

BOOKSHELF

‘The Howe Dynasty’ Review: An Imperial Family

The brothers led Britain’s military campaigns in America while their sister shrewdly campaigned for them from London.

By Stephen Brumwell

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On the hot afternoon of July 6, 1758, advance troops of a vast Anglo-American army probed through forest toward the French fortress of Ticonderoga, in what is now upstate New York. As skirmishing suddenly erupted, the woods crackled with gunfire. Casualties were minimal but momentous: Shot through the heart, and among the first to fall, was the army’s charismatic second-in-command, British Brig. Gen. George Augustus, Lord Howe.

Since arriving in America the previous summer, the dynamic and popular Lord Howe had galvanized hopes of reviving a flagging colonial war against the French. The calamity of his death was soon compounded by another: Two days later, the flustered Maj. Gen. James Abercromby authorized a frontal assault that was repulsed at a heavy cost in killed and wounded.

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**The Howe Dynasty: The Untold Story of
a Military Family and the Women
Behind Britain’s Wars for America**

By Julia Flavell

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The loss of George Howe at age 33 was not simply a jarring setback in Britain's struggle with France but a personal tragedy for the aristocratic family he headed. Back in England, his widowed mother, Charlotte, Lady Howe, led the official mourning. Despite her grief, she worked to ensure that the seat in Parliament left vacant by George's sacrifice was filled by one of his surviving brothers rather than an outsider. It was an action that won widespread admiration, inviting comparisons with the stoical matrons of ancient Rome.

Yet as Julie Flavell reveals in "The Howe Dynasty," it was just one example of the way in which extraordinary Howe women transcended their expected gender roles to enter spheres of influence dominated by men. Ms. Flavell, an independent scholar who specializes in British-American relations, traces the fortunes of Lady Howe and her extensive brood. Key characters include George's younger brothers Richard and William, who likewise played prominent roles in Britain's imperial conflicts, and their lesser-known—but no less remarkable—elder sister Caroline. During a long lifetime, Caroline Howe (1722-1814) was a dedicated correspondent, expressing opinions that not only provide a fresh perspective on her notoriously taciturn brothers but offer fascinating glimpses into the rarefied world of the English aristocracy.

Spanning almost a century of the Georgian era, "The Howe Dynasty" presents a richly detailed and lively saga of one of its most distinguished families. Challenging and insightful, it reflects impressive scholarship, grounded in exhaustive archival research on both sides of the Atlantic. An especially valuable source is the correspondence that Caroline Howe maintained over more than 50 years of friendship with Lady Georgiana Spencer, mother of the celebrated leader of fashion, Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire.

"The Howe Dynasty" shows how women whose supreme function in life was to produce male heirs could nonetheless find a voice through informal "networking," establishing crucial contacts in the drawing room or on the hunting field that could be mobilized to secure favors and control opinion.

Charlotte von Kielmansegg was only 15 when she married Emanuel Scrope Howe, 2nd Viscount Howe, in 1719. At her husband's death in 1735, Lady Howe had already borne him 10 children, eight of whom lived into adulthood. Her direction of family affairs was later aided by a redoubtable sister-in-law, Mary, Lady Pembroke. She dedicated herself to schooling Lady Charlotte and Caroline in the subtle arts of exercising influence at court and in the country. In Ms. Flavell's assessment, mother and daughter alike became "apt pupils of their capable kinswoman."



Caroline Howe (1812), by Henry Howard.

PHOTO: PRIVATE COLLECTION/KEITH SIMPSON

The Howes shared the same Hanoverian ancestry as their monarchs, and it was widely credited that Charlotte was the illegitimate offspring of King George I of Great Britain. Thanks to Lady Pembroke's persistent lobbying, Charlotte became lady-in-waiting to Princess Augusta, the wife of Frederick, Prince of Wales. This was a vital conduit of patronage that proved pivotal for reviving the Howe fortunes. In her turn, Caroline established a rapport with the unconventional Princess Amelia—the aunt of George III—who shared her love of hunting, gossip and cards.

Caroline's brother Richard began his career at sea in the merchant navy without the benefit of family connections, but they were instrumental in securing prestigious army commissions for George and William. By the onset of the Seven Years' War (1756-63), all three brothers were veterans, and George had already demonstrated the forceful leadership that soon led to his death at Ticonderoga.

George's siblings were not slow to exact vengeance. In 1759, they distinguished themselves in the most decisive encounters of Britain's *annus mirabilis*. That September, at Quebec, Col. William Howe led a daring nighttime escalade of the cliffs above the city, paving the way for Gen. James Wolfe's famous victory on the Plains of Abraham. Two months later, Commodore Richard (who had inherited the title Lord Howe) played an equally important role in the battle of Quiberon Bay. Fought in a raging storm off the Breton coast, it wrecked French sea power.

The Howe brothers came to personify British valor. Richard was known as "Black Dick" because of his swarthy complexion. The genesis of William's nickname, "the Savage," is more mysterious. First appearing in one of Caroline's letters of 1761, it may reflect his contact with Native American warriors during his recent Canadian service. A legend that William came home wearing "buckskins and Indian moccasins" leads Ms. Flavell to speculate that he may be the hitherto unidentified figure dressed in such frontier clothing in Benjamin West's iconic painting "The Death of General Wolfe." If so, it is the only surviving image of him taken from life.

George Howe was commemorated in 1762, when a monument funded by the admiring colony of Massachusetts Bay was unveiled in Westminster Abbey. Testimony to the shared war effort against France, the memorial was a gesture of respect from the colonists that Richard and William never forgot, and it colored their attitudes as American resistance to the crown's taxation policies heightened tension.

By 1774, civil war within the British Empire appeared increasingly inevitable. Through meticulous research, and by triangulating sources not previously combined, Ms. Flavell makes a convincing case that the resourceful Caroline Howe was instrumental in orchestrating a last-ditch attempt to avert armed conflict.

Exploiting her extensive social network, Caroline acted as a go-between to organize face-to-face meetings between Benjamin Franklin, the London agent for several American colonies, and her brother Richard. Caroline lured Franklin to her home on Mayfair's fashionable Grafton Street by challenging him to a bout of chess. Franklin was impressed by his opponent: "I have never conceived a higher opinion of the discretion and excellent understanding of any woman on so short an acquaintance," his journal reports. It was not until Christmas Day, 1774, after several enjoyable games, that Franklin began to realize what was truly at stake. Upon his arrival, Ms. Flavell writes, his hostess "asked whether he would like to meet her brother, Lord Howe," who took the opportunity to express alarm at the escalating American crisis and to say that he hoped Franklin might work toward reconciliation.

While Caroline's stratagem failed to prevent the Revolutionary War, it underlines a central theme of Ms. Flavell's book: that determined and well-connected women could move beyond their strictly delineated positions and seek to affect political affairs. As the expected war unfolded, and her brothers played controversial roles as commanders of the British army and navy in North America, it required all Caroline's talents on the home front to defend their battered reputations.

When hostilities commenced in 1775, William Howe was among the generals sent to Boston to stiffen the resolve of its beleaguered British garrison. In June he fought at Bunker Hill, a Pyrrhic victory that many historians believe left him traumatized and reluctant to authorize further attacks likely to incur equally heavy casualties.

Such hesitancy has been detected in Howe's conduct of the battle of Brooklyn in August 1776, when, as commander in chief, he routed Gen. George Washington's raw troops but failed to finish them off by storming their entrenchments. That respite allowed Washington to evacuate his army to Manhattan and fight again.

Acknowledging that Howe unwittingly spurned Britain's best opportunity to snuff-out the rebellion, Ms. Flavell is unconvinced that he called a halt through fear of another bloodbath. Rather, Howe was concerned that his exultant Redcoats were out of control and vulnerable to counterattack. Months later, he unleashed his regiments in a successful assault against the formidable Fort Washington in upper Manhattan—a curiously bold move for a commander allegedly averse to risk.

Tidings of William Howe's victorious New York campaign met acclaim in London and earned him a knighthood. But they were soon followed by reports of George Washington's devastating ripostes against Trenton and Princeton and grumbling that the Howes lacked the killer instinct. Because both William and Richard were also appointed as peace commissioners, it was tempting to suggest that they were more interested in talking than fighting. But for the ambitious and patriotic Howes, the mailed fist and the velvet glove were not incompatible. Hopeful of negotiating peace, they accepted that the rebels must *first* be humbled on the battlefield.

Mounting criticism of the brothers was disseminated by a burgeoning newspaper industry. On the home front, Caroline Howe fought tenaciously to control the media narrative. But nothing could deflect disapproval of Sir William's part in a campaign that ultimately proved fatal to Britain's hopes of retaining America. In September 1777, he trounced Washington at Brandywine and captured Philadelphia, but that triumph was soon overshadowed by a far heavier defeat, when Gen. John Burgoyne surrendered another British army at Saratoga, encouraging France to enter the war as an American ally.

Amid the scramble to apportion blame for the debacle, Sir William, as commander in chief, was accused of leaving the hapless Burgoyne in the lurch. For once, even the indefatigable Caroline was rattled. As if symptomatic of the downturn in her brother's fortunes, she experienced an ominous run of bad luck at the card table.

Without doubt, William was culpable of some blunders. His decision to approach Pennsylvania by sea, rather than overland, meant costly delays, while failing to recognize that the rebels could field two substantial armies underestimated the dangers facing the reckless Burgoyne. But Ms. Flavell argues forcefully that the underlying responsibility for disaster lay with the hawkish American secretary, Lord George Germain, who insisted upon orchestrating strategy from across the Atlantic. Above all, Germain failed to issue Howe with timely and unambiguous instructions, or even make it clear that he was expected to cooperate with Burgoyne.

Demoralized by hostile press, William requested to be relieved of his command. He went home in May 1778, but Richard stayed behind, where his professional competence helped to keep the Howes afloat. In August, he fended off a French fleet supporting a patriot offensive against British-held Newport, R.I.

During 1779, William Howe defended his conduct in America before Parliament. But it was in October 1782, after the American war had already been lost and Britain was grimly battling on against her traditional European enemies, that Adm. Richard Howe secured a morale-boosting success that went far to restore both his country's and his family's prestige. As commander of the Channel Fleet, he evaded a superior Franco-Spanish flotilla to resupply the besieged garrison of Gibraltar, then rebuffed his pursuers on the homeward passage.

When he was in his late 60s, and embarked upon his fourth war, "Black Dick" rehabilitated his dynasty beyond all doubt. In 1794 on "the Glorious First of June," he won a celebrated naval victory over Revolutionary France. A grateful George III presented him with a diamond-encrusted sword. Caroline was ecstatic at this vindication, writing to Lady Spencer that she was "wild with joy" and overwhelmed with notes of congratulation and visits from well-wishers.

Given Caroline Howe's significance, it is regrettable that there is no surviving portrait depicting her during her indomitable prime. Yet a likeness painted when she was about 90 includes telling details. As befits such a prolific correspondent, Caroline sits at her writing desk, quill in hand. Artist Henry Howard also showed Caroline's treasured chess pieces, a reminder of those memorable matches with Benjamin Franklin 40 years earlier—and of the other gambits she deployed to uphold her proud family name.

—*Mr. Brumwell is the author of "Paths of Glory: The Life and Death of General James Wolfe."*