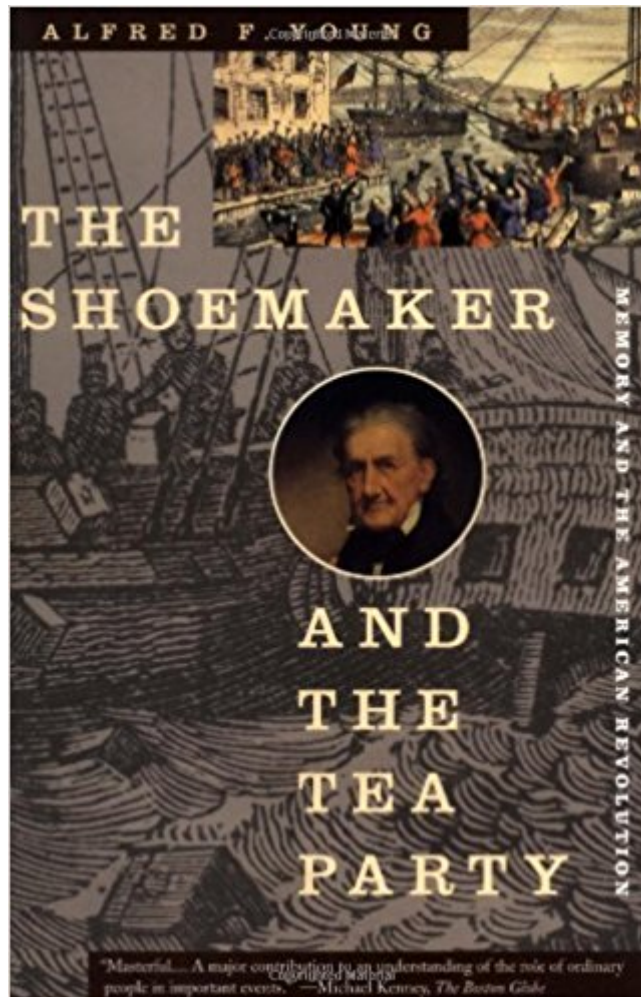


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The Shoemaker And The Tea Party: Memory And The American Revolution



Synopsis

George Robert Twelves Hewes, a Boston shoemaker who participated in such key events of the American Revolution as the Boston Massacre and the Tea Party, might have been lost to history if not for his longevity and the historical mood of the 1830's. When the Tea Party became a leading symbol of the Revolutionary era fifty years after the actual event, this 'common man' in his nineties was 'discovered' and celebrated in Boston as a national hero. Young pieces together this extraordinary tale, adding new insights about the role that individual and collective memory play in shaping our understanding of history.

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Customer Reviews

Similar to Howard Zinn's "People's History of the United States," Young's book views history through the eyes of a member of the "middling" class. The book is really two stories- the life of George Robert Twelves Hughes, a poor Boston shoemaker who was present at many famous events in Colonial Boston (as remembered by him); the second part presents the public's memory (e.g. why certain groups feel differently about certain events, how and why they came to be commemorated, etc.). Anyone interested in American history would enjoy this thought provoking contribution. It will make you think about where we the people feel the lines are to be drawn between protesting and revolting.

Alfred Young's book is a well-written example of how ordinary people shaped the Revolution.

History tends to limit itself to the "Great Men" of the time, but sometimes an ordinary person like George Robert Twelves Hewes finds himself recorded into history. In this case, Hewes just happened to outlive many of the others who fought in the Revolution, and his experiences managed to live on in two biographies written about him while he was still alive. But Hewes is only part of the story. The rest of the book details how certain events of the Revolution have been forgotten (or at least not celebrated) such as the tar-and-feathering of John Malcolm. Young's book is striking and poignant, and it is written in a curt manner. I would suggest this book to anybody who has an interest in the American Revolution.

As I get older, I get less & less likely to read those American History "survey" books than ever, and to find my solace in "little books" about real events that the historians use as a lever to explain, to explain intensely, a slice of the past. *The Shoemaker & the Tea Party* is just such a volume of interpretive history. The book consists of two historical essays, the first of which dredges everything we could possibly find out about the Shoemaker & his involvement in historical events ... the second which evaluates how the Tea Party has been viewed through history as different "powers" have had their hands on the rudder of historical interpretation. This book, like others about the early Republic, shows how our revolution was a profoundly conservative event, not an event that challenged the social structure of the colonies (except insofar as assets from the Tory elite were confiscated by the revolutionary elite). Although the revolution was made by both the elite & the workingman (tradesman & farmers), it was naturally the elite who chose to view & to institutionalize that view, historical events through their own eyes. The importance of social stability was paramount, hence the mob'ist origins of the revolution were downplayed or ignored. By the time this fellow, the Shoemaker, reemerged in the 1830s, the course of our American History writing about this topic was set in stone. The revolution was not a chaotic, angry event, but a smooth, patriotic one. This is a short book, a little pricey for its length, but well worth reading.

Young analyzes the ways the personal and public memory influence our present historical understanding of events like the Boston tea party, the American revolution, and its heroes. He makes clear that what is remembered and celebrated is by no means inevitable, but shaped both by memory and the shifting needs of society. The first half of the book is an account of shoemaker George Hewes' life and involvement in the Revolution, while the second unravels the shaping of historical memory. I found the second half to be both more "meaty" and interesting.

Young creates two essays; one that recalls George Robert Twelves Hewes participation in nearly every important event of the Am. Revolution, a sort of Forrest Gump of his time, and one that delves into the existence of historical memory- the true service of this book. Young relates the events of Hewes life through contemporary biographers who had on hand the last of the revolutionary warriors. Contemporaries, intent on justifying and embellishing the memory of the revolutionary fathers, left a clear track of what the people of 19th century America wanted to know and to believe about their forebearers. It matters little that it would have been extremely unlikely that Hewes was present at every event he recalled. That is Young's point. Sometimes, the story tells us as much about the historian and the market for his writing as it does about the event being recorded. Historical interpretation is recollection of events and placing them in context. Even immediately after an event, the eyewitness accounts vary. Today's historian may fall prey to superimposing current attitudes and values on prior events as those these are determinants. Young's Shoemaker is a valuable caution to interpreters of history.

An absolutely great book to read if you like pre-Civil War America. I personally ordered the book for my history class, but then as I read it, I got more and more interested in it. I was very pleased to have read the book, and I do not plan to spoil any parts of the book here, but I can assure you that this is a good history reference.

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