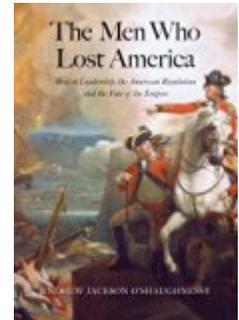


Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy. *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. xiv + 466 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-300-20940-2.



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Why and how did Great Britain, the dominant world power in the latter half of the eighteenth century, lose the War for American Independence (1775–83)? For well over a generation, historians have focused their attentions on different—perhaps brighter—periods in British military history, or they have looked at the ostensible failure of Britain’s military and political statesmen. Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy, in *The Men Who Lost America*, shows that British leadership was not hopelessly inadequate. Britain’s government, army, and navy were not overseen by people who did not know what they were doing. Although they have often been caricatured as buffoons—by historians and their contemporaries alike—Britain’s war effort in North America and in the Caribbean was coordinated by intelligent and able men “who,” O’Shaughnessy argues, “nevertheless failed” (p. 5). The scholarly and popular conception “that they were simply incompetent and hidebound” is wrong (p. 5).

This is a strong argument. But O’Shaughnessy’s cast of characters enables him to

make it. The ten men in *The Men Who Lost America* are often featured on the laundry list of those Britons who were not up to the task of beating America’s revolutionaries: King George III, Lord North, the Howe brothers, Charles, Earl Cornwallis, Lord George Germain, Sir Henry Clinton, Sir George Rodney, and the Earl of Sandwich. Each chapter offers a biographical profile, detailing each man’s life before, during, and after the War for American Independence. This structural approach—history through, or as, biography—is to the book’s benefit. It opens up a plethora of primary and secondary material, and O’Shaughnessy skilfully navigates through his subjects’ papers—and their lives—in well-crafted prose. Indeed, each chapter in *The Men Who Lost America* is based upon a substantial and impressive amount of research. Perhaps more impressively, though, the book is beautifully written. O’Shaughnessy moves through his subjects’ public and private lives, “warts and all,” with considerable ease (p. 5). This is no easy task, considering he looks at a monarch, three politicians, four generals, and two

admirals. Put simply, O'Shaughnessy has collated his characters' stories into an understandable narrative.

More important, the arguments he puts forward in each chapter are persuasive. In chapter 1, "The Tyrant: George III," O'Shaughnessy shows how the young monarch was not power-mad; he "had less power than virtually every other monarch in Europe" (p. 19). And, O'Shaughnessy disagrees with Thomas Jefferson, writing, "George III did not instigate the colonial politics that triggered the American Revolution" (p. 21). His ministers did that; and, up until ca. 1774, George III emphasized restraint. After then, he was reluctant to give the thirteen rebellious colonies up. Much to the dismay of his ministers, he prolonged the war. Chapters 2 and 3 look at Lord North and the Howe brothers, respectively. They, too, are persuasive. O'Shaughnessy paints North as a skilled manager of Parliament and a capable speaker, who worked under difficult circumstances. The Howes, however, felt they lacked the military and naval strength to win. This is not to say they did not have the chance. During the New York campaign of 1776, they failed to follow up on their victories, allowing Washington and the Continental Army to survive another day. But, O'Shaughnessy explains, the Howes' reluctance to destroy Washington's army was an articulation of their approach to the war. They wanted to "win the support of the people" to make "postwar reconstruction" easier (p. 98).

The other chapters within *The Men Who Lost America* are equally strong. O'Shaughnessy pulls his characters together into a single narrative, illustrating how, after French entry into the war, Britain's aims shifted: protection of its Caribbean colonies took priority. With his examination of Sir George Rodney and the Earl of Sandwich, O'Shaughnessy shows how figures like Charles, Earl Cornwallis, became, to some extent, victims of imperial prioritization. Colonies like Jamaica,

and not Virginia, were the future of the British Empire.

Yet, in spite of the breadth of *The Men Who Lost America*, its omissions highlight the amount of research that still needs to be done on British perspectives on the American Revolution. To be sure, O'Shaughnessy's ten mini-biographies are a fabulous resource, but there are many other individuals who merit further examination. The first is Thomas Gage, commander in chief of British forces in North America at the start of the War for American Independence. Gage features in almost every study of the American Revolution, but dedicated scholarly focus on his life is minimal. Second, Frederick Haldimand, who was acting commander in chief between 1773 and 1774 and, later, governor of Quebec, is without a full biography. This is not because Gage and Haldimand are difficult to trace. On the contrary, Gage's papers, held in the William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan, are extensive. So, too, are Haldimand's papers, held at the British Library. Gage and Haldimand are two examples. There are more figures who merit further study; namely, Charles James Fox, Sir Henry Moore, John and Thomas Pownall, the Earl of Dartmouth, the Earl of Hillsborough, the Earl of Shelburne, and Henry Bouquet, among many others.

In Britain there is no real equivalent to the Founding Fathers editorial projects. O'Shaughnessy has shown that perhaps there should be. If the papers of Clinton, the Howes, John Burgoyne, or Lord Cornwallis—or other similarly important figures—were published those publications would, like *The Men Who Lost America*, rewrite the British history of the American Revolution.

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