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BOOKSHELF

The Tea Party, Version 1.0

By Robert K. Landers
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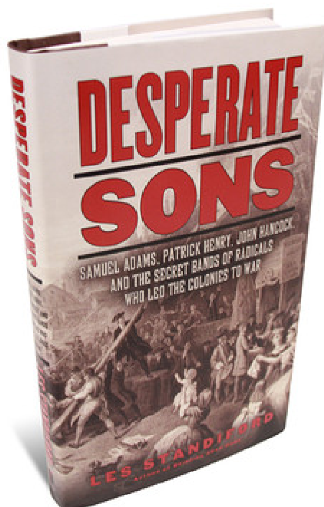
In August 1765, a Boston mob, enraged by the tax that was shortly to be imposed by the Stamp Act, burned an effigy of the designated distributor of stamps for the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The mob also leveled what was reputed to be the future stamp house and, failing to find the stamp man himself, attacked his home. Later that month, a mob destroyed the elegant mansion of Massachusetts Lt. Gov. Thomas Hutchinson, who was blamed for encouraging passage of the Stamp Act in the British Parliament even though he had strongly opposed it.

The mob actions that August in Boston and also in Newport, R.I., as Pauline Maier noted in "From Resistance to Revolution" (1972), "demonstrated a remarkable political extremism on the part of colonial crowds." By September, the leaders of the protests had begun to realize that violence was alienating both colonists and otherwise sympathetic Englishmen. A movement away from overt violence soon commenced, Ms. Maier discovered, especially after Sons of Liberty organizations began to be formed in late 1765 and early 1766, giving an official designation to protest groups that had been loosely calling themselves "sons of liberty." The Sons retained the threat of violence, however—and it proved sufficient to bring about the repeal of the Stamp Act in March 1766.

Between the Stamp Act agitation and the battles of Lexington and Concord in April 1775, Les Standiford writes in "Desperate Sons," the Sons of Liberty prepared "the colonies for battle against Great Britain." One can only begin to appreciate the magnitude of this accomplishment, Mr. Standiford asserts, by imagining "that the counterculture movement of the 1960s had actually been successful in toppling the U.S. government at gunpoint."

Mr. Standiford, who directs the creative-writing program at Florida International University, seems to have worked hard to absorb a great mass of material about the decade-long movement toward revolution. The result of his labors offers a rough overview of this important period in American history, but the narrative, alas, proves neither compelling nor illuminating.



A large obstacle in the way of any such narrative is the amorphous nature of the term "sons of liberty." During the Stamp Act crisis, it came to refer to all fervent British-American patriots who opposed the new law requiring the purchase of revenue stamps on legal documents. The nascent Sons of Liberty organizations played a vital role in the repeal campaign. After word of the repeal was received, according to Ms. Meier, "the Sons of Liberty movement dissolved." A few years later, the organizations reappeared to support the "nonimportation" of British goods as a way of opposing the Townshend Act of 1767, which imposed duties on tea and other commodities.

But as opposition to Parliament's new measures grew, many Americans labeled themselves "sons of liberty," and the term also was used to refer to newspaper writers and tavern organizers active in opposing the British policies. In the Stamp Act

DESPERATE SONS

By Les Standiford
(Harper, 312 pp., $27.99)

crisis, to which Mr. Standiford devotes two-fifths of his narrative, it isn't hard to make out the vital role that Sons of Liberty organizations played; in the more complicated oppositional world of the later years, it is.

In the case of the Sons of Liberty, then, simple narrative isn't enough; nuanced analysis is needed as well, but "Desperate Sons" too often fails to provide it. Mr. Standiford appears averse to anything that would unduly complicate the story, even when it might be in the Sons' favor (such as the moderation trend after the initial mob violence). He notes the symbolic importance of the Stamp Act—but not its trivial effect on the finances of the average American. He notes the colonists' complaint of "taxation without representation"—but not the fact that most English taxpayers, who had long endured a stamp tax, had no more representation in Parliament than Americans did.

Mr. Standiford gives the impression that the mob violence against the Stamp Act was more or less spontaneous. It wasn't, according to Edmund and Helen Morgan, who wrote in "The Stamp Act Crisis" (1952), the classic work on the subject: "Merchants, lawyers, and plantation owners may have appeared seldom enough in the actual work of destruction, but that they directed the show from behind the scenes is suggested by every surviving piece of evidence." To Mr. Standiford, who commends the Morgans' book, such a contention "sounds suspiciously like the kind of criticism that faulted only entitled 'eggheads' and 'liberals' for encouraging the protests against racism and the Vietnam war."

Bringing his apparently unreconstructed "Sixties" mind-set to bear on the "Sixties" two centuries earlier, Mr. Standiford produces some jarring juxtapositions. "Just as there would be a long wait for Huey Newton or Stokely Carmichael to gain credibility during the civil rights struggle," he writes, "relatively few colonists in 1769 were ready to take marching orders from the likes of Samuel Adams. "

Although the subtitle of "Desperate Sons" names individuals—"Samuel Adams, Patrick Henry, John Hancock, and the Secret Bands of Radicals Who Led the Colonies to War"—Mr. Standiford, in his enthusiasm for "the common man," seems reluctant to give them too much credit. He doesn't trouble to delve very deeply into the motives of Adams and other leaders.

Toward the end of "Desperate Sons," however, Mr. Standiford does note that Samuel Adams, whom he considers "the real Father of his Country," was "a zealot," who never seemed much concerned about the likely costs of the war that he and his colleagues were setting in motion. Mr. Standiford adds: "In the final analysis, as Malcolm X declared [in 1963], 'You haven't got a revolution that doesn't involve bloodshed.' " Such a claim, of course, avoids a fascinating question: whether the American Revolution was really necessary—whether it might have been better to give peace a chance.

Mr. Landers, a writer in Baltimore, is the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell. "

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