
II. The Real Alexander Hamilton

Hamilton's Controversial Ally Dunlap: Opponent of Slavery, Defender of Progress

by Renée Sigerson

Decc.5—In recent discussions, American statesman Lyndon LaRouche has challenged those who desire great progress to result from the new, oncoming U.S. Presidency to recognize that the fight to achieve that goal is in fact part of an international battle for “a new universe of mankind.” The world is at a pivotal point of transformation, in which human progress in any number of locations will come from upward shifts in human cognitive development overall, based on the drive for fundamental discoveries. That effect, which in human history has always required an interplay between classical principles of artistic composition and scientific discovery, will largely determine whether the new Administration in the U.S., and future administrations, will bring benefit to mankind.

In an earlier, immensely uncertain time, Alexander Hamilton recognized that it was the moral and cognitive development of early Americans which had to be deliberately promoted, if his economic policies, launched for progress against British-centered imperialism, would succeed. As we documented in the December 2 *EIR*, that is why Hamilton worked with stage director and painter William Dunlap to build the Park Theater in Manhattan, to provide New Yorkers with more access to improved, quality performances of great classical theater. As we document, it came to pass that the process of achieving that goal depended upon linking up with international theater projects out of Ger-

many, and their radiating effects in Russia, for the effort to work.

Here we will say a few more things about William Dunlap personally, not merely because his collaboration with Hamilton has been “written out” of modern historical accounts. Our brief footnote here defends the Hamilton-Dunlap project against the charges of academic “experts” who insist that Dunlap was a “hack,” whose terrible theater productions were typical of the “primitive,” “low-level” early American outpouring of non-artistic “stock” or “stereotyped” theater productions which have no significance for what such “experts” call “culture.”



William Dunlap, self-portrait circa 1812.

Fortunately, there exists a small circle of American theater historians, typified by author Prof. Samuel Shanks of Iowa and Minnesota, that rejects this characterization wholesale. In an article entitled “Rooting Out Historical Mythologies: William Dunlap’s ‘A Trip to Niagara’ and its Sophisticated Nineteenth Century Audience,”

Shanks identifies Dunlap accurately as a patriot who had a deep understanding of the unique mindset forming in the culturally complex multi-cultural American environment. The citizens of the newly formed nation were faced with the revolutionary challenge to persist in building a functional existence, largely out of nothing, as they struggled to free themselves, sometimes in what may have seemed clumsy fashion, from ingrained prejudices about the nature of man which still mani-

fested itself in slavery and hierarchical social habits.

The Battle Against Slavery

First and foremost, like Hamilton, Dunlap was an ardent opponent of slavery: he freed his family's slaves immediately following his father's death, was actively involved, as Hamilton had been, in the Manumission Society, and served as a trustee of the Free School for African Children. His much-maligned play, "Trip to Niagara," performed in 1828, one year after New York passed legislation finally eradicating slavery, was in part shaped to celebrate this victory over the slave system.

The play involves a "boatload" of characters both from Europe and America, traveling up the Hudson against a moving "rolling-pin" stage background, showing the actual scenery on the Hudson's eastern bank. With humor, the play illuminates the contrast between British stodginess versus American commitment to progress. As Shanks convincingly demonstrates, Dunlap stuffed the play with endless contemporary references known to audiences of that time, evoking an audience reaction to events and personalities which typified that well-known difference. For example, in that context, clearly underlining his own well-known determination that slavery be ended, Dunlap introduced a character named Job Jerryson, the first-ever portrayal of a free African-American brought on to the American stage. Job, according to Shanks, was most likely named, per the Biblical reference, to emphasize the incredible struggle of African-Americans to survive the nightmares of slavery; at a critical moment in the play, he declares: "Master! – I have no master. Master indeed.... I am my own master."

This commitment to eradicate slavery was central to Dunlap's collaboration with Hamilton when they first met back in the 1790s. When Hamilton arranged for over 100 New Yorkers to buy shares in Dunlap's Park Theater (see Dec. 2 article), the participants included Hamilton's closest friends, all of whom were involved



"Distant View of Niagara Falls" by Thomas Cole, 1830.

in the Manumission Society, namely: Stephen Van Rensselaer, a New York gubernatorial candidate; James Watson, his running mate; William Bayard, the man who took Hamilton home after he had been shot by Aaron Burr, and in whose arms Hamilton died; DeWitt Clinton, the individual most responsible for the building of the Erie Canal; Nathaniel Fish, named as the executor of Hamilton's will; and Rufus King, Hamilton's closet political ally.

One year after Hamilton's death, Dunlap went bankrupt. The Park Theater was subsequently taken over by an explicitly pro-British Theater crowd, who derided the popular, American-authored productions which Dunlap would include on the stage, along with classical productions. The American theater works merely reflected the population's strong attachment to stories of the 1776 Revolution. In 1826, a competitor to the now Anglophile Park Theater was opened under the name Bowery Theater, financed by three prominent descendants, namely the sons of President James Monroe, of John Jacob Astor (whose operations in the Pacific Basin put him in the center of U.S. relations with Russia), and of Alexander Hamilton. This is where Dunlap's "Trip to Niagara" was presented, with great acclamation from the anti-British section of the New York population, in 1828.

Cole, Cooper, and the Erie Canal

Dunlap was also a close personal friend of author James Fenimore Cooper, whose beautifully written fictional accounts of American life are equally derided today by “politically correct” critics, who consider his characters “psychologically flat,” and even, in the case of Native Americans and African-American servants, “stereotyped to the point of being racist.” Contrary to such academic judgment, the reality was that Dunlap and Cooper were an absolute backbone in the fight to eradicate slavery, and to promote human dignity. Another theme which his theater works emphasized was American rejection of the typical British obsession with “deference” as a right of the upper strata in society when dealing with lower classes.

Dunlap, along with painter Thomas Cole, was a member of James Fenimore Cooper’s “Bread and Cheese Club,” a weekly luncheon affair where writers and artists would meet. Dunlap, who had resumed painting in the later years of his life, was also a member, with Cole, of the New York Drawing Association, which met three times a week for drawing sessions. The play “Trip to Niagara” was also designed by Dunlap to promote Cole who had become renowned

for his landscapes of the Hudson River in a variety of weather conditions, and receiving sunlight at different times of the day. The moving, “roller-pin” like diorama moving in the background portrayed exactly the route Cole had taken between Manhattan and the Catskill Mountains when he painted his most recently famous works.

Derided today by “theater historians” as undeserving of serious attention, “Trip to Niagara” drew a highly political audience of enthusiasts who supported the just-completed Erie Canal and promoted Fenimore Cooper’s novels. There occurred in the Bowery Theater a surge of theater attendance that was unprecedented. At a time when most theater productions were held once a month, 17 performances of “Trip to Niagara” were sold out the first month it was shown, with people still standing outside after the 3,500 seats were filled.

For today’s purposes, the account of Dunlap’s collaboration with Hamilton and his subsequent work serves as an inviting illustration of the principle that the social development of the human mind through classical art is a necessary component of the fight for economic progress and justice.

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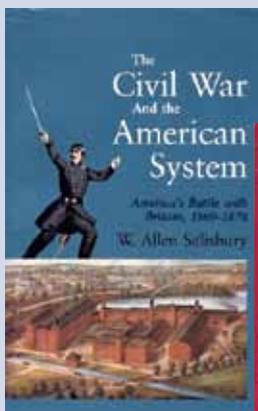
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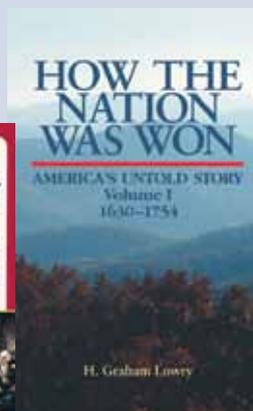
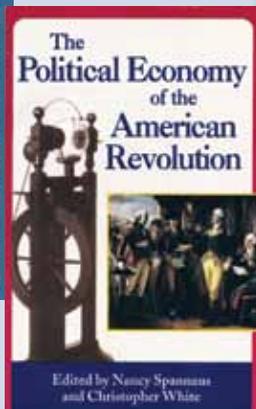
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