First Opinion: The Surprising Revelations of the Infamous Benedict Arnold


*Monica Ferguson Belus*

*The Real Benedict Arnold* is a compelling biography that looks at the life and tribulations of the vilified Arnold, but what makes this book so intriguing is that Murphy cites a variety of primary documents that focus on the great successes and accomplishments of Arnold—a frequent oversight by many historians.

This book begins with an overview of the Arnold family whose distinguished bloodline can be traced back to seventeenth century New England but whose wealth was depleted. The Arnold name was sullied as a result of Benedict’s father’s alcoholism; this shame became the impetus of Arnold’s determination to restore his family’s once good name. Following an apprenticeship in his cousins’ trading business, Arnold established himself as one of the wealthiest and most respected merchants in New Haven, Connecticut. Furthermore, Arnold also became a passionate and outspoken supporter of the American Revolution. He left his family and thriving business to fight the British. Impassioned with a desire for freedom, Arnold’s most nefarious enemies proved to be his own compatriots.

Using numerous political documents and personal letters, Murphy reveals Arnold as a fearless leader whose strategic brilliance often undermined the experienced British military. He was a brilliant commander who was respected by not only his men, but the British whom he impressed as well. While many commanders could lead troops from the rear or give directions from base camp, Arnold always rode in front of his troops and encouraged them no matter how dire the situation—his confidence and support prevailed.
Murphy enthralls his readers with surprising details and shows Arnold's fierce loyalty to the Patriot cause and his men through 1777. Arnold quickly rose to the well deserved rank of General due to his ingenuity and bravery on the battlefield, but his quest was not easily attained. Many jealous fellow officers sought to hinder his successes by claiming his accomplishments as their own and vilifying his honor and name with Congress. Arnold repeatedly defended himself. To aggravate the situation, his leadership that helped the Patriots win a decisive battle during the Revolution, the Battle of Saratoga, was disregarded. Self-aggrandizing Horatio Gates claimed the win while Arnold was recuperated from a severe leg injury incurred during this fight.

Murphy shows how Arnold's favor for the Revolution waned as his reputation and personal finances diminished. At no point does Murphy condone the traitorous actions of Arnold, but he accomplishes what so few historians have chosen to do; he illustrates the great militaristic and personal accomplishments of Benedict Arnold, enthralling the readers with political intrigue and military feats.

About the Author

Monica Belus is currently an instructor at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte where she teaches a variety of courses founded in childhood and adolescent studies and children's and adolescent literature for both the American Studies and English Departments.