

Robert V. Sparks, "The Hinterland of Belief: The Revolutionary Correspondence of Edmund Quincy" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 10, No 1 (January 1982).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

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The Hinterland of Belief: The Revolutionary Correspondence of Edmund Quincy*

Robert V. Sparks

The central questions of any age are rarely intelligible without acquaintance with its intellectual foundations, with what William H. Greenleaf called the "hinterland of belief." Unfortunately, the ordinary opinions and notions of one generation, revealing but less often recorded, fade unobtrusively into those of a later day where they lose cohesion and relevance. The correspondence of Edmund Quincy (1703-1788) clearly documents two such "ordinary" opinions, which offer important insights into the development of a revolutionary mentality. These are, first, the belief that successive British ministries conspired to build in the American dependencies the same sort of political machine that effectively controlled the home constituencies. The second opinion was a fear that once operational that machinery would be used to corrupt the virtue of the American people. Real or imagined, such beliefs threatened two of the most cherished political paradigms of colonial Massachusetts - the ideal of a Puritan republic and the glorious Revolution of 1688. This paper does not attempt a broad explanation of the origins of the American Revolution or argue that Quincy's thinking was always valid. It offers illumination of one aspect of the eighteenth century world of ideas which compelled one educated and informed Massachusetts citizen to espouse the cause of resistance and rebellion.

Edmund Quincy was fourth of that name in line from the first Massachusetts Quincy, a dissenting Puritan who arrived in Boston September 4, 1633. He received his primary education at the Boston Latin School and was a member of the Harvard College class of 1722. Following graduation, he opened a dry goods business with his brother Josiah and brother-in-law Edward Jackson. They traded principally with the West Indies but remaining neighborly enough to procure books for Jonathan Edwards, a wig for Thomas Brattle, and silk stockings for John Adams.² The monotony and drudgery of shopkeeping, however, together with a penchant for lavish spending en-

^{*}This paper was presented at the Third Annual conference on the History of Massachusetts, held at Westfield State College on March 28, 1981.

couraged him to seek more immediate paths to success. One such venture was his participation, with nine partners, in organizing and directing an ill-fated silver bank scheme.³ Another was his abortive attempt to interest another brother-in-law, John Wendell, in a New Hampshire mining venture.⁴ Quincy also tried his hand in the international money market by speculating in provincial bills to the tune of £6,000 sterling, which he transferred to a London business partner for redemption at a favorable exchange rate. Had his timing been less favorable, Quincy might have ended his days in jail.⁵



"Edmund Quincy, from the Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society"

If he did not become rich as a result of his mining and currency schemes, Quincy need not have worried. A 1748 letter from his London business partner brought news he had eagerly awaited; a ship belonging to the firm of Quincy, Quincy, and Jackson had captured an armed Spanish treasure ship. In the hold of the Jesus Maria y José were one hundred and sixty-one chests of silver and two of gold. Quincy's share amounted to \$100,000, which enabled him to retire to a life of ease and leisurely enjoyment.⁶

But though he dined and moved freely among Boston's mercantile elite, Quincy discerned signs that boded ill for the future of Massachusetts and its traditions of independence and self-government. While some of his associates — Thomas Cushing, John Hancock, James Otis, Edward Payne, and Ezekiel Price — founded the Society for Encouraging Trade and Commerce Within the Providence of Massachusetts Bay, in opposition to British imperial regulations, Quincy's concern ran deeper. In the actions of successive British ministries he perceived a deliberate design to export to Massachusetts the worst political practices of Georgian England — bribery, peculation, and construction of a political machine to control and silence all opposition. In a 1739 pamphlet he had written to denounce the illegal arrest of two Massachusetts citizens, Quincy wrote:

To extend the Governor's Right to Command, and Subjects Duty to obey, beyond the Laws of One's Country, is Treason against the Constitution, and Treachery to the Society whereof we are Members: And to dissolve the ties by which Princes stand confined, and overthrow the Hedges, by which the reserved Rights, Privileges, and Properties of the Subjects are fenced about, tempts every Prince to become a Tyrant, and to make all his Subjects slaves.⁹

Of the actions of British administrations which condoned such behavior he concluded: "It is mean and smells of the dunghill." 10

Throughout the next two decades Quincy remained skeptical of the Royal establishment and vigilant of their every move. Not until 1765, however, did their actions take on the character of a direct assault on American liberty and virtue. He was among the first to openly question the wisdom and constitutionality of the Stamp Act but believed that widespread opposition had ended all efforts to raise such revenues in the colonies. Equally disturbing was the suggestion that Massachusetts assume responsibility for part of the American military establishment, estimated to cost £400,000 sterling. Quincy flatly rejected voting such appropriations and warned that a standing army was itself a violation of the English constitution.¹¹

Encouraged by repeal of the Stamp Act, Quincy viewed with renewed alarm the passage of the 1766 Declaratory Act, which reaffirmed Parliament's right to tax her American dependencies. A year later, following passage of the Townshend Act with its duties on lead, glass, tea, and other articles of merchandise, he favored resistance. With other Boston merchants he refused to



"Stamp Act Protest, from Antique Views of Boston, 1901."

import or consume any and all goods taxed under the new legislation. At the same time he acted as an agent for the group in soliciting signers to these non-importation and non-consumption agreements. For a year and a half he actively campaigned to keep the movement alive and amidst disintegration of colonial unity warned Americans that if they relaxed their guard "the Dreadful Hydra, Despotism will drop its mask." 12

By May of 1768 Quincy had his first glimpse of the "Dreadful Hydra." In that month two armed schooners and the fifty-gun warship *Romney* arrived from Halifax. Emboldened by this show of strength, the Boston Customs

Board ordered John Hancock's sloop Liberty seized for falsifying its manifest. For his part Hancock announced in the Massachusetts House that customs officials boarded his vessels at their peril. The drama reached a climax on the evening of June 10th when the Liberty was actually seized. When a detachment from the Romney subsequently cut the moorings and towed the ship under the protection of its guns, a mob turned out and roughly handled the Customs officers. The introduction of naval power to intimidate Bostonians convinced Quincy that a dark conspiracy was on foot. 13 The landing of British regiments in Boston later that year provided further evidence of conspiracy; Quincy's near death at their hands confirmed his worst fears. On July 13, 1769, Ionathan Winship of Cambridge appeared before Justice of the Peace Quincy to initiate a charge of assault against Private John Riley of the Fourteenth Regiment of Foot. As expected, a warrant was issued for the grenadier's arrest and he was subsequently fined five shillings for his offense. The case seemed routine enough and when Riley pleaded insolvency, Quincy allowed him twenty-four hours to raise the money.14

The following afternoon Riley appeared once again but encouraged by his superior officer, refused to pay. Quincy promptly ordered him off to jail, whereupon the soldier slashed and wounded a constable and bolted into the street. Unwilling to allow his prisoner to escape, Quincy dashed after him only to find himself confronted by "the hostile appearance of...about 20 Grenadiers and other soldiers, many if not most of them, armed with cut-lasses, swords and other instruments of death." The aged Justice stood his ground and ordered the soldiers to their barracks. Both sides stubbornly refused to yield; passersby waited nervously for the shot that would commence a riot and possibly civil war. After a short time the troops fortunately marched off. Confident he had done his duty, Quincy retreated to the safety of his office, more convinced than ever of the workings of an evil plot to employ the military to silence political opposition. Had he acted more precipitantly, Quincy might well have been the first martyr of the American Revolution. 15

The actual shooting of five Bostonians on March 5, 1770 was additional proof of the degree to which the British Ministry was willing to go to subvert the liberties of Massachusetts — or so Quincy viewed the "massacre." Although not directly involved, he remained intimately informed of the progress of the case. His nephew, Samuel Quincy, as Solicitor General of the province undertook prosecution of the soldiers, while another nephew, Josiah Quincy agreed to conduct their defense in collaboration with yet another Quincy kinsman, John Adams. To Quincy the incident closely paralleled the "massacre" at London's St. George's Field in May, 1768, at which time British troops fired on an overly enthusiastic crowd assembled to support recently jailed popular hero John Wilkes. ¹⁶

In July 1772 Lord Hillsborough transferred responsibility for Massachusetts judicial salaries from the General Court to the British treasury. 17 Here again, Quincy discerned reason for alarm. He warmly applauded the estab-

lishment in November of a Boston Committee of Correspondence to organize local opposition.¹⁸ Two months later the British Ministry opened discussions with the East India Company which resulted in allowing them to export tea directly and more cheaply to the colonies. The tax on tea levied in 1767, however, remained in force. Quincy thought this a transparent ploy to force unconstitutional taxes down the throats of Americans. To fellow "patriots" he suggested renewed non-importation and non-consumption of the "otherwise innocent herb," especially among females, he explained, "from whence may fairly be argued that the resolution of the other sex must be invincible."¹⁹

By 1773 conspiracy and corruption had become the twin measures by which Ouincy interpreted all actions of the British administration. As a result, the spectacle of £90,000 worth of East India Company tea floating in Boston harbor did not trouble this Yankee trader. "We are fighting a good fight," he declared, "We ought not to hesitate. The preservation of our rights and liberties is worth every peril we can endure." Unless concerted action was taken, he wrote, "worse things than stopping up an American Port - will very soon be heard of."20 On December 22, 1773, ten years after he had proclaimed the American colonies at the pinnacle of their glory, he found them suffering under a "Total Eclipse."21With British troops everywhere in evidence throughout the city, Quincy pronounced the drift toward war irreversible. In the extralegal meetings of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, convened to oppose Parliamentary legislation aimed at isolating and punishing Boston for the destruction of the East India Company tea, he found actions worthy of the times. "No time is to be lost," he advised, "there's no according with Despotism." Writing to his daughter Katy, he boasted: "Administration do your best!!! - We are ready to seal our righteous oppugnation with our blood! — & as the blood of the martyrs proved formerly the seed of the church, so American blood, must prove the perennial seed of American Liberty."22

The events of April 19, 1775 Quincy greeted as a "Blessed mistake," the inevitable climax to years of unwise and illegal Ministerial actions. Not permitted to leave Boston until Saturday the twenty-seventh, he carried with him all that could be conveniently removed to Lancaster in Worcester County, where his son-in-law William Greenleaf lived. Able to sit for long periods without interruption, he devised a most compelling explanation of the origins of the American crisis. On September 30, 1775 he asked himself this simple question: "What cause can be assigned for such an unheard of, strange and unnatural, as well as impolitic and distracted project?" The answer, he concluded, was a single word — conspiracy. And what was the source of the conspiracy? American representatives of the Royal administration, he theorized, who, following the example of Sir Robert Walpole, sought to perpetuate political power through fraud, graft, bribery, and peculation.²³

In his capacity as public official in Boston and Braintree, Quincy readily understood the need for ever-increasing revenues, whether for the poor rolls, repair of public highways, or the recruitment and supply of a military expedition. Similarly, as a merchant he had first hand knowledge of the temptations

toward private use of public power. Did he not try to employ family connections to obtain New Hampshire lands? True enough, but there was one crucial difference. Quincy's fortune was built through honest trade, speculation, and the fortunes of war; he accepted all risks and when his firm bankrupted in 1758, he accepted the consequences. British representatives of the Crown, he argued, long before his financial reverses, risked public funds for private ends and used political office to cover their offenses. To an intensely religious, conservative man, who reasoned that men of wealth and learning should rule in the interest of those less fortunate, this amounted to a betrayal of their right to leadership. Their example alone, in time, would erode the Puritan virtues of honor, benevolence, and patriotism.²⁴

Quincy thus attributed the decline in public virtue in eighteenth century Massachusetts to an organized imperial scheme to deflower the American colonies. He feared less that a Charles I or a James II might suddenly arise and seize power than that public office was being used to introduce corruption and acquiescence to British policy. In letters written at Lancaster he expanded and clarified these conspiratorial origins of the American Revolution. The plot was first advanced by Lord Bute, he maintained, and was later matured by Lord North and his "Junto" at Carleton House. The insatiable corruption of these men directed their attention to the American colonies, which owing to the richness of their resources and the weakness of their defenses, looked particularly ripe for the picking. As early as 1760, Quincy believed, these "evil counsellors" embarked upon the two-fold scheme of compelling submission and extracting riches. 25

It is in this correspondence that one finds a classic statement of the progress of the American mind from resistance to rebellion. The lasting value of the letters is not their wild, conspiratorial exaggerations or their Whig philosophizing, but rather their illumination of the eighteenth century hinterland of belief, the detailed step by step classification and identification of those events which from 1763 to 1775 convinced a large segment of the educated, informed Massachusetts citizenry that the home government had become an enemy of the people. This disaffection constitutes what John Adams characterized as "the real American Revolution," completed before the events of April 19, 1775 and July 4, 1776. ²⁶

Read for the first time or considered apart from the eighteenth century hinterland of belief, these letters may appear the crack-pot ravings of an idle man. Assessed within an eighteenth century perspective, they assume a different character. To educated English and American gentlemen, such as Edmund Quincy, conspiracy and corruption were not only common historical fare, but a functional part of recent English politics. Quincy had extensively read and studied classical authors, particularly Cicero, Sallust, and Tacitus. In the fall of the Roman republic he found the same luxury, venality, and corruption which he believed perverted the English constitution in America.²⁷ At other times he drew upon medieval precedents, as when he likened British customs and military officials to the Norman invaders of England — "Locusts

of the times...who...suckt the Sweets of every flower, left destroyed both root and branch."²⁸ Another frequently employed analogy was Dutch resistance to Spanish tyranny. "King Philip and George the Third," Quincy wrote daughter Katy, "have engaged in an equally unjust design."²⁹ As for evidence in recent English politics, one need only mention Titus Oates and the Gunpowder Plot, the intrigues surrounding the court of James II, or the Glorious Revolution itself, the greatest and most successful of all English conspiracies.³⁰

The point to be stressed is that as the Revolution neared, Quincy became not only increasingly influenced by his interpretation of the past — where he found ample evidence of the workings of corruption and conspiracy — but also dependent upon it. If, he postured, an enlightened public refuses to act in defense of its liberties, then tyranny will prevail. The past thus became a contemporary determinant. "The Freedom of antient *Rome*," he reminded John Hancock, "continued till public and private virtue were nearly expired." And in a revealing passage in his commonplacebook Quincy wrote:

The Romans were originally, a hardy, rough, robust warlike, industrious people. From their industry and hardiness, they grew powerful, from being powerful they grew rich; from their riches they grew luxurious and vicious; and from a long course of vice and luxury, they degenerated still further into the most scandalous corrupt & the most abandoned profligacy, till at last their degeneracy...brought them to Slavery & ruin.³²

As events moved toward the final confrontation, Quincy consciously poured through the works of Locke, Grotius, Burlamaqui, and Montesquieu for evidence of justified resistance to lawful authority.33 From Locke he extracted "power delegated (is) always revocable...this is and ever was the Fundamental constitution of every well-ordered Civil State."34 In the political writings of Grotius he learned that "a person is obliged to obey his father in all things, yet he is not to obey him, when his commands are of such a nature that he ceases thereby to be a father."35 There is no doubt that Quincy substituted here George III for the father and the American colonies as the children. He also copied and quoted the following exhortation from the works of Burlamaqui: "It is high time to think of their safety and to take proper measures against their sovereign when they find that all his actions manifestly tend to oppress them."36 There is also to be found in a large, bold hand the following excerpt from Montesquieu: "All power is derived from the people - their happiness is the End of government."37 And finally, after a long discussion of the duties of rulers and the evils of government, Quincy copied the following passage into his notebook:

if the Sovereign should push things to the last extremity so that his tyranny becomes insupportable, it appearing evident that he has formed a design to destroy the liberty of the subject, then they may rise against him, and deprive him of the Supreme power.³⁸

A partial explanation of Edmund Quincy's paranoid style, then, lay in his

A partial explanation of Edmund Quincy's paranoid style, then, lay in his dependence on the past for guidance and his willingness as a result to cast royal officials in the role of tyrants and usurpers. Thirty years before the opening of the American Revolution, he offered the voters of Massachusetts this solemn warning: "Tyranny, like the Palsy, always first attacks the extreme parts of the body, but never leaves it, 'till it has got possession of the Heart." By 1775, he reasoned, a half century of conspiracy and corruption — like the palsy — had weakened the virtues of Puritan Massachusetts and those liberties won at the Glorious Revolution of 1688. To someone intensely concerned with the future of free government and witness to the actions of British ministries since the 1720s, there appeared incontrovertible proof that a monstrous plot was on foot. Filtered through the lessons of the past, in which there were to be found consistent, rational patterns, the events after 1765 provided a logic for rebellion, a logic which led loyal American subjects such as Edmund Quincy along the road from resistance to revolution.

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