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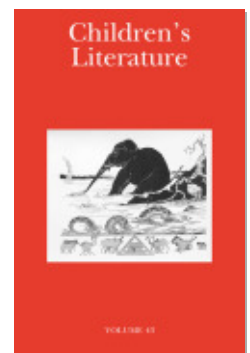
Reimagining Revolution: Later Lives of the Narrative of  
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# Articles

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## *Reimagining Revolution: Later Lives of the Narrative of Joseph Plumb Martin in Children's Literature*

Christiana Salah

When is it right for a child to fight for his country? Modern readers are likely to bring this question to the opening pages of *A Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Dangers, and Sufferings of a Revolutionary Soldier, Interspersed with Anecdotes of Incidents that Occurred within His Own Observation*, Joseph Plumb Martin's memoir of the time he spent fighting in the Continental Army from age fifteen to twenty-two. When first published in 1830, Martin's narrative received little public attention; however, mid-twentieth-century historians rediscovered and lauded the text as one of the most detailed, useful, and readable primary sources on the life of the common Revolutionary soldier. Since the renewal of interest in Martin, children's book authors have been drawn to the text's vivid voice and its tight focus on a man who was not a general, martyr, or spy, but an apparently average citizen of the emerging republic. In addition to being republished, Martin's narrative has also been variously repackaged, abridged, and rewritten for twentieth- and twenty-first-century child readers—an audience very different from the one Martin envisioned when, at age seventy, he conceived the project as a way of reminding the generations now in power of their debt to the aging soldiers who secured their liberty. Implicitly, these reconceived editions not only raise the question of when children should fight for their nation, but present us with a complementary query: when is it acceptable for adults teaching children about war to edit the historical record?

As regards the first question, Martin's original narrative never questions whether boys like him should have been allowed to fight. His age is an implicit factor in the story of his enlistment, however, the motive being one part youthful bravado and two parts peer pressure. Martin's desire to become a soldier stems from imagining the jealousy he would feel, were his friends to come "swaggering back" with daring, glorious

stories he could not compete with as a well-behaved farm boy (9). After unsuccessfully pressuring the grandparents with whom he lives for permission to join up, he is ultimately egged on by friends to present his guardians with the accomplished fact of his enlistment. At fifteen, his patriotism amounts to a generalized enthusiasm, not an ideological stance: “the Americans were invincible, in my opinion” (16). By the end of seven years’ service as an enlisted man in the Continental Army, 1776–83, he has seen enough of dying friends and poor war management to lose this opinion. Martin’s “narrative,” in a generic sense, is more an episodic series of anecdotes and reflections. Though written five decades later, the text is not a glowing, nostalgic account of heroism so much as a record of long slogs, confusion, camaraderie, occasional bursts of excitement, and above all, grueling physical privation. Martin does not linger over details of battle and strategy, though he makes the point that what Howard Zinn calls “Washington’s frozen army” saw heavy and significant combat service (80). However, he spends more time on the life of the camp and the road, with “here we suffered again for eatables” (or similar sentiment) as a frequent refrain throughout (236). Martin’s aim in publishing his “Adventures, Dangers, and Sufferings,” explicitly stated in the final pages, is to counter the notion at the time of writing that the Continental Army was not as useful to the Revolution as the Militia, and that old soldiers did not deserve government pensions.

Martin’s narrative has been reprinted several times in an approximation of its original form, though with a variety of titles. And, as an accessible “everyman” story of the Revolution, it has also appealed to writers and editors of historical books for children. Historian George F. Scheer, who in 1962 edited Martin’s memoir under the title *Private Yankee Doodle*, abridged and further edited the text for a 1964 edition aimed at independent child readers, *Yankee Doodle Boy: A Young Soldier’s Adventures in the American Revolution Told by Himself*. In 1996, children’s nonfiction author Jim Murphy published a retelling of Martin’s tale, entitled *A Young Patriot: The American Revolution as Experienced by One Boy*; and in 2001, Connie and Peter Roop brought out a more heavily abridged edition of the narrative, called *The Diary of Joseph Plumb Martin, a Revolutionary War Soldier*. While their approaches vary in significant ways, the three texts all highlight Martin’s youth, as is evident in the use of “boy” and “young” in two out of the three titles. In a move similar to that used by the *American Girl* books and other historical fiction titles marketed to young people, these texts present young modern read-

ers<sup>1</sup> with a version of Joseph Plumb Martin who, though divided from them by time, is fundamentally identifiable as a child like themselves.

While they make one early American's experience accessible to young readers, these texts also present problems for the modern child, both from a historical and an ideological perspective. First of all, because they have abridged Martin's story, the choices made by the editors regarding what to cut and what to keep present readers with a significantly different text than Martin's own; nevertheless each version asserts that it is still Martin's narrative of his war experience. While each presents a boiled-down—one might say "essentialized"—version of the tale, the question of which elements of a life narrative should be considered essential is an inherently ideological one. Historians and many common readers have been struck by the text's pointed criticism of the Continental officers; as Thomas Fleming puts it in his introduction to the most recent full edition of the narrative, "Martin's bottom-up view of the Revolution's leaders is seldom flattering" (*Narrative* viii). Without changing any of Martin's words, however, the simple excision of certain incidents from his story can change his image to that of an apparently deferential soldier, as I will demonstrate below. Similarly, while the frequency of Martin's references to hunger and scrounging for food might inspire an editor to scale back these remarks for length's sake, it is the omnipresence of such comments in the narrative that drives home his critique of the mismanagement of the war. The unique voice, the historical accuracy, and the ideological goals of the narrative can all be drastically reshaped by shortening the text. As I shall argue, the changes made to Martin's text in versions for children demonstrate a reluctance to pollute the national origin myth with complications that might negatively influence how children perceive the early leaders of the nation, and therefore the principles of its foundation. Nor has this editorial impulse weakened over time; while the 1996 retelling allows controversial elements to remain, the 2001 edition exercises even greater control over the politics of the narrative than the 1964 abridgement. How best to represent history to children is still very much an open question.

In this postmodern era, one might step back and question which aspects of a historical text—its voice, accuracy, or political goals—a modern-day children's book has the responsibility to preserve, if any. Most, I believe, would agree that historical accuracy (as far as such a thing is possible) should be a priority for nonfiction texts which present themselves as educational. And can truthful representation be separated

from voice and ideology? As Jill P. May observes in her 1995 article "Realism and Moral Attitudes in Children's Literature," it is often asserted in children's literature scholarship that an "author's rhetorical style controls the reader's response, and that the author shapes his writing to fit his adult attitudes about what is 'best' for the child's life within the culture surrounding him" (60). This control wielded over the child reader's response has particularly serious consequences when the text assumes an aura of historical veracity and transcultural resonance, as John Stephens points out in *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (1992). Stephens warns that historical fiction for children, by claiming authenticity and encouraging a sense of vicarious experience, becomes "a very powerful ideological tool, especially for inculcating social conservatism . . . through its capacity to transform events which appear to be historical particularities into universals of human experience" (205). While Martin's text is nonfiction, it operates in a similar fashion, especially when pruned into a neat story arc as with the Scheer and Roop abridgements; as Stephens justly points out, "the writing of history as a narrative form already places it on the same axis as fiction" (205). The excised editions are in effect fictionalized versions of Martin's narrative, one degree removed from such authenticity as the original can claim.

The presentation of an altered version of the memoir as authentic, therefore, has two troubling consequences. First, it invites readers, particularly young readers who have little to compare it to, to perceive Martin's war experience as typical, while simultaneously mediating what conclusions the reader draws about that experience. Jim Murphy's *A Young Patriot*, as we shall see, attempts to adjust for the bias of Martin's worldview by fleshing out the larger history of the war, placing Martin in his historical context for the reader. In contrast, the abridged versions could be said to obscure accuracy, by telling only a selective version of a single soldier's experience but presenting it as representative. Secondly, the repurposing of the memoir as an educational text obscures its original (activist, critical, political) goals and, in doing so, could be said to diminish the honesty of its portrayal of history. Certainly Martin is writing from an embittered perspective which was not shared by all soldiers; nevertheless, much of his narrative has been verified by contemporary accounts. But if a child does not read about the Scrooge-like officer who tells Martin that if his sick friend dies, "the country will be rid of one who can do it no good" (Martin, *Narrative* 35), or of any comparable incident of official heartlessness, would they have any reason to guess that such things happened? It is

no longer possible for the text to fulfill its original purpose, long after the deaths of all involved, so the question of responsibility is a fraught one; nevertheless, knowledge of that purpose must inevitably color the way one reads the text, if such information is provided.

Joseph Plumb Martin's primary goal in writing his narrative, as mentioned above, was to pass on the memory of the Revolution, and to revive a forgetful and parsimonious public's sense of admiration "that an army [who] voluntarily engaged to serve their country, when starved, and naked, and suffering everything short of death (and thousands even that), should be able to persevere through an eight years war, and come off conquerors at last!" (*Narrative* 3). In examining both the content and the material presentation of these three children's books, this essay seeks to reflect on how the memory of America's foundational war is passed on to its youth today. Taking into account the necessities of contextualization and reshaping for purposes of audience appeal, it is my aim to interrogate the ideological consequences of the choices made by the editors and their publishers. I first examine Scheer's abridged edition, *Yankee Doodle Boy*, in light of trends in historical scholarship that no doubt influenced its publication. Next, building off this discussion, I take ethical and political questions specific to the process of abridgement and apply them to what it is tempting to call the Roops' bowdlerization, *The Diary of Joseph Plumb Martin*. Last, I address Murphy's retelling, *A Young Patriot*, which serves to answer some of the problems posed by the earlier texts, counterintuitively staying closer to the original text's spirit by moving away from its language. The fact that Murphy's text is not the latest chronologically is, indeed, part of my point here: schemas which periodize different methods of telling history to children based on specific cultural markers miss the fact that national myth propagation is an ongoing endeavor. By tracing each text's response to developments in the study of history and new perspectives on war, but also by looking for what remains consistent over time, we can see how the afterlife of one historical memoir opens broader questions about the ways that war, truth, and history are represented to rising generations.

### *Yankee Doodle Boy*

Even before Howard Zinn's trendsetting *A People's History of the United States* appeared in 1980, a Marxism-influenced turn in historical scholarship beginning in the 1960s led to an increased interest in "history from

the bottom up,” a way of chronicling the past that focuses on the lives of average citizens rather than kings and generals. Literary critic and historian George F. Scheer took a significant part in this movement as it applied to the study of the Revolutionary War, compiling (with Hugh F. Rankin) a volume called *Rebels and Redcoats: The American Revolution Through the Eyes of Those Who Fought and Lived It*, and also republishing Joseph Plumb Martin’s narrative for the first time since its original limited debut in 1830. Two years later, in 1964, Scheer—perhaps on his own initiative, perhaps at the request of his publishers—took on the curious task of turning a man into a boy. Transforming *Private Yankee Doodle* into *Yankee Doodle Boy* offered the appeal of identification to a young teen demographic; Martin’s age at the beginning of his tale made the change possible, and the readability and instructive potential of the text made expansion to a young market a promising endeavor. The fact that *Yankee Doodle Boy* is still in print confirms the soundness of this marketing decision.

This abridgment was one of many historical children’s books which marked “the change from jingoistic biographies in the 1950s to works in the 1960s that focus on women, minorities, and walks of life long overlooked”—such as the life of a starving, scrounging soldier of the line like Martin (Billman 92). However, as Carol Billman observes, this change in subject matter did not lead to a revolution in how children’s authors approached history: “the prevailing opinion, which sometimes amounts to historical myth rather than fact, must be adhered to if the work is to appeal to a popular audience” (91). The differences between *Yankee Doodle Boy* and Martin’s full text allow his unsettling narrative to conform more easily to traditional lore about the Revolution, such as the ardent patriotism of the rebels and the noble nature of officers, particularly those remembered as American heroes. Martin’s regretful remarks about joining the army are excised. In his full text he describes two encounters with General Putnam, one in which the officer harangues some of the men for stealing wine and threatens to hang them, and another where Putnam demands that Martin open a gate for him and Martin impudently refuses.<sup>2</sup> Neither incident appears in Scheer’s abridgement, nor does an anecdote of a tearful officer who went around before a battle anxiously trying to make peace with everyone in case he should die. Another casualty of excision is the story of an aide-de-camp who was sent for ammunition during a battle and got arrested as a deserter by an officer of a different line; Martin, telling of the man’s last-minute escape from hanging, writes: “it was

well that he was [rerieved], for his blood would not have been the only blood . . . spilt;—the troops were greatly exasperated, and they showed what their feelings were by their lively and repeated cheerings after the reprieve, but more so by their secret and open threats before it” (40). The dangerous power of soldiers contemptuous of or at odds with their commanders is suppressed in Scheer’s abridgement. This suppression may speak to a lingering distrust in the early ’60s of anything that smacked of communism, but it also clearly speaks to a desire to soften Martin’s narrative for consumption by young readers, giving them a taste of history without unseating reassuring myths about the forging of the nation.

The new title’s emphasis on Martin’s age (from *Private Yankee Doodle* to *Yankee Doodle Boy*) also changes how the book can be read, by drawing a parallel between his coming to man’s estate and the growing up of America. As historian Michael Kammen points out in his influential 1978 study *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination*, “writers have consistently perceived the American Revolution as a national *rite de passage*, and have relentlessly projected that vision to an ever-widening readership” (189). Scheer’s text could be one of the “hundreds” Kammen refers to which make this move, because even though Martin himself draws no explicit connection between his literal coming-of-age and the supposed coming-of-age of America, the packaging of *Yankee Doodle Boy* turns Martin into a metonym for the nation. Shifting away from Martin’s own emphasis on being one individual soldier among many, Scheer’s title generalizes his experience as *the* experience of patriotic youth, as does the heroic image of a musket-wielding teen on the book’s cover.

The drawing of this parallel has a significant consequence: it changes what kind of arc Martin’s life story can follow. If he is a figure of America, he cannot come to a bad end—not for a child audience, at any rate. Hence, *Yankee Doodle Boy* amputates Martin’s text, ending it with the surrender of Cornwallis in June of 1781 instead of including the further two years Martin spent as a soldier or any of his postwar experience, and it also rewrites his ending. The original narrative concludes in some bitterness, reflecting on the hardships suffered during the war and particularly on the fact that the soldiers were paid only a tiny fraction of what was owed them. Martin paints a bleak portrait of men who “spent their youthful, and consequently, their best days in the hard service of their country” and who require government assistance merely “to eke out the fag end of their lives a little too high for the



groveling hand of envy or the long arm of poverty to reach”; he blasts the “hard-hearted wretches” who complain about the government’s money going towards pensions for old soldiers (*Narrative* 251).

In sharp contrast, Scheer’s “Editor’s Afterword” summarizes the last forty-six pages of the full text in barely five, and puts an entirely misleading spin on Martin’s later life:

When 1784 rolled around, Joseph Martin . . . as he said, “set my face to the eastward and made no material halt till I arrived in the state of Maine.” There he remained ever afterward, living a long, useful, and happy life. And there, in a big frame house in the town of Prospect, on Penobscot Bay, he set down what you have read, his recollections of the adventures, dangers, and sufferings of a youthful, valiant, and devoted Continental soldier. (172)

Martin may not have been an unhappy man, but he was clearly unhappy with the way his country had treated the men who purchased its independence. And, far from the affluence this above passage implies, his pension file from 1818 shows that the reward of his service was an old age with “no real nor personal estate nor any income whatever” (Martin, “Pension file”). Having aligned the young Martin with young America, however, it seems to have been important to Scheer or his publishers to show that the Revolution “paid off”—that long life, liberty, and happiness were achieved. As Peter Hollindale observes regarding tales for children in general, “the happy ending . . . amount[s] to a ‘contract of reaffirmation’ of questionable values which have earlier seemed to be on trial” (38).

The insertion of the adjectives “youthful, valiant, and devoted” into the last line, which otherwise echoes the original title, speaks to the whitewashing of Martin’s message perhaps even more eloquently than the overt fiction of the “happy life” in the “big frame house.” In his 1992 essay on “Ideology and the Children’s Book,” Hollindale cautions readers to be aware of stories that present values in a “package” in which “separate items appear to interlock” (38). Does the story, he asks, “celebrate a seemingly inseparable threesome made up of [for example] patriotism, courage, and personal loyalty? . . . Are these groups of virtues or vices necessarily or logically connected with each other? Are they being grouped together in order to articulate some larger, aggregated virtue or vice?” (38). In the case of *Yankee Doodle Boy*, the concepts being packaged with this version of Joseph Plumb Martin are patriotism, endurance, and success. The linkage of these three attributes suggests

that if you go to war not to annoy your grandfather, or for bragging rights, or to earn money, but to serve your country—and if you stick it out through hardships without questioning the system that exposed you to them—then you will be rewarded in the end. Tying Martin metonymically to the young nation is the ultimate in “packaging”: by bringing about a better future for his country, one must of course assume he has brought about a better future for himself.

*The Diary of Joseph Plumb Martin*

Although published almost forty years later, the most recent of the Martin children’s books has much in common with *Yankee Doodle Boy* and, as an abridgment as well as a simplification of the original text, raises critical questions which follow on directly from those addressed above. Edited by Connie and Peter Roop for their “In My Own Words” series of easy-reading adaptations of primary historical texts, *The Diary of Joseph Plumb Martin, A Revolutionary War Soldier* (2001) is aimed at the youngest audience of the three adaptations addressed in this essay. At a mere ninety-six pages including notes (Scheer’s version is twice as long), *The Diary* simplifies Martin’s language and pares down his direct addresses to the reader, leaving a skeletal narrative that for the most part presents the events of Martin’s war experience with little interpretive commentary. The Roops, a pair of former schoolteachers who have edited and written many historical texts for young readers, claim to have “shortened [Martin’s] text but otherwise . . . remained true to his unique way of saying things, altering only where we felt the reader might become confused” (89).<sup>3</sup> In fact, the sentences shortened for ease of understanding comprise almost the entire book, and a fair amount of rewording was involved in this process.

*The Diary* does include the hardships of army life at pretty fair length; however, like *Yankee Doodle Boy*, it reduces the unpleasantness of the officers, cutting the Putnam stories and the cruel officer who tells Martin to abandon his dying friend, among others. Hence, though the men undergo privation, there is less of a sense of abandonment on the part of the government and Revolutionary leaders. The British are the only antagonists remaining in the piece and they are a distant presence. Given the passage of forty years between them, it is interesting to interrogate why the Roop approach so closely mirrors the Scheer abridgment, in methodology if not in scope. Margaret Higonnet, writing about a different Revolutionary War children’s book in 2005, has

argued that “the Vietnam War unravelled American myths about our national morality and political leadership,” and that the painful resonance of this loss of faith in leadership is evident even in didactic works for youth (150). While evident in some other standout children’s texts, as I will address in the conclusion, this unravelling is not apparent in *The Diary*. While, being composed of Martin’s words, the text cannot be made to praise the American leadership beyond a few admiring words for Washington and a couple of other officers, the narrative is nonetheless “conscripted into the service of the ‘national heritage’ that serves to reinforce the idealized picture of the national home” through the excision of critique—the declawing of Martin’s text (Watkins 193). The reason for this reinforcement seems directly related to the specific ideological task of telling children about the Revolution.

As Sara L. Schwebel points out, taking away the idealism of war isn’t necessarily a progressive move: “If one understands the Revolution as empty of principle, it can no longer be understood to have laid the groundwork for the abolitionist, women’s suffrage, and civil rights movements” (89). However, in teaching young readers about such topics as violence, unrest, and rebellion, an increased emphasis on morality and inspirational ideals is also a measure of the way that children are conceptualized in modern Western culture. Sharon Stephens, in the introduction to her 1995 book *Children and the Politics of Culture*, writes that there is “a growing concern in recent decades with the domain of childhood as threatened, invaded, and ‘polluted’ by adult worlds” (10). “At stake here,” she continues:

are notions not only of innocence, but of nature, individual freedom, social values of enduring love and care (as opposed to temporally restricted economic and bureaucratic transactions), the family as basic unit of society, the bounded local community as the site of value definition and transmission, and the possibility of noncommodified social domains outside the realm of the market and market-driven politics. (10)

What is intriguing about this way of defining the idealized Western conception of childhood is that it closely resembles the ostensible ideals behind the Revolution. Contemporary ideologues claimed, and many people today believe, that the Revolution was fought on behalf of individual freedom and in the interest of caring, familial local governance as opposed to distant tyranny, and certainly not for any “polluted” market-driven motivations.

*The Diary*, while aimed at the youngest audience of the three versions, lays the least emphasis on Martin's youth. I would argue that this is attributable to that "growing concern" Stephens noted in 1995, six years before its publication—the anxiety about children taking on adult roles, particularly violent ones. The 1990s brought child soldiers into the public eye due to their much publicized presence in conflicts such as the Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars, and the early 2000s were noted for the emergence in the media and on the literary market of memoirs and stories about boy soldiers. To class Joseph Plumb Martin as a child soldier would be anachronistic, but accurate by today's definition. Therefore, in order to allay anxiety that readers may feel (perhaps the adult arbiters of juvenile reading more than the children themselves), the text plays up the alignment between childhood ideology and Revolutionary rhetoric. A child who fights may be alarming, but a child who fights to maintain the values associated with the protected space of childhood— independence, community, the right to self-definition, etc.—is less so. Thanks to the continuing prevalence of the "season of youth" rhetoric that Kammen noted, a boy can fight for the emerging American nation because this America itself is still a boy. This way of imagining the Revolution contrasts with the more ideologically fraught wars of the past half-century; the story of an American boy fighting in any war since WWII would *have* to entail a loss of innocence, and could not be characterized as an adventure. Because Martin is depicted as fighting for the values of boyhood, to protect America as a space in which those values reside and thrive, it becomes more acceptable for modern children to read the story of a fighting boy.

The chief strategies for aligning Martin with the ideology of childhood that *The Diary* employs are linguistic. The Roops simplify Martin's language so that he in fact sounds like a boy, not like a seventy-year-old man recalling his youth with a self-reflexive awareness of how events would come to pass and of the flaws in his former thinking. He seems to move with an innocent lack of expectation from event to event. Also, by laying stress on the soldiers' suffering but, as in Scheer, declawing Martin's critique of the war's management, *The Diary* constructs the soldiers as more obedient and devoted than they seem in the full narrative. It does include the brief mutiny Martin took part in after the "hard winter" at Valley Forge, but makes it seem as if the revolt was immediately quelled by a call upon the men's honor. While in the full text a lot of negotiation with their officers takes place before Colonel Walter Stewart comes and addresses their complaints of starvation, the

*Diary* version reads: “Colonel Stewart of Pennsylvania questioned us as to why we were behaving thus. We expressed our complaints. He said, ‘You have won immortal honor to yourselves this winter past by your patience and bravery. Now you are shaking it at your heels. I will see your officers and talk to them myself’” (70). Virtue, not the promise of a full stomach, wins the day. In short, it is a peculiarity of the abridgments of this narrative that, while they focus on Martin because he is just one of the soldiers, no Washington or Paul Revere, they seem unable to resist the impulse of what John Stephens calls “secular hagiography” (238)—focusing on the aspects which make him a “model soldier” rather than those which show him as a flawed individual or which might lead the reader to question what personal value his service had for him. *The Diary* doesn’t entirely elide the idiosyncratic or unpleasant aspects of the narrative, but by transforming it from an old man’s reflection on his past to a sort of bildungsroman, it constructs those idiosyncrasies as attributes of immaturity and the unpleasantnesses as travails to be overcome and left behind.

Critics have debated what to call Martin’s narrative, as it blends the genres of memoir, autobiography, and even polemic. Catherine Kaplan describes it as a picaresque, though she argues that in contrast to the usual self-interested protagonist of the genre, Martin portrays himself as “a rogue in the public interest” (519). She theorizes that Martin legitimizes his critique of the government through this form; that “insisting on his own moral worth and sincerity allows Martin to use the picaresque mode for an unlikely and earnest purpose: to demand honorable actions from the dishonorable society he portrays” (520). However, by beginning with the start of the war and ending with a vague, hopeful promise of the soldier’s successful reintegration into society, the abridged versions of the text preclude the possibility of Kaplan’s reading and instead impose on Martin’s narrative the structure of a coming-of-age tale. And the use of this structure, in turn, confirms Martin as a sort of model for the reader. Marcus argues that “an unquestioning determination to offer a moral example even when the facts (and complex moral issues involved) do not necessarily justify it has led to many . . . disturbing contradictions in biographies for children” (17). It is only when Martin’s words are placed into the framework of a new, modern narrative that we begin to see some of these complexities addressed.

*A Young Patriot*

Jim Murphy's *A Young Patriot: The American Revolution as Experienced by One Boy* is not an abridgement but rather a rewriting of Martin's text. Murphy, a prolific author of historical fiction and nonfiction for children, not only retells Martin's story but offers it as a way into the history of the Revolution. The personal aspects of Martin's narrative are not lost—on the contrary, they often receive more attention than in the abridgements—but they are interpreted through a late-twentieth-century lens and placed in context. In his narrative, Martin is insistent about the fact that he is *not* writing a general history of the war; Murphy does not take on this task either, but he does step in to explain circumstances Martin could not have known about, or did not choose to record, which broaden the reader's understanding of the locations, battles, and other circumstances Martin describes. As Martin's intended readership would likely have been much better versed in the history of the war than the average nine- to twelve-year-old of today, these changes seem more like a facilitation of the original goal to increase awareness about the experience of Continental soldiers than an imposition on or redirection of the text.

Murphy's approach in *A Young Patriot* is to weave quotations from Martin's memoir, along with occasional tidbits from other primary sources, into a third-person tale which forms a more unified narrative than Martin's episodic one. While he nods to Martin's youth by calling the protagonist "Joseph"—or perhaps seeks to establish a sense of familiarity with the reader—Murphy does not address his age as a troubling factor in his enlistment, other than to observe: "While regulations stated that the minimum age for enlistment was sixteen, Joseph knew perfectly well that many fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds were being allowed to sign up" (14). Murphy includes a three-page account of Martin's vacillations regarding enlistment—the fear of danger versus the fear of being left out—but also appends this paragraph:

If he needed added incentive, it's possible that the signing of the Declaration of Independence provided it. Congress adopted the declaration on July 4<sup>th</sup>, and ordered the official printer to Congress, John Dunlap, to print eighty to one hundred copies of the document. The next day couriers were galloping along post roads and rural byways to deliver the call to freedom. A courier would have arrived in Milford late on the 5<sup>th</sup> or on the morning

of the 6<sup>th</sup>, but Joseph made no mention of it or what he felt about its content. (14)

While Murphy takes care to frame this supplemental motive as potential only (“it’s possible,” “made no mention”), its addition does have the effect of folding Martin’s experience into one of the most common tropes about the war: the inspiring power of the Declaration of Independence as a “call to freedom.”<sup>4</sup>

In general, however, Murphy’s text tends to offer a commentary on whatever mythology it includes. This is generally done by demonstrating change over time in the way the war has been remembered and understood. According to Hayden White in his important 1987 volume *The Content of the Form*: “[w]here, in any account of reality, narrativity is present, we can be sure that morality or a moralizing impulse is present too” (24). This observation holds true in the three versions of the narrative addressed above, including Martin’s, but it is interesting to see how Murphy—though far from abandoning narrativity—attempts to balance the “moralizing impulse” by showcasing competing narratives. For instance, three successive pages toward the beginning of the book showcase three images of the so-called Boston Massacre (an event Martin had nothing to do with, included for context): Paul Revere’s engraving, a mid-nineteenth-century drawing by Alonzo Chappel, and an 1855 illustration by William C. Nell. In captions, Murphy points to the way each image tells a different story; Revere’s, for example, exaggerates the unarmed victimhood of the Boston citizens, and Nell’s, from his book *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution*, showcases the presence of Crispus Attucks where the other two depict only white men. While there is an implied moral structure to Murphy’s approach here—the portrayals move from less to more realistic and diverse—this comparative tactic also draws direct attention to the moralizing impulses of historiography. Child readers, after being shown how competing ideologies can shape accounts of the same event, are more likely to notice it for themselves thereafter, perhaps even observing the biases of Murphy’s own account.

While *A Young Patriot* presents an unglamorized view of the war, and recounts some of the bad feeling Martin had towards his commanders, it also deemphasizes his individuality (despite the subtitle, “As Experienced by One Boy”) by putting that experience into the context of the war at large. The effect of this broader view is to show Martin as one piece in a large puzzle, which is not a bad move per se, but could be said to position him more as a stand-in for all common soldiers. As

though constructing a television news piece, Murphy transitions back and forth from “expert” narrator to the voice of the “man on the street.” The inclusion of the expert perspective has a direct impact on the effectiveness of the text for Martin’s purposes; in his insistence that he wasn’t calling the shots and didn’t even have the big picture of events he was involved in, Martin increases the poignancy of his plight in later life, bereft of the promised reward for this blind endurance. Martin’s argument is that, as a man who simply had a job to do and did it, he should be fully compensated. His limited view and relative lack of interest in the major players and wider history of the war, and his evident contempt for most contemporary war historians, keeps the reader’s eye focused on him and blocks the possible response that fighting for freedom and a new nation should be its own reward.

As there is nothing a modern reader can do about changing public sentiment towards old soldiers in the 1830s, however, the advantages to contextualization outweigh the drawbacks. John Stephens discusses the kind of work Murphy is attempting, arguing that some writers of historical books for children attempt to draw attention to the fact that our perspective on the past is, by necessity, “imposed retrospectively” (237). Such representations, he continues, “are also apt to render problematic many of the ideological assumptions which inform much of historical fiction for children, such as . . . a coincidence of closure and positive outcome . . . and the belief that action is superior to inaction” (238). Murphy challenges both assumptions. In his final chapter, he discusses Martin’s poverty later in life, the Pension Acts, and Martin’s purpose in writing the memoir. He presents a picture that is neither shining nor entirely gloomy: “Even as Joseph approached his ninetieth birthday and blindness darkened his world, he retained much of his vitality and could still spin a spirited story about his many exploits” (90). In this chapter Murphy demonstrates that, to some degree, Martin might well regret entering a service for which he was so unjustly compensated. Nevertheless, he confirms Martin’s simultaneous pride in his service.

The image accompanying this final chapter aptly illustrates the doubled perspective offered by Murphy’s text. It is a reproduction of a nineteenth-century engraving of a Continental soldier, quite similar in effect to a grown-up version of the Yankee Doodle Boy on Scheer’s cover. He holds a musket and a flag; his uniform is crisp; he looks serious and bold. A caption under the picture draws attention to these elements, and comments: “It’s doubtful that Joseph Plumb Martin would have recognized this man as a fellow soldier” (88).



### *Conclusions*

In comparing the ideologies of the three children's books, it would be remiss not to further consider the way the visual elements of each play a significant role in the impression given to the reader. As Leonard S. Marcus has argued: "Illustrations . . . contribute more to a picture book biography than occasional picture-equivalents of the author's words. They traffic to some degree in unnamable objects, states and feelings" (17). Whether the internal illustrations reflect the text of Martin's memoir, as in *Yankee Doodle Boy*, whitewash it as in *The Diary*, or offer a bird's eye view as in *A Young Patriot*, they are always trafficking in ideology. Of the three, *Yankee Doodle Boy* contains what might be called the most accurate accompanying images, at least in terms of the unique story being told. The pen-and-ink maps and sketches match up with the surrounding text, sometimes strikingly—as on page 120, where the words "I do solemnly declare that I did not put a single morsel of victuals into my mouth for four days and as many nights, except a little black birch bark which I gnawed off a stick of wood" are capped by a bleak drawing of a soldier in rags and a tricorne hat, gnawing a stick, while a miserable bandaged man sits near, resting his head in his hands. What is notable, however, is that the soldiers pictured here and throughout the book look like full-grown men, not even especially young. This sharply contrasts with the young patriot on the cover, posed like a martial statue, well-clothed and the picture of health. Clearly the birch-eating man would have sold fewer copies; just as clearly, the internal illustrations were influenced by an unease about showing child or young-adult soldiers in an extremity of distress. What kind of nation is founded on the suffering of children?

The illustrations in *The Diary* present a far more egregious deception. The most drastic fraud occurs during the description of the Valley Forge winter. As one reads the following passage, one turns the page at the place marked by an asterisk (mine):

The army was now not only starved but naked. The greatest part were shirtless and barefoot. They lacked blankets. I found a piece of raw cowhide and made myself a pair of moccasins. It was this or go barefoot, as hundreds of my companions had to, till they might be tracked by\* their blood upon the rough frozen ground. (*Diary* 47–49)

Page 48, which interrupts the text, is a full-page watercolor illustration of a line of marching soldiers. They wear bulky coats and have scarves wrapped around their necks, and drag or carry huge packs of supplies. The only indicator of discomfort in their appearance is that their legs are wrapped against the cold. Unlike in *Yankee Doodle Boy*, it is clear that this illustrator, Laszlo Kubinyi, has not read (probably was not asked to read) the text he was illustrating. However—since, as Marcus notes, “illustrations put a face on the abstraction of pastness” (17)—the effect of this juxtaposition is to give the reader the impression that “naked” must have meant something different in the eighteenth century. Not only do images leave behind an impression sometimes more lasting than that of words, but children’s belief in a verifiable reality of the past about which they lack knowledge can make them question their own judgment when a disjunction in the record presented to them occurs.

*A Young Patriot* is illustrated with historical prints and paintings, mostly contemporary to the war or from the nineteenth century. The cover image, from the painting *The March to Valley Forge* by William B. T. Trego, offers a fair gloss on Murphy’s text. The picture shows a soldier stepping out from a line of soldiers to raise his hat to General Washington, who is reviewing the troops from astride his iconic white horse. The figure of Washington draws the eye immediately, while the soldier at first blends in with the background. However, his face is the only one fully visible; Washington and the others are turned to the side. The soldier’s gesture may be one of deference, but it sets him distinctly apart from the line of wounded and weary-looking marchers—making a statement, one might say, that is as much about him as about the General. All in all, this seems a more fitting image for Martin’s text than the poster child soldier of *Yankee Doodle Boy* or the hundreds of indistinguishable men marching away from the viewer on the cover of *The Diary*.

As stated above, I chose not to address these texts in chronological order so as to juxtapose the two abridgements, *Yankee Doodle Boy* (1964) and *The Diary* (2001). However, it is worth stepping back to see whether the three publication dates, including Murphy’s retelling from 1996, map onto larger trends in the telling of history to children. Sara L. Schwebel, in her 2011 monograph *Child-Sized History: Fictions of the Past in U.S. Classrooms*, breaks fictional works about war for children into three chronologically and ideologically distinct types, which she terms generations. The first generation of the 1940s and 50s, typified by Esther Forbes’s *Johnny Tremain* (1943), tended to be bildungsro-

mans, in which the protagonist “symbolically figures as the nation as a whole,” and tended to “rest on the assumption that war tested America but ultimately strengthened both the nation and its people” (72). In response to Vietnam and the Civil Rights movement, Schwebel argues, a second generation developed in the 1960s and 1970s (typified by Christopher and James Lincoln Collier’s 1974 novel *My Brother Sam Is Dead*), which had a disillusioned, explicitly pacifist agenda. In the 2000s, in the wake of 9/11 and motivated by an effort to increase the diversity of classroom fiction, second-generation novels claiming that nothing could justify war made way for a third generation of books that asserted the existence of ideals worth fighting for, such as justice and equal rights, but critiqued political leaders as not adhering to these ideals.<sup>5</sup> While Schwebel’s observations apply closely to the most significant, awarded, and classroom-adopted texts of these eras, it is worth noting that texts of earlier generations continue to be widely read, and earlier goals and generic patterns were more supplemented than supplanted by later ones.

Because Joseph Plumb Martin’s narrative is nonfiction, we should perhaps not make too much of the fact that Schwebel’s generational schema for fiction does not map onto the retellings we have examined here. We can, however, trace several of the impulses she discusses in the ways Martin’s story has been reproduced. For instance, the 2001 *Diary* shows perhaps the strongest impulse of the three to (as Schwebel describes the first generation) “merg[e] central character and country” in order to “tell not just a story about a particular war, but *the* story of the war—ultimately, a narrative of the nation, its people, and its destiny” (72). On the other hand, Murphy’s rewritten and expanded 1996 edition seems a forerunner of the third-generation desire to “play with historical documentation” (84). The use of primary sources mixed with new content, Schwebel notes, reflects a postmodern attitude to history: “even as the narratives question the ability to represent a ‘real’ past (as opposed to an image of that past shaped by our modern-day ideas about a period fundamentally unknowable), they place value on ‘the real’—on artifacts of history.” (84). Martin’s narrative, as an artifact, offers exactly the kind of “ground-up” perspective which has been popular in historiography since the post-WWII era, and particularly since the publication of Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* in 1980. Still, tales of Revolutionary leaders (Washington above all) continue to greatly outnumber the children’s books on library shelves that focus on “common people” such as Martin. Thus, while we might question

the moves made by Scheer and the Roops to temper Martin's critique of the Revolution's leadership, it is worth noting that these authors are going against the grain simply by making the statement that a real, historical, ordinary soldier's viewpoint deserves to have the sustained attention of a full narrative—rather than being subsumed among many “voices from history,” or employed simply to shed reflected light on major historical figures.

In the late 1980s, John Bidwell argued that “we have imposed a conservative interpretation on our Revolutionary past . . . [and] contrived to overlook its radical roots and destabilizing effects” (280). The three children's versions of Joseph Plumb Martin's text, from 1964, 1996, and 2001, prove that this claim is true only to a degree. The attributes of Martin's story that make it interesting and worth preserving are the same attributes that make it potentially dangerous to propagate—his harsh war experience, his critique of the government, his distance from the heroic, mythologized experience of George Washington and the other familiar heroes of the Revolution. Furthermore, the very move by which Martin is made relatable to young readers—the stress on his youth—is dangerous because it suggests a destabilization of American national values, right at America's emergence as a nation. In the popular imagination, it is only bad, unstable countries that have child soldiers, so only an utter purity of ideals can gild the severe image of a fifteen-year-old soldier. Yet ironically, it is for the sake of ideals that resemble a modern conception of childhood (as a time of freedom, connection to family and the natural world, and moral clarity) that Martin forfeits his innocence. The books must show Martin to be a child, but not too much of a child; and they must show him to have undergone hardship, but not too much hardship. By aligning Martin's rise to maturity with that of the nation, the books must give him a happy ending or else imply a profound critique of what post-Revolution America has become. This critique is available, to a degree, in Murphy's text only. Nevertheless, in spite of the entrenched problems in contemporary America's conventional methods for passing on the memory of war to children, it is still gratifying to see Joseph Plumb Martin's engaging narrative receiving attention today. Perhaps, for children with an interest in history, any one of these books might prove a jumping-off point to broader investigation and understanding.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Two of the three books, *A Young Patriot* and *Yankee Doodle Boy*, are still in print as of this writing.

<sup>2</sup>Putnam appears to even greater disadvantage in James Lincoln Collier and Christopher Collier's 1974 Revolutionary War novel *My Brother Sam Is Dead*, where the general orders the death of Sam on false charges, to "make an example" of him. However, the fact that Scheer removes Putnam's rudeness and Martin's defiance from his abridgement evinces how the impulse to portray authority positively in texts for children often carries the day.

<sup>3</sup>Four of the Roops' other works deal with the Revolution, demonstrating the range of their interest in it: there are two novels (one about a girl soldier, and one about a Quaker boy who spied for Washington), a biography of Paul Revere, and another "In My Own Words" text about Ben Franklin.

<sup>4</sup>Martin does not use the word "freedom" in this section or, as far as I can tell, at any point in his memoir. A reference to "free blacks" seems the only use of the word "free" in its political sense, except in the final pages, where Martin compares the experience of the "free citizens" of the Militia to that of indentured Continentals like himself: "they would not have endured the sufferings the army did" (249).

<sup>5</sup>M.T. Anderson's *The Astonishing Life of Octavian Nothing* (2006–08) and Laurie Halse Anderson's *Seeds of America* trilogy (2008–forthcoming), both told from the perspective of enslaved young protagonists, are Schwebel's primary examples for the third generation.

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