

Brothers in Arms

The saga of a famous English military family as chronicled by its female members.

By RICK ATKINSON

PITY THE POOR Howe family of 18th-century England. If the clan is remembered at all, it's usually for complicity in that debacle of imperial overreach known as the American Revolution.

One Howe son, William, commanded all British Army forces in America for nearly three years while the rebellious colonies more than held their own on the battlefield. His older brother, Richard, commanded the mighty Royal Navy on the North American station for much of the same period

THE HOWE DYNASTY

The Untold Story of a Military Family and the Women Behind Britain's Wars for America

By Julie Flavell

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without conspicuous success, even though the rebels hardly had a navy worthy of the name. A third brother, George, considered by some the best soldier in the British Army, did not live long enough to fight the Americans, having been shot dead in a confused skirmish in the New York wilderness during the French and Indian War.

Vilified and mocked for ineptitude, accused of secretly supporting the rebel cause, the Howes became scapegoats both for those appalled by Britain's violent suppression of the American insurrection and for those convinced that it was not violent enough.

Yet the Howe story is more compelling than the stupid redcoats caricature that has persisted for more than two centuries, as Julie Flavell demonstrates in "The Howe Dynasty," her vibrant biography of the accomplished, beguiling family. By widening her lens to include various Howe women — usually considered bit players, if not nonentities, in military histories — Flavell illuminates not only Britain at war, but also the larger world of 18th-century Georgian culture that provides war's backdrop. She tells her story well, with thorough documentation, providing context and insight into how Britain blundered so badly, and then recovered from those blunders.

The family matriarch, Charlotte von Kielmansegg, had emigrated as a young girl to London from Hanover when her family joined the court of King George I, another German, who had been offered the British crown to keep it atop a Protestant head. Charlotte married Scrope Howe, a second-tier aristocrat whose viscountcy was only an Irish peerage, precluding a

seat in the House of Lords. Ten children followed, most of whom survived to adulthood.

Two years after being appointed governor of Barbados in 1732, with a handsome salary of 7,000 pounds a year, Scrope, just 36, abruptly sickened and died, forcing his family to find innovative ways to revive its fortunes. His widow, the dowager Lady Howe, found a paying position at court, allowing her to promote the virtues of her children. The next generation ascended.

Caroline, the family's eldest daughter, remains the most appealing and was likely the smartest of the brood. A reader of Shakespeare, Voltaire and Thucydides, with a passion for mathematics, politics and languages, Caroline was fluent in French, and capable in Italian and Latin; later in life she took up ancient Greek. By coincidence she married a man with the same last name, and Caroline was known to her friends as "Howey." Her husband died in 1769, consigning her to a long but robust widowhood, much of it spent cultivating her brothers' interests. A family friend confessed, "How exceedingly do I respect the Howe family for their love to each other."

The tart social critic Horace Walpole wrote that the Howes were "undaunted as a rock, and as silent," and the incineration of family papers in a 19th-century house fire has mostly kept them silent. But Flavell has extensively mined a half-century of Caroline's correspondence with her most intimate friend, Georgiana Spencer, a rich countess. Those tens of thousands of pages, likely the largest single collection of letters in the British Library, confirm that war was both disastrous and propulsive for the Howe dynasty.

The combat death of young George in 1758 on that New York battlefield made Richard the new viscount and family patriarch. Having gone to sea in 1736, the beginning of a six-decade career as one of Britain's greatest fighting sailors, Richard by 1760 had participated in 57 naval battles, with many more to come. He so distinguished himself in the Seven Years' War — known in America as the French and Indian War — that George III, who became king shortly before Britain's triumphant victory in the struggle, later called Richard his "trusty and well-beloved cousin."

William, who took an army commission in 1746, won fame in the same war by leading his troops up a near-vertical river bluff

in Britain's celebrated defeat of the French at Quebec in September 1759. Siblings nicknamed him "the Savage." The fighting Howes emerged from the war as household names in Britain and America. Four Howe brothers would hold seats in Parliament.

In December 1774, Caroline initiated a three-month series of sociable chess matches in her Grafton Street townhouse against Benjamin Franklin, then an agent for colonial interests in London. She became the conduit for last-gasp British gov-

Howe commanded the bloody British catastrophe on Bunker Hill in June 1775, which left at least 226 redcoats dead, and he was the commander responsible for British defeats 18 months later at Trenton and Princeton. More damning, William contributed to Britain's strategic incoherence with a meandering campaign against Philadelphia in 1777 that was wholly disconnected from a simultaneous sortie out of Canada toward the Hudson River — the prelude to America's stunning triumph at Saratoga. He bore much culpability for

Britain's abominable treatment of American prisoners, thousands of whom died from hunger, disease and neglect.

By the time William was recalled to England in 1778 (he had requested to leave), followed a few months later by Richard, the prospect of a British victory had all but vanished. Five more years of war under different senior commanders would prove the point. At home the Howe brothers were pelted with fatuous assertions that they were war profiteers, or rebel sympathizers, or limp in their war-making — a charge that would baffle Americans whose men were bayoneted, women raped and towns burned. The Howes fought back in parliamentary hearings, pamphlet salvos and drawing room pleadings. But, as one critic observed, "The fault must be laid somewhere to account for the miscarriage of an undertaking which has been given out as impossible to fail." Walpole concluded simply, "The Howes are not in fashion."

Yet they soon came back in fashion. One rehabilitation followed another. With the

American war succeeded by another protracted struggle against the French, Richard was appointed first lord of the Admiralty and later took command of the Channel Fleet to win the greatest naval victory in living memory, the "Glorious First of June" in 1794. William was promoted to full general, supervising troop training and defense of the home islands. Both lived to an old age, in honor.

The Howes have long been opaque and even inscrutable. Flavell's scholarship and deft storytelling add nuance, sympathy and granularity to the family portrait. As for Caroline, she lived into her 90s before dying in 1814. "You have a soul that could govern a nation," a friend told her. Given her intelligence and wily pragmatism, had she been granted a free hand to negotiate with those fractious colonials, perhaps things might have turned out differently. □



Caroline Howe at 90, in 1813.

ernment efforts to avoid bloodshed in America. Nothing came of the efforts, but Franklin, who soon sailed home to join the revolutionaries, confessed, "I never conceived a higher opinion of the discretion and excellent understanding of any woman on so short an acquaintance."

WHEN THE AMERICAN REBELLION became a shooting war in 1775, the crown turned to Richard and William, now a vice admiral and a major general, respectively. Forced to patrol a 1,000-mile American coastline, to escort supply and troop transports across the North Atlantic, and to support British Army operations, Richard made the best of a bad lot while battling American privateers and, soon enough, French warships allied with the rebels.

Flavell's effort to resuscitate William's military reputation is a heavy lift. General

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