

Strange death of silas deane



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“ The Strange Death of Silas Deane” by James West Davison and Mark Hamilton Lytle creates a new perspective on what people see history as. Although many people would define history as something that happened in the past, through “ The Strange Death of Silas Deane”, the authors demonstrate that this everyday view on history can be profoundly misleading. In the section, “ An Untimely Death”, the author explains the key events of Deane's life and his death. Silas Deane “ began his life as the son of a humble blacksmith in Groton, Connecticut” (16). He went from rags-to-riches as he graduated from Yale College and opened up a practice.

Deane married, divorced, and married again. He wasn't happy being a businessman so he entered politics. He worked his way up to be a delegate to the first and second Continental Congresses. “ In 1776 Congress sent Deane to France... to purchase badly needed military supplies” (16). He then became the Minister Plenipotentiary from the United States to the Court of France. People then began to watch him carefully. Arthur Lee “ accused Deane of taking unfair advantage of his official position to make a private fortune” (16). After much debate, Congress voted to recall Deane from his position.

His life began to slip away and he found himself adrift as he could not return to America nor France. He decided to take refuge in Flanders where he unhappily spent the next few years of his life. His only friend, Edward Bancroft, who had been his pupil and later his secretary, provided him with living money from time to time. After realizing he could no longer stay in London, Deane “ booked passage on a ship sailing for the United States” (18). A storm approached not long after they had set sail. As they were

waiting out the storm, Deane complained about being dizzy and having an upset stomach.

His condition worsened and he tried to say something twice but no one could figure out what he was saying. Four hours later he passed away. The author points out that this is the basic story and will remain the same until historians begin to put together a more complete account of Silas Deane's life. Due to this, some of these basic facts mentioned earlier will soon become obscure. Historians will begin to hear rumors about Deane and different sides to his life. " According to certain people... [Deane] had committed suicide; John Cutting... wrote of a rumor that Deane had predetermin'd to take a sufficient quantity of Laudanum to ensure his dissolution; And Tom Paine... reported the gossip: Cutting told me he took poison" (18).

If historians are told of all these rumors they will never get down to the real facts. This is something that will not stop and is the reason why the " happened in the past" view on history can be deceiving. In the section " Silas Deane's Friend", the authors take a look at one of Deane's friends, Edward Bancroft. His story reveals a lot about himself as well as Deane. The reason why Deane contacted Bancroft when he was going to England was so Congress's Committee of Secret Correspondence had " a good source of information about British war plans" (23).

As mentioned earlier, Arthur Lee did accuse Deane of using his position to make a profit for himself, but that was just an accusation up until now. Apparently Deane was legally allowed to collect commission on all the war supplies he purchased for Congress but he took it further. " He and Bancroft

used their official connections in France to conduct a highly profitable private trade of their own” (23). Now this information wasn’t known until long after. “ Historians now know these facts because they now have access to the papers of Deane, Bancroft and others” (23).

If historians just wrote about the past instead of looking deeper and doing some research, no one would know about this, the truth about Silas Deane. Using all the new facts and evidence, the authors take a second look at Deane’s death. “ Combining that evidence with what we already know about Deane’s death, we might theorize that Deane committed suicide because, underneath all his claims to innocence, he knew he was guilty as Congress charged” (24). That is a perfect example as to why history can be misleading and isn’t just what “ happened in the past”.

“ Historians are generally forced to deal with probabilities, not certainties, and we leave you to draw your own conclusions... ” (29). Even though the everyday view on history is that “ history is what happened in the past”, Silas Deane’s death indicates that this view isn’t very accurate and can be misleading. “ History is not “ what happened in the past”; rather, it is the act of selecting, analyzing, and writing about the past” (19). Without doing some heavy research and expanding the topic, historians will never be able to write a complete historical account on any matter.