

Dramatic Adaptation of Berniere's "Curious Narrative" to General Gage

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Framing Question

In what ways were the towns around Boston working together on a regional/provisional basis in 1774 and 1775, and what were the effects and implications of this cooperation and broader sense of identity?

Main Ideas

- 1) Great closeness and communication existed within and between communities – ironically even between groups of different political persuasions (“liberty people” and “friends to government”) when they might have strongly preferred otherwise.
- 2) Political passions were running high and were evident throughout communities as fighting (the outbreak of war) between the “liberty people” and the British military approached.
- 3) A revolution in thought, feeling, and identity had already occurred before the first fighting and an entire war made that revolution manifest.

Historical Introduction

Toward the end of February 1775, General Thomas Gage sent Captain John Brown and Ensign Henry De Berniere from British-occupied Boston on a spy mission to Suffolk and Worcester counties to sketch out the countryside and communities therein, to note possibilities for British military encampments, and to gather information about provisions that might be drawn from the counties to support a military campaign. Worcester was of particular concern because of the dismissal of all royal or royal-connected government that had occurred there and because of the suspected stockpiling of munitions and provisions by the colonial militia. Brown and Berniere ended up sending their sketches ahead to General Gage (by means of Brown's manservant) because of fear that they would be identified and caught before they could return. Berniere subsequently submitted a “narrative” to General Gage of what transpired during their mission. The narrative is rife with dramatic incidents and dramatic irony, especially on pages 11-13 dealing with their passage from Weston to Marlborough as they tried to make their way back from Worcester to Boston.

Brown and Berniere traveled by foot along miles of country roads. They often stopped at taverns, also called public houses or inns, to get food and drink, temporary or overnight rest, and information. The taverns were, indeed, quite the public places. Public notices were posted at taverns since newspapers, at least in daily form, had not developed yet (weekly “broadsides” might be seen at the taverns). Both travelers and the local population would frequent the taverns. Town officials would even conduct some business in the taverns, with drinks paid for by town taxpayers. A main location for taverns was in the center of town, close by the town meetinghouse that served for both official town meetings and religious services. Brown and

Berniere's experience of the taverns they stopped at and the towns they passed through proved to be far more public and political than they had anticipated.

Critical Thinking Questions

These questions pertain to the document "General Gage's Instructions, 22 February 1775" (at <http://www.masshist.org/database/516>), to the artifacts of a colonial tavern circa 1775 (photographs of restored Hartwell Tavern at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/51154990@N03/?saved=1>), and to the landscape around a tavern (Drawings by Amos Doolittle: plate 1 of Lexington Green, with Buckman Tavern on the left, on April 19, 1775 and plate 2 of Concord, with Wright Tavern in the center, also on April 19, 1775, both plates to be found at <http://www.history.org/foundation/journal/summer06/paintings.cfm>).

- 1) What appeared to be the typical placement of a tavern in a town landscape (consider things like the town green or common, meeting house, and belfry)? What does that placement suggest about the frequencies and types of social interactions?
- 2) What did the exterior and especially the interior of the tavern itself suggest about the closeness of interactions? What do you think would be the implications for privacy in such a public place?
- 3) What incidents do the British-officers-turned-spies Brown and Berniere experience as they move from one loyalist tavern or home to another that suggest that their identities have been found out? How do those structures and surrounding landscapes seem to contribute to their being "discovered"?
- 4) What finally convinces Brown and Berniere that they have been discovered? What are some possible reasons (related to environment, society/culture, and individuals) why it has taken them so long to come to this realization?
- 5) Why do you think the "friend to government" Mr. Barnes is reluctant to answer the questions from Brown and Berniere about what the "liberty people" would do to the two of them, and how do you interpret his answer when asked again?
- 6) What can you infer from Berniere's narrative about the closeness of communities, the lines or networks of communication, and the overall atmosphere in the countryside and the towns therein?

Activity and Assessment

In groups of three to five, students will take one scene in Berniere's dramatic narrative and turn it into a performance piece. Each group will share equally the following responsibilities:

- 1) Feature a landscape from an appropriate historical website as a backscreen projection to complement the dramatic scene. One of the landscape images provided above may be

creatively used by students; they are encouraged to select their own landscape appropriate to the scene. (15 points)

- 2) Feature at least one artifact for the scene: an authentic tavern artifact in the form of a backscreen projection from an appropriate historical website and/or one or more key props representative of items in the scene. The tavern artifact images provided above may be creatively used by students; they may well wish to make appropriate substitution, and they are encouraged to add props as described. (15 points)
- 3) Write a complete script in dialogue form, one to two pages in length, of the dramatic scene selected from Berniere's narrative. Incorporate quoted speech from the narrative into the scene dialogue, adapt reported speech and other parts of the narrative into the scene/dialogue, and fill in any gaps with writing that is consistent with the content and the tone of Berniere's presentation. (35 points)
- 4) Play the roles in the scene – *be the people* – by speaking the lines of dialogue, not reading them. Include, naturally, the appropriate movements, positionings, gestures, and facial expressions to accompany the spoken words and silent reactions. In other words, make history come alive! (35 points)