



The Enigmatic Ethan Allen: Two Notes on Sources

Ethan Allen is without doubt Vermont's most well-known, most quoted, and most popular historical figure. He is also our most enigmatic historical figure.

Controversy surrounds every aspect of Allen's life and career. How much of his involvement in the struggle with New York over land grant titles was self interest? How much was a self-professed love of liberty; how much a violent reaction against authority, a philosophical distaste for New York's aristocratic patronage system, a personal dislike for some of the Yorker agents? What exactly did he say to William Delaplace when he roused the British captain from his bed to demand the surrender of Fort Ticonderoga? Did he really twist the nails out of his manacles with his teeth during his captivity on board a British prison ship? Is he truly the author of Reason the Only Oracle of Man, or is this a case of plagiarism from his late friend and mentor, Thomas Young? What did he expect to accomplish by participating in the rebellion in Pennsylvania's Wyoming Valley? Did he plan to betray the American Revolution in the Haldimand negotiations, or was he playing a risky cat and mouse game with Congress to win recognition for Vermont as one of the United States? Was he, finally, a frontier rebel or a revolutionary outlaw—in today's terminology, a freedom fighter or an insurgent and terrorist?

Even his contemporaries were confounded by Allen. George Washington wrote of him, "There is an original something in him that commands admiration," yet kept an eye on Allen and contemplated having General Philip Schuyler kidnap him. No wonder, then, that contemporary scholars continue to be fascinated and puzzled by Ethan Allen and continue to scrutinize and interpret his words and actions.

In this issue of Vermont History H. Nicholas Muller III examines the sources for the statement attributed to Allen that "the gods of the valleys are not the gods of the hills," and Ennis Duling compares Allen's description of his capture and captivity to a similar description in a play published three years before Allen published his famous Narrative. Clearly, we are not done with knowing what Ethan Allen said, when he said it, or what he meant by what he said.

— MICHAEL SHERMAN