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David L. Preston

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Abstract

The Ordeal of Thomas Barton is a highly informative read that I recommend for anyone interested in the history of eighteenth-century Pennsylvania. Scholars will find the book useful for its many connections to the histories of settlement, religion, politics, Indian diplomacy, and warfare on the Pennsylvania frontier. The book's author, Gettysburg College English professor James P. Myers, Jr., has written the most deeply researched account of Barton's importance in eighteenth-century religion and politics, and has contributed some of the finest overall scholarship on early Pennsylvania in recent years. Based in Huntington Township in what is now Adams County, and later in Lancaster, Barton was an Anglican frontier clergyman, missionary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (S.P.G.), and a client of the Penn family. The word *ordeal* aptly summarizes the tumultuous life and career of Thomas Barton, which spanned the French and Indian War and the American Revolution. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Adams County Historical Society, ACHS, Adams County, Pennsylvania History, Missionary, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, Anglican, Thomas Barton

James P. Myers, Jr., *The Ordeal of Thomas Barton: Anglican Missionary in the Pennsylvania Backcountry, 1755-1780* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, Studies in Eighteenth-Century America and the Atlantic World, 2010)

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Many readers are perhaps familiar with Barton's vivid journal of his experiences as a chaplain in British Gen. John Forbes's campaign in 1758. This crucial description of Forbes's army is reprinted in the book's appendices along with many other useful primary documents related to Barton. Chaplain Barton's journal alone would have made him a significant figure for historians of the eighteenth century; but Myers's book reminds us that his importance in colonial Pennsylvania was even more extensive than his participation in Forbes's Campaign.

Myers's well-researched portrait of Thomas Barton is instructive on a number of levels. It reveals the precise social context in which Barton operated: he was a recent Anglo-Irish immigrant with many of the same characteristics as his more famous Anglo-Irish contemporaries, William Johnson and George Croghan. Born in Ireland in 1728, Barton's family had sufficient means to send him to Trinity College, Dublin, but his immigration to America in 1751 suggests poor economic prospects in his native land. Barton pursued a calling as a missionary of the S.P.G. and began his ministry at the Conewago settlements in 1755—a particularly dangerous time on Pennsylvania's western frontier. The Conewago clergyman fashioned himself as a "watchman on the walls"—a scriptural allusion to the prophet Ezekiel's role as a spiritual watchman over the kingdom of Israel (p. 29). The comparison is apt, for just as Ezekiel suffered rejection and resentment from his people, so too did Barton. He achieved a degree of

prominence for his efforts to defend Pennsylvania and for his sermon *Unanimity and Public Spirit*. Published in 1755, the sermon exhorted all Pennsylvanians to unity and a manly defense of Protestantism in the face of the Catholic French and Indian onslaught against the colony after Braddock's Defeat; but his sermon was mired in charges of plagiarism of a popular English sermon from 1745. And his dissenting neighbors, largely Ulster Presbyterians and German Lutherans, were always suspicious of Barton's motives, given his status as a S.P.G. missionary and proprietary placeman.

Myers's book also illustrates the gritty struggle for sheer survival on the frontier, even for a presumably well-to-do clergyman like Barton. Beyond the physical threat of French and Indian attacks, much of Barton's life was a struggle for financial security. A father of eight children with his wife Esther, he was almost constantly in debt and searching for ways to establish a solid economic foundation. Unlike his Anglo-Irish peers William Johnson and George Croghan, Barton's attempts to gain wealth through frontier land faltered. Like Johnson's and Croghan's careers, Thomas Barton's ultimately rose and fell according to the fortunes of his powerful patrons. The Anglican missionary could never escape the chaotic interplay of politics, religion, and society in eighteenth-century Pennsylvania, for Barton was always a client of Pennsylvania's Proprietors—a status that instantly set him at odds with the “swarm of sectaries” that composed Lancaster County (p. 79). The ironic moment when Barton became at least a nominal ally of his sectarian opponents was the Paxton Crisis of 1763-1764. Myers has given us the finest explanation to date of Barton's role in the Paxton affair, especially his authorship of a pamphlet that defended the Paxton B killings of the Conestoga Indians.

Ultimately, what I found most instructive about Myers's biography was the tenuousness and fragility of Barton's frontier world. Here was a man who was tied to the Anglican Church's militant arm, the S.P.G., and personally acquainted with powerful figures such as Thomas Penn, William Johnson, and Richard Peters. Though he represented connections to Great Britain, the Church of England, and the ideals of the Enlightenment, his influence was attenuated. By the 1770s, Barton struggled against a revolutionary tide that crashed upon his world with overwhelming force. He ended his career on the Pennsylvania frontier as a political outcast and loyalist who refused to abjure his sovereign as required by the State's Test Act of 1777, and he died in British-occupied New York City in 1780. Myers aptly summarizes the trajectory of Barton's life as one of “many beginnings . . . with few decisive endings or even, and certainly, fewer sustained periods of stability” (p. 80).

David L. Preston