

LENGYEL, Cornel

TO make history palatable, one of the popular techniques devised is what might be called the "day" look at an event or man. It is the antithesis of the long look professional historians employ to illuminate their subjects. Lively writers who can make the past come alive and able researchers who apply journalistic methods to discover new materials are helpful if by their efforts a wider public becomes interested in history's meaning. But it is questionable history when an "angle" is used to compress background, motives and other circumstances into a "day." For example, many new readers now know about the day Lincoln died without knowing much about the years Lincoln lived and their import. There have been a number of other twenty-four-hour views of history.

The documentary technique is applied in a new book published today that attempts to tell the story behind the Declaration of Independence. It is called "Four Days in July."* It is an hour-by-hour account of the first four days in July, 1776, when the Continental Congress met to debate the wisdom of making a formal declaration of revolt. While the delegates were meeting in Philadelphia, General Washington rushed fortifications along the shores of New York to resist an expected British attack. On another island 3,000 miles away George III studied his maps and enlisted German mercenaries. The fulcrum of all this activity was to be a strongly worded piece of paper.

Many Facts Marshaled

The author of this book, Cornel Lengyel, has dug deeply into the sources of the past and unearthed interesting facts, which are well-supported and indexed in his story. Yet the presentation is an odd mixture of actual quotations and filled-in dramatic action to give this four-day history a sense of urgency. The author notes, "Except for minor interpolations the speeches and conversations are drawn verbatim from the letters, diaries, and memoirs of the delegates." In this respect the author has done a good job of pulling together; but in the process he has also wrenched and tugged. His story keeps stopping, moving backward years in time from July 1 in order to explain the lives and motives of the delegates. There is much repetition, and a continuous hovering between past and present in the writing. As a result these four days have been forced into a more, instead of less, complicated book frame.

The facts themselves as set forth in chapter notes are to be respected. It is nice to know all the dimensions of the writing box used by Thomas Jefferson; what parts of the Declaration were changed (that good deskman, Dr. Franklin, put the quill to "We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable," and recommended "We hold these truths to be self-evident"); that the weather on July 4 was recorded as "Fine sunshine; pleasant morning wind, southeasterly." But in spite of the commendable attempt to enlist more general readers, it is doubtful if the "day" format is workable for serious history.

~~Another, more conventional, method of~~

***FOUR DAYS IN JULY.** By Cornel Lengyel.
360 pages. Doubleday. \$4.95.

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