

The Fourteenth State

Who was the real Ethan Allen?

By Tyler Resch

“Inventing Ethan Allen,” published in 2014 by the University Press of New England, is not another biography. Nor is one needed, for there exist a dozen published biographies of Ethan Allen, that boisterous fellow who rallied the Green Mountain Boys, captured Fort Ticonderoga, preached a religion called deism, violently harassed the Yorkers to retreat to Albany, and without whom there would be no state of Vermont. At least that’s the popular image.

“Inventing Ethan Allen” is revisionist history in the best sense, and was written by two of the most experienced scholars of Vermont history: John J. Duffy, a retired professor of English and humanities at the Vermont State Colleges, and H. Nicholas Muller III, who taught history at the University of Vermont, served as president of Colby-Sawyer College, and has written extensively on Vermont.

These authors have skillfully analyzed the extant published biographies and propaganda, which generally echo the manipulative images and mythologies created by Ethan himself, ably assisted by his brother Ira. Then they took a fresh and sophisticated look at the real Ethan Allen.

Perhaps their best approach would be to consider this quote from the authors (p.42):

“Which Ethan Allen roamed the Grants perpetrating violent acts and at the same time filled the ‘Connecticut Courant’ with reasoned political and philosophic arguments presented with brisk verve in language and a style that would appeal to the public he sought to influence? Which was the real Ethan Allen: the brawler, the backwoods philosopher, the polemicist, the publicist, the propagandist, the prevaricator, the man in dogged pursuit of a fortune as a self-serving landjobber (a scurrilous epitaph he reserved for Yorkers in the land business), or an aspiring and mannered gentleman? The evidence suggests that, driven by the pursuit of fortune and fame, he donned all of those guises individually or in combination as it suited him, selecting and changing them as he thought one or the other would help him seize the main chance.”

It could be argued that the crude and violent tactics Ethan used against the New Yorkers – burning houses, horse-whipping opponents, smashing millstones – constituted terrorism and that he was a kind of sociopath.

Moses Robinson, whose biography was reviewed in this column recently, found that in attempting to negotiate for statehood with New York he was handicapped because of Ethan Allen's bad behavior. Robinson, who would become Vermont's first chief justice, coolly adhered to the rule of law when he dealt with adversaries.

Nor is it true that Ethan was one of the key founders of Vermont. How could he? He was imprisoned by the British for 32 significant months, from September 25, 1775, to May 6, 1778. Among important events he missed were the Battle of Bennington, the chain of citizen conventions that led to the declaration of independence, the adoption of the constitution, and the organization of the first legislature. As soon as Ethan was released, he resumed his fiery reputation, donned the guise of prosecutor and dramatically managed a kangaroo trial that convicted and publicly hanged poor David Redding, a Queen's Ranger.

"Inventing Ethan Allen" explores the "confused accounts" of Ethan's death; studies the many representations of him in fiction, statuary, and popular imagery; and documents his "heavy borrowing" from the writings of his friend Dr. Thomas Young in the text of Ethan's "Reason the Only Oracle of Man" (1785). All in all, it's a great reality check.