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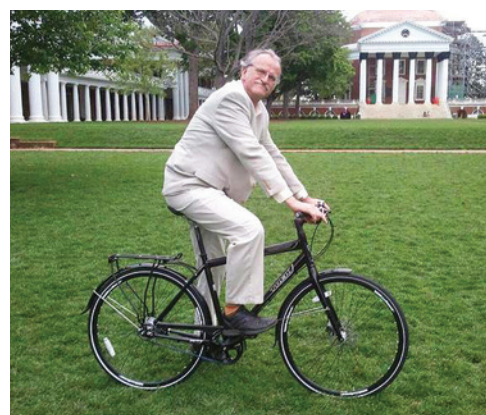
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THE REVOLVING BOOKSTAND

Peter Onuf Reviews *The Men Who Lost America*



Peter S. Onuf is Senior Fellow at the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies at Monticello as well as Thomas Jefferson Foundation Professor Emeritus at the University of Virginia. Onuf is also “Eighteenth Century Guy” on the *BackStory with the American History Guys* radio program.

Monticello’s **Revolving Bookstand** is a new series of monthly book reviews featuring what our staff is reading. Peter S. Onuf, Senior Fellow at the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies at Monticello, reviews Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy’s *The Men Who Lost America*. Read these book reviews each month on the Monticello Blog. Visit www.monticello.org, click on the **Online Community**, and click on **Blog**.

Andrew O’Shaughnessy offers a provocative account of a familiar story from a refreshingly unfamiliar angle in *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire*. The literature on the Revolution is vast but overwhelmingly focused on the American side, with founding fathers garnering the lion’s share of attention in recent years. Until now, their British counterparts’ engagement in the Revolution generally has been neglected. This is hardly surprising. Despite George III’s commitment to suppressing

the rebellion and widespread fears that the loss of America would jeopardize British prosperity and power, the war’s damage—if not its expense—proved limited. The wonderful irony of the American Revolution is that it set the stage for Britain’s ascendancy to global empire and power in the 19th-century. O’Shaughnessy’s compulsively readable book helps explain both why victory in America proved so elusive and why, in the wake of Cornwallis’s humiliating capitulation at Yorktown, the collapse of Lord North’s ministry, and the 1783 Paris

peace settlement, Britain rebounded so impressively. The men who lost America were a mixed lot, at different stages of their careers, and with different futures before them. But none of them were losers.

O’Shaughnessy’s approach is unabashedly top-down, with 10 political or military leaders featured in nine engrossing chapters, with the brothers General William and Admiral Richard Howe sharing a single chapter as they shared leadership of the first British campaign of the war. O’Shaughnessy follows his politicians through the labyrinth of British politics and his commanders to the field of battle in America, drawing on a rich array of primary sources to bring their campaigns to life.



Winning the Revolution was never going to be easy, and it got harder when the war went international.

O'Shaughnessy's story is driven by the question of how Britain finally would extricate itself from America and how the war would affect its relations with the other belligerents. Britain was doubtless better off without its unruly colonies: though the United States won its independence, the new nation remained in the former metropolis's commercial orbit well into the future.

The Men Who Lost America gives us an illuminating new perspective on Britain's ruling elite in a period of geopolitical upheaval. Far from being the effete, corrupt, and bumbling incompetents of American patriotic lore, British leaders acquitted themselves well in a nearly unwinnable war. Readers of O'Shaughnessy's superb book will not be surprised that Britain would be well prepared for the far greater existential challenge of the wars with Revolutionary France that shaped the future of the modern world. Nor should it be surprising that the American Revolution should fade so quickly in British historical memory.