

# News from the Stow Historical Society

*A newsletter for all friends of Stow history.  
Please feel free to pass it along to others who might be interested!*

December 2012

## Good Reads For The History Buff



George Washington, as painted by Charles Wilson Peale in 1776.

*Wherein the editor, who didn't have anything specific to write this month, pontificates about recently read history, just in time for holiday gift-giving.*

### ***Washington – A Life*, by Ron Chernow**

**Who knew that George Washington had a difficult mother** whose reaction to his leading his nation to independence and founding its government was to complain that he never visited her enough?

**In this terrific, comprehensive biography**, Ron Chernow presents a portrait of the American icon in all his humanness – an ambitious young man acutely conscious of his lack of college education and sensitive to slights. And with an iron control over a strong temper and a relentless sense of duty. Essentially – my interpretation – Washington spent the early part of his life seeking success and a place in society and, once he got them, wishing they would go away.

That is, after marrying well and inheriting property, he basically wanted to stay home and be a farmer – and his country kept calling on him to do things like save his country. Fortunately for us all, Washington had that overwhelming sense of duty.

**Chernow documents Washington's learning process, successes and mistakes** as a frontier surveyor, young soldier who fought the opening battle of the French and Indian War, new general who took over the disorganized troops laying siege to the British in Boston, military commander who led his small army to defeat at New York and victory at Trenton, through Valley Forge to the victory at Yorktown. And the statesman who created many of the norms we still see today in American government. He survived (and played well) the vicious political games of the Continental Army, Continental Congress and early U.S. political environment. As Chernow puts it, Washington "was that rare general who was great between battles and not just during them."

**Through it all, Washington kept close tabs on his estates** and tried to manage them at long distance. Also, his teeth hurt. A lot.

### ***Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, by John M. Barry**

**Everybody knows the "Cliff-Notes" version of Roger Williams and the founding of Rhode Island:** He came to Massachusetts to escape religious intolerance in England, ran afoul of the leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, was banished from "Bay" society and migrated south, where he established a new colony marked

by sunlight and tolerance. That's it, story told, move on. Except for everything else, which is the subject of John M. Barry's extensive work on Williams' evolution from a relatively mainstream Puritan scholar and minister in 1600s England to a pioneering thinker who essentially created the American concept of separation of church and state. In Barry's view, Williams was one of American history's most important figures.

**It's not news that the Puritans left England to escape** rigid enforcement of Anglican Church orthodoxies that were swerving toward Roman Catholic practices. Nor is it a revelation that after they reached Massachusetts they set up their own rigid theocracy. Barry fills in many details as to what happened in both Englands, Olde and New, as the 1600s progressed and the Puritans went through political, theological and physical struggles in building the society that became Massachusetts.

**Williams himself was not in any way a 21st-Century man.** He believed in Puritan doctrines as much as the Bay colony leaders he clashed with. But he did have differences with them, including about the rigid enforcement of those doctrines. Going to Rhode Island was first a survival tactic, then a new life, then a philosophical evolution.

**What the Cliff-Notes version of Roger Williams' story leaves out** is the Bay colony's long-lived effort to take over Rhode Island, Williams' two successful trips to England to find protection for his unauthorized colony, and his achievement of a charter confirming its existence separate from Massachusetts and mandating – in Rhode Island only – freedom of religion and separation of church and state. This book fills in an important void in our understanding of both a remarkable man and Puritan society.

### ***Ethan Allen: His Life and Times*, by Willard Sterne Randall**

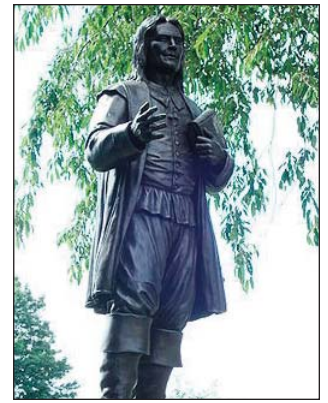
**Not knowing much about Ethan Allen, I was surprised to learn that his “Green Mountain Boys”** weren't a crack fighting unit during the American Revolution so much as a local militia that protected the Vermont region during land disputes between the colonial powers of New York and New Hampshire before the war. “Robin Hood” he may have been for the people of Vermont but he was also an opportunistic land speculator. When the Revolution broke out, Allen did take a force across Lake George to capture Fort Ticonderoga and took part in the unsuccessful attack on Montreal in 1775. Captured there by the British, he returned to Vermont after his release in 1778 and took part in Vermont military and political affairs. Allen gets credit as a patriot, visionary and man of principle – and also as an egomaniac and difficult person who alienated almost everybody.

### ***A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War*,**

**by Amanda Foreman**

**Although I read this book more than a year ago, it still remains one of the most engrossing** I've come across in some time. It's a history of the American Civil War from the British point of view. It's more relevant than that might sound. The Confederate government expended a great deal of energy on trying to persuade Great Britain (and France) to recognize and support its independence, and the Union government a great deal on trying to prevent it. The result was a long, slow-motion battle of diplomatic maneuvering, espionage, propaganda and surreptitious arms-building in the British Isles (more than one Confederate warship and blockade runner left British shipyards disguised as neutral merchantmen, only to be armed or loaded in Bermuda).

**At the same time, more Brits than you would have thought took sides in the American war – literally –** by serving in the Confederate or Union armies. Some British aristocrats identified with the South's planter society; other Britons found the South's dependence on slavery repellent. British newspaper correspondents, some openly biased, some struggling to report objectively, combed both sides of the American conflict.



Statue of Roger Williams at Roger Williams University.



## ***The Long Road to Antietam: How the Civil War Became a Revolution*, by Richard Slotkin**

... and....

## ***Rise to Greatness: Abraham Lincoln and America's Most Perilous Year*, by David von Drehle.**

**Nobody likes General George McClellan, which may be why he's generally just written off** in most Civil War histories as vain, arrogant, ignorant, childish, timid and a thorn in Abraham Lincoln's side until the president relieved him of command at the end of 1862. These two new books flesh out the conflict between the two. It wasn't just McClellan's personality flaws, it was that he was a maneuverer who covertly opposed the president's war aim of abolition and sought to wage a "soft war" intended not to destroy Southern forcers but to create a stalemate, lead the South back into the fold and restore the Union – just as it was before the war. Among the many things McClellan failed to recognize was that the Confederates were not interested; they were playing "hard war," and for keeps. McClellan may not have seriously considered marching on Washington to seize power as a military dictator, but some of his staff certainly talked out loud about it and the administration worried about it.

**As detailed in both books, whatever his personal feelings in opposition to slavery**, Lincoln started out the war cautiously in terms of the war's aims regarding it, feeling constitutional, political and practical constraints. For one thing, keeping the slaveholding border states in the Union was an essential consideration. For another, even during the war, southern sympathizer Roger Taney remained chief justice of the Supreme Court, endangering potential legislative approaches to emancipation. But as the need for hard war became apparent, Lincoln moved to embrace emancipation as a moral, political and military issue.

***The Long Road to Antietam* is the more military of the two books**, providing a detailed account of one of the war's first horrific battles. ***Rise to Greatness*** barely examines the battle itself, focusing on personal and political issues, working through 1862 month by month to lead to the Proclamation. There's much detail I had never seen before – for instance that Lincoln was so concerned about the dangers of the southern ironclad ship *Virginia* (better known to history by its earlier Union name, *Merrimack*) that he personally visited Fort Monroe, opposite the Norfolk harbor, and organized the attack that captured the Norfolk shipyard. Once it developed that the Confederates had burned and scuttled the *Virginia*, he went to the shipyard to see it for himself.

***And finally, the perfect gift book:***

## ***Stow Things*, by Ralph Fuller**

**Granted, most people who are likely to see this newsletter have already read *Stow Things***, but in the event you're looking for a gift to tell your sister in Ohio or your old college roommate about the unique community you live in... think ***Stow Things***!

**You can buy a copy at Randall Library, the Council on Aging, Stow Hardware or Russell's Convenience Store.** All proceed go to support educational programs of the Stow Historical Society.

**You can also buy copies of earlier books on Stow**, such as Edith Child's ***History of Stow***, at Randall Library. If you really want to.

