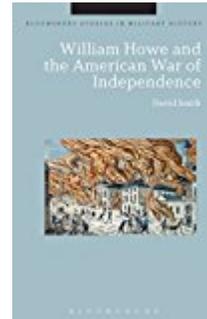




David Smith. *William Howe and the American War of Independence*. Bloomsbury Studies in Military History Series. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015. 208 pp. \$112.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4725-8535-6.



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The Very Model of an Enigmatic General

Lieutenant General Sir William Howe has long been a difficult figure to understand. He was an experienced officer who had commanded troops and fought in North America and Cuba during the Seven Years' War and later served as commander in chief of the British army in the thirteen rebellious colonies from 1775 to 1778. Whiggish in his politics, Howe was sympathetic to Americans, yet was loyal to his king and personally ambitious. Charged with suppressing the American rebellion, Howe commanded British forces from the siege of Boston through the capture of Philadelphia until his relief by General Sir Henry Clinton in May 1778. Upon returning to England, Howe engaged in a messy, protracted parliamentary hearing to clear his name and to gain absolution for having failed to end the rebellion. Thus, sketched in broad outline, was William Howe.

Historians' difficulty in assessing and understanding Howe is due to the lack of personal archival sources. In the early nineteenth century, a fire in the library at Westport House, Ireland, destroyed the bulk of Admiral Richard Lord Howe's papers and, presumably, those

of his brother, the general—at best an assumption, since there is no inventory of the destroyed collection. A good deal of Howe's official correspondence and letters by others about him exist in collections in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the United States. As for personal papers revealing Howe the man, only a few exist; hence historians have had to rely on others' words to flesh out the few details offered by Howe. Compounding the dearth of personal archival resources is Howe's muddled prose, and thus the equally muddled thought behind the written exposition of that thought. David Smith, however, has shined a light on this most difficult of figures. Thanks to the 2010 acquisition by the William L. Clements Library of Howe's draft of his parliamentary defense and Smith's painstaking analysis, historians now have a fuller, if still incomplete, understanding of this perplexing figure. Historians have known of Howe's parliamentary draft, but none have analyzed Howe's editing as a way of trying to understand the general's thoughts and decisions. Rather than relying strictly on the published version, Smith focuses his attention on Howe's deletions and revisions in

this close textual analysis.

In assessing Howe the general, Smith divides his work into five chapters bracketed by an introduction and a conclusion. In the introduction, Smith addresses the historiography on Howe. He notes the challenges faced by scholars in evaluating and understanding the man and his motives. Chapter 1, "Howe's Experience," is an overview of Howe's education, character, and experience before assuming command of the army in America. This notwithstanding, Howe's rise in the army was due to his ability and bravery. Just as previous biographers have noted (Bellamy Partridge in *Sir Billy Howe* [1932], Troyer Steele Anderson in *The Command of the Howe Brothers during the American Revolution* [1936], and Ira C. Gruber in *The Howe Brothers and the American Revolution* [1972]), Smith points out that Howe was inclined toward indolence and the pursuit of pleasure. Smith notes that despite optimistic predictions in his letters to Whitehall, a strong thread of pessimism permeated Howe's communications. As a military commander, Howe's forte was in the realm of tactics, particularly light infantry tactics, something in which he was experienced, but in which he left few thoughts. As a strategist, Smith finds, Howe was thoroughly conventional, a serious shortcoming.

In chapter 2, "Preparations for War," Smith delves into Howe's assignment in America, his planning for the war, and his assessment of the state of the army in America. Smith contends that Howe found the army undisciplined and altogether too ready to launch itself into a fight. Britain's redcoats were brave, indeed to the point of casualty-inducing foolhardiness—something that Britain could ill afford. Smith takes considerable time in relating Howe's relationships with Lord George Germain, the colonial secretary, and with his chief subordinate, Lieutenant General Sir Henry Clinton. The very complexity of the relationship prevents a full discussion. Nonetheless, to say that Howe's relationships were troubled would be an understatement.

Smith addresses the campaigns of 1776 and 1777 in

two chapters. In these, he pays significant attention to Howe's steadily worsening relationships with Germain and Clinton, and to his strategic and tactical decision making. From the outset, Germain had prompted Howe to seize the line of communication that lay along the nexus of the Hudson River-Lake Champlain-Richelieu River, the traditional invasion route for British and French forces as they had battled for supremacy in North America. Early in the war, Germain emphasized protecting Montreal and using the river corridor as an avenue from which to launch raids into New England. Howe, despite acknowledging Germain's entreaties, ignored the strategy in 1776. In this, Howe was resolutely consistent. Even as Lieutenant General John Burgoyne launched his 1777 push from Canada into New York, Howe focused on taking Philadelphia and left Burgoyne to fend for himself as he fought his way through the wilderness to Saratoga and surrender.

Alas, Howe had had enough of the war by 1778 and he requested permission to resign his commission as commander in chief. Following a bravura May send off in the *Mischianza*, Howe surrendered his commission to Clinton and set sail for England. At Howe's request, Parliament granted him a hearing in which Howe intended to defend his name as he smeared that of Germain. Smith's analysis of Howe's draft of his parliamentary defense lays out the twists and turns and evolution of the general's thoughts. In the hearings, Howe accomplished as much for his reputation as he had for British victory in America. It was for naught.

Will historians ever come to know in any great degree what was behind Howe's thoughts or what drove and motivated the man? In all likelihood, they will not. This notwithstanding, Smith has pried open and given readers a view into some small part of Howe the general. His analysis is careful and rigorous. Smith has made an important contribution to the field. Students of the American War of Independence would do well to read and will profit by this book.

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