Encyclopedia of the Wars of the Early American Republic, 1783-1812: A Political, Social, and Military History

The editors believe that The Encyclopedia of the Wars of the Early American Republic, 1783–1812: A Political, Social, and Military History is the first to be dedicated to the military history of the early United States, and on this evidence it has been long overdue. Anyone who imagines that the formative years of the American Republic were not shaped by military concerns would benefit from browsing through the entries in this encyclopedia. The social and political landscape of this period was shaped by conflicts with Native Americans, confrontations with European powers, and fears of insurrection at home. These and other topics are covered in the first two volumes with over 600 entries alongside numerous maps and illustrations. The third volume consists of 120 documents, ranging chronologically from the Declaration of Independence to Tecumseh’s Speech to the Osages. After the documents are appendices on medals and decorations, military rank structures, a glossary, a chronology, and a selected bibliography.

The Encyclopedia of the Wars of the Early American Republic is the latest in an impressive series on military history published by ABC-CLIO. Written in a popular style, with plenty of black and white illustrations and maps, the double-columned printed version is easy to use and should appeal to students of all levels. The eBook is just as useable, and in many respects offers greater accessibility, although in the opinion of this reviewer lacks some of the coherence of the printed volumes.

One question to ask of any reference work is whether they will be used, and how. There is certainly enough
substance of value here that this encyclopedia should be welcome on the shelves of any student or scholar of the early United States. Whether commercial enterprises like this can compete in the long-term with freely available wiki encyclopedias, notably Wikipedia, or continually updated subscription services, such as the Oxford Reference Online, I am less sure.

There is certainly no doubting the quality of the content on offer here. Previous offerings in the series are noteworthy for their range of coverage and attention to detail, and The Encyclopedia of the Wars of the Early American Republic is no exception. Tucker, his editorial team, and a host of contributors have made great efforts to ensure that every entry contains relevant information based on up-to-date scholarship, while remaining readable and succinct. Many entries abound with enlightening details, often in the form of tables or figures.

The encyclopedia is at its best when dealing with military matters. There are rich entries on the War of 1812 that draw from a previous contribution to the series, The Encyclopedia of the War of 1812: A Political, Social, and Military History, published in 2012. As well as a comprehensive overview of the conflict and its causes, the deterioration of relations between Great Britain and the United States are outlined in detailed entries of individual events. Readers unfamiliar with the topic are able to familiarise themselves with numerous contextual entries such as the ‘French Revolutionary Wars’, the ‘Continental System’, and the ‘Royal Navy’. Entries regarding the Tripolitanian War of 1801–5 likewise balance pinpoint detail with broad context. A detailed overview of the conflict is complimented by contextual entries on the United States navy, the relevant North African states, and Barbary piracy. The reader is invited to pursue the story in more detail through entries on the Dey of Algiers, the Pasha of Morocco, and the Tripolitanian ambassador to Great Britain.

The scope of The Encyclopedia of the Wars of the Early American Republic is by no means limited to discussions of battles and generals, however. Detailed entries on weaponry, tactics, treaties, and institutions are complemented by efforts to incorporate recent trends towards social and cultural aspects of military history. These are especially in evidence when the encyclopedia looks west, into the North American continent. A wide range of entries capture something of the complexity of the United States’ relationship with Native Americans, and its impact on military developments. Entries on separate conflicts, individual tribes and leading personalities illustrate that frontier warfare was both highly unpredictable and frequently changeable. Other entries highlight the significance of cultural practices on Native American and European-American notions of war.

Nor is this merely an encyclopedia of military history. Personalities from a range of fields, social issues, literature and art are just some of the subjects included, and it justifies its subtitle as a social, political and military history. Once again, broad entries such as ‘Industrial Revolution’, ‘Women’, and ‘Slave Trade’, provide useful background context for understanding more specific examples, such as the Lowell System, an industrial textile labour system that underpinned the first textile mill in the United States that opened in Boston in 1814. The Encyclopedia of the Wars of the Early American Republic is particularly sensitive to the emergence of political parties and ideologies during the period. As well as the importance of these developments in their own right, the encyclopedia emphasises how political deliberations were often inextricably connected to military concerns. On occasion this could be developed further. The entry on the ‘Militia’, for example, is concerned with the military capabilities of the institution, rather than its political machinations.

The entries will therefore prove useful to the student and the scholar of the early republic alike. For the most part, however, the reader is left to pursue their own path through the material available. This is not a chore: the entries are arranged alphabetically, and each is followed by suggestions to related topics. In the eBook, these are hyperlinked, which enables even easier navigation. A categorical index (as well as an alphabetised one) and, in the eBook, a search function also aid the researcher. Yet I was left wondering if this was enough guidance, especially for a reader new to the topic. There is an introduction by Alan Taylor that draws out some of the most important themes of the encyclopedia, notably the impact of war on the early republic, as well as an overview by the editor, which provides a useful chronological outline of the period. But the riches
of these volumes could be made clearer by the inclusion of one or more critical essays that offer the student an approach to grappling with the material and analysing the major themes within.

Nor is there any engagement with the historiography of the period, no doubt a decision based upon judgments of available space and scope. However, even a limited overview of how scholarly interpretations have shifted over the last two centuries can help us understand why a particular topic is significant, and why we have reached our current conclusions. Without an appreciation of the historiographical changes, history itself can seem static and immovable, when we should be encouraging students to think the opposite. The study of loyalism, for example, has rarely been without some form of scholarly contention. The recent efforts by historians such as Maya Jasanoff, Jeremy Banister and Liam Riordan to situate the experience of loyalists in an Atlantic context is all the more poignant when we understand that previously loyalism had been considered predominantly in a more limited framework. A brief discussion of loyalist demography would benefit from placing Paul H. Smith’s revisionism within the context of how loyalism was understood in the late 19th and early 20th century. As an aid to further research a selected bibliography accompanies each entry, but with no discussion of the scholarship the reader is left to judge for themselves the relative significance of the works cited.

More detailed analytical and historiographical background would have been especially welcomed in the documents volume. This volume provides an excellent introduction to the primary sources of the period, and should prove invaluable to any student new to the history of the early republic. A wide variety of source material is included that ranges from official decrees and treaties, to cartoons, literature, correspondence and eyewitness accounts. These diverse sources, brought together in a single volume, are each accompanied by a brief introduction that provides context for the document in question. It is here that this volume falls short. By focusing predominantly on the background and provenance of the source, the introductions often fail to adequately explain their significance. This pattern is established from the very first document, the Declaration of Independence. The introduction concisely explains the process of drafting, revising, passing and distributing the Declaration, but its wider significance is left unexplained. Perhaps an explanation was deemed unnecessary due to the Declaration’s seeming ubiquity. However, I would propose that the very fact that the Declaration is so well known makes it even more vital that the editors explain its wider ramifications, especially those that concern military developments in the early republic. Engaging, if only briefly, with some of the vast scholarship on the subject would only further enhance our reading of the document. On other occasions, a discussion of the historiographical literature would allow the reader to judge why a particular source was included, and not another. Why, for example, the British cartoon ‘Property Protected’ from 1798 that ridicules the XYZ Affair, when there are a plethora of cartoons satirising different topics throughout the period? Or why use a novel published by Emerson Bennett in 1848 to discuss Simon Girty? Why not Uriah James Jones’s novel of 1846 or Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s theatrical tragedy published in 1783? These questions could be at least partially addressed through a more critical introduction.

The need for greater critical analysis is all the more relevant in the documents volume, considering that the vast majority of these sources are available elsewhere, either in other published collections, or online. Replication of this sort is not necessarily a concern, and in fact would be difficult to avoid, but it does mean that this volume has to work harder to emphasise its value. Adding scholarly criticism to the contextual introduction would distinguish the documents in this publication from the multitude freely available elsewhere. Explicitly explaining the connections between the other documents and the themes running through the encyclopedia would be beneficial to students and scholars alike. Hyperlinks to related entries in the earlier volumes would have been especially useful in the eBook.

The Encyclopedia of the Wars of the Early American Republic will be a welcome addition to the shelves of any library. Its readable style and thoroughly researched entries will make it valuable to any student, especially those new to certain topics. How long this encyclopedia will remain useful is less clear. Many of the entries here are far more detailed than those in the Oxford Reference Online, although this may not always be the case as the latter continues to be updated. Other entries cover people, events or subjects that
could not be easily found elsewhere, and certainly not to an equal standard. However, the fact remains that for many subjects Wikipedia offered entries that were as good, if not better, than those available here. Wikipedia entries were often longer, better referenced, and with more comprehensive bibliographies. *The Encyclopedia of the Wars of the Early American Republic* compliments rather than replaces other reference works like these and should no doubt be read alongside them. Hopefully these excellent volumes can prove that printed encyclopedias still have a place rather than disappearing from our libraries for good.

Notes


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