

INTRODUCING THE NOVEL: *JOHNNY TREMAIN*

The story of *Johnny Tremain* begins in 1773 in the Boston home and workshop of old Mr. Lapham, a master silversmith. Fourteen-year-old Johnny Tremain is one of three apprentices who live with the Lapham family while learning the silversmith trade. Although Johnny is an orphan, he had the advantage of a mother who taught him to read and write. These abilities, along with Johnny's intelligence and superior skill as an apprentice silversmith, make him overly proud. He wins no friends with his haughty attitude toward the other two apprentices. Johnny is so proud and aware of his value to the Laphams that, at times, he even treats his master's family disrespectfully.

As the story begins, Johnny is far more interested in his personal ambitions than in the political turmoil brewing all around him. At this time, the colonies were on the eve of the American Revolution, and Boston was a hotbed of tension and unrest. Many colonists were fiercely engaged in debating how much control Great Britain should have over the colonies and whether to form a separate nation.

Johnny's story is filled with characters, places, and events that make Boston, as it existed in the early 1770s, come alive. Some characters are mostly interested in their daily lives. Other characters are passionately interested in the political changes erupting around them. Though many of these characters are fictional, Forbes has skillfully interwoven their stories with those of real people and events from history. In fact, the author has combined fact and fiction so seamlessly that readers may not always know what is real and what is invented. In the words of one critic, "If Jonathan Lyte Tremain never lived in the flesh, he lives vividly with the men of his time."

In writing *Johnny Tremain*, Forbes drew upon the extensive research she did for her biography of a famous Boston patriot: Paul Revere. With Forbes's vivid descriptions, readers can imagine what it was like to walk down Boston's cobblestone streets in the early 1770s. They can share the sense of danger and excitement surrounding such real events as the Boston Tea Party, Paul Revere's famous ride, and the Battles of Lexington and Concord. Readers also learn more about such great Patriot thinkers and leaders as Sam Adams, John Hancock, and John Adams.

In *Johnny Tremain*, readers share not only a historical journey but also Johnny's personal journey of growth and discovery. When planning the novel, Forbes was determined "to give Johnny room enough to change and grow." She also wanted "an obstacle [for] Johnny . . . to face from the beginning to the end of the book. . . . This obstacle was to have psychological significance." At the beginning of the novel, Johnny is an arrogant and impulsive boy, but then life knocks him around quite a bit. He runs into some bad luck and also creates some problems for himself with his excessive pride. He has to face his problems and try to figure out who he is and what matters to him. When the dramatic events of the American Revolution involve Johnny, he must decide what ideas and beliefs are worth fighting for.

THE TIME AND PLACE

The story of *Johnny Tremain* takes place mainly in Boston, beginning in the summer of 1773 and ending in April 1775. At this time, Boston was an important colonial city with a thriving economy. The thirteen American colonies were well established and had grown in population to two and a half million. The geographic area of the colonies was larger than that of the mother country, Great Britain. Transportation within and between colonies was very slow, with horse or horse-drawn carriage the fastest method of travel. Mail service was minimal and news could take days, weeks, or months to circulate.

The circumstances leading to the momentous historical events described in *Johnny Tremain* had been brewing for more than a decade. In 1763 Great Britain found itself deeply in debt after the end of the French and Indian War. The British government decided that it was time that the American colonies helped pay for their own defense. Between 1763 and 1775, the British Parliament approved a variety of laws requiring colonists to pay new taxes. Many colonists objected strongly to paying these taxes because they had no representatives in Parliament. Thus, they said, Parliament had no authority to tax them. "No taxation without representation" became the rallying cry of colonists opposed to the new taxes.

One of the new laws, the Stamp Act, meant colonists had to pay a tax—in cash—for most products made from or using paper. As this tax affected nearly every purchase, the colonists decided to protest by boycotting, or refusing to buy,

British goods. Some protests led to violence. The most important effect of the Stamp Act, however, was that the colonies began to unify. People like Sam Adams began to organize groups dedicated to the cause of fighting British tyranny.

Another event that helped trigger the American Revolution was the Boston Massacre in 1770. Confusion during a routine street dispute led to violence and bloodshed between colonists and British soldiers who were stationed in Boston. This event further convinced Patriots such as Sam Adams that all the colonies should unite against Great Britain. He encouraged regular communication between important leaders from the different colonies. Eventually, Adams's "committees of correspondence" became the Continental Congress, which met for the first time in 1774.

Did You Know?

Not all colonists were Whigs—people who supported independence from Britain and opposed British control of the colonies. Some colonists protested the taxes the British imposed on them yet did not support independence from the mother country. Other colonists were Tories who opposed the Whigs entirely and supported King George's rule. The issue was not simply how much control the British should have, but how governments should be organized and how much say individuals should have in their governing. Some merchants, like Mr. Lyte in the novel, tried to stay neutral in the political disagreement in order to keep customers. They claimed to support the Stamp Act boycotts, for example, but then secretly traded with the British.

Important real-life Whigs such as Sam Adams, his cousin John Adams, and John Hancock appear in *Johnny Tremain*. Several of the British leaders and soldiers in the novel— for example, Governor Hutchinson and General Gage—were real-life Tories. According to Forbes's research, they were decent people who disagreed very politely with their Boston neighbors. In fact, Whigs and Tories were sometimes friends, despite their political differences, both in the novel and in real life.