

Book Reviews

Adam Lyons. *The 1711 Expedition to Quebec: Politics and the Limitations of British Global Strategy*. London, New York, etc: Bloomsbury, 2013. ISBN 978-14-72-581693. Pp. xiv, 272. Hardcover. £100.00.

This is a most welcome study of a key naval operation, the first assault on French North America by the newly united Great Britain in the eighteenth century, significant not just for being the first in a century marked by such operations but for being a failure.

British failures are potentially very valuable to the historian. They can offer an important perspective from which to reassess many unspoken assumptions which fill the pages of those naval histories which conspire to perpetuate the familiar sense of inevitability to the rise of eighteenth-century British imperial power. This success was, of course, dramatically confirmed by the Peace of Paris of 1763, but Lyons promises here a refreshing examination not of strengths, but of British limitations. Also up for reconsideration, one might hope, is the corresponding picture of congenital French failure reinforced by the two later and successful sieges of the great fortress of Louisbourg in Nova Scotia in 1745 and 1758.

For all the many strengths of this book, it is perhaps unfortunate, however, that Lyons chooses as his purpose the apportioning of blame for the failure of the expedition. No longer, we are told, should opprobrium fall on the commander of the expedition, Hovenden Walker, but instead upon his political superior the Secretary of State, Henry St John. This approach might help us to understand better what went wrong in 1711, but it also does less than Lyons claims to shed new light on the subsequent history of Britain as an eighteenth-

century maritime power.

The main contention is perfectly plausible, that is that St John's misguided desire for secrecy meant that the expedition was undersupplied, that this put pressure on Boston from where it was launched, and that the brief window of opportunity in the short campaigning season due to harsh Canadian winters was wasted. Indeed, the argument is very well made. There is no doubting the quality of the primary research and the thoroughness of the background secondary reading. Sensible, thoughtful conclusions are drawn. The rather one-dimensional accusations that historians have levelled against Walker, that he was 'timid', for example, undoubtedly neglect many complexities, the difficulty of navigating the St Lawrence and the nature of these winters foremost among them. Moreover, given the undeveloped nature of amphibious operations at the time, Lyons sagely warns us against using the standards and expectations of British operations in the Seven Years War (1756-63) as a weapon against poor Walker.

The result is an excellent insight into the first stage of the Anglo-French competition of the eighteenth century. We learn much about the strategic context, the politics, the personal histories of the leaders involved, and the enormous practical and logistical preparations. With the arrival of some 10,000 men from Britain, the population of Boston was effectively doubled for a short time causing a number of complications and tensions. Still, a squadron of 77 vessels of various sizes

managed to head north.

It must be said that Lyons clearly lays out the operational difficulties, along with the sheer scale of the operation which came to grief in the difficult waters of the St Lawrence and was forced to retreat. It may have amounted to nothing, but the 1711 expedition was clearly no mere afterthought. It was a key part of British politics and strategy in the wider War of the Spanish Succession. We now have our definitive account which Lyons has constructed with great care and authority.

Detailed studies of any such specific aspects of the War of the Spanish Succession are sorely needed. So much is said about the foundations of British naval power being laid by the Peace of Utrecht of 1713-14 that anything which can deepen our understanding by qualifying this picture is to be welcomed. We understand better, for example, that the 1711 expedition exposed French vulnerability and led to the construction of defensive fortifications in New France and in particular that of the enormous fortress of Louisbourg from 1719.

Otherwise, however, the picture of British foundations being set is simply confirmed by Lyons. The failure of the expedition had no detrimental effect on the negotiations at Utrecht. Annapolis Royal (Nova Scotia) was confirmed in British hands and, for all the criticism Lyons heaps on St John the greatest effect of his oversight of the expedition is to have 'initiated the resurgence of a true blue water strategy' (p.180). Traditionally, historians have felt that the expedition was a waste of time and resources, starving the Duke of Marlborough of strength at a key moment in the European war. Lyons tells us that it was not a waste at all. St John's determination was a sign of the commitment to the blue water strategy which he should be credited with keeping alive.

There is, therefore, something of a contradiction in Lyons' handling of St John, which is difficult to overlook. In other words, the failure for which he must shoulder so much of the blame is not really even being presented as a failure at all, but as just one more important foundation stone for future British greatness. True, the tension the expedition

created between London and Massachusetts, as Lyons concedes, would later find its full fruition in the loss of the thirteen colonies, but the connection is a bit tenuous and the broader interpretive perspective on the cause of the American rebellion is not new. The principal conclusion is that behind the failure was a strategic approach which would later lead to British success.

This is, overall, a very good book and a valuable addition to the work that already exists on the eighteenth-century overseas experience. There is, nevertheless, a lingering sense that there were perhaps some opportunities wasted to apply this experience of failure to a meaningful challenge of fundamental assumptions or to address bigger questions, to re-assess relative French or British strength and weakness, for example, or just to fashion a more imaginative reconsideration of the standard conceptual model of British success.

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