

Jill Lepore. *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History*. Princeton, New Jersey and London: Princeton University Press, 2010. 207pp.

Tom Cutterham*

University of Oxford

We need more time yet to tell how central the Tea Party's role was and will be in twenty-first century American politics. Like its Boston namesake it has been a publicity coup of unexpectedly massive proportions. Whether it will quite mark the beginning of a revolution is another matter. Jill Lepore's book helps us to put the Tea Party idea into the context of a historical front in the culture wars. "For all its periwigs," she writes, it "had very little to do with anything that happened in the 1770s. But it did have a great deal to do with what happened in the 1970s" (68). At its most daring, *The Whites of Their Eyes* is a book about what doing history *is* and *is for*.

Lepore is not a polemicist. She's certainly no Glenn Beck of the left; her aim here isn't to debunk right-wing myths and replace them with liberal ones. She turns a somewhat haughty glare on Jeremy Rifkin's People's Bicentennial Commission, the New Left's attempt to hijack that event for civil rights and antiwar movements. "Rifkin wrote the Tea Party playbook," (84) she complains. What really went wrong was that professional historians in the 1970s "didn't offer an answer, a story, to people who needed one" (69). In this book Lepore offers a series of deftly interwoven stories, full of humour and pathos. If it often reads more like an extended *New Yorker* piece than a history book, that is part of the point.

While she accuses the Tea Party of acting as though "time is an illusion" (8), and forgetting the two centuries that separate us from the founders, Lepore playfully juxtaposes vignettes from three different times: the revolutionary era, the decade of its bicentennial, and the few years since President Obama's election. She wants to show both how impossible and how undesirable it is to go back to the nation's founding. Her most poignant story is of Ben Franklin's impoverished sister and her afflicted family. "Whenever I hear people like that nurse from Worcester talk about getting

* Tom Cutterham (tom.cutterham@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk) is a DPhil candidate in revolutionary American history at St. Hugh's College, Oxford.

back to what the founders had,” she writes, “I think about Peter Franklin Mecom: he was tied up in a barn, like an animal, for the rest of his life. I don’t want to go back to that” (50).

This aspect of the book is in a sense a celebration of the work professional historians have done, uncovering the lives of “ordinary people” in the revolution and beyond. Lepore makes a lot of the escaped slave Crispus Attucks, the first man killed in the Boston Massacre; in 1848 an abolitionist historian called William Cooper Nell, also an African-American, discovered an advert identifying Attucks as a runaway, revealing the famous event in a new light. This story is about historians and how they become part of history: “The study of history requires investigation, imagination, empathy, and respect” (162). These qualities Lepore finds in her daughter’s elementary school history class. But what the Tea Party preaches, through “Beck and Hannity, and the Texas School Board,” is really a kind of “antihistory” (15).

Readers will not find in *The Whites of Their Eyes* an analysis, or full definition, of this “antihistory” or “historical fundamentalism” (125). In SAT style, Lepore writes that it “is to history what astrology is to astronomy [and] creationism is to evolution” (125). What she is getting at, I think, is that the Tea Party’s version of history is based, *founded*, on certain assumptions and values – America is a Christian country, and one where freedom means no more or less than freedom from taxation – rather than on an open-minded engagement with evidence. “People who ask what the founders would do quite commonly declare that they know, they know, they just know what the founders would do and, mostly, it comes to this: if only they could see us now, they would be rolling over in their graves” (125).

Sometimes it feels like Lepore knows, she just knows, what Tea Partiers would say. But her book is not a chronicle of that movement. Its focus on Boston leaves a parochial impression. Where is Arizona? Florida? The Revolution itself gets a similarly narrow treatment. Philadelphia, Richmond, Charleston hardly appear. This is a small book and it works well. One might even call it perfectly formed. But it is neither a complete study of the Tea Party nor a history of the Revolution, in spite of claims in the preface. Eschewing any real desire for comprehensiveness, Lepore is more able to give us stories, and to make connections that spark contemplation. This history differs from “historical fundamentalism” because it is meant to start rather than shut down thought. Again, it is about “imagination” and “empathy,” not “reverence” (162).

The Whites of Their Eyes is thus an important challenge, not only to the Tea Party and its supporters (for whom, writes Lepore, “it’s not the past that’s a foreign country. It’s the present” (137) but to the historical profession itself. It is no ordinary history book, and on the whole that is its strength. Readers might cringe at the prose once or twice – “taking soundings in the ocean of time... Here, now, we float on a surface of yesterdays” (19) – but to be shown how a historian, engaged imaginatively in investigation of the sources (in her observation and ethnography of the contemporary Boston Tea Party as well as her archival work), can produce something incisive, insightful, provocative, and fun? We can learn something from that.