War for Independence was also a radical revolution, an event that left an inspiring legacy we should all cherish." Richard D. Brown, professor emeritus at the University of Connecticut, remembered him as "a great scholar, an honest, unpretentious person, and a true friend. His brilliance was manifest." Mary Beth Norton, professor emerita at Cornell University, and Peter S. Onuf, professor emeritus at the University of Virginia, sent similar messages of mourning.

Timothy Hall Breen, of Northwestern University and author of *The Will of the People*, wrote:

Blending remarkably accessible prose and thorough research, Gordon Wood interpreted the American Revolution for an entire generation. He managed to bridge a divide between academic historians and general readers, giving us a powerful story of political leaders who were not demigods but rather were men who blended creativity and pragmatism to bring forth a new constitutional republic.

The unpretentiousness recalled by Richard Brown was not a pose but a settled trait—one perhaps owing something to his working-class origins. In conversation Wood wore his immense learning lightly. Yet the range of that learning could astonish. He seemed to carry the entire world of eighteenth-century America in his head, moving without effort from the constitutional debates of 1787 to the etiquette of patronage and "politeness" in colonial society, from the marginalia of Adams and the correspondence of Jefferson to the land speculation of Aaron Burr, paper

money schemes and tavern politics of the backcountry.

Wood had read, it seemed, everything—the pamphlets, the newspapers, the sermons, the diaries, the account books—and retained it all, not as inert antiquarian detail, but as the living texture of a vanished world that he could summon at will, and that he never ceased to find fascinating.

In a career spanning six decades and numerous books, articles and lectures, Wood established himself as the foremost historian of the American Revolution and the Early Republic. His *Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787*, published in 1968, won the Bancroft Prize, and his *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, arguably the most important book yet written on the period of the American founding, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993. Wood's *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1815*, published in 2009, was a landmark contribution to the Oxford History of the United States series initiated by C. Vann Woodward and Richard Hofstadter.

For nearly four decades, from 1969 until his retirement in 2008, Wood was a member of the faculty at Brown University, where he held the title of Alva O. Way University Professor.

Wood was born on November 27, 1933, in Concord, Massachusetts, where the very first battle of the American Revolution had been fought, and where the youths of Emerson, Thoreau, and Louisa May Alcott had been nurtured a century earlier. He grew up in a working-class family in nearby Worcester and Waltham. Wood's father was a factory worker, and his mother took office work. Neither parent attended college.

Wood later recalled finding high school history unbearable, suffering through classes in which the teacher simply read from a textbook. A Latin instructor encouraged him to attend nearby Tufts University, which he attended on ROTC funding while commuting from home. He graduated *summa cum laude* in 1955. His subsequent Air Force service in Japan caused Wood to abandon earlier ambitions for a career in the Foreign Service. He instead enrolled as a graduate student at Harvard University.

There Wood studied under the brilliant scholar of the colonial era, Bernard Bailyn, who was himself early on in a remarkable career. Precisely in those years Bailyn was at work on a close study of the massive body of pamphlets that had, he surmised, created the political climate of the American Revolution, a study that resulted in his most important book, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. Published in 1967, it won both the Bancroft and Pulitzer Prizes and remains worthy of careful reading today.

Wood's own *Creation of the American Republic*, produced out of the dissertation he had completed under Bailyn, came just one year later. It announced the start of an extraordinary career that clearly owed much to the work of his mentor, but that went, in key respects, beyond it. The "Bailyn school," which nurtured the careers of a constellation of significant historians—among them Pauline Maier, Mary Beth Norton, Michael Kammen, Jack Rakove and Fred Anderson—produced three Pulitzer Prize winners in addition to Wood.

Wood's writing, unlike much of academic history, was accessible to a

general readership. He achieved this without sacrificing complexity and while still conveying his encyclopedic grasp of the archive. Like Bailyn, Wood possessed a rare literary gift, one rooted in a sensitivity to the voices that survive in the historical record and in a respect for his readership. Much like the present, the past was a living world inhabited by actors confronting circumstances whose resolution they themselves could not foresee. In Wood's hands, the Revolutionary era ceased to be a familiar sequence of settled events, moving toward an outcome predetermined by the historian, and became instead a drama unfolding in real time, animated by uncertainty, conflict, possibility and tragedy. "The past cannot see the future," Wood liked to remind students and colleagues.

From this conviction followed Wood's emphatic rejection of historical anachronism—the ripping of historical figures out of their own time in order to impose upon them the assumptions and standards of the contemporary world. Such an approach, Wood insisted, was inherently moralistic and hypocritical. It flattered the present at the expense of the past, converting history into an exercise in self-congratulation and it rendered genuine historical understanding impossible. The men and women of the eighteenth century could not be indicted for failing to think and act as people of the twenty-first; the historian's task was to comprehend them within the world they actually inhabited, with its given limits and possibilities.

Critics occasionally associate Bailyn and his students with the "Consensus school" of American history, which, under the pressure of anticommunism of the post-World War II era, washed away conflict from American history in favor of a mythological "American exceptionalism." This view of Bailyn and Wood's work is in error. Sometimes also referred to as the "Whig interpretation of history," a concept borrowed from British history writing, the Consensus school, as it applied to the colonial and revolutionary eras, is more accurately associated with Bailyn's contemporary at Yale University, Edmund S. Morgan.

In fact, both Bailyn's *Ideological Origins* and Wood's *Creation of the American Republic* revealed a world of intense conflict. Particularly with Bailyn, the focus of these contests was on ideology. It was a school that approached the record of human thought with great seriousness. In Wood's work, the social element was stronger than in Bailyn's—the Revolutionary era was not merely one of competing ideas. Behind the politics were competing interests that ultimately found expression in the creation of entirely new concepts of political power that took the form of constitution-writing. Wood crystallized this early work in a concise recent book, *Power and Liberty: Constitutionalism in the American Revolution*, published in 2021.

Wood never went to great lengths to identify precisely what those interests were or how they related to social classes in the emerging capitalist world—a limitation dictated, in great measure, by his fidelity to the archive and his sensitivity to the nature of the society itself. There was no modern bourgeoisie or significant wage-labor working class in the late colonial period, though both were emerging by the early republican era. Instead, Wood insisted, and demonstrated richly in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, that what was at stake was the erosion and eventual collapse of a monarchical society.

Monarchy and its social and property forms were weak in America, Wood acknowledged, but nonetheless they existed. The American Revolution was waged against this *Ancien régime* no less than the French Revolution was a decade later, a comparison from which Wood never shrank. It was an Old World challenged and undone by what Jefferson called a new "natural aristocracy" of republican leaders. But, in tragic irony, these Founders' vision of a republic governed by disinterested statesmen gave way, in Wood's telling, to a bustling, vulgar democracy commanded by career politicians representing a new "middling type."

Wood was at his literary height when he conveyed the sense of tragedy over the outcome of their revolution felt by founding fathers who lived

into the 1820s, figures such as Jefferson, Adams and Madison. One senses that, to a certain extent, the author shared their view, which he captured memorably at the conclusion of his *Empire of Liberty*:

No American had spoken more eloquently or more fully for the radical impulse of the Enlightenment than Jefferson. No one had expressed the radical meaning of the Revolution—the deposing of tyrannical kings and the raising up of common people to an unprecedented degree of equality—than Jefferson. Yet he always sensed that his "empire of liberty" had a cancer at its core that was eating away at the message of liberty and equality and threatening the very existence of the nation and its democratic self-government...

Although Jefferson in his final years tried to retain his sunny hopes for the future, he had twinges of an impending disaster whose sources he never fully understood. He and his colleagues had created a Union devoted to liberty that contained an inner flaw that would nearly prove to be its undoing. The Virginians who had done so much to bring about the United States knew in their souls, as Madison intimated in his advice to his country from beyond the grave, that there was a "Serpent creeping with his deadly wiles" in their Arcadian "Paradise." Like Madison, many of the older generation came to realize that "slavery and farming are incompatible." The Civil War was the climax of a tragedy that was preordained from the time of the Revolution. Only with the elimination of slavery could this nation that Jefferson had called "the world's best hope" for democracy even begin to fulfill its great promise.

These and other passages give the lie to some critics' claims that Wood was indifferent to the issue of slavery, or to other forms of oppression. But while the historian did not shrink from the tragedy of unintended consequences, which, as Trotsky observed, always "lay inherent in the contradiction between the awakened world of the mind, and the stagnant limitation of means," Wood emphatically insisted on the revolutionary, transformative character of the American Revolution, on its world-historic significance. He never budged from this stance.

This put Wood increasingly at odds with what passed for "the academic left," which came to find in the American Revolution either a scheme to perpetuate elite white male rule—the argument advanced by identity-centered historians—or else a non-event, as maintained by scholars influenced by postmodernism. It was indeed in response to such arguments that Wood wrote *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. The book has never been forthrightly answered by his critics.

When the *World Socialist Web Site* first interviewed Wood in 2014, he expressed confidence that postmodernist approaches to history would never gain broad traction among the public. Yet academia, it turned out, had been incubating ideas that would eventually serve as the basis for a far-reaching assault on the historical significance of the American Revolution. The campaign would emerge from none other than the flagship publication of American liberalism, the *New York Times*, which earlier, back in 1969, had praised Wood's *The Creation of the American Republic* as "one of the half dozen most important books ever written about the American Revolution."

Wood was already elderly when the *Times* launched this attack on the subject of his life's work, but he responded with the vigor of a much younger man. It was the *World Socialist Web Site* that initiated the fight against the 1619 Project. In the autumn of 2019, the WSWS published a series of interviews with historians Victoria Bynum, James Oakes and James McPherson, exposing the project's major errors of concept and

fact. In November 2019, Wood sat down with the WSWS for an extended interview of his own. Together these interviews were read hundreds of thousands of times. Wood later joined several of these historians in an open letter to the *Times*, which pressed the criticisms that had first been raised in the WSWS interviews and demanded corrections.

The *Times* was forced on the defensive. Its defenders in the academic pseudo-left launched vicious attacks on Wood and McPherson, paced by Nikole Hannah-Jones, who condemned these eminent scholars as “white historians” who could never understand American history on account of their race. Hannah-Jones elaborated a quasi-zoological view in which not only did one’s race determine one’s view of history, but in which history itself was the never-ending working out of the conflict between “white Americans” and blacks. It remains a travesty and a shame that so few in the profession found the nerve to oppose these foul and intellectually bankrupt attacks.

Against them, Wood persevered with remarkable energy. He carried on his collaboration with the *World Socialist Web Site*, joining an important webinar on American Independence Day 2020, “The Place of the Two American Revolutions: Past, Present and Future.” Many thousands viewed this event, which also included Oakes, Bynum, Clayborne Carson of Stanford University, and Richard Carwardine of Oxford, as well as labor historian and WSWS writer Tom Mackaman, and David North, the editorial board chairman of the WSWS.

Wood was not a socialist or a Marxist, and neither he nor the WSWS made any claims to the contrary. What fused our work was a common insistence that the American Revolution was a transformative event—that it was indeed a revolution—as well as our common insistence on a truthful, objective approach to history.

Wood appreciated this collaboration. In 2021 he wrote to his WSWS interviewer, “you seem to be the only historian who understands what I was saying in my *Radicalism* book.” The correspondence continued until just a few weeks before his death. Wood said that he had finally retired from writing—“at 92 it would be foolhardy” to continue, he wrote—but he was looking forward to a full schedule of events marking the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution.

At the close of his life, as the United States approached the 250th anniversary of independence amid deep political and social crisis, Wood stood as one of the last major representatives of a historical tradition that is now embattled and endangered. He belonged to a generation of historians who believed that the past could be understood objectively, that ideas mattered and that great revolutions altered the course of human history. He rejected cynicism, superficial and ahistorical present-mindedness and the reduction of history to race, identity or power for its own sake. For him, the American Revolution remained one of the decisive events in the democratic development of humanity, however incomplete and contradictory its results.

That conviction animated his scholarship across more than half a century and gave his work its enduring vitality. It will be read long after the racist falsifications and postmodernist evasions that he combatted in his last years have been discredited, not only in scholarly works but also, and most important, by the practice of a radicalized working class that draws encouragement and inspiration from the ideals of the first American revolution.



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