

Edward Bancroft: Scientist, Author, Spy

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Reviewed by John Ehrman

We like to believe that the Revolutionary War showed Americans at their best. With the odds stacked against them, the liberty-loving colonists put together a government and army and overthrew the British rule that threatened their freedoms. Along the way, the leaders of the rebellion proclaimed the new country's independence in a document that still inspires, and the fledgling government carried off several diplomatic coups that did much to help seal the victory. But there was a more ambiguous side to the story as well. Not every colonist favored independence or saw the British as tyrants. Indeed, some maintained their loyalty to the crown and believed that it would be best for everyone if the colonies remained under British rule. One of these men was Edward Bancroft, and in a new biography, *Edward Bancroft: Scientist, Author, Spy*, historian Thomas Schaeper gives us the story of this remarkable man.

Edward Bancroft is hardly a familiar name to Americans today. Born in Massachusetts in 1745, he was apprenticed as a youth to a doctor in Connecticut but ran off in 1763, eventually reaching what today is Guyana. There he worked as a physician on local plantations and traveled through the region, researching plant and animal life for a book—*An Essay on the Natural History of Guiana in South America*—he published in 1769 after he moved to London. The book made Bancroft a prominent scholar—it remained authoritative for more than a century—and propelled his rapid rise in London's social and literary circles. Bancroft also continued to travel, speculated in North American land, and, as the political crisis developed between England and her North

American colonies, became a spokesman for the American cause and a close associate of Benjamin Franklin, who represented the colonies in London.

Because of Bancroft's prominence as a friend of the colonies and his relationship with Franklin, when the Continental Congress sent the first American diplomat, Silas Deane, to Paris in 1776, it instructed him to contact Bancroft for support. Bancroft joined Deane in July 1776 and stayed in Paris with the American diplomatic mission for almost the entire remainder of the Revolution. Bancroft became a key member of the group, working closely with Franklin—who joined the mission in December 1776 and later was made ambassador—handling much of the paperwork, drafting reports and correspondence, and translating. He was present for meetings with the French and for almost all of the Americans' internal discussions. Unfortunately, however, during his brief trip to England in August 1776, the British had recruited Bancroft as a spy.

One of the strongest parts of the book is Schaeper's exploration of Bancroft's motives for spying. Bancroft has long been condemned as a traitor to his country—"perfidy" was the word the great US diplomatic historian, Samuel Flagg Bemis, used to describe Bancroft's work—but Schaeper points out that, before making this accusation, one must first ask, "what was his country?" (61) When the Revolution began, Schaeper notes, most colonists still thought of themselves as Englishmen rather than citizens of a separate entity. Even among the rebels and their leaders, the view that they were defending their rights as Englishmen

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held until after the outbreak of war. Bancroft shared this view and, Schaeper concludes, saw himself as a “subject of the British Empire, and he hoped that the empire would remain intact.” (63) Thus, when the British government asked for his help, he gave it willingly. In Schaeper’s account, Bancroft was a spy, but not a traitor.¹

What a spy he was! Bancroft was the asset that case officers and analysts today dream about, and Schaeper gives copious details about how Bancroft went about his work. With his unlimited access, Bancroft had no need to recruit subsources or make potentially alerting queries. He copied documents or wrote his own summaries of papers and meetings, and kept the British fully informed of all aspects of Franco-American diplomacy, French commercial and financial assistance to the Americans, and French military planning. Bancroft’s communications methods were no different than those that already had been in use for centuries and, except writing everything by hand, still are used today. He sent his information to London, either openly as letters or via trusted couriers—often using code language or invisible inks (Bancroft was a skilled chemist)—or through dead drops in Paris. Above all, his communications were timely; Bancroft’s information reached London within a few days, meaning that the British were far better informed about Franco-American diplomacy than was Congress, which had to wait weeks for information to arrive from Paris. Finally, nothing in Schaeper’s account suggests that Bancroft presented any serious handling problems. With his patriotic motivation, he seems to have worked diligently and with few complaints.

As good as his account of Bancroft’s espionage is, Schaeper is most perceptive when he answers another important question: What did Bancroft’s activities accomplish? Schaeper’s answer is, fortunately for the United States, not very much. This essentially was because the British were unable to make effective use of their intelligence windfall. Sometimes, the problem was that the British were afraid to use

Bancroft’s information. For example, before the French and Americans signed their formal alliance in February 1778, Bancroft regularly gave London advance notice of the departure schedules of scores of ships leaving French ports with aid for the colonists. The British government declined to intercept them, however, fearing that violations of neutral rights would provoke the French. Throughout the war, moreover, Lord North’s government was poorly organized and plagued with infighting and indecision that often kept it from acting on Bancroft’s information. In one case, in the spring of 1778, Bancroft told London that a French fleet under the Comte d’Estaing would be sailing from Toulon for North America and that Deane would be a passenger. The British had ample time and resources to intercept and destroy d’Estaing’s force, but North allowed the internal debate to go on so long that London missed the opportunity. This was by no means a unique case. The British had no system for evaluating incoming intelligence and integrating it with political and military decisionmaking and so, notes Schaeper, the government generally was unable to take action on Bancroft’s priceless information. Indeed, it is a classic example of a problem that continues to plague governments.

With the end of the Revolutionary War, Bancroft’s espionage career came to a close, and he resumed his prewar pursuits. He traveled briefly to the United States on business and became involved in numerous ventures, none of which ever amounted to much. Building on his work in Guyana, Bancroft continued to research chemicals and dyes, and published books and articles until almost the time of his death in 1821. Money was tight in his later years, and he died broke. His espionage remained a secret, and his reputation as an American patriot remained intact until the late 1800s, when researchers found the evidence in British archives.

Schaeper’s is a decidedly revisionist biography, taking a sympathetic view of a man who for more than a century has been condemned

¹ Samuel Flagg Bemis, “British Secret Service and the French-American Alliance,” *American Historical Review* 29 (April 1924): 477.

as a traitor. The best part of this approach is that it not only reminds us that Bancroft was a man of many accomplishments outside of espionage, but it also makes us remember that sometimes the question of loyalty is not as clear-cut as we would like to believe. Unlike many of the most notorious modern spies—people such as Alger Hiss or Aldrich Ames—Bancroft was not in a situation where taking one side over the other was a clear act of betrayal. Instead, he was living in a more fluid situation, where many saw rebellion as the wrong approach in a dispute with a system with

which they had no fundamental quarrel. We would do well to remember this when dealing with spies who come from places where loyalty to a modern nation-state is much weaker than ties to tribe or locality—what appears to us as loyalty may look very different to others.

Overall, *Edward Bancroft* is well worth reading. Schaeper tells a good story about politics, diplomacy, and espionage, and leaves his readers with much to think about.

