

REVISITING AMERICA REVISED:
FRANCES FITZGERALD AND HER CRITICS

Loren E. Pennington
Emporia State University

Frances FitzGerald's account of the Vietnam War, Fire in the Lake, made her reputation as an author. It won a Pulitzer Prize, a National Book Award, and a Bancroft Prize. When I picked up my issue of The New Yorker for February 26, 1979, and found the first installment of a pre-publication serialization of her commentary on American history as presented in the nation's elementary and secondary textbooks, I fell to reading it with great anticipation. Two weeks later I put down the third installment with anticipation unfulfilled. I thought that while FitzGerald's essays might be informative for the general reader, they said nothing any professional historian did not already know; indeed, they seemed a trifle naive. Nevertheless, when America Revised appeared as a book in late 1979, it was nominated for a National Book Award, and the author was the central participant in an elaborate Washington symposium sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities.¹ In the thought I had perhaps misread the New Yorker essays or underestimated their value, I turned to the book's reviewers.

As is so often the case with "non-scholarly" works, America Revised was generally ignored by the "best" professional journals. The Journal of American History and the American Historical Review did not review it at all, though the AHA did take extended notice of it in its Newsletter.² But America Revised made quite a splash in the more popular weekly and monthly magazines. Under the title "The History Scam," Newsweek praised FitzGerald for telling the American people, as she had in Fire in the Lake, what they did not want but needed to hear, and for reminding them that by downgrading the importance of intellectual history, elementary and secondary history texts have forgotten that history is made by people rather than by impersonal forces.³ Raymond A. Schroth, writing in Commonweal, thought America Revised belonged in a class with Alexis de Toqueville's Democracy in America, Richard Hofstadter's Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, and David Potter's People of Plenty. His only criticism (and one echoed by most other reviewers) was that while it is an accurate description of the deplorable state of American history school texts, it offers no remedies or solutions.⁴ The New York Times Book Review lauded the work for its scrutiny of the muddled attempts of the new social studies to rethink American history and for its criticism of ethnic history, which seems to imply that Americans "have no common history, no common culture, and no common values." Aside from the usual criticism that the book is non-prescriptive, the Times' chief complaint was that while the chapters are clear enough when read individually they "are a bit confusing when read as a whole."⁵ So far, the reviews seemed unexceptionable, if overly extravagant in their praise. But other critics had different views.

New York University historian Albert Weeks, in a review for The Christian Science Monitor, saw America Revised chiefly as a criticism of the Muzzey school of textbook writers, and as a left-handed compliment to the current texts for offering a more realistic view of foreign affairs.⁶ I had not found FitzGerald that favorable to current texts nor that critical of Muzzey. I also wondered what FitzGerald herself might think of Weeks's solution to the problem: give the students a large dose of conflicting historical interpretations such as those to be found in Gerald S. Brown and Sidney Fine's The American Past, a readings book generally considered difficult for college students, let alone for those of secondary schools. The Weeks solution seemed a good example of the "mandarin" approach condemned by FitzGerald in her third essay. Reviewer Clara Claiborne Park, in Saturday Review, suggested that history might regain its relevance in the American search for roots.⁷ Considering FitzGerald's criticism of the narrowness of ethnic history, one doubts that she would find much merit in the genealogical approach.

The picture one gets of America Revised from the above reviewers was at least favorable, if somewhat confused. But then all of them appeared to represent the politics of moderation, a position often noted for confusion. As might be expected, there was no confusion in the minds of the critics of the right. Joseph Sobran, senior editor of the National Review, found the book totally without merit. In a review sarcastically entitled "What About Squanto?" and which was more a review of Fire in the Lake than America Revised, he accused FitzGerald of using the excuse that history had no objectivity "to badger us into a new consensus based on the fashionable views she holds. That's politics, not history."⁸ The most extreme attack came from Kenneth S. Lynn, whose review appeared in Commentary. It took Lynn nearly 6000 words to complete his demolition. He characterized FitzGerald as a representative of the segment of the new left which criticizes the breakdown of discipline in America and her book as "the latest instance of leftist fundamentalism." To Lynn, she was still the same radical who had written Fire in the Lake.⁹

If the claims of Sobran and Lynn have validity, it is strange that FitzGerald fared no better with the critics of the left, of whom the most prominent was William Appleman Williams. Writing in The Nation, Williams lamented the unfocused nature of America Revised: "She has trouble locating the jugular." What FitzGerald failed to take into account in her discussion of pre-World War II textbook writers was that they did have an ideology--one "most accurately described as Empire as a way of life." And in Williams's view, nothing has really changed; it now is "Empire at bay." He gave FitzGerald higher marks for her second essay, with its argument for more economics in history, but could not accept her criticism that the recent textbook stress on ethnicity means "that the center cannot and should not hold." Indeed, that is the core of Williams's quarrel with FitzGerald: she believes the center should hold; he of course believes it should not.¹⁰

Besides Weeks and Williams, the principal reviewers of America Revised among professional historians were Walter Karp, C. Vann Woodward, and H. Ray Hiner. In his review in Harper's Magazine, Karp praised FitzGerald for diligence in working her way through a mass of material; "about what it all signifies, however, she has only confused and contradictory notions." According to Karp, FitzGerald's supreme contradiction is that she resists the historical view that things are in the saddle but refuses to accept the idea that to replace things with men leads almost automatically to the elitist history she deplores. And whereas Williams had chastised FitzGerald for failing to recognize the value of ethnic history, Karp criticized her for seeing it as an improvement.¹¹

C. Vann Woodward, in the New York Review of Books, identified FitzGerald as an author who has written "a book on Vietnam," which is a little like saying Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has done some writing on the New Deal. In spite of this patronizing remark, Woodward's review was the only significant one by a professional historian that was almost completely favorable. Contesting the usual claim that FitzGerald was biased in her presentation, Woodward found FitzGerald not given to easy answers or glib solutions, and "considering the provocation involved, her indignation and rage are remarkably controlled." In the process, "she . . . leaves her target riddled with direct hits." Woodward's only disagreement with FitzGerald was in discovering the villains. FitzGerald's are the publishers, the schools, and the faddists. Woodward's are professional historians and their present-mindedness, and, more directly, the American people themselves. Since Jefferson, they have always seen the present as independent of the past.¹²

N. Ray Hiner, in Phi Delta Kappan, was perhaps the most perceptive (and objective) of those reviewers who took an unfavorable view of America Revised. As a professional historian (and a professional educator), Hiner was surprised

by FitzGerald's naivete. Did she really expect history texts not to reflect the trend of the times? How could she praise James Harvey Robinson for his exacting historical standards when his historical relativism represented the very thing she was condemning? As for her claim that the publishing industry, with its continual reaction to market forces, political preserves, and just plain quirks is controlled by an educational establishment--well, just how does a conspiracy control total chaos? Like Woodward, Hiner laid the blame on professional historians, not so much for present-mindedness as for regarding the whole business of writing textbooks as a non-intellectual pursuit.¹³

Few books have brought forth such diverse reviews as America Revised. What one reviewer praised another condemned. Moreover, the critics could not even agree on what it is that FitzGerald is praising or condemning. In substance, while their specific points have validity, the reviewers are of no real help in understanding America Revised. The reader must turn to the book itself and form his own judgments. On the face of it, America Revised is simple, almost disarming. But as I found on a second reading, it is exceedingly complex. And in spite of the complaints of Sobran and Lynn, it contains only a trace of leftist ideology; essentially it is written from what (as only Williams recognized) can best be described as a consensus point of view, although with some variation.

America Revised is not a tightly written book. Rather, it consists of three extended essays only loosely connected, and they are best read individually rather than collectively. The first, "Past Masters," is neither a polemic against the right nor a defense of the left. It is a statement of situation, muckraking without prescription, as most good muckraking is. The essay begins where FitzGerald began: with the textbooks of the 1950s. FitzGerald claims she accepted her textbooks as gospel. While it is difficult to believe that Frances FitzGerald ever accepted anything as gospel, we can surely accept her statement as true of Americans in general. The texts of the fifties were noted for their chauvinism, coverage, and blandness, but at least they had a certain unity that the student could grasp. Then came the sixties, the real watershed, according to FitzGerald, in American history textbook writing. It was not simply that new fads came into vogue, that the texts became less unified and in the process less bland, but that the theme of progress gave way to the theme of change. The new texts run the gamut from the moderate left to the moderate right, and the only thing they have in common is their social science approach. They are now masterpieces of design, their illustrations striking, if neither very effective history nor illustrative of their written content. These new books with all their relativism amaze the older generation, which continues to hope that somewhere out there in history is absolute truth, a truth the texts persist in ignoring. What this proves is that history textbooks, which historians lament as always being behind scholarship, are really always up to date.¹⁴ The difficulty is that each generation of Americans reads only one generation of textbooks, and the thing they remember is not the facts but the interpretation, which that generation accepts as absolute truth.

The question is, who is it that propounds these one-generation truths? In her last two essays FitzGerald apportions the blame, but here she lays it primarily on the publishers, who are caught in a dilemma: "On the one hand they are running what amounts to Ministries of Truth for children, and, on the other hand, they are simply trying to make money in one of the freest of free enterprises in the United States."¹⁵ If they are to be successful, their texts must satisfy the really big (and narrow) adoption units such as Texas, as well as all the other statewide or district-wide adoptions, which are based on the idea that somebody has to stand between the hardpressed classroom teacher and the world of commerce. But this only increases the dilemma. The publishers are continually caught in the argument between liberals and conservatives.

The swings are unpredictable (those publishers who have tried to anticipate them have usually come cropper), and the effective life of a text may be as little as a year. Carried to its logical end, this should force publishers to admit that they have no standards, that "truth" is what can be marketed at the moment. But of course they cannot admit this, and "hence the swampiness of their public statements, and their strangely unfocused anxiety when they're asked about their editorial decisions."¹⁶

In spite of these criticisms, does FitzGerald believe that textbooks have improved since the sixties? Some of her reviewers think that she does. But it seems to me her opinion is generally the opposite. Why else does she conclude this first essay with a nostalgic (if sometimes despairing) look at the most famous of American history texts of all time, those written by David Saville Muzzey (and his revisors) and published by Ginn and Company from 1911 to 1966? The secrets of Muzzey's success were his style and his biographical approach to history--men were free agents who made history, and not vice-versa. Muzzey's texts may have been bad institutional history, but they reflected the belief of Americans in their own goodwill, their belief that America could improve itself by remaining within the established system.

FitzGerald's second essay, "Continuity and Change," is a good summary of the swings in American history textbooks from Bancroft to Beard to consensus to new left. Once again she emphasizes the 1960s as the breaking point, although she makes it clear the break was by no means complete. Recent textbook authors have had to deal not only with the views of the present "but with the very powerful images of America that their predecessors taught generations of Americans."¹⁷ Thus the parameters of revolution are limited.

In nineteenth century textbooks, America as a Christian nation was the basic textbook focus. By 1900, the problem of the immigrant had come to dominate the texts, and by 1940 the idea of the melting pot pervaded all. From there it was just a step to the civil rights movement and its emphasis on reinterpreting Reconstruction.¹⁸ FitzGerald makes the point that the new view of Reconstruction made its mark in the academic world with the works of Francis Simkins in the 1930s, but it took the civil rights movement to put it in the textbooks, proof that social conditions rather than academic research influence text interpretations.¹⁹

In contrast to this slow recognition of Blacks, the textbook trend in regard to American Indians has been "resolutely backward over the course of a century."²⁰ Texts of the 1830s and 40s did treat Indians in a fairly favorable light, but from then on it was downhill until the 1930s, when the Indians simply dropped out of the textbooks. The texts of the 1960s and 70s would discover women, Asians, and Hispanic-Americans, but they would rediscover Indians. The biggest textbook discovery of the sixties and seventies was the Hispanic-Americans. Insofar as the Spanish had been in texts before the sixties, they were the Spanish of the Black Legend. Nowadays these offending passages have been removed, but the accomplishments of Spanish-America have yet to come into their own. If they ever do, it may well require the biggest rewriting job American history texts have ever undergone.

The main feature of all this stress on ethnic history is that while all, or most, groups are now covered, all are not covered with an even hand. In the coverage of white ethnic groups, one is able to show poverty and degradation. With Blacks and Chicanos, it is lab coats, business suits, and when they are farm laborers, they are happy at it; indeed, one would suspect that they all "took happy pills."²¹ The non-whites are always struggling to achieve equality, but the texts are careful to give little mention to what they are struggling against--namely, the whites. In fact, the non-whites, as the texts tell it, seem to be struggling in a void.

This brings us to the chief difficulty of the ethnic approach. As FitzGerald sees it, it is how to give the non-white minorities their inning without offending the white majority. The Squanto of Sobran's review is a case in point. The text pictures him as a friendly Indian who taught the Pilgrims how to deal with unfriendly Indians. But by any objective test, Squanto was an opportunistic traitor and the unfriendly Indians were the real heroes for resisting the white invasion. Then add Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Asian-Americans, Blacks, and women and the unity of American history is destroyed--it can only follow that the center cannot and should not hold. Here we have FitzGerald's basic quarrel with ethnic history: It means we are in danger of having no longer a history of American civilization, but only histories of groups. The nationalism of American unity was bad enough, but the fragmented nationalism of ethnic history is even worse.

Ethnic history is a recent development of American history textbooks, but while they were creating this new problem, the recent texts were perpetuating two older ones in their treatments of economic history and foreign affairs. American history texts pretty much ignored economic history until the 1890s, and then it was mostly the history of technology. Such ideas as the economic interpretation of the Constitution were played down or ignored, even in Charles Beard's own textbooks. Today's texts still regard economic history as something that took place mostly in the nineteenth century. They talk about the progressive movement and the New Deal, but there is little or no discussion of the way these movements transformed the traditional American economic system. FitzGerald believes the best example of the inattention of present texts to economic matters is the way in which they handle the question of poverty and the poor. The texts did, in the 1960s, discover the poor, but they usually end up with mild statements that some believe poverty cannot be solved by government action, while others believe that the war on poverty has failed because of insufficient government action. So poverty remains a kind of disease, its cause unknown, its cure debatable. What is never raised is the question of whether poverty is endemic to capitalism, or, one might add, to any economic system yet devised by man.

If present texts fail as economic history, they do not do much better in their treatment of foreign relations. According to FitzGerald, a major shift in history texts since World War II has been their increasing emphasis on world affairs. The texts of the fifties were, if anything, more chauvinistic than their predecessors, which at least had not viewed every American venture into the outside world as an unqualified success. The nightmare for textbook writers and editors came in the 1960s with the Vietnam War. To FitzGerald, the surprising thing is that current texts are even worse on the subject of Vietnam than were those of the sixties. Today's texts are neither hawkish nor dovish, but simply evasive. The tendency is to cut down discussion and wipe the slate clean, leaving the impression that in the sixties the American people were united behind the government, and that the war finally stopped because Nixon and Kissinger decided that it should. Unfortunately, one is led to suspect that FitzGerald's criticism has a good deal to do with her own views of the conflict. Nothing is so upsetting as the downplaying of one's favorite topic. That this is likely is seen in the fact that other than on the Vietnam War, FitzGerald finds (as Weeks noted) the most recent texts something of an improvement over their predecessors in the treatment of foreign affairs. But they promise more than they deliver. Their problem is that they continue to think of foreign affairs only in relation to America, and thereby they give a false picture of the world. What can be done? Very little, so long as they remain histories of the United States. National histories have their own intrinsic value, "but the fact remains that an American child who will grow up to work for General Motors . . . will find United States history [as presented in recent texts] just about as useful as the history of Saxony would have been to a Saxon soldier going off to fight in the Napoleonic Wars."²²

As near as one can judge, many of the complaints leveled at America Revised are really criticisms of this second essay. In particular, it seems to contradict FitzGerald's general assumption that what students of American history need is less emphasis on facts and more on ideas, less on the nomothetic and more on the intellectual. In this second essay she seems to come down on the side of more economics and more international affairs, neither of which is ordinarily thought of as intellectual history. In reality, the contradiction is in the minds of the critics. For FitzGerald, the contradiction does not exist because she does not think of economic history or the history of foreign affairs in the ordinary sense; she does not think of either as givens (as the textbooks do) in which we can only muddle along in Thucydides-like fashion and hope to stave off total disaster. Instead they are problems capable of solution through rational analysis. Our real difficulty in these areas is that America has allowed itself to be a prisoner of events. As one who believes in the value of intellectual history and the power of ideas, FitzGerald finds this totally unacceptable.

It is in her third essay, "Progressives, Fundamentalists, and Mandarins," that FitzGerald comes down squarely on the side of intellectual history. Here, if nowhere else, she does have that Williams sense of the jugular; literally nobody escapes unscathed. It is not that present texts ignore intellectual history--they contain everything from Moby Dick to pop art. The trouble is that they think of those things, and not of ideas, as intellectual history; they do not deal with political history in any kind of an intellectual framework. By removing people from political history they have removed ideas and substituted a kind of natural disaster theory of history in which nobody has ever caused anything. The new inquiry texts are about the only ones which have tried to avoid this approach, but they have done so in a half-witted and loaded manner that no respectable historian can accept, and have covered their tracks with social science jargon and concepts. The result is not history but high school debate.

How have we reached this deplorable state? As FitzGerald makes clear, the truth is we did not reach it; we have always been there, at least since the second decade of this century when the National Education Association passed from the hands of college presidents and professors and into the control of school administrators. From that time on, subject matter was rejected in favor of utilitarianism and vocational education. In the name of progressive education there prevailed a hide-bound conservatism that saw all intellectual activity, and especially intellectual history, as having nothing to do with reality. It was a view that remained unchallenged until 1957, when Sputnik caused panic in American education. Suddenly intellectual activity seemed to have every connection with reality. The reform banner was immediately raised, and about five years later it reached the social studies. Professor Edwin Fenton took the lead with his new social studies and his inquiry method: Work with raw data, apply the concepts, and come up with the answer. It sounded good, but it didn't work, chiefly because the proponents of the inquiry method never really moved away from utilitarianism. The new social studies was never more than a new form of vocational training.

If the new social studies never achieved much success, it did help to bring out the critics. On the one hand were the lineal descendents of the progressives, who argued that what was needed was not the new social studies, but Head Start, Sesame Street, and Black Studies. Entering from stage right were those who hit at both the new social studies and the neo-progressives for their cultural and moral relativism, about the only thing, aside from values clarification, those two groups seemed to have in common. This new fundamentalism was based on a philosophy basically at odds with political liberalism, cultural modernism, and the spirit of scientific inquiry. Very shortly the controversy was joined by the Back-to-Basics movement, and by what

FitzGerald describes as the "mandarins," the followers of Admiral Hyman Rickover, who, while professing to believe in the power of the intellect and the value of science and the cultural tradition, actually wanted to limit the curriculum--the narrow view again. All of these groups in one way or another promised a panacea, but none of them has produced it. All think in terms of manipulating rather than educating the student. All take a reductionist view of history, and none really believes in its worth, no matter how much they give lip service to the idea that one must know history to understand the present and make provision for the future. History, if not the worse for their efforts, is certainly no better.

America Revised is a damning indictment, but an accurate one. Frances FitzGerald is critic to us all. To ignore her is to ignore every problem history has faced, not just in the past thirty years, but in this century.

NOTES

¹Frances FitzGerald, America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century (Boston, 1979). For the symposium in Washington, see "Revising America: A Symposium at the National Endowment for the Humanities," The History Teacher, XIII (August, 1980), 561-577.

²Fay D. Metcalf and Matthew T. Downey, "Do School History Textbooks Lie to Children? Reflections on Frances FitzGerald's America Revised," AHA Newsletter, XVIII (February, 1980), 6-7, 13.

³Peter S. Prescott, "The History Scam," Newsweek, XLIV (October 15, 1979), 122-125.

⁴Raymond A. Schroth in Commonweal, CVII (April 11, 1980), 214-216.

⁵New York Times Book Review, October 14, 1979, 9.

⁶Albert L. Weeks in The Christian Science Monitor, November 17, 1979, 17. Actually FitzGerald praises only the inquiry texts and a few others for making possible a more realistic approach, but she then goes on to criticize them for not making good on the possibility. See America Revised, 138-148.

⁷Clara Claiborne Park in Saturday Review, VI (December, 1979), 58.

⁸Joseph Sobran, "What About Squanto?" National Review, XXXI (December 7, 1979), 1565.

⁹Kenneth S. Lynn in Commentary, LXXIX (February, 1980), 74-80.

¹⁰William Appleman Williams, "You Aren't Lost Until You Don't Know Where You've Been," The Nation, CCXXIX (October 27, 1979), 405-407.

¹¹Walter Karp, "Textbook America," Harper's Magazine, CCLX (May, 1980), 80-88.

¹²C. Vann Woodward, "Playing Hooky. America Revised: History Textbooks in the Twentieth Century," New York Review of Books, XXVI (December 20, 1979), 16, 18-19.

¹³N. Ray Hiner, "FitzGerald's Study, Though Compelling, Fails as History," Phi Delta Kappan, LXII (September, 1980), 63-65.

¹⁴What is obvious here is that the reason texts do not keep up with academic scholarship is because scholarship (fortunately) is often not in tune with the times.

¹⁵America Revised, 28.

¹⁶Ibid., 31.

¹⁷Ibid., 73.

¹⁸It is unfortunate that FitzGerald's discussion of Reconstruction history is quite prosaic, and at one point she has Andrew "Jackson" struggling with the Radical Republicans (ibid., 83-89).

¹⁹FitzGerald points out that none of the new texts go so far as to include new left scholarship in their discussion of Reconstruction (ibid., 89).

²⁰Ibid., 90.

²¹Ibid., 100.

²²Ibid., 144-145.