

worker, Gehring insists, who devoted hours to mastering his props, and the actor's inclination to hide his emotions worked well for him; audiences perceived McQueen as exuding a kind of troubled mystery.

As Gehring takes the reader through the highlights of McQueen's career and personal life, he balances discussion of the actor's harsher traits with quotes from those who loved him, and provides anecdotes that reveal his lesser-known humorous side. Gehring recounts, for example, the great passion (and volcanic arguments) of McQueen's love affair with and eventual marriage to Ali MacGraw.

Steve McQueen was candid about his flaws and the reasons behind them. At the root of his life story was the fact that, despite his ability to recognize the deprivations that shaped him, he was unable to get out from under them. Because of this, the book ends on a somewhat melancholy note. After a lifetime searching for a way to prove himself and for "a

safe place" (p. 233), McQueen was unable to make peace with the pain and chaos of his early life until his final years, before his death from cancer at the age of fifty.

Gehring quotes McQueen as saying, "I've done everything there is to do but a lot of my life was wasted" (p. 205). His biographer poignantly disagrees. Believing that the actor squeezed as much living into his short life as possible, albeit much of it self-destructive, Gehring points to McQueen's humility, talent, and devotion to his two children as the star's real legacy. An unabashed fan of McQueen's great escape from both his hardscrabble Indiana childhood and his life-long personal demons, Gehring reminds his readers that "we will always have the films" (p. 242). Thanks to this touching and highly readable new biography, readers will regret that there are so few.

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*American Insurgents, American Patriots*  
*The Revolution of the People*

By T. H. Breen

(New York: Hill and Wang, 2010. Pp. 337. Notes, index. \$27.00.)

*This Violent Empire*  
*The Birth of an American National Identity*

By Carroll Smith-Rosenberg

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. Pp. xxii, 484. Illustrations, index. \$45.00.)

The theme of violence has been surging to prominence in the writing of

early modern American history, and these two books by senior historians

duly place it at the heart of their re-evaluations of the American Revolution and the Early American Republic. T. H. Breen and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, who have enjoyed illustrious academic careers since earning their doctorates in 1968, join a vibrant younger generation of scholars working to counter the tenacity with which the conventional narrative of American history has for so long been sanitized and distorted. Vincent Brown in *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (2008) focused on the violence in the history of slavery; Patrick Griffin in *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier* (2007), and Peter Silver in *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America* (2007) stressed the violence on the so-called "frontier." To these can now be added Breen's book dramatizing the physical violence of the Revolution, and Smith-Rosenberg's book interrogating the rhetorical violence of the Early Republic. Both historians insist that for us to do justice to the past, these foundational moments of American history must be re-appraised for their violent tendencies, and for the emotionality impelling that violence.

In Breen's account of the American Revolution the leading emotion is rage, because only rage can explain the inexorable march toward war in the two critical years preceding the War of American Independence. That war would entail tremendous sacrifice and bloodshed, but before the war

itself there was a crucial phase of "insurgency," by which Breen means organized popular political resistance. In his previous book, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (2004), Breen had sought to explain what managed to unify colonists living in the thirteen disconnected yet ultimately rebellious colonies; there his answer had been consumer culture and boycott politics. In this follow-up volume, Breen seeks to explain what motivated diverse ordinary people to pursue revolution and to wage war; his answer here is political rage. Other scholars have concentrated their energy on the "genius" of the so-called Founding Fathers, on the intellectual arguments of political pamphlets, and on the vanguard of urban activism, but such an elitist approach cannot, according to Breen, explain a rebellion as widespread as the American Revolution. His spotlight falls instead upon the middling white farming families who constituted, in Breen's estimation, 70 percent of the population in the thirteen rebellious colonies. These were the proverbial ordinary people instigated by the actions of the British imperial government to organize local protest committees, with the unexpected and magnified consequence of fomenting a revolution and sparking a war.

Breen's story effectively begins with the March 1774 passage of the Coercive Acts in response to the Boston Tea Party, and it ends shy of the Declaration of Independence in

July 1776 with an insurgency by then at full throttle. Breen traces the events and processes through which middling white farming families living in small communities throughout the thirteen rebellious colonies were awakened to political consciousness and incited to political rage: these are the “insurgents” of the book’s title. Spurred into action by the Coercive Acts, new protest committees forced increasingly stark choices on their local communities: either you are with us or you are against us. For Breen, these committees became “schools of revolution” which in two years’ time managed to overthrow imperial authority in the colonies, leaving King and Parliament with only an unsavory military option to restore order. The committees served simultaneously to channel political rage by those “with us,” and to stifle political dissent by those “against us.” The emotive and unflinching intimidation of imperial officials as well as “friends of government” (i.e., loyalists) constitutes the unappreciated violence of this crucial phase of the American Revolution. Without an insurgency, Breen insists, there could have been no revolution.

In Smith-Rosenberg’s account of the Early American Republic the leading emotion is not rage but fear, because only fear can explain the venom directed at social scapegoats in the two critical decades following the War of American Independence. The peace treaty of 1783 left the victorious American rebels without any

central government or national identity to carry them securely forward into the future. Because the War had disrupted every aspect of life in the thirteen states, it forced an extraordinary burden of re-creation upon citizens of the new nation. Hence a pervasive and abiding fear beset bourgeois and middling urban whites in the postwar era, as they confronted not the imperial beast of Britain, but seemingly intractable economic problems and political tensions within the thirteen independent “United States.” Smith-Rosenberg’s story begins with the violent outbreak and military suppression of Shays’s Rebellion in 1786 in western Massachusetts, an episode she considers symptomatic of the ongoing turmoil that would prompt middling urban whites to choose to heap opprobrium on rural farmers, women, Native Americans, and African Americans.

Scrutinizing the political magazines and the novels of the era, Smith-Rosenberg engages in both psychoanalytic interpretation as well as cultural analysis to pinpoint the terms of this rhetorical violence. Bourgeois and middling urban whites projected their fear and self-loathing onto weaker social groups—“the Other”—in a bid to bolster their own fragile identities and frustrated aims. They sought to construct a binary social world where exclusion of the marginal would enable consolidation of a mainstream: a secure new American ruling class to replace the ousted British. Yet no matter how fiercely

political magazines demonized rural farmers, women, “Indians,” and “Africans,” none of this managed to produce a coherent nation, a rigid social hierarchy, or a secure ruling class. The magazines’ images of “the Other” would remain so riddled with ambiguities and contradictions as to undermine any sense of cultural confidence or social stability for their audience. Scapegoating proved, in the end, a disturbingly weak rhetorical weapon of the self-appointed new American elite.

In Breen’s account of the American Revolution, physical violence succeeded in generating an effective broad-based insurgency against the most powerful empire in the world. In Smith-Rosenberg’s account of the Early American Republic, rhetorical violence failed to fortify a new American ruling class, one which held political power but enjoyed neither confidence nor security. Breen’s nar-

rative ends optimistically on the cusp of political triumph—independence first declared by force of words and then defended by force of arms—whereas Smith-Rosenberg’s narrative ends pessimistically with a fractious degree of fearfulness continuing to plague American history down to the present day. Both books steer us to greater appreciation of the emotionality as well as the violence endemic to two foundational periods of American history where we have been led to least expect it. In so doing, Breen and Smith-Rosenberg help us reconsider the peculiar terms of American history, and of the “American character.” Are Americans essentially a violent people?

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*Big Bone Lick*  
*The Cradle of American Paleontology*  
 By Stanley Hedeon

(Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008. Pp. xviii, 182. Illustrations, notes, index. \$24.95.)

Stanley Hedeon has packed a great deal into one small book. This is a story about a place and an American icon. Americans’ fascination with monstrous animals that once roamed the continent, armed with massive teeth—and exemplifying American power—did not begin with the dinosaurs of the nineteenth century.

Fully a century earlier, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Charles Willson Peale, and a host of others, were engrossed in the study of a different monster—one with ten-foot tusks. We know it today as the mastodon, a relative of the living elephants of Africa and Asia and the extinct “Siberian” mammoth (which