

The Fourth of July

Shall we never, never get rid of this Past, cried Holgrave. It lies upon the Present like a giant's dead body! In fact, the case is just as if a young giant were compelled to waste all his strength in carrying about the corpse of the old giant, his grandfather, who died a long while ago, and only needs to be decently buried. Just think a moment; and it will startle you to see what slaves we are to by-gone times.

Holgrave, a character in Hawthorne's novel *The House of the Seven Gables*, believed strongly in progress, the primacy of reason over old myths. He believed in freedom: to cast off *the moss-grown and rotten Past and lifeless institutions* and begin everything anew. He favored independence, ambition - physical, mental, and professional mobility. He himself had been a schoolmaster, salesman, editor, dentist, sailor, lecturer and had recently taken up a new-fangled thing called photography. He despised settling down so much that he believed no public building should be made of stone or brick (not even the U.S Capitol). *It were better, he said, that they should crumble to ruin, once in twenty years as a hint to the people to examine into and reform the institutions they symbolize.* [Sound familiar?] As for private dwellings, they should be no more durable than a bird's nest, to be left behind while we move on to what's fashionable next year. Holgrave embodied for Hawthorne all the values of the American Revolution - values that certainly permeated my consciousness, growing up as I did in the Cradle of Liberty otherwise known as Philadelphia.

I mean, Boston might boast of Paul Revere, the Old North Church, its famous Tea Party, Lexington, Concord and Bunker Hill. But we natives of the City of Brotherly Love had as much and more to be provincially proud of: Independence Hall, the Betsy Ross House, the Liberty Bell, the Declaration and Constitution, Valley Forge, the Battle of Brandywine. We could match the Boston Massacre with the Paoli Massacre. I used to play on the lawn of Strawberry Mansion where Benedict Arnold once courted Peggy Shippen. My school stood near the Chew House, still marked by the cannister of the Battle of Germantown. Not far off was Washington's Cossing. So the American Revolution was in the air we breathed - an almost current event.

But we were also Catholic and, much as the good nuns impressed on us the Catholic contribution to the Revolution (Commodore John Barry, signer Charles Carroll, Pulaski, Kosciusko, Lafayette), they also admonished us not to despise the Past. They reminded us that the world didn't begin in 1776, that we indeed had a vital Past that went all the way back to Abraham - a heritage that valued freedom, exodus, but also - fundamentally - faith, compassion, solidarity and Christic self-sacrifice as the qualities upon which a truly sane commonwealth must be built.

In other words, as Catholic Americans we were educated to be not so iconoclastic as Holgrave about ancient, deeper values. We were educated to be more like Hawthorne's other character Phoebe who taught Holgrave to allow his heart to influence his head. In the end we find him bartering his once haughty revolutionary faith for a far humbler one *in discerning that man's best-directed effort accomplishes a kind of dream, while God is the sole worker of realities.*

