1-1-2018

Review of *The New Map of Empire: How Britain Imagined America before Independence,* by S. Max Edelson

Bryan C. Rindfleisch
Marquette University, bryan.rindfleisch@marquette.edu

BOOK REVIEWS

The New Map of Empire: How Britain Imagined America before Independence. By S. Max Edelson. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017. Pp. ix, 448. $35.00 cloth)

S. Max Edelson takes what we already know about the events that precipitated the American Revolution and turns it on its head. In particular, he utilizes a voluminous body of familiar but also obscure maps commissioned by the Board of Trade in London between 1763 and 1775 to reconstruct a spatial history of empire that "enabled British officials to see distant lands in high resolution after the Seven Years' War . . . [and] take command of a new colonial territory . . . in new ways and with new purpose" (pp. 6–7). After years of immersing himself in this vast visual archive, Edelson argues that contrary to scholarly interpretations of how the men of empire in London mishandled the efforts to centralize authority in North America after 1763, the Board of Trade recognized from the beginning that the fate of the empire not only hinged on its American colonies, but they feared that the distance and cultural separation between colony and metropole would ultimately breed resistance to imperial power. As a consequence, British administrators actively sought to "reintegrate the colonies into a stable structural relationship with metropolitan Britain before the process of cultural, social, and economic divergence became too deep-seated to reverse" (p. 53). In other words, the Board of Trade immediately understood the empire's precarious state of affairs in the colonies and sought to impose a "vision of controlled American colonization [which] depended on obtaining a comprehensive body of geographic information and both disseminating and managing this data effectively" (p. 244).

Edelson asserts, then, that we must see the events of the "Imperial Crisis"—such as the Proclamation Line of 1763, Indian treaties

at Augusta (1763) and Fort Stanwix (1768), the Quebec Act of 1774, and the settlement of Florida, the West Indies, and the St. Lawrence River Valley—as all part of the same imperial vision for North America. However, Edelson is quick to remind us that despite such comprehensive mapping efforts to establish authority over the American colonies, this process was contested from the very start by the colonial population as well as Native Americans who asserted their own ideas of sovereignty. Although the end of the story in which the empire "failed in its quest to remake America" is quite familiar, what is significant for us to understand is how "the Board of Trade shaped a language of empire [through cartography] that framed every serious discussion of American policy" in Great Britain after 1763 (p. 337).

Yet this is not the most important contribution of Edelson's work. Instead, his book is complemented by an online map database (http://mapscholar.org/empire) composed of seven digital atlases (one for each chapter), together comprising 257 maps, which readers can interact with and read in tandem with the text. But these maps are not just complementary to Edelson's work, as is often the case in historical scholarship; they are central to the herculean efforts to "reassemble a representative sample of this cartographic corpus before your eyes so that you can see how Britain attempted to take command of America and how comprehensive, provocative, and serious this effort was" (p. xii). What Edelson has accomplished is a unique marriage of history and digital humanities, at a time in academia when scholars struggle to make the case for the importance of digital technologies to the study of the past, and vice versa with the relevance of studying history in a digital era. Therefore, Edelson has not only brought to life a spatial history of empire for his readers, but he also provides historians with a model for how to integrate historical scholarship and digital humanities for the future.

BRYAN C. RINDFLEISCH is an assistant professor of history at Marquette University.