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Review of *The British are Coming: The War for America, 1775-1777* by Rick Atkinson

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**Rick Atkinson, *The British are Coming: The War for America, 1775-1777*. New York, NY: Henry Holt, 2019. Xviii + 776pp. 32 plates. ISBN: 978- 1627790437 (hardback). Price £25.99.**

The initial volume of a 'Revolution Trilogy', Rick Atkinson's *The British are Coming* is an extensive narrative undertaking, one that minutely examines those formative, but crucial, years of the American War of Independence, 1775-1777. For the British, the opening salvos of the war consisted of promises of victory, missed opportunities and, to quote Robert Harvey, another of the 'popular' historians of the epoch, a 'few bloody noses'. For the American colonists, from 1776 committed to winning their independence from a nation considered *the* global superpower of the era, the goal was to survive; and to keep the embers of rebellion burning long enough to cement international support for what was, at times, a precarious cause.

Atkinson, an acclaimed 'popular' military historian, has a masterful ability to weave together, through lucid prose and acute eye for detail, those key martial events and crisis characters that shaped the war from Lexington to Princeton. Undoubtedly, the depth of research and insight the author affords in this narrative are impressive. Academic titles such as Matthew Spring's, *With Zeal and with Bayonets Only*, which examines the minutiae of the British Army's martial culture and conduct during the war, have been integrated into the work's underlying research base, demonstrating the author's willingness to bridge popular history and those works at the forefront of 'New Military' historiography. *The British are Coming* is, therefore, a balanced title; a far cry from early Whig-inspired narratives that simplistically portrayed the Revolution and War of Independence as an instance of providentially favoured, liberty-loving colonists arising to defeat a tyrannical mother country that had lost its way, and sense of 'Englishness' (or 'Britishness'), as it emerged as a true 'blue water' power.

The manner in which Atkinson's work conveys the exploits of the war's more minor participants, whose actions have often been subsumed by the great events and individuals that surrounded them, should also be acknowledged. Indeed, those familiar with the American Revolution will be very aware of *certain* rebel exploits that took the war to the British mainland; John Paul Jones' burning of Whitehaven (1778) being one of the most famous (or infamous) examples. How many, however, will have learned of, through lesson, reading or entertainment (or would easily recall), the fate of James Aitken – alias John the Painter – whose acts of sabotage so alarmed the British population and whose pursuit by authorities was intimately followed by George III. That Aitken's eventual execution at Portsmouth was witnessed by 20,000 persons

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reveals not only his notoriety, but the degree to which his actions shocked and threatened the British state and its people.

Nevertheless, as a largely battlefield-centric account of the War of Independence's formative years, *some* might suggest that, at times, Atkinson is a little too dismissive of the significance of other themes that shaped the conflict between 1775-1777. Indeed, from Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* to the Declaration of Independence, the power of ideas – and the influence of words – can hardly be understated. However, in suggesting that George Washington's soldiers, accompanied by a 'chirpy throng of citizens' (Page 348) were bored and restless, shifting from 'foot to foot' as their Commander-in-Chief read aloud a 'pruned' version of the Declaration of Independence, Atkinson is perhaps too ready to underplay the role of revolutionary words and ideas. After all, none other than John Adams would argue that the war was an 'Effect and Consequence' of a Revolution that, at its core, was shaped by its ideas. Certainly, one might also examine post-war evidence to advance this perspective. At the signing of the Constitution (admittedly, beyond this book's remit), citizens from all walks of life, including those who had served in Washington's army, celebrated with vigour a Constitutional settlement that enshrined the principle of the sovereignty of 'the People'. Furthermore, the role so-called ordinary Americans played in the Revolution and its aftermath gave many citizens, such as the Masons of New York, the confidence to proclaim that 'Buildings and Rulers are the Work of *our* Hands'. It is a little difficult, therefore, to imagine that Washington's soldiers grew restless and bored as many of the now-codified principles upon which the revolution was fought were conveyed to them at so perilous a time.

However, Atkinson is a military historian, and *The British are Coming*, never pretends to be a social, ideological or constitutional study of the Revolutionary era. For these fields, individuals have the scholarship of Bernard Bailyn, H. T. Dickinson or Gordon S. Wood. What is advanced in Atkinson's work is a detailed, balanced, rigorously researched, and engaging narrative. It should find a welcome place on the shelves of any student, scholar or history buff examining the martial course of the War of Independence from 1775-1777.

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