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The Amiens Truce. Britain and Bonaparte, 1801?1803

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Kevin Linch

This book charts the 'experimental' peace between Britain and France in 1801?1803, often regarded as little more than an interlude in the twenty-year struggle between the two. Grainger makes clear in his introduction that these eighteen months deserve more attention than they have hitherto received, as the two wars that sandwich this peace are given different names yet the continuity in the struggle is often taken for granted. In essence, there is a teleological issue which needs to be addressed: as the peace failed and lasted such a short while it has been consigned to history as a mere truce. Yet to do this is to deny a thorough exploration of the topic. Although Amiens was an Anglo-French treaty, it was Britain who decided to break the peace, so the work focuses on Britain. It uses a generally chronological framework, working from the armistice through the peace negotiations and onto the almost immediate arguments that broke out after the treaty was signed, and then proceeds to the final breakdown and descent into war. This is not, however, a purely diplomatic account of the international relations between Britain and France as it shows a wider awareness of the political and strategic differences between the two, and seeks to show how both countries were in unstable situations.

Despite its wider remit, first and foremost this is a good diplomatic history. The treaty is often seen as

?defective? from a British viewpoint due to French skill and persistence and the Addington government?s distraction and weakness. Grainger does much to undermine this position. The work shows that the French were not skilful negotiators, quite the opposite in fact. Had the French been prepared to negotiate sensibly, Grainger shows that a peace could have been had much quicker ? the treaty as signed was not that much different from initial British proposals. Throughout the account of the negotiations, Grainger has a clear view that the Addington government had consistent attitudes towards Napoleon: in the negotiations Hawkesbury (the foreign secretary) came to realise that there was only one way to deal with French tactics and that was to ?stick to your own set of terms and ignore the Bonapartist flummery? (p. 37). More generally the government was prepared to give Napoleon the opportunity for peace and although it is true that a lot was given up in the Treaty, an experimental peace had to be tried.

The details of the negotiations in the rather complex world of European diplomacy are dealt with effectively without particularly presenting information for information?s sake. On a general level, Grainger skilfully sets out the different diplomatic situations of Britain and France, particularly highlighting the long ?not war but not peace? condition between the Preliminaries and the actual treaty. At the other end of the spectrum, the extent and certainty with which the Malta problem is handled is excellent. Grainger guides the reader through the Malta problem in sufficient depth to show the complicated nature of the question, involving as it did the Order of the Knights of St. John, the Maltese, a Grand Master who resided in Austria and whose resignation had not been accepted, the Pope and, of course, the Tsar, all of which had to be taken into consideration by Britain. It was not surprising that the clause on Malta was the longest and most complicated in the treaty. Usually, the British retention of Malta is given as the reason for the resumption of hostilities, but through this careful study of the problem *The Amiens Truce* shows that Britain was prepared to give up Malta if the guarantees in the clause were fulfilled. Essentially Malta, and the eastern Mediterranean generally, provided a litmus test for French intentions and, coupled with Napoleon?s disregard for other clauses in the treaty and the exploitation of the Treaty of Lunéville with Austria, the Addington government felt war was necessary.

The Amiens Truce provides much more than this diplomatic account. Firstly there is a prologue on the rise of Bonaparte and equal time is devoted to the formation of the Addington government. Throughout the work Grainger deals with the complex military and strategic situation, particularly focusing on the revolutionary threat in Ireland within its international dimensions, and the relation with the French expeditions that were preparing (which eventually sailed for the Caribbean). Moreover, in the limbo state between war and peace that existed during 1802, Grainger continues to chart the military situation. Such information adds to the general scene of the negotiations and, for the most part, is useful particularly in the case of military actions as they were often used by the French as part of their negotiating tactics.

The work also focuses on the leading British personalities who have often been treated quite unfairly. Elsewhere Cornwallis has been described as ?inexperienced?(1) but Grainger is emphatic: ?quite clearly he [Cornwallis] knew what he was doing, had confidence in his work, and was responsible for the treaty as much as anyone? (p. 76) and, more generally, Cornwallis?s long service to Britain as a general/administrator is highlighted, and rightly so. In a similar view, Hawkesbury?s abilities are pointed to although he was rather inexperienced when he took the seals as Foreign Secretary in 1801, but his political career was already 10 years old and, despite changes in title which mask his continuity in office, he went on to become Prime Minister after a successful stint as Secretary of War. In this sense *The Amiens Truce* can be seen as part of the more general attempt to rehabilitate the Addington administration and its personnel, in line with the biography of Addington by Philip Ziegler and Christopher Hall?s article on the government?s conduct of the war up to 1804.(2)

This challenge to some historical views stems from Grainger?s close reading of the British diplomatic sources, rather than relying on the contemporary opinions of the treaty that were, at best, lukewarm. Such close work with the diplomatic sources provides both strengths and weaknesses. As to the strengths, that is clear by the outline in the above; but as to the weaknesses, two in particular emerge. The first is that by focusing almost exclusively on British diplomatic sources, in places the other side of the story feels like it is missing. Often French intentions are guessed through studying the material the British received (and is

available today) and so there are occasional allusions that Napoleon might have been directing events which are without any evidence. By a little more research (if only Napoleon's *Correspondence*) some of this could be cleared up more satisfactorily. To the author's credit, he admits that the book concentrates on the British side to the exclusion of others, as it would be easy to produce a much more voluminous work on the French side alone (and he hopes that one day this will be produced). However, such awareness does not remedy the deficiency. The second problem resulting from such a close relationship to the sources is that it occasionally reads like a report on the sources, rather than weaving the material into a history; sentences such as 'Cornwallis's report is optimistic as to an early conclusion' (p. 60), although not seriously questionable, does pose questions about the dialogue between the sources and the work.

Perhaps this is most clearly shown in the account of the outbreak of war. Details are provided of the various correspondences between Hawkesbury and the French government, but nothing is really shown as to why, at that particular point, the British government decided to take a much firmer stand against France. Grainger clearly lists the concerns that Britain had, and equally clearly shows the escalation of tension in 1803; what does not emerge that succinctly is why a war was averted in March 1803 yet not in May. This is the pitfall of fairly straightforward narrative account – it is not always that clear on the whys or the changes over time.

Consequently, the larger scale analysis is left to the conclusion, and within this is the biggest statement of the whole book: that support for war in 1803 was unanimous and continued throughout the war because of Napoleon's actions during the peace. This is a very bold and contentious statement to make and, in part, is covered by an analysis of the accounts of those who went to France during 1801–1803. The research on these travel accounts is interesting and opens up an appealing avenue of historical inquiry, particularly useful in this case as the Amiens Treaty was not being judged purely in a diplomatic/political arena: for Britain it was also subject to public scrutiny (at least the scrutiny of a politically aware class in Britain). His work on this does ensure that the book moves beyond a purely political account of Amiens, and for this he is to be praised. However, it is clear that there is potentially much more here and, in particular, by focusing solely on accounts of those who went to France, it necessarily misses more general accounts of France/Bonaparte/Amiens. Such research would have been an enormous addition to the book, and may well have supported the author's contentious proposition.

Grainger's assertion that the support for the war was unanimous is not supported by the evidence that he presents, and he falls into line with the rather tired historical cliché that patriotic Britain rose as one in defiance of Napoleon, united in the will to defeat the Corsican upstart. This interpretation would need a serious variety of sources to be credible and to overturn recent historical inquiry. From the material presented it would, at best, be fair to say that the British government was agreed at the time that it must fight Napoleon. Even then, this consensus was never unanimous nor continuous: there were peace proposals in 1806 by the Ministry of the Talents (albeit half-hearted, but at least it indicates that there was still pressure for peace); serious parliamentary debate over the wisdom of continuing the war in the Peninsula; and outside parliament a more general campaign for peace, despite the unrealistic expectations that the peace campaigners had of Napoleon. In the latter case, J. E. Cookson's *The Friends of Peace* shows that anti-war liberals were agreed that 'the cause of liberty was being upheld in Great Britain' (3) at the resumption of the war in May 1803, but this support was conditional on the war being defensive and so they often glossed over the responsibility for the outbreak on the war and instead concentrated on Napoleon's invasion plans. As a result, as the war went on, their support for the conflict declined and they returned to opposing the conflict with France, not out of any regard for the Emperor, but due to an interpretation of the realities of French power and the changed world order. Britain, seeing continental allies smashed time and again by the French armies between 1805 and 1809, was fighting a purposeless war.(4) The anti-war liberals may have got their interpretation wrong – the massive fleet building programme initiated by Napoleon points towards a return to a 'defensive' war for Britain at some stage (5) – but by ignoring later history, for instance the 150,000 who supported a peace petition in 1808 from Yorkshire and Lancashire and the subtleties of the support for the war (6), Grainger demonstrates a lack of historical context and his position on the support for the war does not stand up to scrutiny. Furthermore, a closer examination of early stages of the war clearly shows a government cajoling a nation into action: the best example of this is the volunteers – who gained exemption

from the militia ballot and were raised under the threat of compulsory training and with so hardly a good indicator of unanimous political support.[\(7\)](#)

The author is quite correct to highlight the peace period as important in the wider context of the wars between 1792 and 1815. Grainger is right to state that Napoleon's actions during the peace indicated that Napoleon did not see treaties as a final settlement. Napoleon also viewed Amiens as an experiment but in very different terms: he was trying expansion through peace. This lesson might not have been taken on board quite as readily as Grainger suggests (as the peace proposals in 1806 hint at and the consideration of peace deals with Napoleon in 1813 and 1814 both indicate). Grainger clearly and in great detail shows that this period was not merely a temporary truce caused by military and financial exhaustion and strategic stalemate. The history of the Amiens truce demonstrates it to be an important break between the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars and, although Grainger may have overstated his case on some issues, the work is to be welcomed for providing a detailed account of the eighteen months when there was peace between Napoleonic France and Britain.

Notes

1. Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics 1763-1848* (Oxford, 1994), p. 227.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Christopher D. Hall, 'Addington at war: unspectacular but not unsuccessful?', *Historical Research*, 61 (1988), 306-15; Philip Ziegler, *Addington: a Life of Henry Addington, 1st Viscount Sidmouth* (1965). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. J. E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace: Anti-war liberalism in England, 1793-1815* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 173.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace*, pp. 182-5.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. R. Glover, 'The French Fleet, 1807-1814: Britain's Problem; and Madison's Opportunity?', *Journal of Modern History*, 39 (1967), 233-52.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace*, p. 190.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. J. W. Fortescue, *The County Lieutenancies and the Army 1803-1814* (1909), pp. 30-34, 64-65; K. B. Linch, 'A Geography of Loyalism?: The local military forces of the West Riding of Yorkshire, 1794-1814?', *War and Society*, 19 (2001), 1-21.[Back to \(7\)](#)

The author is pleased to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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