

DR. BENJAMIN CHURCH

Dr. Church is depicted in Johnny Tremain as a grouchy, free-thinking sort of man who is not quite trusted by the other members of the Boston Observers. The real Dr. Benjamin Church was one of the most skilled and highly-trained doctors in Boston. He loved politics, and early was involved in writing for the Whig press, although there is evidence that he wrote replies to his initial writings in the Tory newspapers! He was also recognized as a talented poet. The question was never about his skills and talent for leadership. One was never sure which side he was really on. His wife was English; his brother-in-law was a Tory printer, John Fleming.

As William Hallahan states: “Dr. Church’s devotion to the radical cause was unflagging. He served with Dr. Warren on every crucial committee, including the powerful Committee of Safety, and was a member of the Provincial Congress. Dr. Church was one of the highest-ranking, most admired, and respected patriots in Massachusetts. Following Lexington, he would be appointed surgeon general of Washington’s army. He was also one of Sam Adams’s favorite companions.”¹

Jeffrey Walker thinks that Benjamin Church was quite strongly committed to the Sons of Liberty and what they stood for right up through the Boston Tea Party. When the Port Act was enforced, and the British soldiers took over the city and shut the port of Boston, Church began to wonder if he’d chosen the “winning” side. “The future looked bleak for Boston, and Benjamin Church was once again worried about the success of the rebellion....1774 would be an important year. It seems that he had finally chosen his side, for in that year the first traces of his defection would come to light and lead to the bizarre series of incidents culminating in his court-martial.”² What makes it hard to follow is that Church did not change his mind about independence. He wanted to be financially stable and safe, whether the Sons of Liberty won or lost their bid for independence. After John Hancock’s Massacre oration, which Church probably wrote, Gage had a private meeting with Church and offered him 30, 000 pounds, an immense sum of money. It is at this point that Church begins to work on behalf of the British. Apparently Benjamin Church was finally caught with a letter in code that connected him with a British officer. Since there was no law against what Church might be doing (the colonies were in an act of rebellion), a court martial was held under George Washington, and Church was found guilty of corresponding secretly with a British officer. All of this happened in 1775, just after Church had been made chief physician of the First Continental Army Hospital in Cambridge!

The story ends in a truly bizarre way. Benjamin Church was expelled from Congress and jailed, but later released, and he sailed for the West Indies in 1776. The ship was lost at sea. No one survived.

¹ William H. Hallahan, *The Day the American Revolution Began: 19 April 1775* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), 11.

² Jeffrey B. Walker, *The Devil Undone: The Life and Poetry of Benjamin Church, 1734-1778* (New York: Arno Press, 1982), 2-3, 88.

A Selection of Poems Written by Benjamin Church

A few verses on the occasion, to the former Minister Pitt

For Americans' relief, appear kind Master Pitt,
Who eat nought of your beef, though flogged with the spit;
Intercept that old t[ariff] the Sc[otchman]'s fav'rite toast,
That feasteth on the beef, and do not pay the roast:
Pray take wit in thy wrath, when met for our relief;
Sc[otchme]n, you know, love broth, pray let us taste the beef.

To the King

Long live great George our King, in peace and harmony,
Of his fame we will sing, if we have liberty;
But if cut short of that, we cannot raise our voice,
For hearts full of regret sure never can rejoice.

[Canst thou, spectator, view this crimsoned scene]

Canst thou, spectator, view this crimsoned scene,
And not reflect what these sad portraits mean?
Or can thy slaughtered brethren's guiltless gore
Revenge, in vain, from year to year implore?
Ask not where Preston or his butchers are!
But ask, who brought those bloody villains here?
Never for instruments forsake the cause,
Nor spare the wretch who would subvert the laws!
That ruthless fiend, who, for a trifling hire,
Would murder scores, or set a town on fire,
Compared with him who would a land enslave,
Appears an inconsiderable knave.
And shall the first adorn the fatal tree,
While, pampered and caressed, the last goes free?
Forbid it, thou whose eye no bribe can blind,
Nor fear can influence, nor favor bind!
Thy justice drove one murderer to despair;
And shall a number live in riot here?

Live and appear to glory in the crimes
Which hand destruction down to future times?
Yes, ye shall live! But live like branded Cain,
In daily dread of being nightly slain;
And when the anxious scene on earth is o'er,
Your names shall stink till time shall be no more!

Liberty

O Liberty! Thou Goddess heavenly bright,
Profuse of Bliss and pregnant with Delight.
Eternal Pleasures in thy Presence reign,
And smiling Plenty leads thy wanton Strain.
Eas'd of her Load, Subjection grows more light,
And poverty looks cheerful in thy Sight.
Thou mak'st ye gloomy Face of Nature gay:
Giv'st Beauty to ye Sun and Pleasure to ye Day.

Fame

Fame is at best but an inconstant Good:
Vain are ye boasted titles of our Blood.
We soonest lose, what we most highly prize
And with our youth our short-lived Beauty dies.
A generous Ardor boils within my Breast,
Eager of Action, Enemy to Rest.
This urges me to fight and fires my Mind,
To leave a memorable Name behind.

Jeffrey B. Walker. *The Devil Undone: The Life and Poetry of Benjamin Church, 1734-1778* (New York: Arno Press, 1982), 172-173, 221, 224-225.

**Benjamin Church, "A Discourse Occasionally Made On Burning the Effigy of the
ST—PM—N in New London in the Colony of Connecticut," 1765. [excerpt]**

By comparing I find the times present to be in some measure parallel with the former; if there is any difference it is against us, we being more imposed upon than our fathers.

I must proceed to draw a few inferences from what has been said.

First. From what we have heard we may learn the human frailty of man, and when I am exclaiming against others I do not excuse myself, for I am subject to many; we not only learn the human frailty of man, but also the folly of laying too much stress or dependence on his conduct. Applied to this colony, hath it not been the case in regard to the st—pm—n? I hope not entirely so. If it hath been the case, I don't wonder that he proves a curse to us rather than a blessing. For it is written, "cursed is man that trusteth in man, and that maketh flesh his arm." But lest I should go beyond my sphere I must stick to morality. And,

Secondly. We may learn from the train of impositions received from the mother country the folly in glorying in the roast beef of Old England, since we are so notoriously flogged with the spit. A little soup-mauger with contentment is preferable to roast beef and plum pudding, since we are like to pay so dear for the roast.

For being called Englishmen without having the privileges of Englishmen is like unto a man in a gibbet with dainties set before him which would refresh him and satisfy his craving appetite if he could come at them, but being debarred of that privilege, they only serve for an aggravation to his hunger.

O my poor brethren in the gibbet of America that cannot come at the dainties of Europe, I pity you with all my heart and soul.

Thirdly. Have we learned that corruption is at the helm and that our country-ship is badly steered? This also teaches us that the watch must be called, and the helm relieved by a better man.

O PITT, is your watch upon deck? Turn out, take the helm from B—e, for he hath nigh overset us at times; he hath carried such taut sails in the squalls of impositions that our sails are wore threadbare. See the hurricane of stamp duties coming on, shorten sail timely, down with topgallant mast, yards, and sails of pride and vainglory, in with all small kites, and see everything snug to stand the storm like a bold seaman; bend new courses to the yards, and for God's sake don't lay [us] a-try, for we have been tried sufficiently. If the gale comes on very hard, put before the wind for the safety of the ship and our lives. Scud her manfully until the pernicious gale is over and the mountainous sea of corruption is ran down or is broken to pieces by a gentle breeze of liberty arising to refresh our wearied souls, which have been so long fatigued with the thoughts of approaching slavery.

Fourthly. Have we found a calf to be sacrificed to in this our day? Let us all, every living soul here present, or that lives within the precinct or of hearing the noise of the beast, take example by that worthy patriarch Moses of old and make a sacrifice of the calf, rather than to sacrifice thereunto. Burn it in the fire, grind it to powder, and strow it upon the ocean, that the filthy naughtiness of the beast may be cleansed from the earth, and that our plagues and impositions may not be made wonderful.

Time would fail me to tell you of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, Daniel in the lion's den, and many other worthies who have been faithful in bearing testimony against unjust decrees, etc., and have been protected by heaven in it, their cause being just in the sight of God. For woe unto them that decree unrighteous decrees. My brethren, fear not the face of man in regard to justice and equity; keep the truth of your side, let the world do what they will. I speak freely unto you all, for I am not afraid; if I lose my head, I cannot lose my gown or cassock.

A word or two of advice to all concerned in this affair of grand importance, and I have done.

First of all, my brethren, my advice to you is to fear God above all things, honor and love the King and his friends, detest and loathe his enemies, especially his private ones. If you see or hear of any corruption in his ministry, bear testimony against it; for it is treason in subjects for to keep silent when they see their prince dishonored; and if by wrong representations of any corrupt person or persons his subjects become grieved, impoverished, or cut short of their liberty or privileges, let such subjects make known their grievance that they may be relieved, for whatsoever tends to the poverty of the subjects by means of the enemies to freedom is a disgrace to a monarch. For poor subjects cannot make a rich King.

O freemen of the colony of Conneticut! stand fast in the liberties granted you by your royal charter. Plead the injustice of any that means to infringe upon you by curtailing the rights and privileges once given you freely without any design to take them from you again (without [them] your conduct could be deemed rebellious); and my opinion is that it cannot be counted rebelling for the freemen of this colony to stand for their absolute rights and defend them, as a man would his own house when insulted, for I see no difference in regard to the possession of either, whether it be by deed of gift or deed of sale.

Therefore, if any man in this colony hath for the sake of filthy lucre misrepresented matters so that ye are grieved or are like to be cut short of the privileges enjoyed for many years past, go, one and all, go to such a man and make him sensible of his error; if he will be convinced of his folly, forgive him, but if he willfully persists in his wickedness, use him in such a manner that he will be glad to conform to the truth; and if he is in any post that unjustly grinds the face of the poor or that contributes to your slavery, ask him peaceably to resign it, and if he refuses to, use him in such a manner that he will be glad to do anything for a quiet life. For Britons never must be slaves. And as we read, that "he which, being often reprov'd, hardeneth his neck shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy." Therefore, take care of Mr. St—pm—n, alias the molten calf. AMEN

Benjamin Church, "Liberty and Property vindicated, and the St—pm—n burnt: A Discourse Occasionally Made on burning the Effige of the ST—PM—N in New London in the Colony of Connecticut," *Pamphlets of the American Revolution 1750-1776*, ed. Bernard Bailyn (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1965), 594-597.

Letter from Benjamin Church to John Fleming, 1775 [excerpt]

This is part of a letter Church wrote in code knowing that it would be seen by the British. The letter exaggerating American forces, which, Church explained, he did to make the English think American forces were stronger than they actually were.

I hope this will reach you. Three attempts have I made without success. In effecting the last, the man was discovered in attempting his escape; but fortunately my letter was sewed in the waistband of his breeches. He was confined a few days, during which time you may guess my feelings; but a little art and a little cash settled the matter. 'Tis a month since my return from Philadelphia; I went by the way of Providence, to visit mother. The Committee for warlike stores [i.e. at Providence] made me a formal tender of twelve pieces of cannon, eighteen and twenty-four pounders; they having taken a previous resolution to make the offer to Gen. Ward. To make a merit of my services, I sent them down [. . .] The people of Connecticut are raving in the cause of liberty. A number from [their] colony, from the town of Stamford, robbed the King's stores at New-York, with some small assistance the New-Yorkers lent them; these were growing turbulent. I counted two hundred and eighty pieces of cannon, from twenty-four to three-pounders, at Kingsbridge, which the Committee had secured for the use of the Colonies. The Jerseys are not a whit behind Connecticut in zeal. The Philadelphians exceed them both. I saw twenty-two hundred men in review there by General Lee, consisting of Quakers and other inhabitants, in uniform, with one thousand Riflemen and forty Horse, who, together, made a most warlike appearance. I mingled freely and frequently with the members of the Continental Congress; they were united, determined in opposition, and appeared assured of success[. . .]

Benjamin Church to John Fleming, [July?] 1775 *General Gage's Informers: New Material Upon Lexington and Concord*, ed. Allen French (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1932), 184-187.