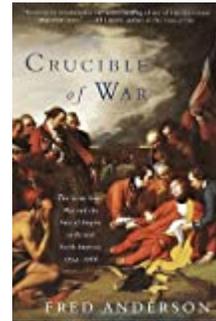




Fred Anderson. *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766.* New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 2000. xxv + 862 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-375-70636-3.



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An Empire of War and Liberty

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Fred Anderson's study of the Seven Years' War synthesizes several lines of scholarship and offers many new insights into that complex event and the decade that followed. His fundamental argument is that the war initiated a dispute about the nature of the British Empire that continued after the peace treaty and led directly to American Revolution. Here Anderson picks up the venerable debate between historians who argue that the Revolution was the "aftermath" of the Seven Years' War and others who emphasize the Stamp Act and regulations.[1] The former concentrate on the financial burden and the new western migration that the War brought in its train. Those who finger the Stamp Act portray the Revolution as a conflict over principle or at least ideology; they view the Revolutionaries as deeply committed to the idea that the central government was subject to principled limitations.

Anderson believes that these two interpretations can be reconciled. The key to his analysis is the effect that the War had on metropolitan and provincial understandings of the Empire. Each side of the Atlantic drew different

lessons from the conquest of New France. The colonists thought that their participation in the imperial war had finally shown them to be equal members in the Empire. By contrast, the War rigidified the metropolitan view of the Empire as a pyramid of authority. The Parliamentary revenue acts were designed to raise money to support the continuing presence of the British military in America, forcing the colonists to pay in taxes what they previously viewed as gifts due only in times of war.

In short, London ministers and American colonists had "competing visions of empire" (746). This exposition of conflicting constitutional visions calls to mind the work of John Phillip Reid and Jack P. Greene.[2] They argue that the colonists drew on a traditional English conception of government as limited by the customary restraints of consent and fundamental law, while at home that conception had given way to one of an unfettered British Parliament. These visions were irreconcilable, and the question becomes why the rupture occurred when it did. Anderson's answer is that a decade of mutual misunderstanding accelerated the two sides toward open conflict. He also reminds us that a lot of resonant

constitutionalism, including much we still hear today, sprang up as the first British Empire flexed its “sinews of power.”[3]

One limitation of this bipolar interpretation is that it simplifies the constitutional situation on both sides of the Atlantic. Those in the colonies, for example, did not all share the same vision of the Empire. Different groups had different perspectives, and it will not do to classify the imperial agents serving in the provinces as metropolitan. For one thing, it was often those agents who formulated what became at home the orthodox view of the colonies. In addition, they rested their theory of imperial government on Crown power, not Parliamentary sovereignty, and to them it mattered little if the Crown enacted the policies they developed on the ground using its prerogative, as with the Proclamation of 1763, or through Parliament. That choice was a function of metropolitan politics. Similarly, the colonial opponents of the new imperial regulation were not a coherent bloc with a single vision of empire. Much divided urban merchants and lawyers, for example, from frontier settlers. They were united in Revolution by their common opposition, and the strains between them began to show soon afterward.[4]

Anderson leaves off in 1766, but by then, he argues, the die was cast. He concludes that we should view “the Seven Years’ War and the Revolution together as epochal events that yoked imperialism and republicanism in American political culture” and then suggests that this perspective on the founding era will help us understand “a national history in which war and freedom have often intertwined” (p. 746). He even offers a tantalizing counter-factual suggestion that a few changes in British policy would have resulted not in revolution but rather in a commonwealth structure coming much earlier than it did and including the thirteen mainland colonies. But to flesh out these ideas would demand another volume, and perhaps Anderson is writing it.

The one we have now opens with nine maps that set the stage for what was truly a global conflict. These are well done and include a chronological map of key battles, one of Native American nations, and another of Quebec and the fateful Plains of Abraham. There are also maps of the Caribbean, continental Europe, and India, demonstrating that by the 1750s the European empires had already moved well beyond the Atlantic world.

But much of the fighting occurred in a small corner of North America along the St. Lawrence River and in the Champlain Valley: the early and, for a long while, lone

British victory at Lake George; the grisly siege of Louisbourg that led to the expulsion of 5,400 French-Canadians from Acadia (which Anderson likens to “ethnic cleansing” (p. 114); and the storied siege of Quebec, memorialized in Benjamin West’s paintings of Major General James Wolfe and the Marquis de Montcalm each dying on the battlefield.

Anderson revises much of the conventional wisdom about these battles. Just one example is the death of Wolfe. Anderson argues that Wolfe, suffering from tuberculosis and taking opiates, felt overwhelmed by the grueling war and sought an honorable exit. His aides thought his plan to attack Quebec directly was unwise, but Wolfe was choreographing a heroic end for himself; he was not trying to grab real estate for the Empire. As it turned out, the defense was more bedraggled than Wolfe expected, and Montcalm, dependent on a Canadian militia for which he felt little but contempt, could not match the disciplined British army. At the end of the day Wolfe got his heroic death, and by the way the British Empire won Canada.

Anderson’s first book analyzed the War’s effect on Massachusetts militiamen who served the Empire,[5] but there is little social history from the bottom in *Crucible of War*. His focus on the larger players yields its own rewards. Anderson gleefully romps through successive British administrations and the military hierarchy and has a Namierite talent for sizing up individual ambitions. As Benedict Anderson notes, there was often a “stagey quality” to elite affection for empire.[6] You get that sense in Fred Anderson’s book as well. Imperial war was a theatrical exploit for many, a chance to make a mark and win appointment to some remunerative post—ideally at home but more likely abroad. Empire was opportunity, and the difference between the diplomats and generals on the one hand and the merchants in counting-houses on the other may not have been quite as large as the Weberian distinction between speculation and capitalism. Renewed attention to these rational mercenaries also sheds light on the controversy about the essential character of the Empire—military or commercial?[7]—and suggests that yet another binary may be synthesized.

Older histories of the War end after the deaths of Montcalm and Wolfe.[8] But they die only midway through Anderson’s narrative, which helps demonstrate his principal argument that the battles were only half the War, and that the War defined future battles too. Anderson’s book also visits Hanover, Bengal, and elsewhere. Correcting the usual American-centered interpretation,

Anderson declares that “the Battle of Quiberon Bay,” on the southwest coast of France, “and not the more celebrated Battle of Quebec, was the decisive military event of 1759” (p. 383). Again, “in the end, it was Lagos and Quiberon Bay that proved decisive at Quebec, and control of the Atlantic that settled ownership of Canada” (p. 395). Now here is revisionism. The reader wants more on this, and wonders why Anderson writes so much about the deaths of Montcalm and Wolfe but gives no other reference to Lagos in these pages.[9] Also curious is this thick book’s thin treatment of the Caribbean. Why did the War have one legacy for thirteen mainland colonies and another for the additional thirteen British colonies to the north and south?[10]

But this book focuses on mid-century North America, and perhaps the greatest difference between older and newer histories of this time and place is the role of the Native Americans. Here they share the stage with European and provincial characters. The index refers to thirty Indian nations, and Anderson shows that there were divisions among them, although the War itself encouraged a “nativist” identity in the Ohio Valley (p. 332). On the advice of imperial agents like Sir William Johnson, the Crown treated the Indians within its territory as quasi-subjects to whom it owed duties, not as savages barriers to expansion—more or less the provincial view. If Anderson follows this volume with another, he will probably explore the way the Empire finally cut its ties with those quasi-subjects, leaving them to fend for themselves in a nation where they were, legally, “domestic dependent nations,”[11] but, practically, obstacles to be removed.[12]

Much more is in this book. There is grist for those interested in the tension between European and American styles of warfare, the problems of supply, the role of the British military in America between the War and the Revolution, and other important issues. For the number of topics canvassed, the geography covered, and the deft sketches of leading figures, this book is a tour de force. It’s also quite handsome. In addition to the maps, paintings, and drawings, Anderson has broken his work into eight parts that are further divided into many short chapters, which keep the whole from feeling unwieldy. It is well-written, and it has an excellent index. Anderson wanted to write a book for “general readers” as well as professional historians (xv). He has succeeded.[13] This is a book you will keep in a prominent place for a long time.

Finally, *Crucible of War* is a tribute to Lawrence Henry Gipson’s monumental, fifteen-volume history of

the British Empire in America. That work is the single most cited source in Anderson’s footnotes, and he is among the few to have read it all.[14] Gipson conceived his project in 1924 and published the volumes between 1936 and 1970, but, with their epic battles and diplomatic intrigue, they all seem closer in spirit to the date of conception than completion. Imperial history fell out of fashion after the Second World War and has only recently enjoyed a renaissance, of which Anderson’s work is a part.[15] Gipson called the Seven Years’ War “the great war for the empire” and Anderson must agree. The difference is that Gipson saw the American continent as the booty of imperial war, whereas Anderson views empire less as an object than structures, practices, and other legacies that were bequeathed to the independent states. Gipson’s new nation was a young rogue; Anderson’s early republic is precocious and more purposefully dangerous. It was born an empire.

Notes

[1]. Compare Lawrence Henry Gipson, “The American Revolution as an Aftermath of the Great War for Empire,” *Political Science Quarterly* 65 (1950-51): 86-104, and Theodore Draper, *A Struggle for Power: The American Revolution* (New York, Times Books/Random House, 1996), with Edmund S. and Helen M. Morgan, *The Stamp Act: Prologue to Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953; 3d rev. ed., 1998), and John M. Murrin, “The French and Indian War, the American Revolution and the Counter-Factual Hypothesis: Reflections on Lawrence Henry Gipson and John Shy,” *Reviews in American History* 1 (1973): 307-18. See also Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967; expanded ed., 1992).

[2]. John Phillip Reid, *The Constitutional History of the American Revolution*, 4 vols. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986-1993; one-vol. abr. ed., 1995); Jack P. Greene, *Peripheries and Center: An Interpretation of British-American Constitutional Development, 1607-1788* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986).

[3]. John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688-1783* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989).

[4]. See Daniel J. Hulsebosch, “Imperia in Imperio: The Multiple Constitution of Empire in New York, 1750-1777,” *Law and History Review* 16 (1998): 319-79; Margaret M. Spector, *The American Department of the British Government, 1768-1782* (New York: Columbia University

Press, 1940).

[5]. Fred Anderson, *A People's Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven Years' War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

[6]. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 111.

[7]. Compare Stephen S. Webb, "The Data and Theory of Restoration Empire," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 43 (1986): 431-59, with Richard R. Johnson, "The Imperial Webb: The Thesis of Garrison Government in Early America Considered," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 43 (1986): 408-30.

[8]. See, e.g., the final volume, *Montcalm and Wolfe*, in Francis Parkman's epic *France and England in North America*, 7 vols. (Boston, Little, Brown, 1865-92; reprint in 2 vols., edited by David Levin, New York: Library of America, 1983).

[9]. Lagos is on the coast of Portugal, Britain's ally at the time. The British navy under Admiral Edward Boscawen defeated a French force there in 1759. Lawrence H. Gipson, *The Great War for the Empire: The Culmination, 1760-1763* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), 14-15.

[10]. For an exploration of the Caribbean in this era, see Andrew J. O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

[11]. *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, 30 U.S. (5 Peters) 1, 17 (1831).

[12]. See Colin Calloway, *Crown and Calumet: British-Indian Relations, 1783-1815* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987); Eric Hinderaker, *Elusive Empires: Constructing Colonialism in the Ohio Valley, 1673-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[13]. *Crucible of War* won the 2001 Francis Parkman Prize, awarded by the Society of American Historians to the book that "best represents the union of the historian and the artist."

[14]. As John Shy remarks, it's hard to think of any modern historian who won more awards and had less influence than Gipson. John Shy, "The Empire Remembered: Lawrence Henry Gipson, Historian," in John Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 109-31.

[15]. Another sign is the newly re-written *Oxford History of the British Empire*, ed. Wm. Roger Louis, 5 vols (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

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