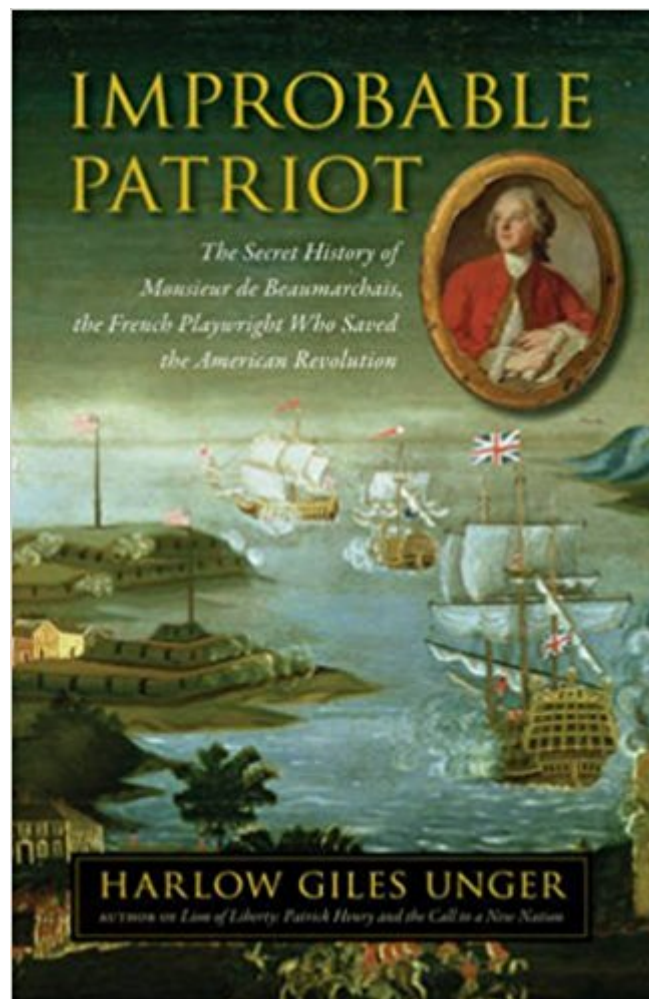




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Improbable Patriot: The Secret History Of Monsieur De Beaumarchais, The French Playwright Who Saved The American Revolution





Synopsis

Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais was an eighteenth-century French inventor, famed playwright, and upstart near-aristocrat in the court of King Louis XVI. In 1776, he conceived an audacious plan to send aid to the American rebels. What's more, he convinced the king to bankroll the project, and singlehandedly carried it out. By war's end, he had supplied Washington's army with most of its weapons and powder, though he was never paid or acknowledged by the United States. To some, he was a dashing hero • a towering intellect who saved the American Revolution. To others, he was pure rogue • a double-dealing adventurer who stopped at nothing to advance his fame and fortune. In fact, he was both, and more: an advisor to kings, an arms dealer, and author of some of the most enduring works of the stage, including *The Marriage of Figaro* and *The Barber of Seville*.

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Customer Reviews

"This delightful rogue of many talents set up a company to front for the French and Spanish regimes secretly supplying weapons, munitions, clothing and food to the struggling rebels." • *American History* "The author of this book brings the secret life of Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais into vivid relief with this well-written, engaging, and fast-paced tour de force." • *The Historian*

"Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais • perhaps France's greatest playwright, editor of the works of Voltaire, master of the dramatic farce and father of musical

comedy, creator of the immortal Figaro – he said – “the greatest act of my life” – was supplying Americans with the weapons that won their independence. Harlow Unger tells the story of Beaumarchais – playwright and patriot – bringing to life the tumultuous age of revolution. (Robert J. Allison, author of *The American Revolution: A Concise History*) “With wit and insight, Harlow Unger explores the question of whether Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais was a rogue or a hero by demonstrating he was more than a little of both.” (Thomas Fleming)

A very readable and enjoyable biography of a man most Americans do not know, but should. A true Renaissance Man, Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais was a skilled watchmaker, a playwright, a composer, a merchant, a diplomat, a spy, a philanthropist and more. But most importantly to Americans, he played a crucial role in influencing the outcome of the American War of Independence. This book is highly recommended to anyone with a modicum of interest in American or French history, and it makes me eager to read other works by Harlow Unger.

This review was written for LibraryThing Early Reviewers. Visiting Independence Hall in Philadelphia, I was surprised to see, hung in the side Chambers room two royal portraits. Turning to the Park Service Ranger in her ‘Smokey the Bear’ hat I asked why there were royals portrayed in this hallowed Revolutionary spot!? Smiling at my British accent she explained that they were of the French King Louis, and his Queen, not English royals at all. I recalled the history of the French support against the English in that particular affair, often forgotten or perhaps not even known of by many Americans, and punned back to her - “Ah yes, the Funding Founders!” Through books on George Washington and the Revolutionary War I had learned to admire the Marquis de La Fayette, who became almost a son to General George Washington. But I was not aware there was a further French hero who helped the Americans win their revolution - here is the story of Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, better known to us from his works Figaro and the Barber of Seville than for his amazing effort in the funding and arms-supplying to the newly-born America! The son of a clock-maker who hauled himself up as high as royalty by his own bootstraps Pierre is the ultimate republican, as American as apple-pie - yet French. An artistic arriviste, manipulating his way through fortunes, revolutions and marriages but almost personally funding an entire nation in its revolutionary war against a common enemy. As for our Founding Fatherswhile the Continental Army slowly rotted away by desertion and near starvation in nearby Valley Forge, the snow covered with trails of their bloody foot-prints as only about a third of the army had any shoes, Congress, the

author says, indulged in ... "the incessant, often infantile backbiting that they euphemistically called congressional debate." But for the funding of King Louis and the arms supply organized by Ben Franklin and Beaumarchais, the war might well have been lost and American independence never achieved. Harlow Giles Unger supplies the reader with an easy entry into the complex issue of the war of American independence while detailing the incredible rise and many falls of this talented playwright, a model for his own most famous creation, Figaro. Never even repaid by Congress for supplying fleet-loads of supplies to the impoverished Army, let alone recognized and honored, Beaumarchais sacrificed not just his own personal fortune (one of several he amazingly made and lost) the playwright also lost all civil and citizenship rights through political intrigue in Paris and was at one stage sentenced to face death if he returned to France, his own country - no, not an Improbable Patriot at all, but a courageous one!

I love books like this. Sometime it is nice to read a small, simple but fresh book in between books like Truman by McCullough, or Alexander Hamilton By Ron Chernow. This book was a fun read about a man who climbed his way from peasant to nobleman. That is the great part about Beaumarchais is his plight of french aristocracy. He made and lost several fortunes and climbed his way from the dungeons to the sacred trust of Kings. His story is remarkable and has been told in great fashion By Harlow Giles Unger. There is so much to Beaumarchais, his story of supplying America with weapons that helped us win the revolution could almost be a foot note in this mans remarkable life. I love reading of the American Revolution and of all our great forefathers Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson, Adams, and the Frenchman that most Americans think of when the Revolutionary war is discussed, Lafayette. Beaumarchais should be placed on the same level of respect as the rest of them, and it is really to bad he is not held in higher regard here in America. He was a great man with high Ideals that took him to great places. Great book, Great Read.

I was only dimly aware of Monsieur de Beaumarchis as a dramatist ("The Barber of Seville") and had no idea of the truly crucial role he played in the American Revolution. This book does an excellent job of telling his remarkable story, and advances the historiography by tying Colonial and early Independence primary sources in with the biographical facts the author gathers from secondary sources. It's fascinating how big egos, small minds, and petty rivalries can have such an effect on the fate of nations; even the sainted Ben Franklin was not above them. And how big ideas and ideals, noble on the large scale, can be devastating on the small scale, even to those who hold them. The experience of taking in this story was marred for me by rather poor copy editing. The

chronology is shaky at times, and literally the exact same sentence appears three times in the text, quoting a historical figure.

An unlikely hero, political intrigue both foreign and domestic, love affairs, fortunes won and lost and won again. Sound like a swashbuckler from Alexander Dumas or Rafael Sabbatini? Well, throw in one of the world's most recognizable opera characters, and you have *Improbable Patriot: The Secret History of Monsieur de Beaumarchais, the French Playwright Who Saved the American Revolution* by Harlow Giles Unger. Best known to the world as the creator of *The Barber of Seville* (Figaro), Beaumarchais led what had to be one of the most exciting and influential lives of his time. A self-made Frenchman who clawed his way up through the court intrigue of Louis XVI's reign and masterminded an arms deal that saved the American patriots at their lowest moment. He then went on to oversee many more projects for the King, falling in and out of favor through the years, until finally having to maneuver his way through the perils of the French Revolution. A rollicking history book for those who enjoy adventure. I was reminded time and again of the *Three Musketeers* or the *Scarlet Pimpernel*. Sometimes truth really is stranger than fiction. A wonderfully enjoyable read.

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