BOOKS

'Not the battle of Lexington or Bunker Hill, not the surrender of Burgoyne or Cornwallis were more important events in American history than the battle of King Street.' —John Adams

Harboring Grievances

Boston's Massacre
By Eric Hinderaker
Harvard, 358 pages, $29.95

BY MARK SPENCER

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FIRST DRAFT Paul Revere's engraving of the Boston Massacre, completed just three weeks after the event.

BOSTON, March 5, 1770—a crisp, clear night. Suddenly, around 9 p.m., shots ring out disturbing the silence. Capt. Thomas Preston and a detachment of British troops posted outside the Customs House on King Street have fired their muskets into a civilian crowd. Three colonists lie dead on the cobblestones. Several others are maimed; two, fatally. Soon, Paul Revere's hastily produced engraving captures the "Bloody Massacre," sending shock waves across the colonies. What had been an imperial disagreement over taxation—debated in newspapers and pamphlets—is transformed into an emotionally charged conflict one step from open rebellion and war.

That is the standard account of the Boston Massacre. But was it so clear-cut? What actually happened in Boston that night more than 245 years ago? In his fascinating book "Boston's Massacre," Eric Hinderaker sets out to find answers.

Sources are plentiful from which to re-create the scene. It may be "the most densely described incident in early American history," Mr. Hinderaker estimates. More than 200 eyewitness accounts survive. But that evidence is frustratingly patchy and uneven, often downright contradictory. Was the crowd "standing still," even peaceful? Or was it a wild mob "armed with large clubs and sticks," intending to "kill all the officers in town"? Accounts had it both ways. So historians tend to balance accounts, picking and choosing, letting one outlier cancel out another. But what if we accept the inconsistencies rather than wishing them away? How would that change the story?

Mr. Hinderaker's meticulous research shows that the Boston Massacre was contested from the beginning. Published accounts immediately appeared in Boston newspapers. Detailed articles in the Evening-Post and the Gazette painted the "most shocking Scene": "the Blood of our Fellow Citizens running like Water thro' King-Street." A similar story unfolded in "A Short Narrative of the Horrid Massacre in Boston," a pamphlet quickly produced by the town for distribution in London. It competed with a very different version of events prepared by British officers, "A Fair Account of the Late Unhappy Disturbance at Boston in New England." Mr. Hinderaker, a professor of history at the University of Utah, shows that those disparate reports were rooted in contexts that had been developing for years.

In 1770, Boston was a town seemingly in decline. In the midst of a prolonged economic downturn, its population of 15,000 was lower than it had been in 1740. Wealthy merchants, customs officials, smugglers and tradespeople all competed for scarce resources. Politically, Bostonians had come to expect a high degree of local autonomy, exercised in town-hall meetings and also through "the Boston crowd." Following the Seven Years' War, Massachusetts Govs. Francis Bernard and Thomas Hutchinson had aimed to curb that independent spirit. Boston's "urban spaces—its waterfront, its public buildings, its streets and warehouses—became battlegrounds where imperial authority competed with local autonomy," Mr. Hinderaker writes.

Boston's reactions to the Stamp Act of 1765 had been particularly violent. The Stamp Tax collector was hanged in effigy. Later a mob set upon Gov. Hutchinson's house, working through the night to destroy it: "They tore hangings and wainscoting off the walls, splintered the doors, and beat down interior walls; cut down the cupola and removed slate tiles and boards from the roof." They laid to ruin the gardens, stole most everything of value and, recorded Hutchinson, left "not a single book or paper" but "scattered or destroyed all the manuscripts & other papers I have been collecting for 30 years." Other riots followed. Into that unstable mix landed 4,000 British troops in 1768. Their mission was ambiguous; they arrived "not in response to a crisis," Mr. Hinderaker notes, "but anticipating the possibility of one."

The Massacre itself came "after seventeen long months of military occupation: a period marked by confusion, outrage, and endemic conflict." In 1769, Benjamin Franklin wrote to a friend in a letter that Mr. Hinderaker does not quote but might have: "I have been in constant Pain since I heard of Troops assembling at Boston, lest the Madness of Mobs or the Insolence of Soldiers, or both, should, when too near each other, occasion some Mischief difficult to be prevented or repaired, and which might spread far and wide."

At first, not all was as bleak as Franklin and others feared. The army, says Mr. Hinderaker, "brought opportunity in the form of supply contracts, rental income, and periodic demand for casual and artisanal labor." Soldiers became friends with local families and residents. But soldiers and civilians also clashed, and both sides "spun competing narratives about their interactions." As the occupation wore on, tensions mounted. Many soldiers deserted. Relations between British officers and local magistrates became edgy. Mediating one disturbance, Justice Richard Dana accosted a group of British soldiers: "What brought you here? We don't want you, do you want to Murder the Inhabitants?" Uncertainty was turning to anger and fear.

The days following the Massacre were just as uncertain. What now lay in store? No one knew. The next day, March 6, Preston and eight soldiers were arrested and taken to the Queen Street jail to await trial. Famously, John Adams and Josiah Quincy Jr. agreed to be their lawyers. In the months between the soldiers' arrests and their trials—which didn't begin until October—"everyone involved wrestled with new fears and uncertainties," as Mr. Hinderaker puts it.

> What actually happened on Boston's King Street that night 246 years ago?

The trials clarified some details. Samuel Gray, a dockside laborer, was "killed on the spot, the ball entering his head and beating off a large portion of his skull." Crispus Attucks, a sailor of African-American and Wampanoag ancestry, was "killed instantly; two balls entering his breast, one of them in special goring the right lobe of the lungs, and a great part of the liver most horribly." Another sailor, James Caldwell, was "killed by two balls entering his back." Samuel Maverick, a 17-year-old carpenter's apprentice, died from his injuries. Patrick Carr, an Irish-born leather worker, suffered a shattered hip and lingered for nine days before he too died. Six others were injured but lived.

But the trials also demonstrated the "radical uncertainty" about the true facts of March 5. Even the basic "sequence of events," writes Mr. Hinderaker, "is sufficiently contradictory to suggest that, on several key issues, we have no way of knowing what actually happened." A fact rarely noticed in the standard telling, for instance, is that in the mayhem four civilians were charged with murder too, accused of shooting into the crowd from a second-story window of the Custom House. They were found to be innocent; so were Preston and all but two of the British soldiers. But for Mr. Hinderaker, "given the contested nature of the events surrounding the shootings, the trials were as much a struggle to construct a dominant, consensus narrative as they were an attempt to attain justice for the accused." The town's reputation and the people's sense of where they stood were in question. "Boston itself was on trial, and the town's character was at stake."

After 1770, Revere's engraving—and one by Henry Pelham, John Singleton Copley's half-brother, from which Revere copied—kept the event alive locally. Conflicting interpretations of the Massacre were disseminated in early histories of the American Revolution by David Ramsay and Mercy Otis Warren.

Beginning in the 1840s, a new narrative took shape. William Cooper Nell and other "black activists" celebrated Attucks as an African-American patriot, "the first man to die for the cause of American independence." Efforts to erect a monument in Attucks's honor, however, met with resistance in a racially divided nation approaching the Civil War. Later, in 1970, in the wake of shooting deaths of unarmed students by guardsmen at Kent State and by police at Jackson State College, the Boston Massacre's legacy was revived. More recently, the author writes, Crispus Attucks's memory has become "relevant once again" for those fearing police brutality against African-Americans.

Many aspects of Boston's Massacre will remain "an irreducible mystery." But its memory should prompt us, the author suggests, to revisit "the limits of legitimate authority, and to place them in the balance against the limits of legitimate popular protest." The Boston Massacre's contested meanings have plenty to tell us about America's identity, past and present.

Mr. Spencer, a professor of history at Brock University, is the author of "David Hume and Eighteenth-Century America."

A Genetic Pandora's Box

The Gene Machine
By Bonnie Rochman
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 272 pages, $26

BY ADRIAN WOOLFSON

WHILE FORTUNE-TELLERS, psychics and mystics have adopted unconventional and unreliable methods to infer our futures, modern clairvoyants have more robust methodologies at their disposal. The playbook defining our development, brain structure and essential aspects of our biology is encoded in our genomes. This master script, written in the language of DNA and parsed into discrete units known as genes, is housed within 46 chromosomal volumes stored in the nucleus of every cell in our body. Together these data points may, through genome sequencing, be deciphered to reveal features of our individual biological futures.

In her thoughtful, engaging book "The Gene Machine," journalist Bonnie Rochman explores the impact and uncertainty that information relating to an individual's genetic material may have on his or her life and family. The book was inspired by the author's experience of being told when she was pregnant that one of her unborn daughter's chromosomes was "upside down." This "chromosomal quirk" turned out to be inconsequential, but the author found herself perplexed at learning of its existence while remaining uncertain of its relevance. It led her to contemplate whether, in a world where the routine genome sequencing of newborns may become commonplace, deep access to genetic information will be either necessary or desirable. Mutations in the BRCA1 gene, for instance, dramatically increase the likelihood of developing adult breast cancer, but should afflicted individuals be forced to carry the knowledge of this legacy years before it has the potential to manifest?

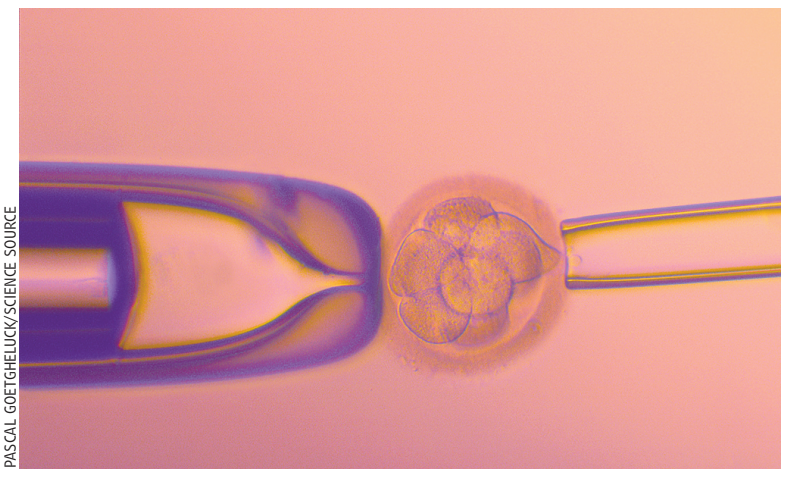
The legal philosopher Joel Feinberg has argued that children have an intrinsic right to an "open future" untainted by prior knowledge of the destiny "abnormal" genes may prescribe.

> We have a user's manual for the construction and operation of humans. How should we use it?

These "rights in trust," he and others claim, should be respected until individuals are old enough to give consent to tests or procedures.

Ms. Rochman argues that the notion of an open future is in some ways illusory, since we are inevitably forced to dance to the tunes programmed into our genes. Parents may, however, treat their offspring differently if they know their children harbor a potentially harmful mutation. Such knowledge may also color a child's vision of his or her own future. Definitions of "normal" and "abnormal" can also be contentious. Ms. Rochman discusses how deaf parents have attempted to use pre-implantation genetic diagnosis to select for embryos carrying the gene predisposing to congenital deafness because they want their offspring to participate in deaf culture.

The prior existence of alternative, but now extinct, species of humans teaches us that, rather than being immutable, human nature has changed profoundly over time under the guidance of natural selection. This inherent malleability results from genomic mutations accumulating as a result of DNA damage and inefficient repair. Such aberrations are necessary for evolution to generate variability, but are also the engine of human diseases. Some mutated genes, including those resulting from alterations at a single position in the genetic code, may have significant consequences: Hemophilia A, for example, results from a mutation in the gene that encodes clotting factor VIII.



PASCAL GOETGHELUCK/SCIENCE SOURCE

CODE CHECK An embryo during pre-implantation genetic testing.

Individual genomic playbooks can now be read effortlessly. Given this new capacity to identify abnormalities, what actions should be taken to correct them? After all, even in the presence of a mutation, diseases may not manifest. At present one of the most effective ways of influencing early genetic outcomes is through genetic counseling and carrier screening, complemented by post-conception techniques such as chorionic villus sampling (CVS) and pre-implantation genetic screening of embryos produced by in-vitro fertilization.

Although our knowledge of the way genes influence our nature is rudimentary, the strength of certain associations offers the prospect of early detection. Globally, up to 350 million individuals are affected by rare diseases, with 90% of these lacking an approved therapy. One in 27 U.S. Ashkenazi Jews carries the gene for Tay-Sachs disease, a fatal early childhood disorder resulting in the progressive loss of sight, speech and movement (children conceived by two carriers have a 25% chance of developing the disease). Screening, prenatal diagnosis and abortion have dramatically reduced the number of cases.

The recent discovery of gene-editing techniques such as CRISPR-cas9 make it possible to consider repairing such abnormalities. This method takes advantage of the primitive immune system used by bacteria, co-opting it to modify human genes. Ms. Rochman discusses the implications of this new technology and its potential to be abused by those espousing eugenic ideologies. More broadly, she correctly notes that right now both patients and physicians are poorly equipped to fully comprehend "the stories that genes may whisper or shout within our bodies." It is one thing to question whether an afflicted child should endure a short, painful and miserable life. But is it appropriate to screen for a nonfatal disease, such as Alzheimer's, which presents later in life? What about genetic abnormalities that lack immediate effects while increasing the probability of developing diseases? Despite the various pitfalls, Ms. Rochman concludes that "knowing your genes" is more beneficial than not.

One can imagine a time in the not too distant future when the molecular basis of characteristics controlled by multiple genes is better understood and all our genomic information is as easily edited as text on a computer today. When this happens, mankind will face the gravest challenge of its history and may struggle to prevent once-inviolable characteristics of human nature from being irreversibly undermined by external interventions.

Dr. Woolfson is the author of "Life Without Genes" and "An Intelligent Person's Guide to Genetics."