

The French and Indian War: A Review Essay

BY JOHN R. MAASS

With the recent interest in the American aspect of the Seven Years' War, known in the British colonies as the French and Indian War (1754-1763), a number of new titles have been published over the last few years in connection with the conflict's 250th anniversary. These range from lavishly illustrated museum exhibit catalogues to detailed accounts of particular campaigns, leaders, or battles, to broad overviews of this momentous struggle, which did so much to shape events in North America. Three studies that fit into the latter category are the subject of this review essay.

Fred Anderson's *The War That Made America: A Short History of the French and Indian War* (New York: Viking, 2005) is the companion to the PBS presentation of the same name, and aired in 2006. Most readers will know that Anderson's major work on this era was *Crucible of War* (2000), an award-winning, massive study of the Seven Years' War in America and overseas and how that conflict adversely affected Great Britain's North American Empire. *The War That Made America* is not, however, merely a watered down or condensed version of the larger, earlier study. Rather, it seeks to focus primarily on the American campaigns of the war, though Anderson does provide enough detail about the global conflict and the decision-making in London and Paris to place what Americans called the French and Indian War in proper context. At 265 pages of text, the book is quite accessible and is certainly appropriate for undergraduate courses, even more so due to Anderson's characteristically lucid prose, a large number of fitting illustrations, and Jeffrey L. Ward's excellent maps.

Anderson holds that the conflict known in Britain's mainland American colonies as the French and Indian War was "the central public event" of the colonists who lived during that era, primarily because of the war's scale and effects, which not only included the "destruction of New France," but also because the war's consequences included the British empire's demise two decades later. (pp. xix, xxiii) Moreover, one of Anderson's most valuable contributions to the scholarship on the French and Indian War is his inclusion of Native American's as central players in the story, as surely they were. Anderson shows the Indians as people who were actively involved in the three-way diplomacy and warfare that marked the struggle, and as people who actively strove to protect their interests, land, and culture in very difficult situations. He also shows the reader that the various groups of Indian peoples were deeply divided in their loyalties to the French and British, and to their bonds with each other. A notable example of Anderson's skill in bringing out the Native story is his depiction of the lure of the Ohio Valley. The majority of French and Indian War histories present the struggle for the Ohio Country as a contest between land-hungry British colonists and Frenchmen bent on dominating the fur trade. By describing the value of the same ground to the Native Americans—for hunting, safe travel, and a location to avoid encroaching whites east of the Appalachians—readers understand that the French and Indian War was not merely a bilateral struggle.

Anderson proceeds through the war's events in a traditional fashion, and provides overviews of key incidents, campaigns and battles with sufficient detail to make the prose compelling. In addition to the major episodes of the war—Fort Duquesne, Braddock's March, Ft. William Henry, Ticonderoga, Louisbourg, and Quebec—he also includes lesser known affairs to illustrate the true nature of the conflict. The British treatment of the Acadians beginning in 1755, for example, was not only an "ethnic cleansing" of Nova Scotia in which both Englishmen and

provincials actively participated, it also demonstrated for all to see the nature of British imperialism. It was based upon a “willingness to affirm allegiance to the king of England, adherence to some form of Protestantism, anti-Catholicism, and Francophobia.” Moreover, as Anderson shows with his sections on the frontier, the British empire would be no place for native groups who “refused to surrender lands coveted by white farmers,” (p. 87) and move west.

To this reviewer, the question about victory came to mind by the final pages of the book. That is, could the French have one the war, or was British victory in the French and Indian War inevitable? One could make a case in the affirmative, given British resources devoted to the war, the overwhelming population disparity between New France and the British colonies (in favor of the British provincials), and the Royal Navy. Yet, as the author so clearly demonstrates, the ebb and flow of victory for each side were the servants of contingency, even as late as 1760. The could not even buy a victory until their capture of Louisbourg in 1758, but even in that year their largest army suffered a horrific drubbing in front of Fort Ticonderoga with staggering casualties. Anderson goes on to show that had France been able to re-supply Quebec successfully in 1759 or 1760, or had reinforcements from Montreal arrived there just a few hours earlier on the day of Wolfe’s stunning victory there, Britain may not have taken, or perhaps held, the “key to the continent” that end in the end played such a large part in her victory. He is most effective in showing readers that this victory was, however, not foreordained.

Anderson’s final pages about the years after the French and Indian War are devoted to the conflict’s results, and are more debatable than book’s account of the war itself. His comparison of the Stamp Act Crisis and Pontiac’s War as two events bent not on destroying the British Empire but readjusting its constraints is thought-provoking, if not convincing with regard to the Indian struggle in the west. Similarly, the supposition that “Americans still regarded themselves as true Britons in 1766” (p. 247) may have been true for a number of elites, but could also be inapplicable to North Carolinians who failed to support the empire in a meaningful way during the war, or backcountry immigrants with a ravenous eye on Indian lands. Curiously, Anderson fails to mention the Stamp Act Congress at all, which might be seen as a meeting of men who were not exactly trumpeting any pride as “true Britons.” Finally, Anderson virtually ignores the South in his book, something he did not do in *Crucible of War*. Granted the bulk of the fighting was done in the north, but we read little on the contributions of the southern colonies toward the imperial war effort, and nothing at all on the Cherokee War of 1759-1761. Nevertheless, *The War That Made America* is a fine narrative overview of what the author calls the key event in 18th century America.

Empires Collide: The French and Indian War 1754-1763 (Oxford: Osprey, 2006) edited by Ruth Sheppard, is a compilation of a number of Osprey Publishing’s volumes concerning this conflict, primarily regarding military history, uniforms, tactics and army organization. Although *Empires Collide* also tells the standard account of the war’s battles and campaigns, it has several major contributions to offer those interested in the conflict for what it essentially was—a military struggle. First, this volume’s detailed maps and handsomely reproduced illustrations (the majority in full color) are superb, a number of which this reviewer has not seen included in any other works on the French and Indian War. Second, readers will learn far more about the French and Canadian forces’ organization, composition, tactics and keys to victory in this study than the vast majority of English language works (including the other two books included in this essay) and as such, it helps to fill something of a void in the literature. In *Empires Collide* the French war effort is accurately depicted as proactive and from the viewpoint of Quebec and Paris, not merely as a strategy of reaction to British thrusts into the Ohio Country and Canada.

Additionally, Native American modes of warfare of the 18th century also receive sufficient treatment in these pages, buttressed by a number of excellent period and modern illustrations of Indian dress and weaponry.

Perhaps this book's most important conclusion is that the key to eventual British victory—which was by no means assured—was the British army's ability to overcome its initial defeats from 1754 to 1757 by adapting its tactics and strategies as the conflict progressed in order to prevail in the end. That this process was one of fits and starts is amply demonstrated within the text, as the readers learn by the example of Braddock's defeat in 1755, a disaster caused in no small part by the British general's failure to secure the support of Native Americans and provincial assemblies. Campaigning too far from adequate supply bases could also spell trouble as well, demonstrated by the French capture of Ft. Oswego in 1756. These debacles and other challenges led Crown officials to adopt new ideas and expedients in order to claim victory by 1760, including the use of ranger units, the creation of British light infantry companies, smoother relations with American provincial troops and their colonies, and perhaps most importantly, much more effective diplomacy with the American Indians. This remarkable transformation is handled in detail within *Empires Collide*, although the British did not retain the benefits all of these lessons once the fighting ended. While this study does not concern itself with political or social aspects of the war, it certainly does provide a wealth of detail on how all three sides fought this lengthy struggle.

Walter Borneman, author of a previous study of the War of 1812, takes up the subject of the French and Indian War in a popular history entitled *The French and Indian War: Deciding the Fate of North America*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2006). It suffers from conceptual problems, uneven coverage of the war's events, and an over-reliance on a fast-paced narrative at the expense of any significant interpretive value—in other words, most of that genre's common flaws. Even the book's cover presents a problem in that the dramatic illustration is not from the French and Indian War, although this may have been the publisher's decision. Nevertheless, there seems to be an over-reliance on Parkman for details, a preponderance of some very dated sources, and no archival research.

Conceptually, it does not appear that the author was able to limit the scope of his tale. Although Borneman's title implies that this book is about the French and Indian War, instead it rather unevenly covers events in Indian, Minorca, and the Caribbean. Although Borneman does tie in Quiberon Bay to the American conflict, he fails to mention other key European events of the Seven Years' War such as the battle of Minden, in 1759. It is unclear why the author chose to lose sight of his topic, especially when he does not properly tie in these wide-ranging digressions to the war in the British colonies and Canada. Even his coverage of the Albany Plan and its associated congress of 1754 do not get tied to the broader picture of the conflict for America. Moreover, his coverage of the 1754 Ft. Necessity campaign and the battle of Lake George in 1756 is quite lacking. Although readers do learn about the Cherokee campaigns in the latter stages of the war, the South for the most part is ignored.

Although Borneman's work suffers from a number of weaknesses, perhaps its chief flaw is its primary focus on the British facet of the conflict. While his descriptions of British war aims and political maneuverings within the London government are clearly presented, a similar emphasis on the French attempts to wage and win the conflict are largely missing. Most disappointingly in his account of the war, however, is Borneman's woefully inadequate inclusion of the Native American involvement, with which he really fails to engage. Readers get very little detail on Indian motivations, objectives, warfare, and society, and almost nothing of what might

be called the “Native voice.” Given the state of the field of Native American history—particularly in this era—the absence of the Indian perspective is inexcusable, and is one of this book’s most glaring faults.

Given the vital importance of this war in the history of North America and its paramount role in the coming of the American Revolution, the French and Indian War is naturally a subject of significant importance to those who profess an interest in America’s past. Anderson’s fine, inclusive overview of the struggle—supplemented by the detail and visual treasures of Osprey’s impressive volume—makes such an historical inquiry not only accessible, but meaningful as well.