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Book Review by Richard Brookhiser

**HERO TRAITOR**

Yale University Press, 384 pages, $30

Pegasus Books, 336 pages, $27.95

"NEVER SINCE THE FALL OF LUCIFER has a fall equaled his," was the verdict of Nathanael Greene on his comrade-turned-traitor, Benedict Arnold. Arnold's 1780 defection to the British during the depths of the Revolutionary War seemed cosmic for several reasons. It was serious: Arnold's plot to give the enemy West Point, and thus control of the vital Hudson River corridor, could have aborted independence. It was shocking: before he switched sides, Arnold had been America's most brilliant tactician. Time has been unkind to him. Unlike the men in gray, Arnold has lacked regional or ideological apologists (most Americans who were active loyalists became Canadians).

Stephen Brumwell and Joyce Lee Malcolm are not pro-treason. But each tries to soften, as much as possible, Arnold's reputation. Brumwell, a prize-winning independent scholar, has written the more academic book: detailed, crisp. Malcolm, a professor at the Antonin Scalia Law School at George Mason University, writes warmly and passionately. They cover the appropriate ground, make no crazy claims, and acknowledge that their (anti-)hero had other options besides the one he fatally chose. But in the end, the reader must find Arnold guilty as charged.

Arnold was born in 1741 in Norwich, Connecticut, the son of a merchant. Benedict had a good early education and was bound for Yale College, but those plans had to be scrapped when his father succumbed to drunkenness and debt. Malcolm writes well of the effects of this family tragedy: "Benedict had the bitter disappointment of a sudden collapse of his hopes, coupled with public shame.... If he was to acquire personal honor after this deep disgrace, [he] would have to earn it himself."

The path to restored honor began in business. Arnold became first an apothecary and bookseller in New Haven, then a merchant, trading horses in Canada and sailing his own ships to the West Indies. His horse-trading made him familiar with upstate New York, where he would later lead troops. His merchant career included a duel in the Bay of
THE WEATHERMEN ON TRIAL: A BOMBshell STORY ABOUT
BRINGING THE WAR HOME
Calh Stewart Rossiter
256 pages $21.95
A Trump tweet starts an FBI investigation, leading to the arrest of an
aging professor for violent acts of protest in the 1970s: actual political
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Christina C. Waldman, J.D.
320 pages $25.95
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ful wavelength that makes the sophisticated lawyerly twists of the trial of Antonio v. Shylock and Portia’s impassioned plea for mercy so striking, as the scene shifts from a “law court” to “chancery court” presaging evolutions in the English legal system. She brings in a wealth of references to writers who have examined this play, and she adds countless exam-
iples of word-play along with intriguing possible historical precedents for names and symbols, add-
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Why! Brumwell and Malcolm sort through the traditional expla-
nations, besides Arnold’s political troubles. For years Arnold had resented the slowness with which he had been promoted. High rank in the American army often went to the well-connected. Arnold himself would claim, after his treason, to abhor the French alliance, on the grounds that France was abso-
lutist and Catholic (anti-Catholicism had not prevented him from trying to bring Catholic Canada into the Revolution, however). One traditional reason—Arnold’s marriage to his second wife Peggy Shippen, a young, high-
class Philadelphia beauty—is endorsed by Brumwell, who accepts the consensus view that she knew, and approved, of her husband’s defection. Peggy was one of those Philadel-
phians who had enjoyed the occupation; one of her British admirers was a dashing young officer, Captain John André. Malcolm acquires Peggy of precocious disloyalty. Her best argu-
ment, made by one of Arnold’s aides, is that Peggy was so given to hysterics that she was never told anything important.

Both authors downplay a reason empha-
sized by enraged Americans when Arnold’s treason was fresh—greed for gain (anti-
Arnold parades and cartoons featured dev-
ils proffering bags of gold). Yet Arnold, his

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biographers admit, needed money. He had spent out of his own pocket on the patriot cause, and the war had destroyed his merchant business. He carefully stipulated the rewards he expected from his new masters.

Arnold’s main reason for betrayal, both Brumwell and Malcolm argue, was his sense of wounded honor. He considered the slights he experienced to have been worse than lost opportunities. They were signs of disrespect. The biographers write intelligently about the role of honor in the 18th century and in the revolutionary army. Rebel- lious provincials needed to feel themselves peers of their professional enemies. Courts martial and duels—legal and extra-legal tests of rectitude—were regular features of American military life.

The power and pervasiveness of honor culture do not by themselves explain Arnold, however. All officers prized their honor, and many had grudges. Why did he almost alone switch sides?

Arnold’s honor seems to have been fatally self-contained. He was like Alcibiades, Coriolanus, or Plantagenet noblemen—a gentleman freelance. He professed concern for the greater good, and for causes larger than himself, but he himself defined what those goods and causes were. His commander, George Washington, thought and acted differently. Honor for him flowed from serving alongside one’s fellow Americans. The terms were set by the institutions that they, as free men, chose. Congress might be full of dolts and pettifoggers (sound familiar?). But there was no other source of authority, and hence no other source of honor.

Arnold’s handler, once he went over to the dark side, was John André, now a major in charge of British intelligence in New York. The plot Arnold and André devised was that Arnold should be posted to West Point, a fort 60 miles north of New York City with command of the Hudson. If, by weakening its defenses, he could allow the British to take it, the river would fall. What Burgoyne, Howe, and St. Leger had failed to accomplish could be done in one swoop. As an added bonus, the British might capture George Washington and his staff, due to visit West Point in the autumn of 1780. (Malcolm, ever loyal to Arnold, doubts this nefarious detail.) The plot, so glowing on paper, so risky in reality, faced a last-minute complication. The British wanted to be certain that the American with whom they had been dealing via coded letters and go-betweens was in fact Arnold. On a night in late September 1780 traitor and handler rendezvoused face-to-face at a spot about 16 miles below West Point. André, who had been brought to the meeting by boat, set off afterward for his own lines on horseback, with the plans of the fort stuffed in his boot. He was captured by ruffians who turned him over to the American army once they saw the importance of whom they had robbed. The officer in charge of the prize captive, not realizing whom André had gotten the plans from, promptly notified Arnold, who bolted for a British ship in the Hudson. Once aboard, he asked the American bargemen who had rowed him to join him in treason. “No, sir,” one replied, “one coat is enough for me to wear at a time.” Brumwell writes that this “uncompromising reaction was the first indication of just how badly Arnold had misjudged the mood of his countrymen; grumbling was one thing, outright defection quite another.”

Washington and his staff were staggered. Peggy succumbed to (or feigned) hysterics, and she was eventually sent to rejoin her husband. André was convicted of espionage by an American board of officers, and hanged. Arnold sent Washington a pair of letters, full of self-justification and bluster. The British let him raid Virginia and his native Connecticut, but after the Revolution ended, never gave him military employment again. He died in 1801.

A tradition among his descendants had it that in his final delirium he asked to put on his old American uniform. Too late.

Richard Brookhiser is a senior editor of National Review and the author, most recently, of John Marshall: The Man Who Made the Supreme Court (Basic Books).
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