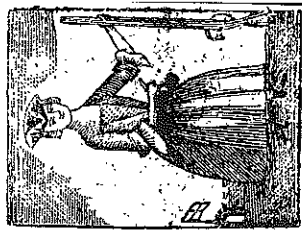


CHAPTER TWO

"THEY SAY IT IS TEA THAT CAUSED IT"

Women Join the Protest Against English Policy



The year was 1765 and in the halls of colonial legislatures from Massachusetts to the Carolinas, leaders rose to protest the disturbing signs that their rights as Englishmen were being threatened. In the newspapers and on the streets of colonial cities, cries of "No taxation without representation!" could be heard as crowds threatened royal officials and destroyed their property. Almost overnight, the wave of nationalism that had followed Britain's stunning victory in the French and Indian Wars gave way to suspicion and anger. Only two years earlier, colonists had lifted their glasses to toast the majesty of their young king George III, the strategic genius of William Pitt, and the heroism of the fallen General James Wolfe. They had celebrated the end to almost a century of intermittent warfare and the horrors of Indian raids on the colonial borders, and they had looked with pride on the fact that the tyrannical yoke of France had been lifted from Canada and the Ohio Valley.

Yet the sweet taste of victory had soured quickly. Land-

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hungry colonists saw their hopes dashed in 1763 when Parliament proclaimed territory west of the Appalachians off-limits until a coherent Indian policy could be developed. The following year, New England shippers and merchants grew indignant when the British government's American Revenue Act signaled a crack-down on their profitable smuggling of foreign sugar into mainland ports. And, now, in a move that shocked colonists everywhere, Parliament had usurped the prerogatives of their colonial assemblies and passed a direct tax on vital services and basic goods. The Stamp Act of 1765 required that government-issued stamps be placed on all legal documents and newspapers as well as playing cards and dice. In one ill-advised stroke, the mother country managed to anger not only local political leaders, but also the most vocal members of colonial society—its lawyers and editors—and those most likely to take their protest to the streets—sailors, dockworkers, and other members of the growing colonial urban poor. This threat to local government's control over taxation also managed to produce what the threat of Indian attack and French invasion had not: united political action by the colonies. Even before the hated stamps arrived in America, the hastily called Stamp Act Congress had agreed to a boycott of all British-made goods until the tax was repealed.

American women were not present in the halls of the Virginia House of Burgesses as the great orator Patrick Henry rose to protest the tyrannical yoke not of France but of Parliament. They did not gather in the dockside taverns of Boston where the wily Samuel Adams helped transform the city's local gangs into the Sons of Liberty. And their opinions were not sought when delegates to the Stamp Act Congress composed their arguments against direct taxation, penned their petitions to Parliament, and decided on their strategy to force the act's repeal. But when the call went out for a boycott of British goods, women became crucial participants in the first organized opposition to British policy.

Thus, the first political act of American women was to say "No." In cities and small towns, women said no to merchants

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who continued to offer British goods and no to the consumption of those goods, despite their convenience or appeal. Their "no" had an immediate and powerful effect, for women had become major consumers and purchasers by the mid-eighteenth century. And in American cities, widows, wives of sea captains and sailors, and unmarried women who ran their own shops had to make the decision to say no to selling British goods. In New York City a group of brides-to-be said no to their fiancés, putting a public notice in the local newspaper that they would not marry men who applied for a stamped marriage license.¹

Parliament could ignore the assemblies' petitions. It could turn a deaf ear to soaring oratory and fights of rhetoric. But Parliament could not withstand the pressures placed on it by English merchants and manufacturers who saw their sales plummet and their warehouses overflow because of the boycott. In March 1766, the Stamp Act was repealed.

Over the next few years, Parliament looked frantically for new means to extract revenue from the colonies. While many colonists became convinced of a plot to destroy American prosperity or to reduce freeborn citizens to slaves, the British government saw these measures as a practical response to wartime and postwar budget problems. As a succession of prime ministers quickly learned, the British government was in desperate financial straits. England had borrowed heavily to wage its long war against France, and it faced continued military expenses if it hoped to keep what it had won. Since the English taxpayers were demanding relief from wartime levels of taxation and were in no mood to see their burden increased, the only possible new source of revenue was the colonies.

A sympathetic colonist might see the logic, or the justice, in Parliament's decision to enforce old trade restrictions and impose new ones, but there were few sympathetic colonists to be found. Thus, in 1767, when the British chancellor of the exchequer, Charles Townshend, tried to expand import duties to include British-made goods

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such as paper, paint, and tea, colonists were quick to organize opposition once again. The campaign to repeal the Stamp Act had taught them valuable lessons: united action was more effective than individual responses, and nonimportation and nonconsumption were the most powerful weapons in their arsenal of resistance.

The boycott that followed covered items as luxurious as "Coaches, Chaises and Carriages of all Sorts" and as basic as "Cordage, Anchors . . . Linseed Oyle [and] Glue." And, once again, women were asked to wield their purchasing power as a political weapon. Local boycott committees put pressure on women to abstain from purchasing sugar, gloves, hats, ready-made clothing, a great variety of fabrics, and shoes, while newspapers carried poems assuring women that they would be more attractive to men if they refrained from drinking British tea. "Throw aside your Bohea and your Green Hyson Tea," wrote one wit in 1767, promising that "though the times remain darkish, young men may be sparkish / And love you much stronger than ever."²

For a small but growing number of women, quiet acquiescence to the boycott did not seem to be enough. In Boston, there were women who preferred to issue manifestos of their own. Such action was not without risk to their reputations. Women's names rarely appeared in print, unless they were runaway servants, brides, or merchants or craftsmen advertising their wares. Genteel women were rarely discussed in print except in eulogies. Despite the risk, on February 12, 1770, the *Boston Evening Post* carried the names of "upwards of 300 Mistresses of Families, in which Number the Ladies of the highest Rank and Influence" who had signed an agreement to "join with the very respectable Body of Merchants and other Inhabitants of this Town who met in Faneuil Hall" and pledged to abstain from the use of tea. "Join with" implied independent decision making rarely displayed by "Ladies." Almost one hundred other women from the less prosperous section of town "of their own free will and accord" announced they had written and signed their own boycott agreement.³

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Public opinion seemed to favor this new daring on the part of women. Yet women who wished to do more than put their names on a petition proceeded with caution. When Mercy Otis Warren, sister of one of Massachusetts' leading radicals and wife of another, decided to write a series of stinging satirical plays about local royal officials, she published them anonymously. Friends like John Adams reveled in the damage that her characterizations did to the reputations of such royal officeholders as Governor Thomas Hutchinson or Attorney General Jonathan Sewall, who supported British policies. Yet Warren consistently denied her authorship of these plays, even to Adams. When the poet Hannah Griffiths wrote urging Pennsylvania women to support the boycott, she too published her work anonymously. Anonymity not only allowed Griffiths to maintain her genteel reputation; it allowed her to openly criticize Pennsylvania men for failing to enforce the boycott themselves:

*Since the men, from a party or fear of a frown
Are kept by a sugar-plum quietly down
Supinely asleep—and depriv'd of their sight
Are stripp'd of their freedom, and robb'd of their right;
If the sons, so degenerate! the blessings despise
Let the Daughters of Liberty nobly arise.*⁴

Anonymous verses continued to appear in colonial newspapers, many of them urging women to politicize their daily domestic life. What a woman bought when she went to a shop, what she ate, what she drank, and the clothing she chose to wear could all signal a political commitment as well as a personal choice. A popular verse advised women to

*First, then, throw aside your topknots of pride,
Wear none but your own country linen;
Of economy boast, let your pride be the most
To show clothes of your own make and spinning.*⁵

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"Clothes of your own make and spinning," or homespun, quickly became a badge of honor and a visible political statement. Thirteen-year-old Anna Green Winslow articulated the connection clearly: "As I am (as we say) a daughter of liberty, I chuse to war as much of our own manufactory as possible." Winslow's identification of herself as a "daughter of liberty" placed her in the growing ranks of women who felt "nationally." Urged by the press, by ministers, and by the colonial leadership to look upon domestic duties and chores as political weapons, these women began to see themselves, for the first time, as actors upon the political stage. This new role, as a political actor rather than an observer, was not easily assumed. Among women of the genteel classes, it clashed with the image of delicacy and femininity they had cultivated. Twenty-two-year-old Charity Clarke voiced her uneasiness in a series of letters to a male friend in England. She feared, she wrote, that her discussion of politics would destroy the "Idea you have of [my] female softness." Yet she could not remain silent. The vision Clarke conjured up of a "fighting army of Amazones," ready to do battle for colonial rights, may have been a flight of fancy, but her willingness to see an independent, self-sufficient America marked her as decidedly more radical than most of the political leadership in 1769. That June, she had issued a warning to her friend:

If you English folks won't give us the liberty we ask . . . I will try to gather a number of ladies armed with spinning wheels [along with men] who shall all learn to weave & keep sheep, and will retire beyond the reach of arbitrary power, clothed with the work of our hands, feeding on what the country affords. . . . In short, we will found a new Arcadia.⁶

Clarke's new Arcadia was far from the minds of most colonists, but a campaign to become self-sufficient was mounted

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in New England. Here, spinning wheels were brought out and dusted off, and lessons in what had become a lost art were offered. Notices of spinning bees for those who remembered how to do it, and of spinning demonstrations for those who had never sat at a wheel, began to appear in local newspapers. Many of these events were hosted by local ministers. Most of the women who participated were unmarried—daughters of prosperous families who were, as one historian has put it, America's first leisure class, yet some wives and mothers managed to attend, despite their household and child-care duties. A matron from Brookfield, New Hampshire, for example, did "the morning work of a large family, made her cheese, etc, and then rode more than two miles, and carried her own wheel, and sat down to spin at nine in the morning, and by seven in the evening spun 53 knots" before "she went home to milking."⁷

Unlike Anna Winslow, many of the women who joined these spinning bees may not have seen themselves as "daughters of liberty." Instead, they may have viewed their actions in more traditional terms, as acts of charity for the poor, the widowed, and the ailing, upon whom the boycott of English cloth fell as a special burden. Yet they could not prevent other colonists from interpreting their actions in more radical terms. The women had, after all, transformed what was traditionally a solitary activity into a group effort. They had crammed dozens of bulky machines and dozens of women into the modest space of a minister's home, and their spinning sessions had been publicly advertised. It was not surprising, therefore, that their personal motivations were lost in the outpouring of praise—and condemnation—that followed what others saw as a conscious political act. Peter Oliver, who would later prefer exile to rebellion, believed that the ministers had consciously inflamed these women into acts of rebellion. "The dissenting Clergy, were . . . set to Work, to preach up Manufactures instead of Gospel," Oliver later wrote in his history of the Revolution. "They preached about it . . . until the Women &

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Children, both within Doors & without, set their Spinning Wheels a whirling in Defiance of *Great Britain*." But supporters of the boycott believed the women needed no outside encouragement; their spinning bees were evidence of their own "love of Liberty, and strict Attachment to their Country's Welfare." Newspaper commentators heaped praise upon the spinners, insisting, as one contributor to the *Boston Evening Post* put it, "that the industry and frugality of American ladies must exalt their character in the Eyes of the World and serve to show how greatly they are contributing to bring about the political salvation of a whole Continent."⁸

Once again, nonimportation and nonconsumption helped force the repeal of the British revenue-raising effort. But the tensions between mother country and colonies did not ease. In Boston and New York, the arrival of British regulars, or redcoats, sent to squelch further riots and demonstrations against British policy and to protect royal officeholders only led to violence between civilians and soldiers. In 1770, a confrontation between British troops and Boston citizens left five men dead. When a local silversmith, Paul Revere, rushed into print an engraving of the evening's violence, this compelling piece of propaganda, with its image of ruthless British soldiers firing on an innocent crowd, persuaded men and women throughout the colonies that the event was a massacre. Although calm seemed to settle over the colonies after the "Boston Massacre," political leaders and writers continued to examine the relationship between Parliament and the assemblies and to raise disturbing questions about their future within the empire. In pamphlets, speeches, and private letters, they parsed out the obligations and privileges of the government and its citizens and gauged what they considered to be the erosion of colonial rights. To an increasing number of colonists, the British government's aggressive policies seemed to reflect a society mired in corruption and mismanagement. Neither men nor women talked yet of independence or rebellion, but as the decade

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of the glorious victory over France ended, a general wariness colored the thoughts of many colonists. Only this growing mistrust could have sparked the tempest in a teapot that began in 1773.

American colonists, like their English counterparts, took their tea drinking seriously, consuming great quantities in much the same fashion as modern Americans drink coffee. Although the East India Tea Company, a British enterprise, technically held a monopoly on the American trade, Dutch traders had regularly captured much of the colonial market by offering lower prices. Two factors had kept the price of English tea high. First, colonists paid a middleman fee to the English merchants who re-exported the tea to America. Secondly, when Parliament repealed the Townshend duties, they kept the import tax on the tea as a symbol of their right to legislate for the colonies. In 1773, a mismanaged and floundering East India Tea Company came to Parliament, hoping for legislation that would bail them out. Parliament soon came up with a plan to make the company's tea more attractive to the colonial market. The Tea Act of 1773 allowed the company to eliminate the English merchant middlemen and sell directly to the colonists. Even with the tea tax still in effect, English tea would now be cheaper than its competitor.

The British government anticipated few complaints over the new arrangement, and may in fact, have expected their decision to be greeted warmly. It was not. Parliament had once again underestimated colonial mistrust and colonial readiness to resist any further erosion of their rights. Rumors quickly spread that Parliament intended to drive out foreign teas, assure the East India Company a monopoly on the universally popular drink, and then allow the company to drastically raise its prices. Many colonists believed the Tea Act was an excuse to collect the tax on tea and thus establish a precedent for new taxes on British goods. Almost no one saw it for what it probably was: a tactic to save a company in which several leading members of Parliament had invested.

Drinking, or refusing to drink, tea immediately became the new litmus test of colonial patriotism. And once again, much of

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the burden seemed to fall on women. In South Carolina, the Presbyterian minister William Tennent III insisted that women could save the colonies "from the Dagger of Tyranny" if they gave up the "trivial pleasure" of drinking tea. "Yes ladies," he declared, "You have it in your power more than all your committees and Congresses, to strike the Stroke, and make the Hills and Plains of America clap their hands." Though caught up in his own oratory, Tennent clearly recognized the psychological, if not the economic, impact of female political action. When the British saw that "American patriotism extends even to the Fair Sex," Parliament would feel compelled to end its oppression. Tennent's tone might strike the modern reader as patronizing, and his warning that every cup of tea sipped by women would be "paid for by the Blood of your sons" as histrionic, but to his eighteenth-century audience his message was both sound and radical: once again women's daily domestic activity was equally, or more, important to the colonial future than the actions of male congresses and assemblies.⁹

The women of North Carolina accepted the challenge to make the hills of their colony clap their hands. On October 25, 1774, some ten months after Boston radicals dumped a cargo of British tea into their harbor, fifty-one women gathered at the Edenton home of Elizabeth King. Constituting themselves as the Edenton Ladies' Patriotic Guild, they composed and signed an agreement to boycott all British-made goods and products. "As we cannot be indifferent on any occasion that appears nearly to affect the peace and happiness of our country," they wrote, "and as it has been thought necessary for the public good, to enter into several resolves by a meeting of members deputed from the whole province, it is a duty which we owe, not only to our near and dear connections, who have concurred in them, but to ourselves, who are essentially interested in their welfare, to do everything, as far as lies in our power, to testify our sincere adherence to the same; and we do therefore accordingly subscribe this paper as a witness of our fixed intentions and solemn determination to do so." Their pledge was

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widely published in the colonies and appeared in the English *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser* on January 16, 1775.¹⁰

The Edenton Resolves illustrated perfectly the liminal state of women's political identity. These North Carolina women had traveled from surrounding towns and farms for the sole purpose of issuing a public declaration. Yet in the preface accompanying that declaration, they carefully acknowledged that they were following "the laudable example of their husbands." And in the brief but dramatic resolution itself, the Edenton ladies declared that they acted out of a duty to the husbands and family who shared their patriotism. Yet they also declared that it was a duty they owed to themselves. In the end, their resolution went beyond a show of support for their husbands. It was a civic act, a commitment to the larger realm of "the public good." Their resolve, both as a character trait and as a document, carried the women beyond the role of surrogate husband or dutiful wife. But it did not carry them into full autonomy.

The Edenton Ladies Agreement seemed to conservative men to signal the same social anarchy as the Boston Tea Party's destruction of private property. Writing to his brother James from England, Arthur Iredell mocked the entrance of women into the public, political sphere. "Is there a female Congress at Edenton too?" he asked. "I hope not, for we Englishmen are afraid of the Male Congress, but if the Ladies, who have ever, since the Amazonian Era, been esteemed the most formidable Enemies, if they, I say, should attack us, the most fatal consequences is to be dreaded." Iredell's Amazon imagery was far less romantic than Charity Clarke's had been; his reference conjured up masculinized, aberrant women, dangerous and out of control. Fortunately, he continued, the Edenton ladies were indeed aberrant, for in all probability there were "but few of the places in America, who possess so much female Artillery as Edenton."¹¹

Iredell was more right than he knew. For, despite the political daring of the Edenton women or the vocal support of the boycotts by Boston matrons, there were many women—and men—

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who remained mere observers of the conflict forming around them. Temperance Smith, a parson's wife from Sharon, Connecticut, spoke for many women when she said she was simply too busy to complain about "extra duties." "To tell the truth, I had no leisure for murmuring," she wrote. "I rose with the sun and all through the long day I had no time for aught but my work. So much did it press upon me that I could scarcely divert my thoughts from its demands." And while some women could clearly articulate the principle of "no taxation without representation," just as many were like Jemima Condict, a New Jersey farm girl, who had only a vague understanding of the issues that seemed to be moving the colonies toward war. "It seems we have troublesome times acoming," she wrote in her diary in October 1774, "for there is a great disturbance abroad in the earth, and they say it is tea that caused it. So then, if they will quarrel about such a trifling thing as that, what must we expect but war?"¹²

The "quarrel about such a trifling thing" was rapidly escalating in New England. After the destruction of the tea, the British government determined to teach Massachusetts in general, and Boston in particular, a lesson in obedience. The strategy was simple: to isolate this troublemaking colony and to crush its rebellious spirit. In rapid succession, Parliament's Intolerable Acts altered the provincial charter, closed the ports, changed legal procedures, and, to ensure that its punishments were enforced, removed the civilian governor and replaced him with General Thomas Gage. But the rebellious spirit had spread more widely than the king or the Parliament realized. In Virginia and the Carolinas, in New York and Pennsylvania, defiant colonists put together shipments of supplies for the besieged Bostonians. The rhetoric in newspapers and pamphlets grew more militant, as political writers declared Parliament an enemy of colonial rights and liberties. The most radical among them urged colonists to arm themselves against British attack.

In September 1774, political leaders from every colony but Georgia gathered in Philadelphia at the first Continental Con-

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gress. Although many delegates urged caution and compromise rather than revolution, the congress refused to offer an olive branch to the king; instead, they demanded the repeal of the Intolerable Acts and called for a third boycott of British goods.

The firm stand taken by this Continental Congress was a culmination of a decade of questioning, debating, and re-evaluating the colonial relationship to the mother country. In their insistence on the rights of local assemblies to govern internal affairs, colonial leaders had slowly redrawn the political map of the empire in their minds. They had renounced parliamentary supremacy and substituted a radical division of sovereignty in which the assemblies governed the colonies with the same authority that Parliament governed England. Only a shared loyalty to the Crown welded these separate parts of the empire into an imperial whole. Not surprisingly, neither Parliament nor the king accepted this reinterpretation. Attitudes in England had hardened since the destruction of the tea and the few outspoken advocates of colonial rights had lost ground in Parliament. By 1774, the government was determined to assert its sovereignty over all British citizens.

Outside the halls of government, the lines drawn between what came to be known as colonial loyalists and colonial patriots had also hardened. Violence erupted as radical men and women tried to pressure their neighbors into supporting colonial resistance. These crowds targeted women as well as men. The loyalist newspaper *Rivington's Gazette* reported in early 1775 that a mob had attacked a private gathering of women, flinging "stones which broke the shutters and windows and endangered their lives." Women who had expressed no political views but were wives or daughters of loyalists were not spared condemnation for "basely and cowardly [giving] up the public cause of freedom." A Massachusetts loyalist described the patriot women in these crowds as caught up in "a certain epidemical phrenzy" that surpassed "all the pretended patriotic virtue of the more robustic males." Peter Oliver, who found it "highly diverting" to see poor widows of Boston sign boycott agreements on luxury items such

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as silk or velvet or clock, and wealthy women stock up on tea before they embraced the ban, was appalled by the presence of women in mobs that tarred and feathered vocal supporters of the Crown. The breach of feminine restraint and delicacy seemed to him almost as radical as the rebellion itself. "When a Woman throws aside her Modesty," he wrote, "Virtue drops a tear." Patriots disagreed. Ezra Stiles, the future president of Yale, applauded news of New England women who "surpassed the men for Eagerness & Spirit in the Defence of Liberty by Arms." Female virtue was clearly in the eyes of the beholder.¹³ *point*

In early 1775, King George III escalated the war of words into a war of musket and rifle. Convinced that a few rambouers in Massachusetts were behind all the trouble in his colonies, the king ordered General Gage to arrest Samuel Adams and John Hancock. Gage dutifully ordered redcoats into the Massachusetts countryside on the evening of April 18. Paul Revere and William Dawes rode out immediately to warn the two men and to alert local militiamen that British regulars were on their way. Before the night was over, "the shot heard round the world" was fired on Lexington Green. The war Jemima Condict feared had unofficially begun. If she now felt herself forced to make a political commitment, there were women who were eager to declare their loyalties. One of these was Esther deBerdt Reed of Philadelphia. That October, several months before Tom Paine's *Common Sense* broke the last bonds of loyalty to the king for many Americans, Reed wrote proudly to her brother in England that her cause, and her husband's cause, was "liberty and virtue, how much soever it may be branded by the names of rebellion and treason." Beneath her strong and determined tone, however, lay a fear of what the future held in store. "We have a powerful enemy to contend with," she conceded, adding, "Everything that is dear to us is at stake."¹⁴ In the coming months, Reed would discover how right she was.