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Henry Knox: Visionary General of the American Revolution
By Mark Puls

Former journalist of *The Detroit News*, Mark Puls, set out to educate readers of Henry Knox's enormous contributions to not only the American Revolution, but to the United States in this biography. This is Puls' third book, he co-wrote *Uncommon Valor: A Story of Race, Patriotism, and Glory in the Final Battles of the Civil War*, with Melvin Claxton in 2005 and *Samuel Adams: Father of the American Revolution*, in 2009. Puls argues that Knox should rightfully be listed among the nation's Founding Fathers and laments that Knox is all but forgotten except as the namesake of America's gold repository. Puls concluded "If George Washington was the indispensable man of the Revolutions, then Henry Knox was his indispensable man (251). This Knox biography is the most complete biography of Henry Knox written in over a century, but it is not a definitive work.

Puls begins with Knox's less than auspicious early life in Boston. Knox's father, William, abandoned his family when Henry was only nine years old forcing the family into poverty. Henry left Boston Latin School to work in a bookstore and stationers, and although his formal education ended, his voracious reading appetite was fed by the bookstores volumes. While there Knox read books on languages, science, math and history. Puls notes that he would listen carefully to British officers who frequented the book shop. Outside of the bookstore, Puls describes Knox as a Boston street rat, running with a tough gang of juveniles. Puls makes Knox's early

life sympathetic from the perspective of living under tremendous poverty and becoming head of his family at the death of his father at age twelve. Puls begins his biography with making assumptions of Knox's state of mind, "Feelings of abandonment must have haunted Henry" (4). Puls also uses this with others in biography. When discussing Knox's retirement from public life, Puls writes, "The president [Washington] perhaps felt that his own happiness had been subverted by duty" (220). He would continue to take this tack throughout the biography's final chapter of Knox's legacy.

Much of Puls' research and quotes on Knox comes from various letters and journals. Knox's own, his wife Lucy and his contemporaries; both military and civilian are quoted often and provided excellent observations of Knox and career. This gives the reader a clear vision of Puls' admiration of Knox and his tendencies to overlook some of the less than stellar writings in regard to Knox's darker side. In the latter part of his life, Knox held a million plus acres in Maine that many historians note he acquired through corrupt dealings, graft and greed. He was so unpopular later in life his neighbors threatened to burn his mansion, Montpelier, to the ground. One of the most critical writings in regard to Knox can be found in the well known journal of a fellow Revolutionary War veteran, Joseph Plumb Martin. Incredibly, Puls never mentions this often referred to journal or the fact that Martin personally appealed to Knox for help from losing his 100 acre farm in Maine. Knox never responded to Martin's plea and Martin lost his farm. Martin may have felt some satisfaction in later years when Knox was in financial ruin and had to sell off much of his own land holdings. One other oddity that Puls leaves out regarding Knox is Nathaniel

Hawthorne used Knox as inspiration for his vicious character, Colonel Pyncheon, in *The House of the Seven Gables*.

Although Puls leaves out negative narratives and information about Knox, it is not to say there is not a preponderance of praise from numerous sources. Knox is quoted as being “a young gentleman of a very good reputation,” and a “youth who had attracted my notice by his pleasing manners and inquisitive turn of mind” by Samuel and John Adams (5). There is no mistaking that Knox has truly well deserved praise in the book. His rise from hardship in early life to the Secretary of War was nothing short of valorous. Knox’s self-taught artillery and engineering skills most certainly helps with the win of the colonists in the Revolution. He took a disjointed, small group of ill equipped artillerymen before 1776 and ended the war with regiments of highly trained veterans. Knox was able to transport desperately needed cannons and powder from Fort Ticonderoga in New York to the outskirts of Boston in the freezing weather of a New England winter. He laid careful and intricate plans for Washington’s crossing of the Delaware River and was a lynchpin in the Battle of Yorktown and Cornwallis’ surrender.

Much of the information Puls writes about Knox helps flesh out in depth insights in American history. Knox serendipitous stumbling upon moment leading to the Boston Massacre and the fatal outcome in March 1770 and the depth of the betrayal he felt from Benedict Arnold gave him clay feet in Puls’ god-like praise. “Knox was stunned by Arnold, a man he had continued to trust even after presiding over his court-martial,” and “The strangest thing in the world has happened. Arnold had gone to the enemy...” (148). Puls also gives readers a better idea of Knox’s post

war life. Knox openly wrote about the weakness of the Articles of Confederation, served as the Secretary of War and was the first to push for a permanent military academy at West Point and the establishment of a strong and permanent navy.

One of the strongest critics of Puls' biography of Knox is J.L. Bell, a Massachusetts writer on American Colonial history and consultant on the PBS series *History Detectives*. He points out several errors and omissions in Puls' work such as Puls writing Alexander Hamilton was ineligible to be elected president and mixing up British grenadiers with artillerymen.

Henry Knox: Visionary General of the American Revolution is not a bad biography, it feels like an incomplete one. Granted that many of the military records of Knox were lost in a fire in the 1800s, which destroyed many original American Revolution military documents, but the reader is still left with the feeling of something missing. The effect of Knox's wife disownment by her loyalist family or the impact of the death of six of his children are left to supposition. Many early American scholars have ignored Henry Knox and Puls' biography is a good foundation for future historians to continue from.