Lucy Worsley Investigates: The American Revolution: Is this all the BBC can offer on one of the most decisive events in world history?

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The BBC/PBS co?production *Lucy Worsley Investigates: The American Revolution* is presented as a fresh exploration of the "forgotten British side" of 1776. It instead reduces one of the most consequential revolutions in modern history to a tale of misunderstandings, wounded feelings, and personal relationships. In Worsley's hands, the American Revolution becomes "the world's messiest breakup."

Worsley's prominence as the BBC's leading historical presenter was preceded by her long tenure as Chief Curator at Historic Royal Palaces, an institution devoted to preserving the ideological prestige of monarchy and the House of Windsor. She retains a focus on courtly interiors, domestic detail, and emotional narrative. Her role is to convert historical events into digestible, Downton Abbey?style entertainment for the upper-middle-classes—stripped of political conflict and class struggle and framed within a comfortably royalist worldview.

PBS's involvement in *Lucy Worsley Investigates: The American Revolution* serves several strategic purposes. As the United States approaches the 250th anniversary of independence, PBS needs commemorative programming that avoids political controversy while appealing to its core audience—older, affluent, liberal?leaning viewers with a long?standing appetite for British presenters and a reassuring narrative of Anglo?American continuity that flatters national myths, avoids divisive debates, and fits seamlessly within PBS's established brand of genteel cultural programming.

Worsley's trivialisation of history, excruciating to watch, serves another clear political purpose. At a moment when the US-UK "special relationship" is fracturing, replete with Trump's attacks on the BBC and on Keir Starmer's government, the British ruling class is desperate to reassure Washington of its loyalty. The soft?focus retelling of the American Revolution represents a smoothing over of the revolutionary rupture between the two nations, presenting their relationship as an unbroken continuum of shared values.

King Charles's April address to Congress made this explicit. His speech reproduced the same ideological manoeuvre as Worsley's series: the reduction of 1776 from a revolutionary break with monarchy into a minor disagreement, saying: "With the spirit of 1776 in our minds, we can perhaps agree that we do not always agree—at least in the first instance" However, for the next 250 years, he claimed, "our destinies as nations have been interlinked."

The king's remarks were a plea for renewed US?UK militarism, amid the deepest rupture in the "special relationship" since the 1956 Suez crisis. By celebrating shared wars, urging NATO escalation, and downplaying the Revolution itself, Charles revealed how both ruling classes now repudiate the democratic content of 1776.

Worsley's "the world's messiest breakup" portrays a marriage that drifted apart through miscommunication and hurt feelings. The Declaration of Independence becomes "the ultimate breakup letter." The destruction of George III's statue becomes an act of personal spite. The Stamp Act appears as a dispute over money, rather than a struggle over political power and representation.

What disappears first is the Revolution's ideological content. The American Revolution was the most progressive event in world history in its time. It was a bourgeois?democratic revolution that shattered monarchical?feudal authority, asserted Enlightenment principles of universal equality and popular sovereignty, and placed slavery under unprecedented ideological pressure. The Declaration of Independence proclaimed that the people have the "right" and the "duty" to "alter or abolish" any government destructive of their liberties. These words inspired the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, and every democratic and anti?colonial struggle across the Atlantic world.

Yet in Worsley's account, the Enlightenment and the Revolution's international reverberations vanish. What remains is a sequence of personal stories—George III's stubbornness, Benjamin Franklin's charm, French "perfidiousness".

Worsley presents George III as diligent, conscientious, and emotionally isolated—a sympathetic figure trapped by circumstance and pride. His deployment of troops to Boston becomes a misunderstanding rather than the violent assertion of imperial authority it was. Worsley concludes that George III "wasn't a tyrant"—precisely the view that prevailed before Thomas Paine demolished it. The result is a portrait of a monarch struggling to manage a difficult situation rather than the head of a global empire.

Worsley delights in the language of "perfidious" French intrigue, Bourbon vanity, and Versailles eccentricity, but pays comparatively little attention to the geopolitical calculations that drove French intervention. French support for the American cause was not an act of aristocratic whimsy. It was a strategic effort to weaken Britain's global position and reshape the balance of power following France's defeat in the Seven Years' War.

One of the most glaring absences in her account is the working people of the colonies. Her dramatis personae are exclusively elite: monarchs, diplomats, generals, merchants. Yet artisans, mechanics, labourers, small farmers, and enslaved people drove the Revolution's radicalisation.

The Sons of Liberty were a mass movement of artisans and labourers. The committees of correspondence and town meetings that dissolved royal authority in Massachusetts were organs of popular power. The militia that surrounded Boston after British troops marched on Lexington and

Concord was the spontaneous mobilisation of tens of thousands of ordinary people. The Revolution was not merely a conflict between colonies and empire, but one within colonial society—between the emerging democratic radicalism of ordinary working people and the more cautious constitutionalism of the merchant and planter classes.

Worsley's treatment of key revolutionary figures illustrates this pattern. John Wilkes, one of the most important radical figures of the 18th century, is reduced to a figure of amusement. Worsley marvels at "Wilkes merch": teapots, mugs, plates bearing his slogans. She imagines "seditious tea parties." The political content of Wilkes's struggle—his defence of press freedom, his challenge to aristocratic privilege, his role in shaping transatlantic radicalism—disappears.

Thomas Paine is introduced as "an English corset maker" and "clever, prickly man"—a colourful eccentric who stumbled into greatness. His intellectual formation—the Headstrong Club, his scientific education, his meeting with Benjamin Franklin—is omitted. He simply "boards a ship" for America and begins writing for the *Pennsylvania Magazine* before producing *Common Sense*, which becomes an accidental bestseller.

The intellectual substance of *Common Sense* is absent: the devastating attack on hereditary rule, the ridicule of monarchy as contrary to reason and nature, the tracing of English kings to "a French bastard landing with an armed banditti," the proclamation that "the cause of America is the cause of all mankind." Nor does the programme seriously engage with Paine's later contributions. His defence of the French Revolution in *Rights of Man* and his broader role in the democratic politics of the late eighteenth century disappear almost entirely.

Benjamin Franklin is presented as the naked air?bather, the electric?shock prankster, the seductive American backwoodsman—a horrible titillating caricature unrecognisable as the revolutionary thinker and statesman he was.

Franklin's scientific work and political thought are never connected, though both flowed from the same Enlightenment rationalism. The Royal Society membership and electrical experiments appear only as picturesque details, never as the intellectual foundation of a man who applied the same rational analysis to monarchy that he applied to electricity.

Worsley's persistent framing is Franklin as "marriage counsellor" between Britain and America, a ludicrous depiction of a colonial agent making substantive arguments about governance, representation, and constitutional rights. He testified before Parliament, published polemics, and lobbied ministers. Most critically, Worsley omits the hinge event of Franklin's political life: his public humiliation before the Privy Council in the Whitehall "Cockpit" in January 1774. This was the moment when the loyal subject concluded that reconciliation was impossible.

Franklin's extraordinary diplomatic achievements—securing French military and financial support decisive at Yorktown and negotiating a peace treaty in 1778 that delivered independence and vast territory—are reduced to a man creating "a totally new look for himself" with his furry hats in Paris, which French aristocratic ladies found so enticing.

Even his most important editorial contribution to the Declaration—changing Jefferson's "sacred & undeniable" to "self?evident," grounding equality in reason rather than revelation—disappears.

Political ideas become personality traits. Social conflicts become misunderstandings. Historical actors become characters in a drama rather than representatives of broader forces and interests.

Worsley concludes her series with the words that the American Revolution "shook the foundations of Britain itself. But Britain didn't fall apart. It burned. It bled. But in the end, George III survived by adapting to a new world. 250 Years ago, both nations were remade. One by casting off a crown, the other by reshaping it."

This is bourgeois historiography at its worst. Her claim that Britain "burned" and "bled" substitutes romantic atmosphere for an examination of the class forces that allowed the British ruling class to reconsolidate power after losing the colonies. The Gordon Riots and other upheavals were contained, not through royal wisdom, but because the working class lacked political consciousness and the ruling class had imperial reserves to stabilize its rule. The British state survived because the ruling class conceded nothing to the masses, reinforcing repression against radicals inspired by the American and French Revolutions.

Worsley's conveyor belt historical output exemplifies the ideological function of the BBC's trivialisation of history: its transformation into courtly anecdote, emotional colour, and royal pageantry. Her narratives—whether on the Romanovs, the Peasants' Revolt, or the English Civil War—consistently displace class antagonism, economic crisis, and mass political struggle, fixating on monarchs, courtiers, domestic interiors and historical cosplay. Her sentimental humanisation of rulers and marginalisation of popular movements reflect contemporary efforts to present the ruling class as the natural, sympathetic protagonist of the national story.

A genuinely historical treatment of the American Revolution would raise uncomfortable questions: Why do the principles of 1776—equality, popular sovereignty, the right to abolish tyrannical government—remain unfulfilled? Why has the ruling class abandoned even the pretence of defending democratic rights? These are precisely the questions the BBC must prevent viewers from asking.

The progressive content of the American Revolution

The ICFI has consistently defended the American Revolution as one of the great progressive events in world history, which provided the ideological and political impetus for the French Revolution and all subsequent democratic, egalitarian, and socialist movements.

• In Defense of the American Revolution (Tom Mackaman, 2016) — A direct statement of the WSWS position: "The American Revolution, the most progressive event in world history in its time, continues to inspire the struggle for equality."

• The shot heard round the world (Tom Mackaman, 2025) — A reflection on the battles of Lexington and Concord, 250 years on, examining the revolutionary crisis that produced the victory over Britain and the establishment of the world's first modern democratic republic.

• Two hundred forty years since the Declaration of Independence (Andre Damon, 2016) — A perspective piece on the Revolution's world-historical significance.

• The contemporary significance of the Declaration of Independence and the Battle of Gettysburg (Joseph Kishore, 2013) — Connects the Revolution and the Civil War as two of the great events in world history whose democratic principles are everywhere under assault today.

• Socialism, history and the defense of democratic rights (Tom Mackaman, 2024) — Mackaman's report to the Eighth Congress of the SEP, which situates the defense of democratic rights within the historical tradition running from the American Revolution through the Civil War and into the struggle for socialism.

The 1619 Project and the Defense of the Revolution Against Racialist Falsification

The largest body of WSWS writing on the American Revolution emerged in response to the *New York Times'* 1619 Project, which claimed

that the American Revolution was fought to preserve slavery — a falsification the WSWS exposed and combated in a sustained campaign involving interviews with leading historians, lectures, and essays.

• The New York Times's 1619 Project: A racialist falsification of American and world history (Niles Niemuth, Tom Mackaman, David North, 2019) — The initial WSWS critique, which dissected the Project's central claim that racism is the essential driving force of American history.

• Slavery and the American Revolution: A Response to the New York Times 1619 Project (Tom Mackaman, 2019) — The text of Mackaman's lecture at the University of Michigan, providing a detailed historical rebuttal.

• The 1619 Project and the falsification of history: An analysis of the New York Times' reply to five historians (David North and Eric London, 2019) — A detailed analysis of the *Times'* refusal to correct its historical errors after being challenged by leading historians.

• The 1619 Project and the attack on the American Revolution (Tom Mackaman, 2021) — Mackaman's report to the SEP 2021 summer school, a comprehensive synthesis of the WSWS analysis.

• Introduction to *The New York Times' 1619 Project and the Racialist Falsification of History* (David North, 2020) — North's introduction to the book collecting the WSWS's major interviews and essays on the subject.

• Gerald Horne's counter-revolution against 1776 (Fred Schleger, 2021) — A review demolishing Horne's *The Counter-Revolution of 1776*, which the 1619 Project drew upon, as "in large measure, a work of fiction."

Interviews with Leading Historians

The WSWS conducted a series of interviews with prominent historians of the Revolution, which are invaluable in their own right:

• Interview with Gordon Wood on the American Revolution (Tom Mackaman, 2015) — Wood is the author of *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* and perhaps the foremost living historian of the period.

• An interview with historian Gordon Wood on the New York Times' 1619 Project (Tom Mackaman, 2019) — Wood's sharp critique of the 1619 Project's falsification of the Revolution.

• Bernard Bailyn, historian of American colonial and revolutionary periods, 1922–2020 (Tom Mackaman, 2020) — An obituary appreciating Bailyn's contributions to understanding the intellectual conceptions that found expression in the Revolution.

July 4th Perspectives

The WSWS has regularly used the Fourth of July to draw the contrast between the Revolution's democratic principles and the present state of American society:

• America on the Fourth of July: From Thomas Jefferson to Donald Trump (Patrick Martin, 2018) — "The most fundamental right asserted by the Declaration of Independence is the right of the people to revolt against tyranny and despotism, a right that this generation will be called on to exercise."

• The Fourth of July in the United States, six months after the January 6 fascistic insurrection (Joseph Kishore, 2021)

• The Fourth of July (Jerry White, 2012)

Cultural Reviews

• Ken Burns' *The American Revolution* (Tom Mackaman, 2025) — Review of Burns' documentary series.

• The American Revolution and the Civil War on screen: Apple TV's *Franklin* and *Manhunt* (Tom Mackaman, 2024)