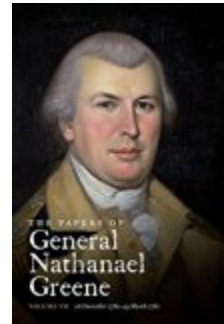


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard K. Showman, Dennis M. Conrad, eds. *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene: Vol. 7: December 1780-March 1781*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. xlii + 544 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2094-0.

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## General Greene and His Army in the American Revolution

The American Revolution has been examined, dissected, and studied by everyone from schoolchildren, novelists, and historians to political theorists, with the purpose of trying to understand the who, what, and why of this decisive war. But the best attack plan is to read the primary sources or documents to get a complete and more accurate picture—which is what the editors of *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene* have done.

Richard Showman and Dennis Conrad have done an excellent job in compiling the documents that relate to the period December 1780 through March 1781 and maintain a coherent chronology. Nathanael Greene, the “fighting Quaker” from Rhode Island, took command of the Southern Army in December 1780 and was immediately confronted with a body of troops composed of “ragamuffins without discipline order or government,” its officers lacking in “confidence or respect” and little or no authority from the various civil governments (p. 81). Supplies were scarce, difficult if not impossible to buy, as money was in short supply or worthless, and the troops were reduced to near nakedness: “The condition of this army for want of clothing...[is appalling]....They are as naked as the Virginia negroes” (p. 82).

In addition, Greene was having to fight a war on unfamiliar terrain against a much better trained, equipped professional army, and he did not hold much hope for success: “with an army without clothing or provisions, in a country exhausted, its currency ruined, the inhabitants divided, and our force less than one third of ene-

mies...the situation is disagreeable and the prospects dismal” (p. 82). Greene is forced into fighting a war of attrition, marked by guerilla actions by Francis Marion and Thomas Sumter that helped to sabotage the British, against British forces under the command of Charles Lord Cornwallis, while literally having to whip his “ragamuffins” into some semblance of an army.

That Greene was victorious is a tribute to his skill as a general, but this book is not just about Greene’s genius as a tactician, leader of men, or even about winning the war—it is much, much more. Volume 7 covers the period that many historians consider the turning point in the Revolutionary War and crucial to the American defeat of the British. Using about 770 of the existing documents, the editors abstracted 598 and left the remaining 152 in their entirety with the intent of showing the realities of war and the difficulties faced by Greene and how he helped bring “the American cause from the brink of defeat to the path that ultimately led to victory” (p. xvi).

Wars on the surface are composed of battles fought and won, the death and wounding of soldiers, and the competence or incompetence of commanders, but the truth is the day-to-day challenges often constitute the building blocks of success—getting provisions, supplies, weapons, and maintaining the morale of the troops. The mere business of staying alive makes the battles almost an aside or an anecdote, and the editors of the Papers have succeeded superbly in illustrating these problems of command. The reader of these collected papers gets

a very clear picture of the frustrations, bitterness, stupidity, and just plain “cussedness” of war as experienced by Greene and his men. The American Revolution takes on new dimensions and becomes more accessible to the general reader as well as to scholars.

This is a thoroughly researched, handsomely assembled book that can be opened randomly and does not need to be read chronologically to be understood—which, to me, is the mark of a good history book.

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