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II

Turncoats, Traitors, & Heroes: Espionage in the American Revolution

By John Bakeless



Reviewed by Aaron M. Spence '07

Researchers, university students, and hobbyists of the American Revolution and the era in which it is set have made records of information pertaining to the victory of the Continental Army in regards to leadership, strategy, and simply blind, dumb luck. Many seem to forget the importance that espionage networks factored into the colonists' victory. John Bakeless, former general intelligence officer during World War II, has not forgotten the rich history of espionage during the American Revolution. Bakeless presents his researched accounts of this topic in *Turncoats, Traitors, and Heroes: Espionage in the American Revolution*.

Bakeless's book tracks espionage networks from their inception and communal knowledge traits to their most advanced levels during the war. He points out extremely common examples for those not as well read in history as some professionals, but adds on to that many unknown cases. In addition, he places an emphasis on the plans that truly made espionage during the American Revolution unique, most notably the lack of technology used and specific tactics for recovering information.

Bakeless hints at three major themes throughout the book that makes it an interesting one to read. These include pointing out errors within the espionage networks themselves, showing how each agent who was caught made mistakes to explain what they could have done to prevent being caught, and what makes espionage at the time of the American Revolution so interesting. Benjamin Church is the first person encountered in this thrilling book and sets a relaxed tone in introducing a familiar character of the revolution.

Pointing out errors in "*Turncoats...*" seems to be what Bakeless enjoyed doing most when writing this book. Wit and parenthetical notes are often used to poke fun at some of the general problems that the spies encountered in this book. In addition to his side comments, he often analyzes the situation from all angles and openly expresses what

was wrong with it from a purely objection point of view. A prime example including both side comments and analyzing comments is found in the informative chapter on John Howe.

Having enemy agents or military catch an agent is the worst thing that could happen to a spy. Many people recognize this. A revelation of Church's identity came about because he had a mistress in another town and lived an extremely lavish lifestyle for such a debtor as he was. Bakeless places emphasis on how many captured agents there were and reveals how careless some agents really were in their pursuits.

Most interesting of all themes found in this book, Bakeless exposes those persons and techniques that truly evolved espionage and its networks during the American Revolution. To conjure up as much information as they did it is impressive to note that there was little to even no use of technology at the time. He goes into detail about Paul Revere and Old North Church, how it was unique, and expounds on the history of simple ideas like that which helped shape signaling within certain networks. Surprisingly, there were a number of double agents present during the American Revolution.

Many may wonder if there are any specific people in espionage that made these networks truly effective. Such a person did exist. He maintained the name of John Clark and served as a Major in the Continental Army for General Washington. Clark's dedication to securing an espionage network in the Philadelphia area is one of the major accomplishments that aided in Continental victory, especially during the British occupation of Philadelphia. Washington ran several agent networks in British-occupied Philadelphia. Major John Clark managed these networks, which used codenames such as "old lady" and "farmer" to describe individual agents. Lydia Darragh, acting as a lone agent, had members of her family carry information to Washington. Her social position gave her access to senior British officers, and her skills of elicitation resulted in reliable advance notice of British troop movements.

Reviewing this book has proved to be a rewarding experience for several major reasons. First, the topic of espionage during the American Revolution is not something normally covered in such detail. Average historically conscious people would not know much of this information and the unfolding of it in such a well-written piece was refreshing. Much of this information is only available to professional historians and those with the means to investigate so intensely the private papers of Gen. Clinton and of Gen. Gage. Bakeless takes that information, processes it and presents it in an easy-to-read manner for both the professional and the "average Joe." In addition, Bakeless was unbiased in his pursuit of information. He pulled from both British and American sources on espionage and treated each side's argument as fairly as possible. Even though there was more of a presence of American detail, the British segments had an overwhelming amount of revealed espionage information for such a "secretive" topic on foreign soil. Lastly, Bakeless wrote this book in a fashion that does not date it. Most authors use references and comparisons that relate the book to events that have occurred in the author's present; he does not do that. "*Turncoats...*" uses information related to the topic solely and does not compare anything to the time in which it was written: the late 1950s. The only items of events mentioned analogously were things that were found in the Revolutionary period.

One thing comes to mind when asked to reflect upon the shortcomings of such a great book as Bakeless's: infusion of personal opinion. In a very few places does he

come out and debase the Continental Army and the British Regular forces for not using the most effective means by which to operate the espionage networks that they had. It seems that he was reflecting on the technological advances and studies with which he had become familiar when he went into the service of the United States Army during World War II. A seasoned veteran would have a hard time separating personal ideas when writing a book of such an interesting nature that related to the former career of that said person.

Overall, the book was a great read. It read somewhat like *Paul Revere's Ride*, but had greater amounts of detail. Bakeless should receive many accolades for creating such a work that must become an addition to many reference libraries and college syllabi. Those who read this book will gain a much greater appreciation and understanding for the war of words and secrecy that takes place in any given war, and even be so impressed by the book that they actually continue to read about such an under-researched topic.

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