Edward Bancroft

Edward Bancroft

Scientist, Author, Spy

Thomas J. Schaeper

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In Memory of Mom and Dad

Who Sacrificed So Much for Us

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History teaches us to expect spies among us and to anticipate that some of those spies will be of us. Espionage has not been invented by our recent adversaries, and it is not a sign of our political or moral decline. In fact, we have been beset by spies from within even before we had a Constitution to unite us. For instance, Edward Bancroft, a New England physician who served as secretary to the commission the American colonies sent to France during the Revolutionary War, was a confidant of Benjamin Franklin, an indispensable agent of John Adams, and a British spy. He sent London weekly communications in invisible ink and placed in a hole in a tree in the Tuileries Gardens. The rebellious colonies did not have to wait long for other disastrous betrayals, and, indeed, from our Country's early history on, the name Benedict Arnold has signified a traitor from within.

—William H. Webster, former director of the FBI, in a report on security submitted to the attorney general of the United States, 2002

Dr. Bancroft . . . you will find [to be] a very intelligent, sensible man, well acquainted with the state of affairs here, and who has heretofore been employed in the service of Congress. I have long known him, and esteem him highly.

—Benjamin Franklin to Robert R. Livingston, 1783

Americans have committed a great injustice in making Benedict Arnold the archtraitor of the Revolution. That eminence rightfully belongs to Dr. Bancroft.

—Burton J. Hendrick, "Worse Than Arnold," 1935

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Acknowledgments

The genesis of this book goes back nearly thirty years, to when I first met Claude-Anne Lopez. It was she who encouraged me to switch my research interests from the early to the late eighteenth century and to broaden my focus from French history to include Britain and America. Among other things, Claude spoke tantalizingly of the mysteries surrounding Edward Bancroft, and she wondered why no one had yet thoroughly investigated him. At long last I have finally taken up Claude's challenge and grabbed Bancroft before someone else did.

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Introduction

It was about nine o'clock on a Tuesday evening in Paris in January 1778. A rather ordinary-looking man could be seen strolling through the Tuileries Gardens. He appeared to be in his midthirties, a bit shorter and stouter than average. Any passerby who might have asked him for directions or the hour could have perceived that he spoke French with an accent that was British—or possibly American. The man seemed perfectly respectable, but a curious observer might have noticed him looking over his shoulder to see if he was being watched. When he was certain that he was unobserved, he darted over to a tree on the south terrace, took some papers from his coat pocket, placed them in a glass bottle, tied a string to the bottle, and deposited it into a hole in the tree.

Who was this man? If someone had asked him, he might have said that he was Dr. Edwards. This was the name signed on the papers deposited in the tree. If the curious onlooker had remained at the scene about an hour longer, he would have noticed that eventually another man stealthily made his way into the gardens, strode to the same tree, extracted the papers from the bottle, placed some other papers in the bottle, dropped the bottle back into the tree, and scurried away.

Who was this Dr. Edwards? What was in those papers? These questions form part of the amazing story of one of the most daring spies of all time. "Dr. Edwards" was one of the aliases used by Edward Bancroft. A native of Massachusetts, Bancroft had been living in London in the years leading up to the American Revolution. From 1776 to 1783 he spent most of his time in Paris, where he formed close associations with Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, John Paul Jones, the Marquis de Lafayette, and a host of other prominent Americans and Frenchmen. He became their friend, assistant, and confidant. Unbeknownst to any of them, he was working that entire time as a secret agent of the British government. The papers inserted into the tree in January 1778 provided intelligence about secret French aid for the Americans and details about a Franco-American alliance that was being negotiated. Thanks in large part to Bancroft, King George III's government would know of that secret treaty before it was formally signed a few weeks later. From 1776 to the end of the American Revolution, Bancroft worked relentlessly to keep the Crown informed of everything important regarding French participation in the colonial rebellion.

Remarkable as Bancroft's story is, until now it has never received the detailed examination it deserves. Indeed, only in 1889 did scholars discover the first conclusive bits of evidence regarding his espionage. In his lifetime, Bancroft was well known as a physician, natural historian, novelist, political commentator, businessman, and expert in inks and dyes. Not exactly an eighteenth-century James Bond. In 1889, however, an American researcher received permission to publish facsimile copies of thousands of previously closed British diplomatic archival documents. Only then did he and, soon thereafter, readers on both sides of the Atlantic discover the incredible story of "Dr. Edwards."

In the years since 1889, virtually all historians who have written about French involvement in the American Revolution have mentioned Bancroft briefly in their books. Two American students have written master's theses on him. A handful of authors have devoted book chapters or journal articles to him. Almost invariably, they have portrayed him as an arch-traitor to his country. They have described him as "villainous," "sinister," "devious," "dishonorable," and a "natural intriguer." Some have called him the greatest spy of all time. Others have said he was more despicable than Benedict Arnold. Many have also stated that the unprincipled Bancroft was a double agent,

taking money from both the Americans and the British. A few have even accused him of murder, claiming that he poisoned one American who knew of his espionage.

Bancroft had access to nearly every important paper or conversation that such people as Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Silas Deane, Arthur Lee, and John Paul Jones had in France. Through his bottles in a tree, special ciphers, invisible inks, and private messengers, the British government quickly learned of everything the Americans in France were planning. Bancroft provided intelligence on treaty negotiations at the start and at the end of the fighting, and in the intervening years he gave London advance notice of hundreds of ships leaving French ports. Because of his treachery, the Revolution lasted much longer and caused the loss of more lives and property than would have happened otherwise. So, at any rate, goes the standard view of this man.

But because no one until now has examined Bancroft's entire life and perused the thousands of relevant documents in American, British, and French archives, these assertions about him have gone untested. Was he a traitor to his country? Was he a double agent, working for both the Americans and the British? What motivated a noted scientist and author to give up his scholarly pursuits and for nearly seven years serve as a spy? Just how important was his secret intelligence to the British ministry? How did he operate and manage to keep his work hidden? Did Franklin or any other American know that he was a British agent? These are just a few of the questions that I endeavor to answer in this book.

In the 1990s I published two books involving the American Revolution—one on John Paul Jones and the other on Jacques-Donatien Leray de Chaumont. In working on those two books, I repeatedly came across Bancroft's name. After completing those books, I turned for a few years to other topics. But I could not get Bancroft off of my mind. Eventually I checked with a variety of experts in the field, and they assured me that Bancroft was still open for the taking. One even exclaimed that Bancroft was "the best topic out there."

Almost as puzzling as the man himself is that until now he has eluded a biographer. He has, however, attracted the attention of a novelist. In 1987 Arthur Mullin published *Spy: America's First Double Agent, Dr. Edward Bancroft*. As a novel, it is a melodrama—filled with lurid sex, violence, corruption, and one-dimensional characters. As historical fiction, it is a travesty.

Normally, when one reads a historical novel, one expects that the characters and events will stick fairly closely to the known facts. Those parts of a novel that depart from the known facts should at least be plausible. Mullin's novel, however, gets far more things wrong than right. For example, at the beginning of the story, one finds that the fictional Edward Bancroft is a tall, muscular man who is able single-handedly to fend off gangs of street thugs. He is in a loveless marriage to a wealthy woman named Olivia. In fact, however, Bancroft was not a man of heroic stature and action. His wife was named Penelope, and she did not come from a wealthy family. At the end of the novel the treacherous, devious main character suffers an unfortunate misadventure; he is assumed to be a homeless, deranged scavenger. The story ends in December 1777, with Edward Bancroft languishing away in the Bedlam asylum for the insane. The real Bancroft was never taken for a lunatic and was never incarcerated in Bedlam. Instead, he lived as a respected man of the world until his peaceful death in 1821.

Because of the many errors about Bancroft that exist in the pages of fiction and nonfiction, the time has come to give a full and accurate account of his life. The present book is much different from the one I first envisaged. My initial interest in Bancroft focused on his spy activities. When I began to delve into that story, however, it became clear that his years as a British agent in France were but a small part of a long and interesting career. Gradually I saw that his life was worth studying in and of itself. I realized, moreover, that many aspects of his espionage could be understood only when put in the context of his broader pursuits. Thus, my book on spying has evolved into a full biography.

1 *Early Life*

The Bancroft Family

The first thing to clear up about Edward Bartholomew Bancroft is the date of his birth. Depending on the book, article, or encyclopedia entry, one can read that he was born on the ninth or the twentieth of January, in either 1744 or 1745. All of these are correct. In the Julian calendar, still used in Britain and its colonies, he was born on 9 January 1744. The Julian calendar was at that time eleven days behind the Gregorian calendar, which had been adopted by all Catholic and most Protestant countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Moreover, as late as the mid-eighteenth century in Britain and some other countries, the new year did not start until 25 March. In September 1752 Britain and its colonies switched to the Gregorian calendar and established 1 January as the start of the new year. Edward Bancroft's birth, when translated into the new calendar, occurred on 20 January 1745. The custom among historians when dealing with persons born in the first half of the eighteenth century is to change dates to the Gregorian. Benjamin Franklin, for example, was born on 6 January 1705 in the old style, but nowadays everyone who writes of him gives 17 January 1706 as his birth date. This book follows suit and uses the new style date for Bancroft.[1]

On his father's side, Edward was descended from John Bancroft and his wife, Jane, both of whom had left London in April 1632 in the ship *James* and arrived about eight weeks later in the Puritan Massachusetts Bay colony. They and their descendants appear to have been of solid yeoman stock—mainly farmers and tradespeople. One of these descendants, another John Bancroft, was born in Windsor, Connecticut, in 1679 but eventually moved to Westfield, Massachusetts, where he died in October 1749. He had eight children, seven from his first marriage and one from his second. The third eldest of his children was born in Westfield in August 1718 and was named Edward. In February 1744, Edward married Mary Ely, from Springfield, Massachusetts. In January 1745 they had their first child, the Edward who is the subject of this book. A second child, a boy named Daniel, was born in November 1746. By that time, however, the father had died, at age twenty-eight, of an epileptic seizure while working in a pigsty on his farm. Mary was left to fend for herself with the two infant boys.[2]

Prospects for the trio could not have looked good. The estate included about a hundred acres of land—scattered in twelve separate parcels in and around Westfield—plus a house, a barn, one cow, two heifers, one bull, and a few household items.[3] In January 1751 the young widow married David Bull, also of Westfield. Soon thereafter the family settled in Hartford, Connecticut. Through the 1750s they moved from Hartford to Springfield, back to Westfield, and then again to Hartford.[4] In Hartford, Bull became the proprietor of a tavern called the Bunch of Grapes. Little is known of the childhood and education of the two boys. Neither had much in the way of formal education. After the family moved back to Hartford, in April 1759, a tutor was hired for Edward. The instructor was Silas Deane, a recent graduate of Yale College. Edward was about fifteen years old, Deane twenty-two. The boy's studies with Deane probably lasted only a few months.

We know of Bancroft's early association with Deane only because many years later on two separate occasions Bancroft happened to mention it. The first came in the spring of 1778, when Bancroft met John Adams, who had recently arrived in France. In their conversations, Bancroft told Adams something about his background, and Adams recorded in his memoirs that Bancroft "had been a School Boy" under Deane.[5] The second occasion came in May 1790, in a letter Bancroft wrote to the famous clergyman scientist Joseph Priestley. Priestley had written to Bancroft to inquire about the circumstances

of Silas Deane's death in September 1789. In his response, Bancroft mentioned that he had been "partly educated" by his deceased friend.[6] The relationship between Deane and Bancroft in the late 1750s therefore was brief and of little consequence. Many years later, however, the two men would become close friends and partners.

In October 1760 the Bancroft family moved to Killingworth, Connecticut. There, Edward was apprenticed to a local physician, Dr. Benjamin Gale. There is no indication of how much money the parents paid the doctor or of how many years Edward was obligated to work for him. At that time in colonial America, only a small minority of physicians and surgeons had degrees from medical schools in Britain.[7] The usual custom was for a boy to be apprenticed to a practicing doctor, usually for two to six years. When the young man felt competent to set out on his own, he established a separate practice. All this was done without any medical degrees or government licensing. There is also some evidence that either before or after the move to Killingworth Edward had some sort of relationship with a physician in Lebanon, Connecticut, one Thomas Williams.[8] Little is known of Edward's medical education over the next two and a half years, but evidently he was not happy with his situation. In June 1763 he broke his apprenticeship contract with Gale and sailed on the brig *Success,* bound for Barbados.[9] In December of that year he wrote two letters to Williams. In the first, he lamented that he had been "a friendless youth." In the second he recalled that "Insults received, a Haughty Disposition, and a Roving Fancy, conspired in effecting this Adventure."[10]

Travels in South America

Running away to sea did not make Bancroft different from countless thousands of other young American and European men. For Bancroft, however, it was the beginning of a career that would indeed mark him as exceptional.

After a few weeks in Barbados, where he was unable to find any suitable employment, he reboarded the *Success* and in September disembarked in South America somewhere along the River Demerara. Demerara (also spelled, Demerary) was also the name of the largest city in the region. Today that city is Georgetown. The eighteen-year-old Bancroft had landed in the western part of what was then Dutch Guiana. The eastern half consisted

mostly of what was called Surinam. The western half contained three districts, named after the three major rivers: Demerara, Essequibo, and Berbice. In the 1790s the British would eventually gain control of these three provinces, which became British Guiana and later the independent country of Guyana. The hundreds of large plantations along the rivers produced vast quantities of sugar, coffee, cotton, and cacao. Bancroft would spend the next two and a half years here and would return to these plantations several times later in life.

On 4 December 1763 he wrote the following to Thomas Williams:

> I sailed for the River Demerara where I arrived about the middle of September. I had the good Fortune immediately upon my Arrival to ingratiate myself into the Esteem of Some gentleman of Note . . . by whose Recommendation added to that of a Celebrated Physician, from Edinburgh, I obtained in three days after my arrival the Employment of Surgeon to a gentleman of Fortune, Owner of two large Plantations and Near two hundred slaves in this River. This incident I esteem as one of the most Happy of my Life. My Employer is a gentleman of a frank, Obliging and condescending Disposition, by him I am treated as a Companion, I sit at his table, share his Diversions and in short lead a very agreeable Life. I have all my Medicins . . . am allowed a servant to attend me—a Nurse to administer my Prescriptions. My Practice being at the Door serves rather as an Amusement, than a Toil. By an intimate acquaintance with the afore named Physician I have a good Library at Command.[11]

In addition, Bancroft told Williams that he would be able to save "one hundred Pounds Sterling free of all Expense" in the first year and even more in the next. A few weeks later, he wrote to Williams that "I have been now for near three Months employed in the business of our Profession, & I have the satisfaction to find that my practice has been successful to my patients & agreeable to my employer."[12] While still in his late teens, Bancroft was demonstrating talents that would serve him the rest of his life: gaining the confidence of men of wealth and importance, having an eye for opportunity, reading voraciously, and being a quick learner.

The names of the rich plantation owner and the expatriate Edinburgh physician are not known. We do, however, know some of the particulars about where Bancroft worked. His first job, referred to in the above letters, was at the Plantation Providence. After a year there, in September 1764, he moved further up the River Demerara. He soon took medical charge of the

Plantation Retreeve. By July 1765 he was also tending to four additional plantations. At the age of twenty he was the sole physician caring for perhaps a thousand or more slaves and several dozen mostly Dutch colonists.[13]

On 20 February 1766 he suddenly gave up his medical practice on all the plantations.[14] He spent the next several months traveling through the Demerara, Essequibo, and Berbice valleys. With his savings from his medical practice, he could afford this hiatus from a regular job. He spent these months making observations of the animal and plant life of the region—studies he would incorporate into his first book.

In June 1766 he sailed to Barbados and from there to Boston and then Hartford. During this visit home he went to see Dr. Benjamin Gale and made amends for his abandonment of the apprenticeship.[15] In November he sold a small parcel of land near Westfield to his uncle John Bancroft for the sum of £22. In the deed recording the sale, Edward's profession is listed as "practioner of physick."[16] In February 1767 he boarded a ship bound for England. In succeeding decades he would revisit North America three times, but never again would it be his home.

The Natural History of Guiana

The story of his early years in London is the subject of the next chapter, but a discussion of his first book, published in London in 1769, is better placed here. That book was called *An Essay on the Natural History of Guiana in South America. Containing a Description of many Curious Productions in the Animal and Vegetable Systems of that Country. Together with an Account of the Religion, Manners, and Customs of several Tribes of its Indian Inhabitants. Interspersed with a Variety of Literary and Medical Observations, in Several Letters.* The title page states that the anonymous author is "A Gentleman of the Medical Faculty." The twenty-four-year-old Bancroft clearly was puffing up his credentials when he described himself thus. In the next two pages of the book Bancroft reveals his name and says that after most of the book was already in press his friends prevailed on him to reveal his identity. They told him that a book about strange things in a distant country would not have much authority coming from an anonymous author. Therefore he published his name, "not with a presumptuous expectation of acquiring Honour from the Work, but solely to add to its Credibility."[17]

This book is important not only for what it says of Guiana but also for what it tells us about the author. Along with Bancroft's later scientific publications, this volume made him a celebrated authority in scholarly circles, both in his lifetime and for several generations thereafter. The 404-page tome would have been remarkable no matter who wrote it, but the fact that its author was such a young, self-taught man from humble beginnings makes it extraordinary. It is written in the form of four long letters to his brother, Daniel. Bancroft thus was following the epistolary form used so often in both fiction and nonfiction in the eighteenth century. The four letters are dated 1766, though Bancroft probably wrote much of the text a year later, after his arrival in London.

Bancroft starts by acknowledging his deficiencies. He admits that he has no formal background in botany and says that his lack of skill in the "art of Drawing" means that he can include no illustrations of the plants and animals that he will describe. Though Bancroft knows the taxonomic terminology of pioneering Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus, he also gives the Indian names for many of the flora and fauna. Moreover, there is a distinctly informal, narrative flavor to many of the pages. His book could be read for pleasure and profit by both specialists and general readers.

He interjects himself and his personal experiences into nearly every page, making the book as much a travelogue as a dry classification of hundreds of animal and plant species. He laments the "unpardonable indolence" of greedy white settlers, who are content to stay on their lowland plantations rather than journey far up any of the rivers. Prizing firsthand observation, Bancroft reports that he has "spent many days . . . investigat[ing] the nature and qualities of these plants; and, by handling, smelling, tasting, etc." After eating some of the nuts of the *Ricinus Americanus* or Physick Nut Tree, which natives had told him was an emetic, he reports, "I believe it from my own experience."[18]

The first part of the book gives a wide-ranging history of European settlements since the early seventeenth century and a thorough account of geography and topography. Bancroft explains that the abundant rainfall makes for rich, verdant forests and an abundance of timber and all sorts of grains, fruits, and vegetables. This natural abundance plus the warm but not uncomfortable temperatures enable the native Indian peoples to feed and clothe themselves without much effort. About seventy-five pages are devoted

to all the major trees, shrubs, and other types of vegetation that he has observed.

The second part is devoted to animals. The species native to the region include lynx, porcupines, hummingbirds, vultures, manatees, and so on. He also mentions some strange animals that he himself did not see but were reported to him by the natives. These include two-headed snakes that supposedly swim in the rivers and the notorious "Wild Man" (perhaps the South American equivalent of the North American Bigfoot). The natives have attested that this wild man stands about five feet tall and is covered with short black hair. The creature is said to attack Indian men and ravish their women. Bancroft drily notes that, unfortunately, none of these fantastic creatures has ever been captured.[19] Four varieties of animals garner his particular attention: insects, snakes, bats, and eels. He had devised a unique method for collecting snakes. By giving a glass of rum to every Indian who brought him one, within three months he accumulated three hundred of the creatures.

His thirteen-page discussion of eels soon became the most famous and important part of the book. He describes an eel native to the River Essequibo and names it the torporific eel. It measures about three feet in length and twelve inches in circumference. He learned of this eel from natives, who feared the shock they got when they touched it. Bancroft became the first person to investigate and explain this phenomenon in convincing fashion.

Since ancient times, Europeans had known about sundry varieties of "numb fish," as they often were called. The most famous of these was the torpedo fish, which could be found throughout the Mediterranean and along the Atlantic coasts of Spain and France. Many scientists and other observers over the centuries tried to explain the nature of its shock. By the mid-eighteenth century the most widely accepted theory was that of the renowned French scientist René-Antoine Ferchault de Réaumur (1683–1757). He claimed that this fish and other "numb fish" produced their effects through the swift movement of their muscles as they "slapped" a victim.

Bancroft writes that the testimony from all persons who have touched torpedo fish in Europe and torporific eels in South America indicates that the two creatures give off the same sort of shock. His methods for examining the eel's shock were so simple that, in retrospect, one wonders how previous observers could have overlooked them. He surmised that if the shock was purely mechanical, a person would have to be touching the eel to feel the

sting. However, in a variety of ways Bancroft demonstrated that persons not in direct contact with the eel could also be affected. For example, a man who touched the eel with an iron rod got stung even though his hands were distant from the fish. Moreover, if that man held hands with a string of a dozen other persons, the shock was transmitted to all of them. Bancroft's conclusion was that the shock resulted from the transmission of electric particles. Réaumur thus had "amused the world with an imaginary hypothesis."[20]

When Bancroft's *Natural History* was published in 1769, the pages on the torporific eel had an effect in Europe and North America that one might very well call electric. Through the eighteenth century the study of electricity had been the focus of many scholars and amateur experimenters on both sides of the ocean. Hundreds of people were building and then getting shocks from touching Leyden jars. Of course, the most famous electrical experiments were performed in the late 1740s and early 1750s by a recently retired Philadelphia newspaper publisher named Benjamin Franklin. Writing recently on this topic, James Delbourgo notes that Bancroft's discovery spurred naturalists, physicians, and philosophers in Europe and North America to replicate his experiments.[21] In 1772 the Englishman John Walsh, a member of Parliament and also a scientist and member of the Royal Society, demonstrated that Bancroft's suppositions about the torpedo fish were indeed correct.[22] In 1773 William Bryant, like Bancroft an American physician working in Guiana, sent a paper inspired by Bancroft's discoveries to the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. The society eventually published the paper in its *Transactions.*[23]

Bancroft thus opened the field for investigations that within a few years would lead to the development of the battery, or Voltaic pile. Delbourgo affirms that "by providing a natural model that could be subject to experiment, the American eel played its own role in the invention of the modern electrical world."[24] Bancroft was also a pioneer in demonstrating the importance of electricity in animal physiology.

In the third section of the *Natural History* Bancroft turns to human beings. Although by the 1760s there were many white Europeans, black slaves, and persons of mixed race in Guiana, his focus is on the aboriginal natives, or Indians. There were four tribes living in the region claimed by the Dutch: the Caribbee, the Worrow, the Accawaw, and the Arrowauk. His opinions about these tribes are curiously mixed. On the one hand he says that all of them

live “but little removed from” the ignorance and ferocity of a state of nature. They get drunk too often, they are sexually promiscuous, and because nature provides them with an overabundance of plant and animal food, they are indolent. They believe in gods who are always causing earthquakes or other natural convulsions, and thus the chief job of holy men is to appease the malevolent spirits.

Some of the Indians eat the bodies of enemies killed in battle. Bancroft says he abhors this practice but states that people who have never traveled outside their own country are in no position to criticize “the manners of distant unknown nations.” He asks if natives who kill in self-defense and then eat their enemies are any worse than civilized nations that, with little remorse, “kill each other by unnecessary wars.”[25] In arguing for cultural relativism, Bancroft situates himself in the mainstream of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought. Voltaire made much the same point, in more humorous fashion, in the chapter in *Candide* where the main character discovers that in some countries it is natural for women to take monkeys as their lovers.

Although the red peppers and hot spices consumed by the natives would “excoriate the mouth” of persons unaccustomed to them, Bancroft observes that the natives eat a balanced, healthy diet. He discusses a broad range of health issues, including leprosy, yaws, worms, snake bite, “intermittent fever” (probably malaria), and “dry gripes” (most likely gastroenteritis). His analyses of the causes and cures for these ailments were remarkable for someone with so little medical training. He was perhaps the first to notice that yaws could be transmitted by flies, and he revealed that it could be cured with mercury treatments. Some of his remedies (such as using pepper to combat malaria) do not stand up to today’s practices, but they were on a par with what the best European medical experts of that era recommended.

Bancroft devotes about thirty pages to an investigation of the poison arrows used by some Indians to kill animals or other Indians, but there is no record of these pages generating any interest among readers at the time. Only in the second half of the twentieth century have some historians focused on Bancroft’s knowledge of poison. I shall return to this topic in a later chapter.

Despite the natives’ occasional cannibalism or use of poison arrows, Bancroft fashions a picture of pastoral tranquility. The Indians spend endless hours dancing, telling fables, joking, or just resting in their hammocks. They

are not acquisitive, and thus they do not have the jealousies and rivalries so prevalent in European society. Because their wants are few, the tribes rarely go to war with one another. He rhapsodizes that "if human happiness consists in contentment, these people must necessarily be, of all others, the most happy; where they have no wants but what are easily supplied, and where all are in a state of perfect equality, in which the tortures of discontent, envy, ambition, and avarice cannot possibly exist."[26] Bancroft notes, however, the pernicious effects of European colonization. He says that the Dutch are infecting the minds of Indians with European values and encouraging the tribes to fight with one another—so that the winners can capture the losers and sell them to the Dutch as slaves.[27]

Despite his lyrical ode to the joys of the simple life, Bancroft attacks those writers who have argued that "arts and sciences" have led to luxury, greed, and other kinds of corruption in civilized countries. Bancroft's readers would have known immediately who his chief target was. In the 1750s Jean-Jacques Rousseau had famously criticized "arts and sciences," saying that they had taken human beings away from a simpler, more natural kind of life. In short, Rousseau seemed to hate "progress" and all the modern trappings of civilization. Bancroft takes a middle-of-the-road approach. He maintains that the Indians' state of nature is admirable but that it cannot last. Progress is inevitable and not necessarily bad. Improvements in culture, technology, agriculture, medicine, and creature comforts are good, if used wisely. The evils of modern society, he maintains, result from the unequal distribution of wealth. This inequality leads to envy and violence among the poor and to avarice and a taste for useless luxuries among the rich. However, Bancroft is no nascent socialist. He says that without ambition and greed the rich would not be bringing improvements in the arts and sciences to the world and not providing jobs for those less well off. In short, Bancroft writes, "Good and evil are indiscriminately mingled in every cup."[28]

After offering these thoughts, Bancroft turns to his fourth and final section, which concerns the changes in Guiana brought by Europeans. He discusses the administrative divisions within the Dutch provinces. In some areas, to encourage settlement, land was given free to any settlers who developed working plantations. The Dutch West India Company, which controlled Guiana, welcomed English settlers. Nearly all of the hard labor was done by African slaves. Regarding slavery, Bancroft takes a two-sided approach. He

notes that slaves outnumber whites five to one. Just weeks before he arrived in Guiana, there had been a huge slave rebellion along the River Berbice. The Dutch put it down brutally. Bancroft is aghast at the bloodshed, but he also says that it was necessary for the "self-preservation" of the whites. Here again, he more or less says that progress, in this case Western imperialism and capitalism, is inevitable; one must accept the bad with the good.[29]

He condemns the white men who force themselves on slave women and mentions that the women do all they can to prevent conceiving children. He reports that blacks are subject to many more illnesses than whites. As a physician on several plantations, he has witnessed the open sores caused by beatings, the sickness resulting from drinking bad water, and the snakebites that come from working barefoot in the fields.

In his ambivalent and often negative view of European settlement in Guiana, Bancroft ran against the current of popular opinion. Most of the adventurers and scientists who explored South America and other parts of the world from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries were filled with a sense of divine purpose. They were interested in the plants, animals, and people of exotic locales mostly because of how they could contribute to the wealth and power of the mother country. Europeans generally believed that native peoples failed to make full use of their natural resources. Bancroft, however, believed that the human beings and flora and fauna that he encountered were intrinsically interesting and valuable and were not simply underutilized tools to be used by "superior" Europeans.[30]

Another element in the *Natural History* that deserves mention is religion. Many of the historians who have written about Bancroft have assumed, because of his "treason," that he was an irreligious man of no moral principles. It should be clear from the above that he had severe misgivings about the cruelty, lust, and avarice of so-called civilized peoples. In numerous places throughout his pages he gives a clear indication of his own religious views. He had been born and raised in Puritan New England, but his *Natural History* reveals a far different kind of religion. In several places he reverently alludes to "the Author of our being."[31] In the book's conclusion he writes, "In taking a retrospect of Animated Nature, I cannot but admire the Wisdom and Goodness of that Power, who has so exquisitely adapted the Organs and Dispositions of all animal Beings to that life in which each is capable of enjoying the greatest portion of happiness, and who has caused each to be actuated

with principles the least exposed to infringe the Order and Harmony of our material System."[32]

Bancroft's belief in a rational deity whose intentions could be grasped through an observation of nature is a religious attitude generally called Deism. With slight variations, this was the religious view of most of the philosophes of the Enlightenment. Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and many of the other intellectual and political leaders of that era were Deists. Bancroft was therefore in good company.[33]

One final aspect of the book that should be noted is Bancroft's obvious acquaintance with classical and modern literature and with the writings of the major scientists of his era. The book is liberally sprinkled with English, French, and Latin quotations from such figures as Socrates, Plato, Virgil, Seneca, Pliny, and Celsus, as well as moderns like Philip Sidney and Alexander Pope. Though Bancroft did not write the book until he arrived in England, he obviously had access to the private libraries on the plantations where he worked. Colonial planters brought with them many of the books of the Old World, providing further evidence of the intellectual connectedness of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world.[34]

By his early twenties, then, Bancroft had mastered a huge amount of the accumulated wisdom of Western civilization and had written the first detailed scientific treatise on northeastern South America. Soon after his *Natural History* appeared, excerpts were reprinted in Britain's influential *Annual Register*—a sort of eighteenth-century scholarly *Reader's Digest*.[35] It was soon published in Dutch and German translations. In January 1783 a committee headed by James Madison recommended to the U.S. Congress a list of several dozen books that it should purchase, to establish a reference library for members. Bancroft's *Natural History* was included.[36] The book has been reprinted in the twentieth century and continues to be cited by numerous historians, natural scientists, and anthropologists.[37] The *Natural History* would bring Bancroft his first claim to fame and give an important boost to his budding career in London.

2 *On the Rise in London*

From May 1767 to the spring of 1777, Edward Bancroft lived mainly in the British capital. During this period he also made several extended journeys—to South and North America, Ireland, and France.[1]

Soon after he reached London, it became clear that this young man of humble origins was prepared to make it big in the great metropolis. In June 1767, just weeks after arriving unannounced and with no powerful friends or sponsors, he became a physician's pupil at St. Bartholomew's Hospital. That institution (commonly called "Bart's") was one of only two large hospitals in London at that time. (The other was St. Thomas's.) By the early eighteenth century, St. Bartholomew's had established a variety of informal instructional services for aspiring physicians. These included several lecture series and internships. Medical students from universities as well as physicians already in practice could make private arrangements to study with senior members of the hospital staff. On a lower level, interested young men could become apprentices to hospital physicians. It was this sort of informal apprenticeship that Bancroft acquired. The doctor he assisted on daily rounds was the prominent staff physician William Pitcairn. Few details of Bancroft's studies are known, but he seems to have developed a close relationship with his mentor.

Bancroft worked steadily at the hospital from the summer of 1767 to the fall of 1769, but he was also busy writing. During these years he wrote and published his *Natural History of Guiana,* dedicated to Pitcairn. He also published another, very different book.

The Looming Anglo-American Crisis

Edward Bancroft was nothing if not protean in his interests and abilities. There was little in his youth or background, however, to prepare one for the other book that he published in 1769. It was entitled *Remarks on the review of "The Controversy Between Great Britain and Her Colonies."* The 126-page volume was published anonymously, though persons in political circles soon knew the identity of the twenty-four-year-old author.

The book exhibits a thorough grounding in British political and constitutional history going back to the Middle Ages plus a firm grasp of current events. Its awkward title needs some explanation. Just a few months earlier a book entitled *The Controversy Between Great Britain and Her Colonies Reviewed* had appeared in London. That publication likewise appeared anonymously. Those "in the know" were aware that the authors of the *Controversy* were William Knox and George Grenville. Knox would go on to serve from 1770 to 1782 as undersecretary to Lord George Germain, the secretary of state for the colonies. Grenville had been prime minister from 1763 to 1765 and was best remembered for the Stamp Act. Bancroft's *Remarks* served as a rebuttal to their arguments.

In their book, Knox and Grenville stridently upheld the official British position regarding the American colonies. In its core, this position stated that a country could have but one source of sovereignty. All individuals and groups had to recognize their subservience to this highest power. In the case of the British Empire, since the settlement achieved after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, sovereignty lay in an inextricable connection between king and Parliament. When William and Mary surrendered all claims to divine right kingship, they acknowledged that Parliament was the senior partner in this sovereign entity. Knox and Grenville gave a historical defense of parliamentary supremacy and explained why it was the best and only way to rule Britain and its empire. They also defended Parliament's rights to govern and tax the colonists.

To understand Bancroft's refutation of Knox and Grenville, one must appreciate the general background. The 1760s were filled with numerous sources of conflict between the mother country and its North American colonists. Ironically, Britain's eventual loss of the thirteen colonies was directly linked to one of Britain's greatest diplomatic and military victories. Through the Peace of Paris of 1763, ending the Seven Years' War, Britain humiliated France. French prestige in continental Europe was gravely damaged, and France lost control of its North American possessions. Britain acquired formerly French lands along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers plus all of French Canada. Moreover, France ceded New Orleans and all of the Louisiana territory west of the Mississippi to Spain. This was done to compensate the Bourbons of Spain for coming to the aid of their cousin Louis XV in a losing cause. Britain thus controlled all territories from the Atlantic to the Mississippi River.

The euphoria from that victory, however, was short-lived. After 1763 the government in London was increasingly angered by colonial violations of the Navigation Acts. According to these mercantilist laws from the seventeenth century, colonists were supposed to trade exclusively with the mother country. British manufacturers and traders continually complained that the colonists violated these statutes and traded with whomever they wanted—in particular with the French in Martinique, Saint-Domingue, and other Caribbean islands. Another source of friction concerned native Americans. Numerous Indian tribes claimed the lands in the wide strip between the Mississippi River and the Appalachian Mountains. Now that this land was British, thousands of colonists were crossing the mountains and laying claim to new territory. To keep peace with the Indians and give his ministry time to figure out how to manage the situation, King George III signed the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which prohibited British subjects from traveling west of the Appalachians. Colonists ignored that proclamation and proceeded to move westward at a steadily increasing pace.

But the most grievous source of conflict concerned the royal finances. The British government had racked up a huge national debt during the war. Because much of the fighting had been done to protect the American colonists from the French and because the newly acquired lands in America would require money to protect and administer, it seemed obvious to the British that the colonists themselves should share in the tax burden. Prime Minister

George Grenville and his successors thus ushered in a series of parliamentary acts designed to raise revenue from the colonies. The first of these was the Sugar Act of 1764. This measure reduced customs duties on molasses entering the colonies, but it levied new duties on foreign textiles, wine, coffee, indigo, and sugar. The Stamp Act of 1765 went even further. It created revenue stamps, which had to be bought and attached to all kinds of printed matter and legal documents: newspapers, almanacs, licenses, deeds, death and marriage certificates, insurance policies, college diplomas, and even playing cards. Americans refused to buy the stamps and retaliated by organizing nonimportation agreements. When the colonists stopped buying British textiles, tea, and other products, thousands of British merchants and manufacturers felt the pain.

After British businessmen complained about the decline in their colonial trade, Parliament repealed the Stamp Act in 1766. But in order to save face, it passed a Declaratory Act, proclaiming Parliament's right to issue laws binding the colonies "in all cases whatsoever." Parliament also created a fictitious difference between "external" taxes that merely regulated trade and "internal" ones collected within the colonies. The Stamp Tax fell into the latter category, which Parliament was for the time being agreeing not to collect.

In 1767 the chancellor of the exchequer, Charles Townshend, mistakenly assumed that external taxes were acceptable to the colonists. He pushed through Parliament a series of bills that came to be called the Townshend Acts. One of these was a revenue act that placed duties on glass, lead, paint, paper, and tea imported into the colonies. Not only did this act impose new taxes on colonists, but it aimed to free colonial governors and other royal officials from control by colonial assemblies. Until then, governors and other officials received their pay from the assemblies. Townshend intended for these Crown servants henceforth to be paid from proceeds of the revenue act. The obvious result would be that governors and other royal officials would no longer be financially dependent on the assemblies.

The new Townshend duties met resistance from both moderate and rabble-rousing colonists. Among the moderates was John Dickinson, a Philadelphia attorney whose *Letters of a Philadelphia Farmer* (1767) opposed parliamentary taxation but urged conciliation. The rabble-rousers included Samuel Adams and James Otis, who succeeded in getting the Massachusetts assembly to distribute throughout the colonies a circular letter that called for

Americans to unite in rejecting the new taxes. The British government retaliated by dissolving the Massachusetts assembly, sending two regiments of redcoats to reside in Boston, and announcing its intention to bring all those accused of treason to London for trial. In 1769 the Virginia House of Burgesses declared that it alone could tax Virginians, and the Crown thereupon dissolved that assembly also. By that time Americans in all the colonies were adhering to new nonimportation agreements, hoping that, as in 1765, they could hurt British businessmen and thereby win their support.[2]

It was at this juncture that Edward Bancroft published his *Remarks*. Part of the book consists of the same sorts of arguments used by other leaders of colonial opposition to the new taxes. He presents a historical survey of the relative independence of the colonies from the time they were granted charters in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Those charters granted taxing rights to the local assemblies and guaranteed colonists "all the Liberties, Franchises, and Immunities" of free subjects of the Crown.[3] Over the years, the Crown "had granted the colonists the constitution and privileges of distinct states."[4] If colonists were going to pay taxes that were aimed at raising revenue, then the colonists deserved the rights of all British subjects. The mass of people in Britain might not be perfectly represented—as only a small minority of white males was eligible to vote—but at least each electoral district had one or more persons watching out for its interests in the House of Commons. The American colonies, with a territory far larger than the mother country's and a population of about two and a half million, had none. In short, "immense is the Difference between a Nation but imperfectly represented, and a People who have no Representation."[5]

The book trumpets the phrase "no taxation without representation," which probably owed its origin to James Otis. If Parliament wished to exercise direct control over the colonies, then every colonist who met the minimum requirements of land holding should be able to vote for a member of Parliament. The colonies should be divided into districts roughly the same size, in terms of population, as those in Britain.

If arguments from natural rights and British constitutional theory did not sway the British government, then Bancroft appealed to the self-interest of people in Britain. He repeatedly asserts that the "National Interest" of Britons would suffer if the government imposed "an Infringement of the Rights of my Countrymen." The colonies have flourished "under the benign

Influence of Freedom, and the Enthusiasm of Liberty grows in their Minds." If "they are made subject to the despotic Power of those whom they have neither delegated nor entrusted, and over whom they have no restraining Influence . . . their total loss of Freedom will be too palpable, and their slavery too real, too feeling, not to urge them to improve every occasion which may be favorable to a change of Government." He continues, "If our cause is just, Resistance is a virtue, . . . our fortitude is laudable." Moreover, he argues, the Americans occupy a continent far larger than Britain. Their numbers are growing far faster than those back home. Within just a few years, therefore, the Americans would be a wealthier, larger power than Britain.[6]

In these pages Bancroft does not, however, seek American independence. He aims "to establish a colonial dependence on a just and permanent basis." In this regard his views were identical to those of nearly all the leading colonial protesters of the late 1760s and early 1770s. No one was calling for independence. Americans simply wanted "the rights of Englishmen." Bancroft also asserts that the British Empire will be larger and stronger because it includes the American colonies. If the mother country does not acknowledge the rights of colonists, the colonists will be too strong to be subdued. Britain, he claims, is filled with "Effeminacy, Luxury, and Corruption." The smaller, weaker mother country needs the youth, health, and vigor of the colonies. Remaining united by "the Ties of reciprocal Affection" will benefit everyone.[7] This was to become an argument that Benjamin Franklin would often use in the years leading up to 1776.

The truly original and fascinating parts of the *Remarks* are those places where Bancroft offers his own distinctive solution to the impasse. Although he criticizes the injustice of Parliament in trying to tax the colonists, his ultimate solution differs from the one usually spouted by John Dickinson, Samuel Adams, and others. Bancroft realized that Parliament would accept no diminution of its sovereign powers to tax and govern. Moreover, even if Parliament agreed to let Americans send their own representatives to London, Bancroft was perspicacious enough to realize that this system would not work. Any American representatives in Parliament would be cut off from their constituents across the ocean. Unlike politicians today who can fly home on weekends and keep in daily touch with their districts via telephone, television, and the Internet, Bancroft states that American MPs would be more or less permanently stationed overseas. Bancroft realized therefore that

Americans would not long be satisfied even if they were to receive their wish of parliamentary representation. They would soon fear that their few representatives were out of touch with their needs or outvoted by the far larger number of men representing districts in Britain itself.[8]

Although Bancroft presents a solid case for colonial representation in Parliament, it is evident that he prefers a second, more radical defense of American rights. Through a careful reading of all the early colonial charters, he deduces that the colonies never were placed under the jurisdiction of Parliament in any regard. He concludes that the texts of the charters "abundantly prove, that the Colonies were not then considered as annexed to the Realm of *England,* or subject to its Laws." He shows that Elizabeth, James I, and Charles I granted charters personally and that whatever powers they retained over the colonies were vested solely in themselves as monarchs. The colonies were outside the realm of England but owed their allegiance to the Crown. To prove this, Bancroft cites numerous documents. These include royal decrees referring to Charles II as "king of England, Scotland, France, Ireland and Virginia." Virginia was thus a different state, under the king, but not under the "English" Parliament. And, unlike what happened to Scotland in 1707, the colonies were never annexed to England.[9]

Bancroft devotes several pages to instances in the seventeenth century that demonstrate the colonies' status as separate territories independent of Parliament. On numerous occasions from 1614 through the 1620s, Parliament passed bills regulating the importation and use of tobacco in England, without regulating its use in the colonies. In the 1620s and 1630s the House of Commons debated a bill that would grant English vessels the right to fish off the coasts of the colonies; both James I and Charles I rejected the bill, on the grounds that it would infringe on the rights granted to the colonists. In the early 1650s, in the era of Oliver Cromwell, Parliament signed a treaty with Virginia. The "country" of Virginia voluntarily agreed to be part of the Commonwealth. The treaty declared that "Virginia shall be free from all Taxes, Customs, and Impositions whatsoever; and none shall be imposed upon them without Consent of their General Assembly; and that neither Forts nor Castles be erected, nor Garrisons maintained without their Consent." In the 1660s Connecticut and New Haven petitioned the king to be united into one colony. At about the same time, Rhode Island and Providence Plantations asked for the same thing. Charles II, of his own authority, granted each request,