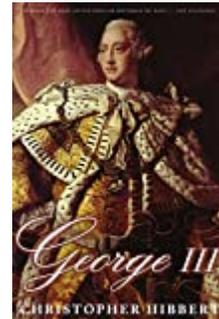




H.T. Dickinson, ed. *Britain and the American Revolution*. London and New York: Longman, 1998. xii + 284 pp. \$31.20 (textbook), ISBN 978-0-582-31839-7.



Christopher Hibbert. *George III: A Personal History*. New York: Basic Books, 1998. xv + 464 pp. \$27.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-02724-8.



Reviewed by Eliga H. Gould (Department of History, University of New Hampshire)

Published on H-Albion (November, 2000)

Imperial Amnesia

Imperial Amnesia

The American Revolution was Britain's longest colonial conflict of the modern era and a struggle that set new standards for British levels of military service and taxation. Although the North American theater is the one with which most people today are familiar, the war affected virtually every part of the empire, with fighting in India, the Mediterranean, West Africa, and the Caribbean. Following the intervention of France in 1778, even Britain had to prepare for a Bourbon invasion, while

mounting opposition to the war in America brought both Ireland and England to the brink of civil war. Thanks to a series of timely victories in India and the Caribbean, the government managed to avoid the full catastrophe that many people had forecast. Even so, the loss of the thirteen colonies was a humbling experience, as potentially devastating to Britain's interests abroad as it was disruptive of political life at home.

Despite these far-reaching implications, historians have typically dismissed the Revolution as a momentary

setback from which Britain soon recovered – at best, a kind of dress rehearsal for the more chaotic upheavals associated with the French Revolution. One need look no further than H. T. Dickinson’s fine edited volume, *Britain and the American Revolution*, and Christopher Hibbert’s splendid biography of George III to discover the attraction that this interpretation still holds for scholars of Georgian Britain. At the same time, though, it is clear from both books that Britain’s rapid recovery was only part of the story and that the American Revolution was in fact deeply a transformative event, albeit in ways the metropolitan public largely chose to forget.

Like most essay collections, *Britain and the American Revolution* does not speak with a single voice. Although the volume’s express purpose – as Dickinson notes in the editor’s introduction – is “to redress the historiographical balance” (p. 2) by giving due attention to the Revolution’s British dimensions, a number of contributors seem comfortable with the American Revolution as a temporary, fleeting crisis that had little lasting effect on British politics. Of these, John Cannon, whose essay on “the loss of America” concludes the volume, is the most forceful and explicit. Although Cannon does not deny the long-term significance of American independence for Britain, he argues that the war’s immediate effects were remarkably short-lived. Despite extraordinary levels of taxation, the British did not see “the flower of their youth destroyed as in 1918, or their cities reduced to rubble as did the Germans in 1945.” Nor did they experience “the sense of personal loss felt by many people at the collapse of the British empire in the twentieth-century” (p. 236). Consequently, the war made little difference to the conduct of politics at home; Cannon likewise sees little evidence of a change in imperial administration as a result of the Revolution.

Although this insistence upon continuity sets Cannon apart from the other contributors, several echo his conclusions by noting that influential sectors of the British public saw nothing extraordinary in Parliament’s attempt to tax the American colonists during the 1760s and early 1770s. As Dickinson argues in his chapter on “the ideological case against the American colonists,” most Britons believed that Parliament “was constitutionally justified” in insisting upon its unlimited authority throughout the empire, including those parts that declared independence in 1776 (p. 95). John Derry makes much the same point in his chapter on government policy between 1760 and 1776, arguing that “belief in the sovereignty of the British parliament” dictated the approach of every minister except Lord Chatham (William

Pitt) to the trans-Atlantic controversy over colonial taxation. Indeed, as Frank O’Gorman reminds readers, even opposition M.P.s who sympathized with the colonists were hamstrung by their reluctance to condone any measure that weakened Parliament’s authority vis-a-vis the crown. In a sense, the Revolution’s British origins lay, not in the innovative, dynamic quality of metropolitan politics, but in the British people’s unswerving refusal to make any change in order to accommodate the colonists’ objections.

By contrast, turning to the other five contributions, one discovers a far more fluid picture of British politics during the Revolution. In his essay on the administration of the American colonies, Keith Mason argues persuasively that British attitudes toward the empire underwent a subtle but profound shift in the fifteen years between Lord Halifax’s appointment to the presidency of the Board of Trade in 1748 and the close of the Seven Years’ War. The result was a growing consensus – one shared by figures across the political spectrum – of the need for tighter imperial control everywhere, especially in North America. H. M. Scott also emphasizes discontinuities in his essay on the diplomatic history of the Revolution, delineating the catastrophic effects of Britain’s isolation in Europe between 1763 and the end of the American Revolution. As Stephen Conway shows in his chapter on the conduct of the war, one consequence of this diplomatic isolation was to swell the ranks of the British army and navy to nearly 400,000 fighting men by 1782, a figure that far exceeded those for Britain’s wars with France earlier in the century. As important, Britain’s lack of European allies compelled the government to devote a significant portion of these forces to the defense of southeast England, thereby depriving the American command of badly needed reinforcements and compelling its commanders to pursue a far more cautious strategy against Washington’s Continental Army than if they had been able to count on the Royal Navy’s undisputed command of American waters.

Complementing this treatment of Britain’s external activities are two excellent chapters by James Bradley and Neil Longley York on popular opposition to the government’s policies in Britain and Ireland, respectively. According to Bradley, the British public was deeply divided over the American Revolution, with people who thought of themselves as outsiders – “off the corporation, outside the church, fearful of the bar and quarter session” – consistently siding with the Americans and Britons who had “a vested interest in sound religion and law and order” (p. 150) typically supporting the government. If

anything, these divisions were even more conspicuous in Ireland where, as York demonstrates, self-styled Patriots seized on the American quest for provincial rights within the British empire as a model that the Irish ought to imitate. Indeed, the British were sufficiently mindful of the dangers of a Hibernian replay of the American debacle of 1775 (to say nothing of 1776) that the Westminster Parliament repealed the Irish Declaratory Act (1720) in 1782, in effect turning the regnal union between Britain and Ireland into a federal relationship. Although the Anglo-Irish Union (1801) put an end to this brief experiment in home rule, York's chapter is a useful reminder that the Revolution's impact on Britain's subsequent imperial history was not quite as negligible as historians sometimes suggest.

So where does this leave us? *Britain and the American Revolution* contains ample evidence to document the underlying conservatism bred by Britain's constitutional monarchy; it also demonstrates that this conservatism was by no means universal. At the same time, though, one cannot help wondering about those in the middle, that is, about Britons who neither fully supported the government's actions nor entirely sympathized with the Americans' response. Speaking of support for the Revolution in America, John Adams speculated that a third of the American people were Patriots, a third Loyalists, and a third neutrals whose only wish was to be left alone. To get a complete picture of metropolitan politics during the Revolution, one would like to know more about how Adams's schema played out in Britain, including questions such as what the war meant to people in the middle, whether neutrality translated into de facto support for the government, and under what circumstances the government's supporters could become its critics (and vice versa).

In matters involving the American colonies, George III was obviously no fence sitter. Nonetheless, Christopher Hibbert's engaging biography sheds some interesting light on the question of how far the British really cared about events on the far side of the Atlantic. Taking as his chief focus the king's personal life, Hibbert depicts a man – and family – deeply preoccupied with domestic matters. In an age when the body royal was still indis-

tinguishable from the body politic, this concern was entirely consistent with a conscientious attention to matters of state. At the same time, though, it is striking how little the American Revolution intrudes upon Hibbert's narrative. At key moments – notably after the battle of Lexington and the final, humiliating surrender at Yorktown – Hibbert devotes considerable space to the king's response to the epic struggle. As was doubtless true of George himself, however, the Revolution always has to compete with other matters. Thus the young king's marriage to Queen Charlotte in 1761 receives considerably more attention than the political controversies surrounding the end of the Seven Years' War. Likewise, mounting tensions within the royal family during the mid-1780s dwarf the treatment of George's reluctant acceptance of American independence.

This is in no way a criticism of Hibbert's biography. On the contrary, it illustrates a crucial point about Britain's involvement in the American Revolution, which is that the British were always free to balance their interest in the colonies with other matters. They were free to do so, moreover, in ways that their brothers and sisters in America could not – a difference of which many Britons were deeply conscious, sometimes painfully so. In examining the British response to the American Revolution, one can easily fall into the trap of supposing that the issues meant the same thing to people on the eastern shores of the Atlantic as they did to those on the west. In fact, nothing could be farther from the truth. This is not to deny the transformative character of the Revolution for British politics; rather, it is to suggest that in evaluating the nature of that transformation, historians need also to take account of those characteristics that made Britain's most humiliating defeat of the eighteenth century one that the political nation had little difficulty forgetting and, ultimately, to make that process of forgetting part of the transformation that the Revolution so clearly did bring about.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Eliga H. Gould. Review of Dickinson, H.T., ed., *Britain and the American Revolution* and Hibbert, Christopher, *George III: A Personal History*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. November, 2000.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4707>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.