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BIAS:

OLIVER AND HEWES ON THE BOSTON MASSACRE AND THE BOSTON TEA PARTY

HISTORY 413

BY

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Bias—the personal perspectives and world views of a given person—is a constant in history. It compounded by those who retell and preserve history. Indeed, it is usually difficult to obtain pure, unbiased history. Bias, while not always easy to recognize, is usually more apparent when subjects are studied from differing points of view. Two men—a loyalist, Peter Oliver, and a patriot, George Robert Twelves Hewes—both gave accounts of the same two events: the Boston Massacre, and the Boston Tea Party, both of which occurred during the American Revolution. Their accounts, however, were very different from each other. It is the biases of these two men which made their accounts different, and ultimately a distortion of what truly happened.

As a loyalist chronicling the actions of a very anti-loyalist populace, Peter Oliver was bound to write about said events in a less than attractive light. His bias was easily spotted—the reference to the populace of Boston as a rabble of demons, for example, when he stated, by way of showing the general temperament of the citizenry, that the “daemonocratick thermometer” was just a few degrees shy of hitting the boiling point. i He also hinted that the notorious Faction (the head of the movement against English policies, presumably consisting of John Hancock and Samuel Adams, among others) used the Boston Massacre as an implement to gain leverage to their cause, to leap up righteously and proclaim that injustice had been done upon them. ii

In his account of the actual event, he very briefly mentioned what he perceived to be the impetus behind the mob—the shooting and killing of a young boy by a custom official some weeks before. iii The Bostonian force which gathered at the custom official’s house was a well-organized, well-planned force, and was not something that hadn’t been seen before in Boston. Indeed, he stated that the Bostonians, at every opportunity they could, annoyed and vexed the British soldiers stationed in the city, even though the soldiers were not directly harming them—their purpose was not to oppress the populace, but to restrain “the rabble from committing their accustomed outrages.” iv For the Boston Massacre, Oliver stated, the vexation was planned—Bostonians armed themselves with clubs before gathering at the custom official’s house, a clear indicator that the riot was not spontaneous. v

Another indicator of this was in the way it was carried out. According to Oliver, it was usual that “boys and negroes” would precede the actual rioters and make bonfires in the street, after which the mob whistle would be blown and the mob would come forth. vi It was the same group of boys and negroes which gathered at the house and began heckling the sentinel there. The rioters assembled quickly enough—by the time Captain Preston arrived on the scene, there were, by Oliver’s reckoning, somewhere around 400 or 500 rioters present—too large of a number to have assembled spontaneously. What’s more, they were well-armed with more than just clubs; they carried “brickbats, ice, oyster shells and broken bottle caps”. vii They rained these down upon Captain Preston’s men, all the while daring them to shoot. Oliver stated that, while one of the soldiers did indeed eventually shoot, Captain Preston had ordered the men not to shoot, and that a rioter had actually approached the soldier in question and tried to take his gun.vii

Oliver’s rendering of the incident strongly painted the British soldiers as victims acting rashly under pressure, and the rioters as overwhelming, violent instigators—not even a mob, per se, but an organized group of men with a definite agenda of provocation. From Oliver’s point of view, the British had been dealing with colonial agitation for quite some times—indeed, one might be inclined to believe it a miracle that no one had been shot sooner. The Boston Massacre, however, was not the only pre-Revolution event about which Oliver wrote, and definitely not the only one where his biases were clearly aligned with his king and with his country (at least, the country his king was in).

Oliver also provided an account of the Boston Tea Party. Again, his characterization of the denizens of Boston was not a kind one: they were “buzzing about in swarms, like bees, with every one their sting.” ix He was clearly of the opinion that the Bostonians were ready for a fight even before the tea arrived in the harbor. Oliver also flew his political colors with his characterization of the Faction calling a meeting in a church, where they proceeded to discuss the “most atrocious acts of treason and rebellion—thus, literally, ‘turning the House of God into a Den of Thieves’.” x He carried this religious theme further, stating that Massachusetts, for having perpetrated a crime like the Tea Party, possessed “the cunning of the serpent,” and that Samuel Adams and his followers would have been more than a match for an entire group of demons. xi

The main instances of treason and rebellion discussed in this section, the events of the Tea Party itself, were referenced as “deeds of darkness.” xii The Bostonians (a number of them dressed as Native Americans), under the lead of the Faction, went down to the dockyards and began cracking open the tea crates. He described many of the people stuffing their pockets with tea, and what was left being dumped into the water. He even provided what can only be construed as a sarcastic exaggeration by stating that some of the inhabitants of Boston wouldn’t eat any fish caught in the harbor after the Tea Party, as said fish had ingested the tea from the ships. xiii

Again, Oliver offered a portrayal of Bostonians as seditious, burglarious, nigh on satanic mischief-makers. His constant demoniac categorizing lends one to believe that he was, perhaps, not being completely straightforward in his account. This is also true of his exaggerative language, evident in the brief account of men not eating fish because they had ingested the tea. History, however, often times is remembered by numerous sources, and not all of the accounts on a subject may match.

George Robert Twelves Hewes was a shoemaker, living in Boston during the events precipitating the American Revolution. Hewes participated in several of these events, most famously the Boston Tea Party and the Boston Massacre. In the 1830s, roughly fifty years after the Tea Party and the Massacre had taken place, Hughes recalled the events for James Hawkes, who chronicled them accordingly. This is an important aspect to keep in mind, as time has a way of blurring the memory, for better or for worse. In addition to the effects of time, Hewes’ personal bias must also be taken into account. xiv

Hewes gave an account of the Boston Massacre. According to Hewes, the mob which was fired upon was not gathered or assembled before the incident, and did not converge on the spot with any sort of pre-manufactured decision in mind. The mob formed spontaneously, drawn by and argument between a barber’s apprentice and the sentinel of the house. The British officer who lived in the house, apparently, had gotten a shave from the barber’s apprentice and hadn’t paid him—the boy had come to demand that he do so. xv

Hawkes, who wrote down Hewes’ recollections, noted that while this particular bit about the barber’s boy is not present in other histories, there could be no doubt about its authenticity, as it came from a man who had actually been there. This is, of course, the very reason why it should be noted that this memory was recorded roughly fifty years after the incident. Yes, Hewes had been there—but he’s also had fifty years to replay the events over in his head, to forget things, to remember things differently. xvi

With this in mind, the next point of consideration—the behavior of Captain Preston—was interesting to note. According to Hewes, Preston demanded that the mob disperse. When they refused, he told them they would be fired upon—and the soldiers immediately did so. xvii

This account of the Boston Massacre painted the Bostonians in a somewhat righteous light—one of their own had been wronged, and they had gathered to support him. When they refused to give up their support, they were mercilessly gunned down. The organized, planned violence of Oliver’s rioters is absent here, as was the futile resolve of the British soldiers not to shed blood—in this account, they open fire almost immediately, without even trying to avoid bloodshed.

Hewes also gave an account of the Boston Tea Party. His bias could be initially seen, faintly, in the wording of one brief statement: “The Commanders [of the ships] declared that if the rebels, as they pleased to style the Bostonians…” xviii There was a barely perceptible emotion in those words—amused resentment, perhaps—at having been styled as a “rebel.” While he was being truthful—they were indeed being styled as rebels—it was an early red flag that Hewes might have worked his own personal feelings and biases into his memory of the event.

Something that stood out in this account of events was the constant interaction between the colonials and the British. The tea ships were surrounded by British war ships, which could have fired upon the tea ships at any given moment, had they been so inclined. Hewes also mentioned how he confronted the ship’s captain and demanded “the keys to the hatches and a dozen candles.” xix The captain, of course, was extremely obedient. xx

Hewes also mentioned two instances of Bostonians trying to steal some of the tea being destroyed. He described how this was frowned upon extensively—one man caught pocketing some of the tea was forced to run a “gauntlet through the crowd.” xxi  Another, older man was sent away, and kicked every so often (but not very much or very hard, in deference to his old age).xxii

Hewes’ account, though not as obviously biased as Oliver’s account, was still arguably the product of a man, and not of straightforward history. The constant British interaction—with the ships and captain—mades the Bostonians seem very brave indeed. Hewes in particular was made out to be somewhat of a tough, issuing orders to the ship’s captain. The instance of Bostonians not allowing people to pickpocket the tea contrasted wildly with Oliver’s account of most of the tea actually being pocketed by everyone, with only what was left over being dumped into the harbor. It does not seem very likely that the Bostonians (who were still at this time Englishmen who no doubt loved tea as much as every other Englishman) would pass up the opportunity to pocket duty-free tea.

Both Peter Oliver and George Robert Twelves Hewes gave accounts on two events of the American Revolution. Both accounts were highly biased—Oliver was a devout loyalist who could not have thought any worse about the anti-loyalist patriots, and the Hewes gave his account many decades after the Revolution ended, which also plugs the factor of old age in next to the preset factor of bias. Ultimately, therefore, one cannot know the exact truth—at least, not by reading only the accounts of these men. Both accounts possess parts that do not seem to be wholly credible—and still, both accounts possess parts that seem to be more credible than the other. The truth, ultimately, lies somewhere in between.

NOTES

iPeter Oliver, Peter Oliver’s Origin & Progress of the American Rebellion, ed. Douglass Adair and John A. Schutz, (Palo Alto, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1961), 87.

iiIbid., 88.

iiiIbid., 84.

ivIbid., 88.

vIbid., 88-9.

viIbid., 89.

viiIbid.

viiiIbid.

ixIbid., 102.

xIbid.

xiIbid., 102-4.

xiiIbid., 102.

xiiiIbid., 102-3.

xivJames Hawkes, A Retrospect of the Boston Tea Party, (New York: 1834), 38-32, Pennee Bender and others, “George Hewes’ Recollection of the Boston Massacre,” History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web, http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5825 (accessed March 1, 2011).

xvIbid.

xviIbid.

xviiIbid.

xviii George Hewes, “Eyewitness Account by George Hewes,” Boston Tea Party Historical Society, http://boston-tea-party.org/account-george-hewes.html (accessed March 1, 2011).

xixIbid.

xxIbid.

xxiIbid.

xxiiIbid.

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