



Ethan Allen and *The Fall of British Tyranny*: A Question of What Came First

John Leacock was a propagandist, not a historian or journalist. In the story of Ethan Allen's capture and captivity that reached Philadelphia, he recognized the barest outline of a story, but he didn't know or care about the details.

By ENNIS DULING

Ethan Allen's surrender at Montreal, September 25, 1775, is among the most theatrical scenes in U.S. history. The details can be found in Allen's 1779 *The Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen*—and in only one other early source, a play published in Philadelphia in 1776.¹

After a night of crossing the St. Lawrence River, Allen and his company of 110 men faced a walled city with its gates closed. In the afternoon when Montreal's defenders attacked, Allen was greatly outnumbered. At first both sides fired their muskets at a distance from cover. But then Allen's men began to melt away, and he ordered a retreat, which turned into a race. He found that he could outrun the British Regulars, but the Canadians and Indians kept coming. After he exchanged fire with an enemy officer—"the ball whistled near me, as did many others that day"—he offered to surrender if treated honorably.²

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As he told the story in *The Narrative*, a moment after he surrendered his sword, an Indian rushed forward to shoot him: “His hellish visage was beyond all description; snakes eyes appear innocent in comparison of his; his features extorted; malice, death, murder, and the wrath of devils and damned spirits are the emblems of his countenance.” Defenseless, Allen grabbed the officer to whom he had handed his sword, and Allen and his human shield danced about as one Indian and then another “imp of hell” attacked. Finally, an Irishman with a bayonet “drove away the fiends.”³

At the Place d’Armes, Brigadier General Richard Prescott of the 7th Royal Fusiliers demanded to know Allen’s name. Once he learned he faced the conqueror of Ticonderoga, Prescott shook his cane over Allen’s head and called him “many hard names,” including rebel. Then he ordered his men to kill thirteen Canadians. In their defense Allen bared his chest and “told gen. Prescott to thrust his bayonets into my breast, for I was the sole cause of the Canadians taking up arms.” The confrontation ended as Prescott answered, “I will not execute you now; but you shall grace a halter at Tyburn, God damn ye.”⁴

Later that day Allen was confined in irons in “the lowest and most wretched part” of the *Gaspee*, where he was “obliged to throw out plenty of extravagant language” and once in his anger and frustration twisted off a ten-penny nail with his teeth. The captain told him “often times” that he was ordered against his liking to treat Allen severely.⁵

In the nineteenth century—at a time when it would be almost sacrilege to suggest that Ethan Allen might tell a whopper—his heroism, nobility, and backwoods wit at the low point of his career helped make him the great Vermont hero.⁶ But in the fall of 1775, few people were speaking of heroism. Major General Philip Schuyler wrote of the “disagreeable Consequences arising from Mr. Allen’s Imprudence”; George Washington wished that “Colonel Allen’s Misfortune will . . . teach a Lesson of Prudence and Subordination to others, who may be too ambitious to outshine their General Officers”; and Congressman John Jay of New York referred bluntly to the “folly of Allen” in exposing his men before Montreal.⁷

In the twentieth century, historians and biographers treated the surrender scene cautiously, not wanting to appear to be gullible (it all sounds a little too melodramatic to be entirely true) but also recognizing that to omit the story would be to deprive readers of Allen’s rhetoric at its best. A common approach was to quote from *The Narrative* at length without vouching for the accuracy.⁸ But biographer John Pell, whose 1929 *Ethan Allen* is still a useful work, quoted the entire stirring scene, while pointing out in an appendix that a play written three years before *The Narrative* “gives the interview with Prescott.”⁹

The play, termed a tragicomedy, was *The Fall of British Tyranny, or American Liberty Triumphant*, written in the winter of 1776 by John Leacock, a forty-six-year-old Philadelphia silver- and goldsmith, gentleman farmer, and prominent citizen, under the pen name Dick Rifle.¹⁰

A precursor of today's television docudramas, the play has no plot or character development and little action. Major British political figures appear under names that describe their roles—Lords Paramount, Mocklaw, Hypocrite, Catspaw, and Poltron—and they make speeches as they plan to subjugate the colonies. Defenders of liberty John Wilkes and Edmund Burke appear as Lord Patriot and Bold Irishman. Various characters describe Lexington and Concord, Bunker Hill, Arnold's march up the Kennebec River to Canada, and the disastrous American attack on Québec.¹¹

None of this makes for memorable theatre, but *The Fall of British Tyranny*, coming soon after Tom Paine's *Common Sense*, is a significant early work rallying Americans to the cause of liberty. It was the first American chronicle play, the first to represent Washington, and the first (or perhaps second) in a long line to find humor in a racist caricature of African Americans. The play was printed twice in Philadelphia and reprinted in Boston and Providence. Its history on stage is unclear, but it was well suited for dramatic readings by patriots. Late in the war, it was performed at Harvard.¹²

In Act V, Scene I, the captive Ethan Allen, who has not appeared previously, is brought before General Prescott, who demands to know his name, calls him a rebel, and then threatens to kill a number of prisoners. Allen says, "Cruel insult!—pardon these brave men!—what they have done has been by my orders—I am the only guilty person (if guilt there be) let me alone suffer for them all. [opening his breast] Here! take your revenge—Why do you hesitate?—Will you not strike a breast that ne'er will flinch from your pointed bayonet?" The short scene ends with Prescott threatening, "I'll reserve you for a more ignominious death—your fate is fix'd."¹³

The next scene is set in a dungeon where Allen rails against the injustice of his imprisonment. "'Tis not death I fear—this is only bodily death—but to die noteless in the silent dark, is to die scorn'd, and shame our suff'ring country," he laments. An officer apologizes for having to follow orders, and Allen forgives his captors as his appearance on stage concludes.¹⁴

The similarity between Allen's *Narrative* and *The Fall of British Tyranny* is uncanny. But could Leacock have heard such an accurate report of events in Montreal that he was able to anticipate Allen's memoir? Does other evidence exist?

Later on the day of his surrender, Allen wrote a letter to Prescott. "In the wheel of transitory events, I find myself prisoner, and in irons," he wrote. He told Prescott that after the capture of Ticonderoga he treated the captured British officers "with every mark of friendship and generosity" and concluded, "I expect an honourable and humane treatment, as an officer of my rank and merit should have."¹⁵

That was the unsettled issue early in the war. Were captured American military leaders to be treated as criminals, or were they officers and gentlemen deserving of respect? Allen was one of the first important American prisoners, so he was a test case and more than his neck was at stake.

In late October, Allen was taken from Montreal to Québec and then on the *Adamant* sent to England, but Americans had little news of his situation. On November 7, Levi Allen, one of Ethan's five younger brothers, sent old news to General Schuyler that Ethan was "in Irons on board the Gaspary brig before Montreal."¹⁶ Schuyler in turn passed the news to Washington of the "shameful Brutality" with which Allen and Thomas Walker, a Montreal merchant who took the American side, had been treated.¹⁷

On November 19, Prescott surrendered a British fleet of eleven sails to Colonel James Easton and Major John Brown, who were stationed at Sorel on the St. Lawrence. Humiliated by the haste of his surrender, Prescott was now a bargaining chip. On December 18, prompted by the Continental Congress, George Washington wrote to Major General William Howe, the British commander in America, protesting that Allen had been "treated without regard to decency, humanity, or the rules of War." Washington threatened, "whatever Treatment Colonel Allen receives—whatever fate he undergoes—such exactly shall be the treatment & Fate of Brigadier Prescott, now in our hands."¹⁸

By the New Year, Prescott was as far south as Kingston, New York, and Congress sent orders to Schuyler to confine him. "We did not order the Prisoner into Irons because it is not quite certain how Allen is treated," noted Congressman Richard Smith of New Jersey in his diary. Prescott arrived in the capital on January 24, 1776, and the next day a congressional committee interviewed him and heard claims that he was following orders from Governor-General Guy Carleton. Lt. Colonel Edward Antill of the Continental Second Canadian Regiment also met with the committee and accused Prescott of "great Malevolence & bad Behavior to our People." Congress confined Prescott in the city's common jail.¹⁹

Meanwhile, Levi Allen interviewed British prisoners in New England, hoping to find witnesses who would swear that Ethan had been

mistreated. Most feared retaliation and therefore wouldn't help, Levi concluded, although one, under some duress, finally signed an affidavit that Ethan had been put in irons.²⁰ Levi assumed that his brother was transported to England, but it was well into February before he learned through Washington that there was "little doubt" that was what had happened.²¹

But none of this has anything to do with Ethan Allen's or Leacock's accounts of the surrender. Prescott's dishonorable behavior was in imprisoning Allen in irons like a common criminal and in imprisoning Walker and burning his house and property. It was an age that reveled in and embellished the moment of surrender for what it told about the vicissitudes of life and about the nobility or baseness of those who were victor or vanquished. But in no account is there even a reference to *noble Allen* or something similar, which might imply knowledge of untold heroics.

As soon as Prescott was ordered to the common jail, Congress began to relax the terms of his imprisonment, allowing him first a servant and the care of physicians, then pen and ink and visits from fellow officers. In less than a week, based on the testimony of leading doctors that the damp jail was harmful to a wound suffered at Fontenoy, "he was indulged with Liberty to take Lodgings in the City Tavern." When Smith, Sam Adams of Massachusetts, and James Wilson of Pennsylvania visited Prescott in mid-March, they found him "open & free," explaining that he had only been following orders and complaining that his own property had been plundered after the surrender to Eastman and Brown.²²

By early April, congressional interest in Prescott began to fade, and when the Committee for Prisoners recommended that he and four others be removed to the old city jail, the action was indefinitely postponed.²³ In September, Prescott was exchanged for General John Sullivan, who had been captured at the Battle of Long Island.

Leacock's play was completed early in Prescott's imprisonment when interest in his villainy was running high. Word of the American defeat before Québec reached the capital a week before the general's arrival and appears in the play; the British evacuation of Boston on March 17, 1776, does not.²⁴

Leacock was a propagandist, not a historian or journalist. In the news that reached Philadelphia, he recognized the barest outline of a story—the hero of Ticonderoga had been mistreated by a tyrant, whose name was now familiar in Philadelphia—but he didn't know or care about the details. In the play Allen heads a scouting detachment and is thrown into a dungeon. Like the rest of *The Fall of British Tyranny*, these scenes are fiction, designed to inspire and outrage patriots.

After a few weeks in England, Allen was sent back to America. From early May 1776 well into the fall, as a shipbound prisoner, he was taken from the Carolinas to New York to Halifax and back to New York, where he was finally paroled.²⁵ By then *The Fall of British Tyranny* was in circulation, and he might have read it while on parole on Long Island. Remarkably, it is even possible that he first learned of the play at Valley Forge, where he traveled after his exchange in May 1778. That spring officers entertained themselves with plays in the bakehouse. Addison's *Cato* was presented outdoors on May 11, the day after Allen's departure.²⁶ "How very likely it seems that *The Fall of British Tyranny* also shared the spring playbill," concluded a scholar who studied Leacock in the 1950s but had no interest in Allen.²⁷

There is a hint that Allen may have seen a performance, or at least had one vividly described. The business with the human shield and the Indian is absent from the few stage directions (and could in fact have nothing to do with *The Fall of British Tyranny* and be an actual incident or an Allen tall tale), but it is easy to imagine actors clowning to the delight of the audience.

The play depicted Allen as one of the great American heroes. In the final scenes, generals Washington, Israel Putnam, and Charles Lee learn of Richard Montgomery's death at Québec and pledge to continue the struggle. Putnam, who was considered old but turned fifty-eight in January 1776, has the last word: "I join you both, and swear by all the heroes of New-England, that this arm, tho' fourscore and four [*drawing his sword*] still nervous and strong, shall wield this sword to the last in support of liberty and my country, revenge the insult offer'd to the immortal Montgomery, and brutal treatment of the brave Allen."²⁸

In *The Fall of British Tyranny*, Leacock imagined a few moments of Allen's life, and Ethan saw no reason to contradict a playwright who had made him a hero, and so he incorporated Leacock's scenes into his own memoir. In fact, he improved upon the drama, for he was the better writer. Leacock's Allen is a wooden, conventional hero; Allen's Allen bites the heads off nails.

NOTES

¹ Ethan Allen, *A Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen's Captivity* (Philadelphia: Robert Bell, 1779), as reprinted in J. Kevin Graffagnino, ed., *Ethan and Ira Allen: Collected Works* (Benson, Vt.: Chaldize Publications, 1992), 2: 1–51. *The Fall of British Tyranny: or, American Liberty Triumphant* (Philadelphia: Styner and Cist, 1776), as reprinted in Norman Philbrick, ed., *Trumpets Sounding: Propaganda Plays of the American Revolution* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1972), 57–134.

² Allen, *Narrative*, 9.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11–12.

⁶ T.D. Seymour Bassett, “Vermont’s Nineteenth-Century Civil Religion,” *Vermont History* 67 (Winter/Spring 1999) 1–2: 42–47.

⁷ Philip Schuyler to John Hancock, 5 October 1775, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* (Washington: U.S. Navy Department, 1966), 2: 306; George Washington to Philip Schuyler, 26 October 1775, *The Papers of George Washington: Revolutionary War Series* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), 2: 239. John Jay to Alexander McDougall, 17 October 1775, *Letters of Delegates to Congress: vol. 2, September 1775–December 1775* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1977), 199.

⁸ For examples, Charles Miner Thompson, *Independent Vermont* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942), 227, tells the Indian story at length but omits Allen’s bared breast; Charles A. Jellison, *Ethan Allen: Frontier Rebel* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1969), 158–159, leaves out the Indians, but quotes the entire confrontation with Prescott; and John J. Duffy, ed. with Ralph H. Orth, J. Kevin Grafagnino, Michael A. Bellesiles, *Ethan Allen and His Kin: Correspondence, 1772–1819* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1998), 1: 53, retells the meeting with Prescott in a note with extensive quotes but little comment.

⁹ John Pell, *Ethan Allen* (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1929), 119–121, 296.

¹⁰ Francis James Dallett, Jr., “John Leacock and *The Fall of British Tyranny*,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 78 (1954): 456–475.

¹¹ *The Fall of British Tyranny*, Philbrick, ed., *Trumpets Soundings*, 57–134. “Introduction to *The Fall of British Tyranny*,” *ibid.*, 41–56.

¹² Dallett, “John Leacock,” 467–468.

¹³ *The Fall of British Tyranny*, 121–122.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁵ Ethan Allen to Richard Prescott, 25 September 1775, Duffy, ed., *Ethan Allen and His Kin*, 52–53.

¹⁶ Levi Allen to Philip Schuyler, 7 November 1775, Duffy, ed., *Ethan Allen and His Kin*, 53.

¹⁷ Schuyler to Washington, 28 November 1775, *Papers of George Washington*, 2: 453–455.

¹⁸ Washington to William Howe, 18 December 1775, *ibid.*, 2: 575–576.

¹⁹ “Richard Smith’s Diary,” *Letters of Delegates to Congress, vol. 3, January 1–May 1, 1776*, Paul H. Smith, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1977), 20, 148, 154.

²⁰ Levi Allen to Washington, 27 January 1776, Duffy, ed., *Ethan Allen and His Kin*, 55–56.

²¹ Robert H. Harrison to Levi Allen, 9 February 1776, *ibid.*, 56–57.

²² “Richard Smith’s Diary,” 167, 185, 204.

²³ *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789*, Worthington C. Ford, ed. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1906), 4: 261–262.

²⁴ Dallett, “John Leacock,” 467.

²⁵ Jellison, *Ethan Allen*, 162–173.

²⁶ Thomas Clark Pollock, *The Philadelphia Theatre in the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1933), 36–38.

²⁷ Dallett, “John Leacock,” 469.

²⁸ *The Fall of British Tyranny*, 131.