

A Review of John the Painter: Terrorist of the American Revolution

By

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Book: *John the Painter: Terrorist of the American Revolution*

Author: Jessica Warner

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John the Painter is an interesting historical tale that follows a young and talented, but very disturbed, Scot who takes it upon himself to assist the cause of the American Revolution by attempting to burn down British Royal Navy Yards across England.

Jessica Warner retraces the steps of a man who believed he could bring a superpower to its knees. James Aitken, alias, James Boswell, alias James Hill, alias James Hinde, alias John the Painter was an ordinary man with extraordinary beliefs. He was "a man whose ambitions and intellectual curiosity vastly exceeded his social horizons" (p. 7).

Born in Edinburgh, Scotland to a poor family, Aitken had little opportunity to acquire money or wealth. His parents had no time for him, so his early years were unhappy and spent working instead of playing. He developed a love of reading and devoured any printed material he could find. This love of reading fueled potentialities for a future he never realized, and created within him an insatiable desire to be noticed.

After boarding school, he was apprenticed to a painter. Painting, at the time, was a profession full of trade secrets about how to procure, measure, mix and apply the pigments used to create the palette of colors that decorated English structures and filled English lives.

Close upon the birth of James Aitken came the birth of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain. Most jobs changed, but the job of a painter changed most remarkably. For the first time, mass mechanical processing made paints available for purchase by the general public without the necessity of employing a painter. Not only could these paints be purchased directly by consumers, but they could also be applied by the consumer because of easy to follow directions supplied by wholesalers and manufacturers. Do-it-yourselfers began to encroach on the livelihood of those painters who heretofore had made a respectable living applying color to otherwise drab living quarters. The job of a painter suddenly required fewer skills and less education.

Painters throughout England, and especially in London, continued to find occasional employment plying their trade, but many turned to sidelighting enterprises. Most sold gin when they were not painting. Some, like Aitken, found a sideline in crime. Aitken was not a career

criminal, but an occasional one, sometimes working and sometimes stealing. Crime proved more lucrative than working as a house painter and it was more exciting for a young person as well.

Sometimes Dickensian in her description of poverty and living conditions in Great Britain during the late 1700s, Warner painstakingly traces the steps of James Aitken from infancy through his public hanging at the age of 25 years. Aitken left his home and family in Edinburgh in 1772 at the age of 20 years. Displaying a sense of overriding restlessness, he wandered in nearly constant motion for almost five years (1772-1777), never staying in one place for very long. Everything he did, he did alone. Throughout his short life, he formed no close relationships or attachments and made no friends.

Having received a relatively good education while at boarding school, Aitken was better educated than most people in England, and he wanted them to know it. In his own mind, he was something other than what he was. He read and dreamed and read some more, tirelessly comparing himself to the heroes of classical antiquity. Like many young revolutionaries of the day, he was influenced by the great ideas of the Enlightenment, and in the manner of the Romantics, he was intent on remaking those ideas into his own image. Throughout his wanderings in Great Britain and even in the colonies in America, he always carried a kit bag containing a change of clothes and plenty of books. He did most of his reading in public houses and coffeehouses, which were always well stocked with newspapers.

Thus, the stage was set. A promising youth is given every possible advantage in the form of schooling and vocational training, only to fall in with the usual culprits: bad companions and loose women. Aitken became a highwayman robbing coaches on the approach roads to London. On his very first night as a highwayman, one of his victims got a good look at his face and informed the famous Sir John Fielding. Sir John Fielding had taken over leadership of the Bow Street Runners from his brother Henry Fielding upon Henry's death in 1754. Sir John Fielding published and distributed throughout England *The Hue and Cry*, a newspaper that described notorious criminal acts and the persons who committed those acts. Widely read throughout the countryside, *The Hue and Cry* served as the first formal criminal intelligence outlet in the United Kingdom. It was in *The Hue and Cry* that James Aitken read his own wanted notice and decided to move to America.

His stay in the American colonies was not long and his hope of becoming "discovered" and installed as an officer in the American Army was not realized. Wandering around the eastern seaboard, living on wits and thefts, Aitken could not find the recognition he felt he deserved. Intrigued by the notion of making his mark in history and furthering the cause of American independence, he decided to return to England to operate as an uncommissioned and unsanctioned *agent provocateur*. He planned to further the cause of American independence by burning down every Royal Navy Ship Yard in Great Britain.

Upon his return to England, Aitken embarked upon a course of action to insure his dreams of becoming famous and changing the face of history. Aitken's grandiose plans quickly crashed upon the rocks of reality as obstacle after obstacle shattered his realization of glory. He became increasingly reckless until finally, after many attempts, in a poorly planned and even more poorly executed operation, he set fire to the Royal Navy Yard in Bristol, England, on

January 19, 1777. Although the damage caused was relatively light, the psychological damage to the citizens of Great Britain was similar to that experienced in the United States on September 11, 2001. Aitken was pursued by investigators across England and captured on January 27, 1777.

Warner's account of Aitken's trial is opulently detailed. Throughout the trial narrative, the administration of English jurisprudence is richly embroidered leaving the reader with a deeper understanding as to how the rules and practices of English law influenced the American Revolution and consequently, the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

Aitken was found guilty of high crimes against the Crown and publicly hanged at the age of 25 years. Although Aitken was captured and his grandiose plans had no effect on the war, he did not consider himself a failure because, for the briefest of moments, he had cheated obscurity and become the most famous man in England.

Jessica Warner has provided readers with an Old World story populated by more than a few little known personages. The strength of this book lies in its description of 18th century English justice. The description of John the Painter's trial is particularly interesting simply because of its ability to evoke the same sense of urgent necessity to change the justice system that flavored the writing of the American Constitution and Bill of Rights.

For one with an express interest in 18th century English justice systems, this book could prove interesting, although it will fall short of enlightening. For most readers, it will simply be a pleasant, though sometimes confusing, historical novel that makes one wonder what drives individuals to believe that their desperate acts of self-aggrandizement manifested by attacks upon innocent people will make the world a better place.

John the Painter's background and personal characteristics may strike the reader as very similar to the backgrounds and personal characteristics of dozens of contemporary "terrorists," including those responsible for the carnage of September 11, 2001 and the July 7, 2005 London bombings. But, this book does not explore those similarities or comment upon the existence of a "terrorist" personality or typology. It simply tells a story about an obscure man who unsuccessfully tried to achieve renown by violent means.

ENDNOTE

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