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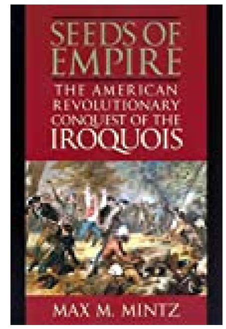
Max M. Mintz. *Seeds of Empire: The American Revolutionary Conquest of the Iroquois.* New York and London: New York University Press, 1999. xi + 232 pp. $28.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-5622-5.



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Cornplanter's Complaint

In 1794 there was the possibility of a fresh outbreak of hostilities between the Seneca and the United States when the Pennsylvania surveyor John Adlum addressed the assembled population at the Cornplanter Grant on the Allegheny River. When Adlum admonished the Indians, in the event war did break out, to "cease to put to death woemen & children" he was greeted with "a mixture of Sterness & resentment". Cornplanter rose to answer. He asserted "You in your books charge us with many things we were never guilty of" and proceeded to list atrocities committed against his people. "Does your books tell you of indians legs being skin[n]ed and tanned? Does your books tell you of parts of indians being skinned, and those skins being dressed and made razor strops of? I know that all these things were done by the whites and I heard them boast of it.... And I know that there is a great many lies written in your books respecting us" (Kent and Deardorff 1960: 458-59). Max M. Mintz, in this telling of the violent story on conflict on the New York frontier during the American Revolution, answers one of Cornplanter's charges. He does point to one of the acts Cornplanter alluded to–the action of men of the First New Jersey Regiment skinning two dead Indians to make leggings (p. 128), as well as other atrocities committed by troops supporting the rebellion. Unfortunately, however, the tone of Mintz's presentation does little to correct Cornplanter's complaint of "a great many lies written in your books respecting us."

One might begin with the book's title and subtitle. The title is not explained until the final sentence of the book – it comes from a letter from an officer in Sullivan's army which invaded and burned villages in the Seneca and Cayuga country in the summer and autumn of 1779. The officer speculates rather tentatively that "we pillagers are carelessly sowing the seeds of Empire" (p. 186). In the subtitle this becomes the "conquest" of the Iroquois. To be sure Sullivan and his huge corps destroyed houses and crops and created severe hardships for the refugee Seneca and Cayuga population over the following winter, but no attempt was made to hold the lands Sullivan and his men devastated. "Conquest" seems too grandiose a term to describe a campaign which most closely resembled mediaeval *chevauchee*.

Mintz manages to revive the image of the savage Red Man (and Red Woman) with chapter titles such as

" 'Blood over the Earth' ", "No Quarter", "Mission Devastation", and "Cry Massacre". He does report that rebels did scalp Indian opponents (p. 69), but it is only Indians in his prose who scalp their enemies while they are "half-dead" (p. 61). Mintz tells the story of the "crazed 'Queen' Esther Montour" who was seen "singing and dancing in her fury as she butchered her victims" after the battle of Wyoming. He admits the story was told when "memory was already at work magnifying the horror" but he does not note (nor does he seem to agree with) the reasoned conclusion of historian Barbara Graymont – "All this is completely fictional" (Graymont 1972: 174).

When Mintz discusses the Mohawk matron Mary (or Molly) Brant, he emphasizes her violent temper, which is certainly not the dominant side of her personality as revealed in the documents that I have read. This he emphasizes by recounting the violent behavior of William Johnson, whom he identifies as Molly Brant's son (pp. 7, 34, 227). William Johnson was not among the eight children born to Molly Brant in her relationship with Sir William Johnson (Johnston 1971; see Sir William Johnson's will in SWJP 12: 1062-76).

Historians need a knowledge of ethnography to understand their sources. The Mississaugas speak an Algonquian language; they are not Algonquins as designated by Mintz (p. 24) nor are they the "Eagle tribe of the Ojibwa, or Chippewa nation". Ives Goddard has pointed out that with respect to their name, "the interpretation 'eagle totem'...is not a translation but a description of uncertain significance" (in Rogers 1978: 769). Mintz misinterprets the details of the white dog sacrifice among the Iroquois. His source states that a dead dog was found which was an offering to "Mars, the God of War" and that purpose of the sacrifice was "to present him with a skin for a tobacco pouch" (Cook 1887: 160). Mintz thinks this means the Indians "would have made the skin into a pouch filled with tobacco and set afire" (p. 198). What in fact was done is that the decorated body of the dog was burned on a pyre along with a tobacco offering while the tobacco invocation was spoken (see Tooker 1970).

Mintz on occasion relies on nineteenth century secondary sources quite blindly. His reference to the Schoharie Tribe (p. 30 – based on the publications of Jeptha R. Simms) may puzzle even some familiar with the ethnonyms of New York's aboriginal population.

One can find many other errors with which one can quibble. George Washington did not receive the name "Town Destroyer" because of the destruction wrought by Sullivan's army (p. 76 – although Mintz is not unique among scholars in stating that this was the case), but rather the future President had been given the name during the Seven Years War (Fenton 1998: 117n). Robert Morris was neither a "federal commissioner" nor did he conclude the Treaty of Big Tree with the Senecas (p. 184). Morris, who had the right to purchase Seneca lands, was locked in his Philadelphia home, hiding from creditors, while his son represented him at the Big Tree negotiations (Wallace 1970: 180). The U.S. Commissioner at the treaty negotiations was Colonel Jeremy Wadsworth (Kappler 1904-41: 1030). Also, the Senecas had not, as Mintz states, "elected to return to land allotted to them in New York" (p. 185). The Senecas had never left.

Mintz is at his best in documenting disputes up and down the chain of command on both sides of the conflict. At times more energy appears to have been expended by officers defending their positions within their own command structure than was expended defending or attacking the enemy.

This review suggests that Cornplanter's complaint of "a great many lies in your books written about us" still has some validity. For a thorough analysis of the role of the Iroquois in the American Revolution, one should still turn to the work of Barbara Graymont (1972), which thankfully remains in print.

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