



Arsonist: The Most Dangerous Man in America

Nathan Allen

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“I will kindle such a fire...though I myself perish in the flames.” An overlooked hero, James Otis stirred the hearts of both privileged and common men to light the fires of the American Revolution. His strong writings, viewed by some of his contemporaries as insanity, may account for little mention of Otis in other historical accounts. In *Arsonist: The Most Dangerous Man in America*, author Nathan Allen resurrects Otis to be a man of significance in the early stirrings of the Revolution.

Allen goes into incredible detail of Otis' family heritage, his upbringing, and Harvard education. He reviews much of Otis' legal work, some that established precedents and were constitutional inspirations. Included in this comprehensive volume are the full texts of three pamphlets written by Otis. His writing was moving and inspired many in the Revolutionary cause. His work was also challenged by those in authority and caused family rifts.

The value of this book is not only the story of James Otis but also the insights into colonial life in Massachusetts. Readers will learn about the banking and currency crises, political wrangling, the practice of law, the development of the judiciary system along with the many events and people that lead to the American Revolution. There are many lessons to be learned from this reading that are relevant today: open-ended search warrants, legal maneuvers to position a case for the best potential outcome, and use of the media to promote a viewpoint.

Serious students of the American Revolution and early colonial America, especially the Massachusetts Bay Colony, will find this comprehensive book a fascinating read. Allen is a thorough researcher and skillful writer able to incorporate legal documents, personal diaries, colonial newspaper stories, and scholarly research into a highly readable book that is never dull.

The author elected not to burden the text with source notes, incorporating essential information about the source in the written text. The lack of source notes in the text makes for smoother reading but the serious scholar will dispute this decision. An extensive bibliography of the works written about Otis along with a list of sources used for each chapter is included. An index is also provided but is clumsy to use. Long lists of page numbers follow each entry. Subheadings would make the index much more usable. The indexing for James Otis is confusing. There are just a few entries under Otis, James Jr. Further exploration finds a more comprehensive listing under “Jemmy” as Otis was called by his family and close associates but no cross-reference exists so the reader is left to discover this on their own.

John Adams, reflecting on the Revolution many years later, stated “...the characters the most conspicuous, the most ardent and influential...were, first and foremost, before all and above all, James Otis...” Allen's work on Otis confirms beliefs of John Adams and will place Otis as one of the significant forces for change in colonial America.

MARY CARY CRAWFORD (June 15, 2011)

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