

## The British Isles and the War of American Independence

**Review Number:**

136

**Publish date:**

Friday, 1 September, 2000

**Author:**

Stephen Conway

**ISBN:**

9780198206593

**Date of Publication:**

2000

**Pages:**

418pp.

**Publisher:**

Oxford University Press

**Place of Publication:**

Oxford

**Reviewer:**

Susan-Mary Grant

The nineteenth-century German political theorist, Heinrich von Treitschke, concluded that it was war 'which turns a people into a nation.' His opinion has been reiterated by scholars over the years, many of whom concur with Michael Howard's assertion that from 'the very beginning, the principle of nationalism was almost indissolubly linked, both in theory and practice, with the idea of war.' War, in Howard's words, 'was the necessary dialectic in the evolution of nations.' America offers a case in point here: founded by Revolution, the nation came apart in the nineteenth century only to be reunited after a brutal Civil War. The impact of both wars has, of course, been the focus of much attention by American historians. British historians, too, express an interest in the American Revolution, but for the period following Britain's 'loss' of her North American colonies their interest in the United States tends to fade, picking up again only once America became involved in the European wars of the twentieth century. Further, many of those studies that do examine the Revolution focus, perhaps obviously enough, on the American side of the equation. Whilst there have been studies, such as John Derry's analysis of *English Politics and the American Revolution* (1976) that focus on the war's impact on the United Kingdom, these have tended either to isolate one aspect of its effect (e.g. on politics) or, as Conway notes, they adopt a broad approach and study the war's 'international and imperial dimensions' (p. 2). Students, consequently, frequently react with surprise when advised that the American Revolution was a central event in British history. The appearance of Conway's work should ensure that, in future, the news comes as less of a shock to them.

It may seem illogical to look at only one side in any conflict, but of course the emphasis on America's origins has tended to blur the considerable impact that the war for independence had on Great Britain. The Revolution is not unique in this regard: in the case of the American Civil War the extended focus afforded the South has resulted in a similarly skewed image of that particular conflict, too. There are additional parallels. The reality of the Revolution, like that of the Civil War, has over time become both obscured and simplified. The role played by the Loyalists in the case of the former has, for obvious reasons, been

downplayed, sometimes to the point where, in popular culture at least, the story of the American Revolution is one of oppressed colonists rising up *en masse* against the dictatorial British monarchy. Of course it was not so straightforward. Like the later Civil War, the American Revolution was a war which pitched neighbour against neighbour, perhaps in an even more brutal and direct way than the nineteenth-century conflict did. It left no one involved left unscathed, and that held as true for Great Britain as it did for her North American colonies.

Conway's study of the effect that the Revolution had on Great Britain is multidimensional. On one level it is a work which argues for continuity, or rather for development, over dramatic change in British history, in several main areas: military, social, economic and ideological. As Conway puts it, his work 'by concentrating on the impact on the British Isles of the last significant conflict before the French Revolution, should add something to the increasingly well-established case against the traditional, "limited war" view of eighteenth-century armed struggles' (p. 5). On another, it is a study of the role that the war played in the construction of a distinctly British national identity. 'The connection between war and national identity and the timing or even the reality of the emergence of a popular identification with Britain,' Conway notes, 'have been hotly contested,' and it is his intention to explore the degree to which 'the war promoted an overarching sense of Britishness' (p. 9).

The range and the complexity of the subject, combined with the fact that Conway is addressing it on more than one level, could result in an unwieldy volume, but the material is extremely well-controlled throughout. Conway selects to begin with an examination of the British armed forces during the Revolution, moving on to consider the economic, social and cultural impact of the war in a broad sense before focusing on its impact on parliamentary and religious reform and on British imperial attitudes generally. He includes several local studies, and has selected Brentwood in Essex, Lichfield in Staffordshire, Strabane, County Tyrone, Hull, Glasgow and the county of Berkshire as providing a representative cross-section of the British Isles at the time. These brief but informative local 'snapshots' enable him to highlight, at the micro level, many of the macro trends he has identified in the body of the work.

The opening chapter examines military mobilisation, and attempts 'to establish just two fundamentals: the number of Britons and Irishmen who served in a military capacity, and the sections of society from which they came' (pp. 11-12). In line with recent trends, Conway argues that the revolutionary war was not as distinct from the French Revolutionary or the Napoleonic Wars which came after. The "'British Armed Nation" of the 1790s and early 1800s,' Conway concludes, 'should be seen less as a revolutionary departure from past practice and more as a development and intensification of recent trends' (p. 29). Here, again, there are distinct echoes of the historiographical debate over the Civil War's 'modernity' and its relationship to the 'total wars' of the twentieth century. In this case, Conway examines in some detail the level and composition of the troops who were sent to North America to suppress the rebellion, and concludes that the evidence 'sits somewhat uneasily with the received wisdom of the composition of the British armed forces in the eighteenth century' (p. 29).

Although foreign - particularly German - troops were employed in the colonies, the British army did not rely on them to the degree previously supposed. Further, the actual composition of the British army and navy was not drawn only from the top (aristocratic officers) and bottom (vagrants, paupers and criminals in the rank and file) tiers of British society, but in fact included a large percentage of the 'middling sort.' Taking the scale and the range of mobilisation into account, Conway argues that the Revolution 'can be seen to fit into a pattern of steadily increasing participation' stretching from the War of Austrian Succession through the Seven Years War, the Revolution itself and on to the conflicts of the early nineteenth century. Rather than representing any kind of deviation from this trend, the American war for independence simply 'carried on the upward trajectory' as far as the British armed forces were concerned (pp. 43-44). It mobilised more men (Conway estimates about one in seven or eight served), at more levels, and consequently had a greater impact on British society as a whole than previously thought.

The war's impact on the economy was less, Conway concludes, than one might have expected, but it did result in 'enormous turmoil and compelled often considerable adjustments and adaptations' (p. 84). Its direct

effect on individuals was, similarly, mixed, but perhaps greater than a cursory glance might suggest. Conway highlights this fact via a close and careful reading of some of the available evidence. He looks at the effect of the war upon women, noting that whilst it increased their involvement in and awareness of the broader world it also 'bolstered traditional attitudes' among men (p. 89). The war also reinforced anti-aristocratic tendencies and class friction generally within British society, providing some 'interesting pointers to the future' even if it did not in itself create such tensions (p. 104). Reform of both the penal system and the poor laws in England can be traced more directly to the changes brought about by the war, Conway suggests, and the reform impulse in general was given a boost. The loss of the North American colonies, he argues, 'caused much introspective reflection, leading to a campaign for moral regeneration and increasing criticism of the slave trade' (p. 128). Similarly, reform of both the representative system and the relationship between Church and State was encouraged by events across the Atlantic. However, as with the British reform bills passed after the American Civil War, it was not necessarily the case that the war created the climate for reform, but rather that it provided an opportunity for reform-minded individuals to press their case and effect change in these areas. Above all, Conway concludes, the war had the effect of militarising British and Irish society, 'not just in the sense that large numbers of adult males went into uniform, but also in that military events fascinated the public' (p. 128). Out of this militarization, he goes on to argue, a more coherent sense of Britishness emerged.

This increased sense of 'Britishness' did not, however, prevent the existence, or the intensification, of divisions within the nation, particularly regarding the appropriateness of the war itself. Again, Conway is in tune with current thinking regarding the levels of support for and opposition to the war, both of which were factors from the outset. In this context he cites the work of James Bradley and Kathleen Wilson, both of whom have uncovered 'strong and consistent opposition to the war' in public petitions and in individual English cities such as Newcastle and Norwich (p. 130). Scotland, by comparison, 'perhaps came nearest to unanimity on the American issue,' and supported British attempts to suppress the revolution in North America (not something many Scots today are likely to highlight in their quest for a 'special relationship' with the United States). Conway warns against taking the evidence as wholly representative, but nevertheless concludes that it 'tends to strengthen the case for considering the Scots as very largely in favour of coercion of the colonists' (p. 133). The Irish, on the other hand, inclined toward the opposite view, and were more generally opposed to the war. Within the political realm, too, the war reinforced already existing divisions and, in some cases, created new ones. Certainly, Conway argues, the British army's extended mobilisation, its use of German mercenaries and Scottish troops led to increasing concern over the government's intentions at that time, and 'reinforced the impression of a slide into tyranny' (p. 165). At the same time, he stresses that in many cases the 'aim of those who opposed the war against the Americans was to stop what they saw as a civil war within the British empire, not to protest at the use of military force per se.' (p. 321)

It was amidst all this upheaval, Conway argues, that Britishness came to be redefined, and here he brings Linda Colley's *Britons* into play. Colley's thesis has, he notes, been criticised on several levels, one of which concerns its timing. Some scholars, most notably Adrian Hastings, take issue not only with the assertion that the eighteenth century was the point at which this sense of 'Britishness' emerged, but question the whole idea of nationalism being a modern phenomenon. Others, such as Murray Pittock, by concentrating on the Scottish, or more generally 'Celtic' expressions of identity, argue against the existence of any coherent sense of 'Britishness' at all, and stress the persistence of marginalisation in the case of the Scots, Irish and Welsh within British/English nationalist constructs. As with nationalism studies generally, the debates are both complex and likely to be lively for some time to come, but in the context of the American revolution and the development of 'Britishness,' Conway argues that the evidence could support Colley's thesis in *Britons*, and perhaps even extend it. Localism, Conway suggests, 'was not necessarily incompatible with an overarching sense of Britishness. Nor was contemporary English, Welsh, Scottish, and even Irish patriotism.' Identity, he reminds us, 'was and is multifaceted,' and, to a degree, context-sensitive (p. 168).

Conway has two main props for his argument, or rather his support of Colley's argument, that a distinct 'Britishness' can be detected in the eighteenth century: first, warfare itself, or the nationalising effect of

military service; second, the importance and influence of what he very neatly describes as 'component patriotisms.' Of the two, Conway places greater weight on the latter. He stresses that the role of warfare, or of the revolutionary war at least, in the development of national identity was not a straightforward case of loyalty to the nation being inculcated in the process of fighting for it. Rather, he argues, 'far from weakening local identification, the American war might well have strengthened it' (p. 170). Despite this, the conflict 'created circumstances conducive to widespread identification with Britain among the peoples of the British Isles' (p. 168).

Conway shows how the British state, by encouraging localism via the extension of militias and the raising of regiments at the local level and under local leadership, effectively turned local loyalties to national advantage. In the case of Ireland, participation in the volunteer units gave Ulstermen 'a voice, a sense of their own importance,' in short, a sense of citizenship (p. 227). Irish volunteers held closely to the ideal of the 'citizen soldier,' and saw themselves fighting to uphold 'republican virtue' in their own communities, an attitude mirrored, of course, by their opponents in the colonies. Sometimes, too, Conway notes, local pride was acknowledged and invoked as a deliberate means of stimulating national involvement, as when Captain Charles Napier sought to encourage naval recruitment in Scotland by suggesting that the Scots would not wish to 'allow themselves to be outdone by the English' (p. 182). Such tactics were doubtless extremely effective in the production of an army in which 'Englishmen, Welshmen, Scotsmen, and Irishmen were brought together and could become Britons' (p. 191).

Reinforcing the link between warfare and nationalism in the case of the American revolution was the fact that the British forces were not simply fighting the colonists but, as the war progressed and as France, Spain and even Holland joined in on the American side, found themselves facing a 'multiplicity of foes.' In the latter stages of the conflict, Conway argues, the 'British could now see themselves as struggling gamely against a formidable coalition, rather than as using parental power to chastise their wayward colonial children' (p. 200). Given the odds stacked against them by that point, Conway concludes, 'even eventual defeat might seem like a moral victory and be cause for national self-congratulation' (p. 202). By the conclusion of the revolution, Britain could position itself in the role of 'beleaguered nation,' a position that was echoed to some degree in the 'Very Well, Then, Alone!' image of Britain facing the Nazi threat during the Second World War. However, whether, in the eighteenth century, this image carried as much weight in nationalising terms remains open to debate.

Although Conway concludes that continuity seems, overall, more significant than change in the case of the impact that the American war for independence had on Britain, he nevertheless identifies certain areas where change can clearly be detected. These include attitudes toward 'the use of military force as an instrument of policy,' which, he argues, became more critical, and 'prepared the ground for the more clearly antiwar campaigns in the struggle against revolutionary and Napoleonic France' (p. 315). The revolution also, he suggests, 'furthered the process whereby the British empire became increasingly associated with authoritarian rule over subject peoples and less with largely self-governing British settlements abroad' (p. 345).

Having detailed the various divisions within British society at the time of the American war of independence, Conway ends by stressing those elements of unity that existed. 'This unity,' he argues, 'was based on a conception of Britishness that was in an important sense very different from what had gone before. Once the Americans departed from the empire, national identity had to be reconfigured' (p. 354). The war itself, he concludes, played a major part in this reconfiguration of Britishness. 'The armed services were themselves melting pots and, perhaps more tellingly,' Conway suggests, 'they presented to the wider public an image of Britishness at work' (p. 355). Yet this perception of British unity should not be taken at face value. Here, again, there are revealing parallels with the nation that America became. There, too, the ideal of the 'melting pot' failed to create the kind of unity that its proponents anticipated. Despite severing the imperial connection in the eighteenth century, Britain and America remained linked, in several ways. In both nations, the achievement of unity and the construction of national identity were fraught with difficulties.

Scholars of nationalism tend to steer clear of the American example because the complexities of a nation of

immigrants which only managed to establish itself as a nation via an internecine Civil War do not fit comfortably with any of the current theories concerning the development of national identities. However, the British case, with its sometimes uneasy mixture of Scottish, Welsh, Irish and English elements and its religious divisions was and remains no less complex. There are additional parallels. The debate over the timing (as if this could be measured with any accuracy) of the emergence of a sense of Britishness has its counterpart in the continuing, and not always constructive, debate over the origins of Southern nationalism in the United States. The balance between local loyalties and American nationalism is, similarly, not yet fully understood. American nationalism, indeed, is too readily relegated to second place by scholars who argue that state loyalties took, and take, precedence in the federal system. In this context, Conway's argument for the nationalising effect of 'component patriotisms,' and the way in which he has shown how localism could function within a national context is extremely valuable, and deserves further attention. Conway's work, indeed, certainly deserves a wider readership not just among British historians, but among American historians and scholars of nationalism more generally. *The British Isles and the War of American Independence* not only presents a succinct and comprehensible survey of a complex period of British history, but has some genuinely original observations to make on the role of warfare in the development of a nation, and the way in which the various component parts of any nation shift around and reconfigure themselves in times of crisis.

#### **Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/136#comment-0>

#### **Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/752>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>