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The lives behind the massacre

by Craig Bruce Smith

March 5, 2020, marks the two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the Boston Massacre, an event permanently imprinted in the minds of Americans as one of the direct causes of the Revolution. Before the blood on Boston's King Street was dry, the patriot and Sons of Liberty member Paul Revere immortalized the famed 1770 event with an engraving called *The Bloody Massacre* that shaped the global perception of the event, all the way down to the present day. The *Massacre* depicts intentional slaughter of unarmed colonists by the British Army's villainous 29th Regiment. Numerous other books, including most recently Erik Hinderaker's *Boston's Massacre,* have dismantled Revere's engraving and painted the complicated and confused nature of the killing of five colonists in a light that shifts the blame away from the British. But the historian Serena Zabin, in her new and well-timed *The Boston Massacre: A Family History*, cuts through the tangled narrative to show how familial and social relationships between the colonists and the occupying soldiers were at the center of the Massacre.

The book has been greatly anticipated. In 2015, Zabin presented early portions of her work to a conference at the Massachusetts Historical Society, which prompted the Pulitzer Prize–winning historian Gordon Wood to declare he would never think of the Massacre in the same way. But that also set expectations extremely, almost unachievably, high. With the publication of *The Boston Massacre,* Zabin aims to offer "an indelible new slant on iconic American Revolutionary history." Granted, some recent work on the Founding era claims to be "the first" or "new" or "genre-redefining" for the sake of publicity sizzle. But Zabin actually delivers. By exploring the personal lives of Bostonian and British families affected by the March 5 events, she has indeed done something excitingly original: shattered over two and half centuries of a carefully shaped narrative that sought to divide civilians from the military for political and legal purposes.

If you are looking for a detailed blow-by-blow account of the Massacre, this book isn't it. The "Deadly Riot" itself only gets twenty-four pages. But by beginning in Ireland in 1765, continuing with the British army to Halifax, Canada, and ending with an epilogue on Boston during the Revolutionary War, Zabin's study gives the reader a sweeping narrative that conclusively illustrates how civilians and the military did not exist in separate spheres. During the British occupation of Boston, the two were unmistakably linked by marriage, friendship, commerce, and

even religion. To be fair, Hinderaker hinted at such connections in his excellent 2017 book, but in nowhere near this level of depth.

By following individuals who were "not famous," like the Irish wife and mother Jane Chambers (married to a soldier in the 29th Regiment) and the "sociable" Boston merchant John Rowe, Zabin tracks webs of personal relationships that demonstrate just how interconnected with the people of Boston the occupying British army really was. This was as true after the massacre, she argues, as it was when the Army arrived in 1768. Zabin also charts every location in the city where a soldier and/or his family lived (both housed privately and in barracks), an amazing undertaking—the map on page 71 alone makes the book worth a look. In so doing, she identifies women as crucial parts of the army, funded and transported by the War Office itself, instead of mere "camp followers" or, as that term has traditionally implied, "prostitutes or parasites." At the same time, Zabin explores the dynamics of military marriages and their regulations—how, for instance, soldiers were rewarded for marrying "industrious sober women." Likewise, many British soldiers also become colonists' friends, husbands, fathers, and godfathers. The 29th Regiment and the army are humanized far beyond Revere's caricature. Zabin provides more background on the lives of the British soldiers than any other book on the Massacre. Her discovery of forty intermarriages between soldiers and Boston women during a four-year period only further proves these claims.

The Boston Massacre suggests a far more harmonious civil-military relationship before March 5 than previously accepted, one in which tax officers rather than soldiers were "responsible for the violence and death." Zabin offers numerous examples: a soldier's wife caring for a recently kidnapped child, locals willing to aid army deserters, and sympathy for and outrage against brutal punishments and executions of British soldiers. Zabin even finds this "neighborliness" in the trial records and flirtations and interactions after the Massacre.

Despite the strength and number of these examples, it is still questionable whether they outweigh the hostility created by British legislation and military occupation. Throughout the book, there are references to fear and violence on both sides. Officers and soldiers offered civilians drunken insults, threatened them with rape and murder, and even demanded that slaves kill their masters. In turn, they were deemed outsiders, residents "in Boston" rather than "of Boston." One Bostonian father essentially locked away his single daughter to keep her from meeting soldiers; city officials feared wives and children would become "permanent" residents. Meanwhile, the British military believed Boston was a stain on their colonial reputation.

And what about actual violence? Colonists often disguised themselves and attacked soldiers looking for deserters. There was even a dockside brawl on March 2, 1770 (which Zabin dismisses as a "red herring"). The Massacre itself, which happened three days later, is the most definitive proof of this simmering tension. Afterwards, the imprisoned British Captain Thomas Preston and his soldiers feared a "partial jury" and even lynching.

Zabin states that "people on every side said later that trouble had been brewing for a long time," but also asks, rightly—is this only in hindsight? There are enough instances of unrest to argue that this shared colonial and British view is accurate. In fact, Anglo-Americans had a deep fear of standing armies, from Oliver Cromwell in the English Civil War to the arrival of British General Edward Braddock during the French and Indian War. Perhaps tensions abated on personal or familial levels, but for Boston and the Army as a whole it seems doubtful.

Aside from this single recurring issue, there are some other minor flaws throughout this outstanding book. In the opening, for obvious narrative intent, Zabin argues that the contrary narratives presented by the defense attorney (John Adams) and Revere are essentially synonymous with "soldiers and civilians on the opposite sides," whereas Adams makes a point of labeling the colonists involved as a mob of Boston outsiders. A broader historical framework might also have helped. Examining the Riot Act of 1714 and how it was employed throughout the British Empire to illustrate expectations in civil-military relations, as Hinderaker does, could have been fruitful.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, for a book about the Boston Massacre, the actual Massacre and its subsequent trials aren't the central focus. This is clearly by intent, but it does limit the usefulness of the book for readers wanting to gain a full understanding of the event or hoping for a definitive single-volume history. Still, Zabin's potential audience is vast. It's both a great "Father's Day book" (although why is this an insult?) and a serious contribution to academic history.

Overall, *The Boston Massacre* is well written with some strong narrative (but it could use more of it), while also being fairly concise for a book that offers such a sweepingly new interpretation. Zabin has accomplished a feat that is good for the public and the historical profession: she has written a book on a famous topic but with an insightfully novel approach. Hopefully this inspires others to do the same. Expect to see *The Boston Massacre* as a finalist for the George Washington Book Prize, awarded annually to the top book in early American history.

Craig Bruce Smith is the author of *American Honor: The Creation of the Nation's Ideals during the Revolutionary Era*. All views are his own.