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Bruce Lenman. *Britain's Colonial Wars, 1688-1783.* Modern Wars in Perspective. Harlow, Hertfordshire: Pearson Education Limited, 2001. x + 284 pp. $32.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-582-42401-2.

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War and National Identity in the Eighteenth Century

The historiography of warfare has developed over the past decade, from a minor footnote to a sophisticated body of text. In July 2000 it received the accolade of being chosen as the theme for the Anglo-American Historical Conference in London, and there are now excellent journals devoted to the subject. Yet it is still hard to find a satisfactory way of writing military history. The (quite proper) emphasis on "war and society" has raised the subject to a broader and more analytical level; but the danger here is that the emphasis on war as a branch of social history leaves unexplained important events, such as the turning of the tide against the German army between July and November 1918; and it does seem useful, at least, for historians of war to know what a battalion is and why it fights, runs away, and recovers--if it does recover. Yet, if the historian is concerned exclusively with battles, sieges, and the like, it can be at the cost of understanding why states sustain warfare--why their citizens support or tolerate it, or fail to do so, and how industrial revolutions have changed the nature and conduct of military operations.

Writing about colonial warfare presents these dilemmas, and more besides. The scattered, long drawn out character of such wars, the apparently peripheral struggles between indigenous people and colonial invader, can make such histories degenerate into wars of kites and crows: a description applied by some to the "Wars of the Roses" in England and Wales in the fifteenth century, implying that they lack any core of intellectual challenge. Massacres abound, but decisive battles are hard to find. Bruce Lenman is the right person to try to work out something different. He possesses a mordant wit, a grasp of detail, and an appreciation of the wider context, in this case of the British colonial wars in the eighteenth century. The result is a book that is a fine example of how it should be done--indeed, of the heartening reflection that it can be done at all. His central theme is that these wars expose and explain the usual assumptions about "British identity;" and in the process he challenges notions about the "military revolution" and "state building." The reader

can perhaps imagine what he has to say about American Nationalism (origins of), post-structural history, and other readings of historical processes and the use of evidence.

Lenman's survey includes the scattered parts of the eighteenth-century empire, from the largest to the smallest. His deep understanding of the internal politics of England (after 1707 Great Britain), combined with his grasp of the reasons why the state, often reluctantly, embarked on warfare, moves the reader easily from place to place, yet with sufficient detail to understand why and how colonial wars were fought and won--or lost. His discussion of the American revolutionary war is a fine example of this writing, where Lenman explains that American colonial society was rooted in violence and did not fear war, while the British lacked a concept of just how such a war against such people could actually be won. He demonstrates that in this, and other colonial wars, the British government was reluctant to be dragged into expensive and possibly protracted conflicts, hence the policy of appeasement. Britain, like her chief imperial rivals, France and Spain, was a European power, with its eyes fixed firmly on how the European continent could best be arranged to suit British interests. But she found herself dragged into overseas wars, often because the colonists or the entrepreneurs (such as the East India Company) tangled with the local populations, or with rival forces. Lenman eschews grand theories, emphasizing instead the importance of individual, and often highly colourful personalities like Sir William Johnson, an Irishman of mixed Roman Catholic and Protestant background (more common than is often supposed), who was British, Irish, and also sort of Mohawk. This example speaks for Lenman's interest in the variety and complexity of eighteenth-century national identities, and he has some withering remarks to make about modern simplifiers of national identity. This perception enables him to explain that some of the most important colonial wars were really civil wars, and here again his discussion of the American revolutionary war is provocative and refreshing. His singling out of the Loyalists for serious and empathetic historical treatment is long overdue. And when he deals with the role of the native American in these conflicts, he again is empathetic without falling into maudlin sympathy. Moreover, this understanding of the nature of colonial settlement and native resistance, or collaboration, makes the important point that, as in the case of India, it is hard to say where imperial wars and local power struggles can be distinguished. Indeed, it is important that they should not be distinguished, because greed and altruism alike often provoked the imperial state into sending men to die in what were often rather unprofitable causes, unprofitable at least to the imperial power. Lenman's sure grasp of tactics, the composition and character of the forces involved, and the leadership given to these forces runs like a steel thread through this book, ensuring that, while retaining a comprehensive span, it does not fall into the soft side of military history--all societies and no fighting.

Another unifying theme is Lenman's concept of history. He points out the danger of studying the past with eyes fixed firmly on the present. Such history is teleological, and he is right to question its value. But the reader will not be unaware that Lenman is writing from the perspective of the United Kingdom, and particularly of Scotland, in the present day, when national identities are once again to the fore. Indeed, Lenman uses contemporary examples to make the point that the Scotch-Irish in the eighteenth century had a visceral and well-founded distrust of the Westminster government in their day as the Ulster Unionists have today, and for the same well founded reason: that the British government considers them expendable. This technique is by no means disadvantageous, for it gives the book its lively, pungent, and provocative style, one that will attract readers beyond the merely academic. Sometimes the argument is not well sustained; Lenman's dismissal of the belief that English

thinking is characterised by an inability to comprehend general ideas is contradicted by the work of Oliver MacDonagh on early nineteenth- century government growth. Lenman's disciplined prose fails him on one occasion, where the sentence beginning "Where imagination was needed" (p. 206) is convoluted. But these are minor quibbles. Lenman has not only written an excellent survey of eighteenth century colonial wars, he has shown how this subject can be tackled, and how war shapes national identities, which are plastic and malleable. In this and other ways this book shows that he is one of our most subversive historians: and that is meant as a compliment.

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