

Words from the Author

Murphy, Jim. *The Real Benedict Arnold*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007.

Jim Murphy

Back in 1994, I was asked to write a brief biography of Benedict Arnold for a Houghton Mifflin textbook. After finishing that assignment, I continued reading about Arnold and thinking about his place in American history. Most people who write about him will admit he was a very good general, but they also tend to paint him as a dark, completely untrustworthy, sneaky, self-absorbed sort of man who sold out his country for hard cash. The more I learned about him, the more I felt these portraits were much too one-dimensional and unfair, that there had to be more to his story (and that kids deserved and could handle a fairer portrait of him). So I went back and started my research all over again, this time trying to piece together a more complex “picture” of Arnold and why he might have abandoned the American Cause.

The first thing I realized was that most of the negative stories about Arnold surfaced after he had been found to be conspiring with the British, and a great many of these stories came from people who openly disliked him well before he turned traitor. It seemed to me that a kind of informal anti-Arnold campaign developed and was later picked up and repeated without much question by historians. Yes, Arnold was a traitor, and he wasn't always an easy person to get along with. However, that didn't justify distorting his record or obliterating his many real accomplishments for the American Revolution.

While trying to piece together what I hoped would be a more accurate picture of Arnold, I also discovered that Arnold wasn't the only patriot who contacted the British or wavered in his belief in American independence. A surprising number of the people who appear to be true Patriots (complete with statues on the square and schools named for them) were actually very disillusioned by what they saw going on around them. In short, there was an amazing amount of back-stabbing, credit-grabbing, money-grubbing, dishonest politics, and outright hypocrisy among the people who seized power from the British and their loyalist subjects. Arnold was frequently caught up in the middle of these unpleasant events and grew more and more resentful. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to shake off his anger or distance himself from the annoying people and events (as most of his contemporaries in the same dilemma were able to do); eventually, he felt the only honest thing he could do was to turn back to the British (who he saw as the lesser evil).

In the end, I came away admiring Arnold a great deal (feeling he may have done more militarily to secure American Independence than any other field general) and understand-

ing a little better why he went over to the British side. So when I wrote Arnold's story I went out of my way to show readers how his history and that of the American Revolution had been distorted and, in effect, turned into overly simplified mythology.

About the Author

Jim Murphy is a two-time Newbery Honor Book author. He has written more than thirty books about American history, and his work has received many awards. His titles also appear on innumerable "Best Book" lists from organizations and journals like the American Library Association, *Publisher's Weekly*, *School Library Journal*, and *Booklist*. For more information about Jim Murphy, please visit his Web site at <http://www.jimmurphybooks.com/>.