

H-Net Reviews

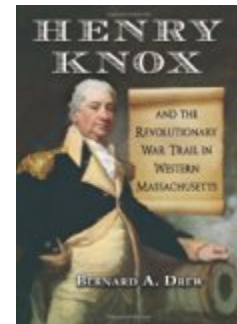
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bernard A. Drew. *Henry Knox and the Revolutionary War Trail in Western Massachusetts*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2012. ix + 338 pp. \$55.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-6276-6.

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Published on H-War (February, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



The title of Bernard A. Drew's book, *Henry Knox and the Revolutionary War Trail in Western Massachusetts*, is somewhat misleading. Drew is interested in the use of the southern Berkshires' "Great Road" that linked eastern New England to the environs of Albany, New York, from the early colonial period in the seventeenth century to the final days of Shay's Rebellion in the 1780s, rather than just in the limited timeframe of the American Revolution. In addition, Drew keeps a constant eye on the way that historical markers, statues, local folklore, surviving buildings, and landscape features have all served to preserve the route's legacy into the present. His study of the road is an exercise in local history, a field that the author defends as being valuable to understanding the past. Because of the focus and detail gained through "very narrow" subjects along with the immersion and firsthand "experience" that practitioners of local history may have, the local historian, in Drew's view, is well situated to explore details that may have been previously overlooked (p. 220).

The book is organized into seventeen chapters in rough chronological order. The first ten chapters are interested in prerevolutionary history; the next four chapters look at the American Revolution and its immediate aftermath; and the final three chapters examine the ways in which government agencies, reenactors, and local historians have kept the legacy of the Great Road alive in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Each chapter includes succinct and satisfactory background histories and draws heavily on primary source material from the letters, journals, and diaries of a wide array of historical actors. Using these sources, the author extensively researched how individuals experienced and coped with

the Great Road for almost two hundred years. Some firsthand accounts are more valuable than others; the author includes several primary passages that laconically note travel dates and stopping points while other accounts offer a much more vivid perspective. The highlights include the hardships of a Hessian prisoner of war being transported to Boston during the Revolution and the travelogue of a French officer in the Revolution, the Marquis de Chastellux.

Drew's history of the Great Road touches on a variety of historical topics and themes. By focusing on the development of the route over a long period rather than just exploits of Henry Knox and his teamsters, he is able to emphasize connections and discord between peoples; the movement of settlers, hunters, soldiers, and traders; and the changing ways in which the region's inhabitants understood and used the land. The book begins with the Indians' use of the stretch of the southern Berkshires as a link to their kin and trading partners in the Hudson Valley to the west. Later on, a colorful cast of English and Dutch fur traders, such as Springfield's founder, William Pynchon, seized opportunities to engage in the lucrative fur trade run out of Fort Orange/Albany. While the route proved to be a source of profit and connection for some, it was also just as often a site of danger and fear. For instance, the fluid and volatile frontier was the site of the last battle of King Philip's War in 1676 as New England's fleeing Indian enemies were massacred in the Housatonic Valley by Major John Talcott's forces. Drew also dedicates a chapter to the understudied colonial border dispute between New York and Massachusetts, a conflict that involved armed skirmishes, counterfeiters, and cross border arrests.

Chapters interested in both the Seven Years' War and the American Revolution examine the Great Road as a thoroughfare of war. British general Jeffrey Amherst, who used the road to march to the Champlain Valley, significantly improved and rerouted portions of the difficult passage. Berkshire and Connecticut militiamen, Stockbridge Indians, and local loyalists all used the road during the Revolution. After the battles of Saratoga and Bennington, British and German prisoners were escorted toward Boston and the Great Road was used as a way for supplies to travel between New York and eastern New England. Knox's famous overland convoy is just one episode among many. In fact, there is frustratingly little source material on the artillery train's time in the region given concerns for secrecy and haste. All of these episodes serve to provide readers with an appreciation of military history beyond battles and leaders. Logistics; perseverance against harsh weather conditions and a hardscrabble terrain; and the everyday experience of officers, soldiers, and their families were equally as important to the conflicts in question. The final chapter delves even further into the experiences of nonelites. While many of the book's actors up to this point had been (usually) white males, the author includes the trials and tribulations of an escaped slave, Bett, and the toils of Lillie Maxwell, whose father had been maimed during the Revolutionary War.

The chapters dealing with the ways in which the trail has been remembered are an interesting look into the nuts and bolts of local history. Not only does the author provide readers with a history of remembering history, such as the 1923-27 placement of commemorative roadside plaques in eastern New York and western Massachusetts to mark Knox's route or the (at times farcical) 1976 reenactment of revolutionary artillery train, but he also seeks to debunk or substantiate local myths surrounding the use of the Great Road. For instance, local historians, residents, and officials in both New York and Massachusetts had long held that General John Burgoyne had passed through such towns as Kinderhook and Great Barrington after his surrender at Saratoga. Drew meticulously dissects these claims and compares them to primary sources about the general's whereabouts, concluding

that the British leader did not in fact travel the Great Road. Drew points to an account by a junior British officer who noted a fellow prisoner traveling with the column claimed to the general in at least one village.

Despite the richness of source material and an obvious passion for the subject matter, the book suffers from several weaknesses. While Drew sufficiently introduces the background of each chapter, he draws very few conclusions. This is also true for the end of the work that is devoid of any conclusion. Also, a work that is concerned with geography should include many more maps. The small map at the beginning of the book does not include all of the places mentioned in the following pages. I grew up and lived most of my life in a neighboring county to Berkshire County and often traveled to some of places mentioned in the book, but I found myself constantly having to rely on outside maps to pinpoint specific roads, towns, and other geographic features. Another imperfection was that the author, while providing liberal quotations from primary source material, also does the same with secondary sources. These lengthy excerpts are valuable when the words of historical actors are presented unaltered but lengthy sections from antiquarian histories are less helpful. Drew could have better contextualized his subjects by incorporating more recent histories, both popular and scholarly.

Even with these shortcomings, this volume is valuable for both its content and conceptualization. By using the Great Road as his focus, the author successfully ties together people and events, highlighting usually obscure linkages and interactions throughout the colonial and revolutionary era. Readers with a more academic background will find a myriad of topics for future examination and primary source material that may have otherwise never been found. The depth of research on such topics as particular buildings or trails in the southern Berkshires may not prove very interesting to those with a passing interest in Knox's artillery train, but local historians, Revolutionary War buffs, and residents of the area in question will delight in Drew's efforts to investigate the important Great Road that shaped history in the region and beyond.

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Citation: Greg Rogers. Review of Drew, Bernard A., *Henry Knox and the Revolutionary War Trail in Western Massachusetts*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. February, 2013.

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