

October 2016

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Robert (2016) "Book Review: O'Shaughnessy, Andrew Jackson. The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, The American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013.," *Saber and Scroll*: Vol. 5: Iss. 3, Article 11.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.apus.edu/saberandscroll/vol5/iss3/11>

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Book Review

Robert Smith, PhD.

It is arguable that no one knows how to do disasters like the British. It is true to such an extent that they should have been the entertainment industry leader in epic disaster films. Consider if you will these historical vignettes—one has the Titanic where they do not have enough lifeboats and the Somme in 1916 where they send tens of thousands of men walking in a straight line into machine guns. Then to one up the historical ante, they lost their Empire in France in the 1400s, despite Agincourt, and lost their Empire for good post-1947. However, losing their Empire in the American Revolution took a special kind of intellectual inertia and failure of leadership at nearly every single level of the British Monarchy and Whitehall. In his highly engaging study of this phenomenon “*The Men Who Lost America*,” Andrew J. O'Shaughnessy achieves just that, but accomplishes making scholarly work pleasurable and accessible.

O'Shaughnessy's work treads a good pathway established by B. H. Liddell Hart's *The Other Side of the Hill*. There Hart interviewed and talked to the surviving key Wehrmacht Operational Commanders to ascertain the key decision points, their personal decision trees, and what went wrong leading to the defeat of the Third Reich. Of course, conveniently with Hitler being dead, at this time it was easy for these commanders to ladle all their sins onto the dead Fuhrer. Here O'Shaughnessy has no one to interview, but his work at looking at the historical record from both sides presents and paints both a convincing and at times human portrayal of the failure of British decision-making. Unlike Hart, whom it felt simply swallowed the German blame-the-dead-guy game; O'Shaughnessy is more rigorous and fair-handed in his approach.

One of the key elements that O'Shaughnessy weaves throughout is his ability to put us into the mind and social conventions of the era without the book becoming a dull review of eighteenth century British aristocracy. One of the things the reader will be surprised to find out is that many of the commanders who failed in America—John Burgoyne, Henry Clinton, and William Howe—were appointed to their posts not due to the normal channels of patronage but because they were capable field officers. Perhaps even more pointed is the case of Charles, Lord Cornwallis, who we lampoon for getting himself boxed in at Yorktown. Yet

instead the reader will now come face to face with a different Cornwallis—a deadly and capable officer who was let down in this instance by the games played within the British court, and who would go on to be one of England’s greatest figures in India.

The British did lose the American colonies, so in that they did fail. However, O’Shaughnessy hammers home that Britain never lost control of the seas, despite a formidable naval coalition arrayed against them. The Battle of the Chesapeake stands out as perhaps the only naval defeat. The British ministers understood that losing the Americas would be bad, but if coupled with the loss of the islands in the Caribbean, the British Empire would be reduced to an impoverished state. The thesis is almost the Cold War domino theory, that should North America fall, Canada falls, the Caribbean Islands fall, and those defeats might just encourage the other jackal empires of Europe to attack it elsewhere. For the American Patriots, the American Revolution was one war, but for the British, as the war lengthened, it took on different dimensions.

O’Shaughnessy’s best work is his dissection of Lord George Germain. In any view of history, Germain is neither a likable nor sympathetic character. His obstinacy in fighting the war and driving the Empire down ill-considered paths had a psychological component to it. The stain of his imputed cowardice at the Battle of Minden seems to have always haunted Germain. Despite the favoritism of the court, he carried that stain on his honor with him. What better way to show he was a British fighting man of spirit than to stand up this time for the king in the face of the war party’s opposition in Parliament?

We see how the British reacted, albeit more slowly than they could have, to changing circumstances. They had a Northern strategy to suppress Massachusetts and Boston and upon its failure shifted to the more traditional seizure of the enemy’s capital, as that always worked in Europe. When that failed, they tried splitting New England from the Middle colonies by the devilishly hard-to-defend-against strategy of Gentleman Johnny Burgoyne, who was undone when his own commander in Philadelphia refused to move up the Hudson River, and cut the colonies in half. *The Men Who Lost America* has just about something for everyone—land warfare, naval warfare, political intrigue, a smattering of psychology and gossip. *The Men Who Lost America* is the perfect coffee table book that will actually be read, as it is that rare scholarly work that transcends the line between academia and popular writing.