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God Save Benedict Arnold: The True Story of America's Most Hated Man

By Jack Kelly (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2023, pp. 306, cloth, $29.00).

In the earliest biography of Benedict Arnold, published in 1835 by Jared Sparks, the traitor had no redeeming characteristics. It was said that as a boy he scattered broken glass in the road where children walked barefoot to school. Even his heroism at the Battle of Saratoga was dismissed: "[His] conduct was rash in the extreme, indicating rather the frenzy of a madman, than the considerate wisdom of an experienced general" (Sparks, *The Life and Treason of Benedict Arnold*, p. 118). By the end of the nineteenth century, however, reputable historians were crediting Arnold with saving the American cause on Lake Champlain in 1776 and with winning the Battle of Saratoga in 1777, the turning point of the American Revolution. Since then, a steady stream of historians, biographers, novelists, playwrights, and filmmakers have sought to correct the misconception that Arnold was nothing more than a traitor. Some have taken extreme positions in praising his heroism or in explaining his treason.

God Save Benedict Arnold by Jack Kelly is the most recent contribution to this ongoing discussion. Kelly's many earlier books include *Band of Giants: The Amateur Soldiers Who Won America's Independence* (2014) and *Valcour: The 1776 Campaign That Saved the Cause of Liberty* (2021). In an author's note to *God Save Benedict Arnold*, he writes, "Perhaps the time has come for us to take another look at one of the most vital and paradoxical figures in our history" (p. xii).

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Kelly writes an exciting brand of history for readers who are new to a subject and do not want the story slowed by contradictions or confusing details. Most of his account is drawn from earlier biographies, including quotations from original letters, memoirs, and journals. The two chapters on the 1775 trek up Maine's Kennebec River, across the divide between the Atlantic Coast and the St. Lawrence River, and down the Chaudière to Québec are an exception. For source material, Kelly relied upon historical novelist Kenneth Roberts's carefully edited compilation of primary sources, *March to Quebec: Journals of the Members of Arnold's Expedition* (1946). For once, we are closer to hearing about events firsthand.

While introductory history plays an important role in informing readers, the question must be asked, how much simplification has taken place to create a straightforward narrative? For those of us interested in the history of Vermont, the answer must be *far too much*.

Arnold clashed with Ethan Allen as they grudgingly cooperated to seize Fort Ticonderoga. Typically, Allen's biographers give him most of the credit, while Arnold's biographers stress his more disciplined leadership. Kelly has little positive to say about Allen and his men, whom he calls "Allen's hooligans" (p. 17). Vermont readers do not have to put Allen on a pedestal to think that Kelly has done him an injustice.

At the siege of Québec in the winter and spring of 1776, Arnold was overall commander of Seth Warner's regiment, sometimes called the Green Mountain Boys. As smallpox swept through the army, Warner permitted, perhaps encouraged, inoculation, a primitive method of lessening the disease's severity. Arnold banned the procedure, blamed Warner and his men, then later ordered the army to inoculate and was overruled by a major general. Although the smallpox epidemic is key to understanding the American defeat in Canada, Kelly says little about the disease and omits the controversy with Warner entirely. The issue is especially relevant today, following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Arnold was part of the council that decided to fortify Mount Independence in Orwell. Briefly, he commanded the First Brigade at the northern end of the rocky peninsula and then drafted hundreds of men from the Mount to serve in the fleet that fought at Valcour Island. After the defeat at Valcour, some 13,000 troops manned the lines at Ticonderoga and Mount Independence, making any further advance by the British that fall impossible.

But in Kelly's book there is not a single reference to Mount Independence—or to the strength of the fortifications on both sides of the lake, built by men who labored through the summer and fall while facing dysentery and ague. Almost alone, we are told, Arnold turns back the British. (Disclosure: this reviewer is on the board of the Mount Independence Coalition, the friends group that supports the state historic site. Kelly lectured at the Mount in 2016.)

All biographers face the difficult task of keeping the focus on one person while respecting the lives of others. Too often in Kelly's narrative, however, Arnold seems to be the only figure on stage. When others appear, they are motivated by "envy," "caprice," and "outright malice" (p. 162).

Although Kelly does not always give a reader enough details to make an informed judgment, he himself has read widely, and the final two chapters, which examine Arnold's character, are thoughtful. Why did Arnold, who has appeared as a patriotic hero throughout much of the book, commit treason? Was it greed, the influence of his young wife, mistreatment by the Continental Congress and jealous officers, a mistrust of the French Alliance, a wish to end the war? Was he a "blackguard" all along (p. 257)? Kelly concludes, "It was a visceral impulse, not the product of careful reasoning. It was an act based on intuition rather than calculation. It was the final improvisation of his impassioned life" (pp. 259-60).

Readers may be intrigued by the title *God Save Benedict Arnold*, which suggests that an American patriot upon hearing news from Canada, Lake Champlain, or Saratoga wrote the words that are so surprising today. But the seeming quote is contrived. Kelly imagines what might have happened if Arnold had been granted an American naval command in the spring of 1780, the year of his treason. In Kelly's alternative history, as patriot Captain Arnold sails into New Haven after a long voyage, "his fellow citizens would have turned out to cheer and someone might have shouted, 'God save Benedict Arnold!'" (p. 269).

Ennis Duling

Ennis Duling of East Poultney has written on the American Revolution for Vermont History*,* Historical New Hampshire*, and the* Journal of the American Revolution*. He is the author of* Thirteen Charges Against Benedict Arnold: The Accusations of Colonel John Brown Prior to the Act of Treason *(2021) and co-author and co-editor of Strong Ground: Mount Independence and the American Revolution (2017).*

Townsend's Folding Globe: A World in Letters from Gold Rush California by Dennis Townsend, Educator and Inventor

By Elaine Zorbas, editor (Plymouth, CA: Mythos Press, 2023, pp. xviii, 162, paper, $18.50).

Out-migrated Vermonters figure prominently in Vermont history and Vermont historiography. This new volume, edited by Californian Elaine Zorbas, tells the story of Vermonter Dennis Townsend, his migration to Gold Rush-era California, and the life he spent there. Born in Reading, Vermont, to a large family, Townsend grew up in financial insecurity but in a family that valued education. He left Dartmouth College before finishing and followed siblings to Ohio and elsewhere, living at times in Iowa, Mississippi, and Louisiana, before settling in Illinois, marrying, teaching school, and then heading to California.

The particulars of Townsend's early experiences in the California towns of Volcano and Fiddletown will not surprise anyone familiar with the boomtown expansion and growing pains of the gold-mining era. Goods and services (including religious services) were not always consistently available, but Volcano and Fiddletown were places for the ambitious; and while Townsend did try mining, he spent more time as a store clerk, postmaster, schoolteacher, violin player and seller, and daguerreotypist. His letters to family often mention the drinking and violence in his new community, aspects of his new home that he found jarring. Over time, Townsend's California towns evolved, and he consistently praised the climate, the abundant agricultural produce, and the effects of both on his health.

This book is an enjoyable read and will be appreciated by those who like social history at the granular level; the book is filled with the kinds of intimate and specific details found when using letters as source material, and Zorbas does a fine job contextualizing that specificity for her readers. Her footnotes add historical context, and she also explains when Townsend's penmanship was hurried, and when his wife added notes to the margins of the page, editorial comments that point out the incomplete nature of reading letters in transcription. We learn that Townsend had conflicted feelings about his balding head, that his overland journey had included a stay with Mormons,

and that he eagerly hoped for family back east to send updated daguerreotypes of themselves. Zorbas clearly explains the complications of the mail system in a new settlement without its own post office. Townsend instructed his relatives to send mail to Sacramento City fifty miles away, where it would be sent to Fiddletown via express. In one letter to his sister, Townsend referred to a letter from their brother who had moved first to Texas and then to Louisiana; that letter took four months to be delivered to Fiddletown, longer than it took letters to arrive from Vermont. To tell Townsend's story, Zorbas, who has previously published on Fiddletown, had to piece together surviving letters from at least two archives (the Vermont Historical Society being one) and earlier family histories.

Townsend's Folding Globe—the title of the book—enters the story toward the end. In the late 1860s, Townsend drew on years of teaching experience to design a six-inch foldable globe. He marketed the small paper globe as an affordable alternative to expensive classroom globes and, thus, an important learning tool for American students. Plans around the globe finally brought him back east, where he sourced materials and where his family supported his entrepreneurial effort; as one brother wrote to their mother, "I think Dennis has a splendid thing in the Globe" (p. 121). But despite obtaining a patent and networking with family to sell the globes on both coasts and in the Midwest, Townsend was ultimately unable to make a profit from the design. His final years back in California were spent in a return to teaching, in poor physical health, and in mental decline for which he was institutionalized. Although he died without realizing his dream for his globe, several of them still exist, including one at the Vermont Historical Society.

In reading Townsend's impressions of California at the point of American colonization, we are reminded of the scholarship of historians like Richard White, who have written about the West as a point of contact. Readers looking for more current interpretations of borders not as points of contact but as sites of colonization may be disappointed, though the letters at the heart of the volume would be rich sources for many kinds of historical analyses. Townsend found a diverse gathering of people in California. Especially interesting are his passing references to non-white people in California, including Indigenous tribes, Chinese immigrants, and Mexicans. Although Townsend understands those people from his perspective as a white easterner, his references to marginalized people who were affected by manifest destiny enrich Zorbas's book.

Readers of Vermont history who loved reading the letters that made up *Roxana's Children*, perhaps Vermont's best-known example of this genre, or readers who enjoy following the migratory impulse of the antebellum decades will find in *Townsend's Folding Globe* material that they will recognize even as it expands on and complements other works like it.

JILL MUDGETT

Jill Mudgett holds degrees in US history and American Studies, and has a lifelong interest in Vermont and Vermonters. She enjoys learning about Vermonters who have spent their lives in the state, and those who have outmigrated to new places.

"Vermont for the Vermonters": The History of Eugenics in the Green Mountain State

By Mercedes de Guardiola (Barre: Vermont Historical Society, 2023, pp. xvii, 263, paper $22.95).

The 1999 study of eugenics in Vermont, *Breeding Better Vermonters* by Nancy Gallagher, was a landmark in the state's historiography. Now comes this new volume by Mercedes de Guardiola that intends to account for, in the author's words, "the many other parts of the movement that came before and after" the Eugenics Survey of 1925 to 1936 (p. xii). The author especially seeks to resolve the question of why so many Vermonters embraced eugenics, particularly in the context of one of the nation's least-diverse states.

The book begins with an overview of the pervasive fears about rural depopulation that arose in mid-nineteenth-century Vermont. State leaders commonly perceived that rural decline was a problem not only of quantity but of quality, and established a host of programs and institutions to address problems that local welfare services could not handle. Among these were the Brattleboro Retreat (1832), the Vermont Reform School (1866), and the Vermont State Asylum for the Insane (1891). Chronically underfunded and tending to abusive conditions, these institutions were at best ineffective at resolving the problems they were designed to ameliorate, and at worst magnified them. Institutionalization could befall both children and adults for a variety of reasons, or for seemingly no reason at all. Boys tended to be committed for crimes, while girls were often institution-

alized for perceived sexual immorality. Same-sex relationships, too, could serve as justification for institutionalization.

The narrative then moves on to the campaign conducted during the gubernatorial term of John A. Mead, 1910-1912, to enact eugenics measures as public policy. Two of Mead's three solutions, marriage restriction and institutional segregation, already were practiced to some measure. The third, sterilization, was new. The subtext to Mead's campaign was the intense contempt that state leaders had for many rural Vermonters. Dr. Don D. Grout, superintendent of the Waterbury Hospital, wrote Mead in favor of sterilization and increased segregation, because "There are hundreds, probably thousands, in Vermont, who are simply 'breeding like rats' and whose progeny are, intellectually, morally, and socially worse than rats" (p. 33). A bill legalizing sterilization passed the General Assembly but was vetoed by Mead's successor, Allen M. Fletcher, on the advice of his attorney general. As with events recounted throughout the book, Mead's campaign is skillfully placed in its national and international context.

De Guardiola's account of the years between Mead and the founding of the Eugenics Survey of Vermont argues that the survey was not an isolated program provoked by a handful of people. It was instead the "inevitable" outcome of the ideology of state leaders and of the state's institutionalization policies (p. 81). The establishment of the Vermont State School for Feeble-Minded Children (Brandon School) in 1915 produced further institutional misery; some of the children were confined there not for anything they had done, but for crimes committed against them. The author traces this enthusiasm for eugenical segregation to a host of causes: class prejudice, ethnic and racial biases, and the perceived need to align the state with the pure image being marketed to tourists. Once institutionalized, patients were subjected not only to often cruel treatment, but also to a form of involuntary servitude. All the while, those responsible for Vermont's institutionalization policies believed they were acting out of the most enlightened, compassionate motives. According to this logic, sterilization could be a kind alternative to institutionalization. After all, if "defective" Vermonters could not bear children, there was less need to confine them. In 1928, a mixed-race teenage female was sterilized rather than institutionalized, a year after the state legislature had defeated a bill to legalize eugenical sterilization.

The middle section of the book is devoted to the Eugenics Survey of Vermont. This account of the program unearths new primary mate-

rial and takes a fresh look at some of those previously used and is a lively and interesting narrative that flows logically from the institutional history that precedes it. Class, ethnic, and racial prejudices remain at the forefront. The fieldwork performed by the Eugenics Survey was often profoundly flawed, tainted by gossip, rumors, racial and class biases, and a frequently profound misunderstanding by fieldworkers of the communities they were investigating. Those targeted by eugenicists were often "fundamentally misrepresented to demonstrate the worst possible conclusions" (p. 92). On the question of the supremacy of environment or heredity in the production of "degeneracy," the Eugenics Survey came down firmly on the side of heredity; the "better branches" of "degenerate" families were dismissed as mere "controls" (p. 98). The author steadfastly maintains that the Vermont Commission on Country Life as a whole, and not just portions of it, was eugenical in nature, and participants in it should be held to account, no matter their role on it.

Following passage of the sterilization law in 1931, the state conducted, according to the author's research, about 250 such procedures over the next two decades. More women than men were sterilized, despite the greater relative complexity of the procedure. A particular strength of the book is its effort to study the process from the point of view of those subjected to it. The terms of the law were that sterilizations needed to be voluntary. To acquire written consent, staff at the Brandon School followed a routine script in which inmates were asked leading questions or given vague or confusing explanations of what they were assenting to. One transcribed conversation in which a doctor prods a twenty-one-year-old woman to agree to the operation is utterly gut-wrenching. Another passage tells the story of a man at an adoption agency in 1945 whose wife had been sterilized at the age of fourteen without understanding what she was agreeing to.

Whereas *Breeding Better Vermonters* essentially concluded in the 1930s, de Guardiola's book takes the story of eugenics up to the present. There has been a public reckoning with Vermont's eugenics past in recent times, with buildings and awards being renamed, and the state legislature issuing a formal apology for the eugenics movement in 2021. The question of how the state should address the problems presented by its most severely mentally ill, however, has not been resolved. Deinstitutionalization has been the direction of mental health care since the 1940s, and the author believes it has gone too far. The community-based model that dominates mental health

services in the present, the author contends, "has largely failed" to address successfully the challenges faced by the severely mentally ill and disabled (p. 173).

Unsurprisingly, there is substantial overlap between the content of this book and *Breeding Better Vermonters*, but there is enough new material, and enough of a new sense of chronology, to make reading *"Vermont for the Vermonters"* a very rewarding experience. This book is a story of racial, ethnic, and above all cultural prejudices that victimized those being judged by unfair standards. The lesson of this excellent book is that, if Vermont is to have truly effective and humane mental health services, lawmakers and state officials must understand those in that system sympathetically on their own terms.

Paul Searls

Paul Searls is a professor of history at Vermont State University. He is currently writing a book about the controversy over rebuilding US Route 7 between Bennington and Rutland from the 1950s to the 1980s.