

The Independence Drama

Four Glorious Days Of America's Birth

Reviewed by Lynn Montross

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IT WAS INEVITABLE that the Declaration of Independence would some day become the material of an hour-by-hour story in line with the vogue started by Jim Bishop several years ago with his "The Day Lincoln Died." And it was fortunate that the Declaration had as its interpreter so able a writer as Cornel Lengyel, who has done a first-class job.

All of the leading characters of the great drama of Independence, both friend and foe, walk through these pages. No detail is neglected, not even the changes in the weather during the four critical days. Thus we know that July 4, 1776, was a day of "fine sunshine; pleasant morning wind, southeasterly. . . . Temp. 3 a. m., 68°; 9 a. m., 72½°; 1 p. m., 76°; 9 p. m., 73½°."

This information is credited in the chapter notes to the diary of Christopher Marshall, a patriotic Quaker member of the Philadelphia Committee of Inspection. It is an example of research that has made use of contemporary diaries and newspapers as well as books published during the present generation. And though pedants may find fault with the number of recent books consulted, the author has shown excellent discrimination and judgment.

A GOOD DEAL of conversation is recorded in the actual words of participants who left diaries or memoirs. References to streets, buildings and other background features are derived from contemporary descriptions.

The effect is to give the reader a sense of the real risks taken by the little group of willful men who dared to defy the world's greatest empire of that day. It was more than a mere quip when, according to legend, Dr. Franklin said, "We must all hang together or we shall assuredly hang separately."



Independence Day, itself is cut down to size in a blow-by-blow account which makes it clear that the first two days of the month were of at least equal historical importance, though they have never received the same popular recognition. It was on Monday, the 1st, that the opponents of Independence had their inning. The debate lasted all that suspense-filled summer day, and the vote was a stunning blow to proponents when Pennsylvania and South Carolina decided in the negative while Delaware's two votes canceled each other.

The actual decision came on the 2d, when those two great patriots, John Dickinson and Robert Morris, absented themselves rather than approve a Declaration they considered premature. The other Pennsylvania delegates, led by Dr. Franklin, then voted aye. Caesar Rodney, dying of cancer, arrived after a dramatic all-night ride to break the Delaware tie; and South Carolina made it a unanimous vote of 12 colonies, with the New York delegates holding aloof while awaiting instructions.

THE DECLARATION was debated as a document on the 3d. Some wise deletions were approved while Thomas Jefferson squirmed with the pain of an author seeing his brainchild undergoing surgery. Thursday, the 4th, brought a vote of adoption, but John Adams wrote to his Abigail that "the second day of July, 1776, will be . . . celebrated by all succeeding generations as the great anniversary Festival."