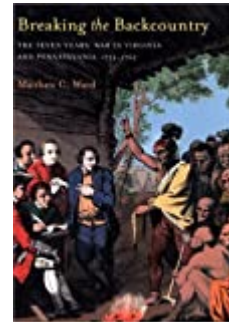




Matthew C. Ward. *Breaking the Backcountry: The Seven Years' War in Virginia and Pennsylvania, 1754-1765.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2003. x + 360 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8229-4214-6; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8229-5865-9.



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War and Society in Colonial America

From the title, one might expect a detailed discussion of frontier military operations, but in *Breaking the Backcountry*, Matthew C. Ward provides more than just a campaign summary—he places the Pennsylvania and Virginia experiences within a larger context of frontier history and development. Organized both chronologically and thematically and drawing from extensive archival sources, he explores colonial politics, Native American diplomacy, provincial military forces, and the war's impact on both colonial and native societies, bringing new perspectives to an often overlooked theater of the war. Rather than end with the 1763 Treaty of Paris, Ward carries several unresolved issues through Pontiac's Rebellion (1763-1765).

Though both Pennsylvania and Virginia were at the heart of the crisis that triggered a global war in the 1750s, neither was prepared for conflict. The backcountry, relatively isolated with a diverse population, divided by religious and geographical factors, had enough difficulty in peacetime. Virginia's militia atrophied after decades of peace and the Quaker-dominated Pennsylvania government initially opposed military service. With Edward

Braddock's 1755 defeat, both colonies found their former native "friends," angered by false promises and questionable land deals, had openly sided with the French and their raiding parties devastated backcountry settlements. Despite frontier violence, both colonial assemblies used the crisis to wrangle more power from the governors. Nevertheless, both colonies eventually fielded their own provincial armies, built fortifications, and tried to stabilize the frontier. Ward examines these provincial forces, profiling the common soldier and his experiences, comparing it to similar studies, most notably Fred Anderson's study of Massachusetts's troops in the same period.[1]

The Seven Years' War in America is most often represented as the British Empire's victory over the French and their Native American allies. Challenging this traditional interpretation, Ward argues that along the Virginia and Pennsylvania frontiers the British may have defeated the French with the 1758 capture of Fort Duquesne, but they did not defeat their indigenous allies. He attributes Braddock's defeat to not only the general's miscalculations, but to the success of the Indians' psychological warfare. By mutilating stragglers and posting their

corpses along the route of march, it undermined morale and discipline, leading to panic when the troops feared encirclement. While providing an overview of this and other campaigns, the author documents a series of failures by the British and colonial forces. Only with the French collapse, combined with diplomatic efforts that addressed native grievances, would the Ohio Indians make peace. In their view, they had waged an effective campaign, devastating the backcountry, gaining plunder and capturing valuable captives and, thus, saw the British as ineffective “old women,” blundering through the wilderness. In 1763, when Britain appeared to be renegeing on its promises, the natives, far from fearing English might, looked upon their earlier victories for encouragement and renewed the conflict in Pontiac’s Rebellion. Again a series of disasters befell British and colonial ranks. Colonel Henry Bouquet’s 1763 victory at Bushy Run seems to be an anomaly. Bouquet’s successful 1764 Ohio expedition did not defeat his opponent, but merely opened diplomatic channels for the renewal of British promises to protect Indian lands and better trade policies. Although details of his thesis can be argued, Ward makes a convincing argument of the Native American strengths and perspectives. Far from being weak French allies, Native Americans mastered frontier warfare. Often acting without French oversight, the Ohio Valley Delaware and Shawnee planned raids based upon intelligence, played upon whites’ fears, and realized the vulnerabilities of fixed fortifications and logistics.

Pontiac’s Rebellion also mirrored the previous war experience in other ways. Colonial legislatures played political games and scrambled for a credible defense. Ward highlights the defensive ideas of the colonies and

how they frustrated more grandiose British plans to strike into the Indian homelands. He hints at the reorganization of frontier and colonial policy already underway that would soon divide Britain and her colonies. The war also highlighted backcountry frustration, both with their government’s ineffective efforts and the realization of their own political weakness. The wartime experience altered frontier society. It became more militant not only towards its Indian foes, but upon the provincial governments whose request for manpower, horses, wagons, and other supplies invaded their prewar isolation. In Pennsylvania, violence spilled over with the “Paxton Boys” murder of friendly Indians and ultimately their march on Philadelphia, protesting not only the government’s poor defensive measures, but also petitioning for more political representation.

Overall, *Breaking the Backcountry* represents an excellent overview of the Pennsylvania and Virginia frontiers during this turbulent era. In Ward’s account, the war does not take place in a vacuum, but ties into various social, political, economic, and even ethnic factors that shaped this conflict on both sides. If he had included Maryland, it could have been a nice regional study. Better maps with more physical features would also enhance understanding geographic barriers that dictated backcountry settlement and shaped strategy. Nevertheless, this is an important work for understanding the complexities of war and society along the colonial frontier.

Note

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

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