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# Commanders and Courtiers

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The Howe family achieved an influential position of power in late-eighteenth-century Britain, propelled by the shrewd social intelligence of the Howe women.

**Reviewed:**

**The Howe Dynasty: The Untold Story of a Military Family and the Women Behind Britain's Wars for America**
by Julie Flavell
Liveright, 462 pp., $35.00

Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs/New York Public Library

Benjamin Franklin playing chess with Lady Caroline Howe while Admiral Lord Richard Howe looks on, London, December 1774; watercolor circa 1875–1885

Lost wars, especially when defeat comes as a rude surprise, inevitably spark painful self-examination. Pundits and politicians, and then historians, generally ask the same questions. How could a strong and confident nation have suffered such an embarrassing setback? Who precisely is to blame? How could the leaders directing the war have failed so spectacularly to devise a winning strategy? And perhaps most

important, what should the losers learn from a contest that revealed their profound ignorance about the character of their adversaries?

Such scrutiny is an important element in moving forward, since swirling uncertainty about responsibility can lend credibility to conspiracy theories denouncing mysterious internal enemies who allegedly betrayed their country. The process is all too familiar. In the United States the debate about the causes of the fall of Saigon in 1975 still generates bitter analysis. No doubt the chaotic departure of American troops from Afghanistan in 2021 will fuel strident commentary for many years.

The British found themselves in this situation after the American Revolution. When the war began, they had great confidence in their ability to quickly defeat the colonial insurgents. After all, during the Seven Years' War (1756–1763) Great Britain had won a stunning victory over the French. Many generals who had served in the North American campaign had gained vital knowledge about waging war on rough terrain three thousand miles from home. Moreover, Britain had the most formidable navy in the world, and once the American colonists showed a willingness to fight, it dispatched over 25,000 troops across the Atlantic.

Overwhelming military strength encouraged complacence. In 1775 George III and leading members of Parliament predicted a huge show of force would end American dreams of independence. A year or two was all it would take to bring the insurgents to their senses. One British informant reported from America that the soldiers serving under George Washington "are not, as they have been represented, a respectable body of yeomanry, fighting *pro aris et focis* [for God and country]; but a contemptible body of vagrants, deserters and thieves." Their sources of intelligence repeatedly assured British leaders that the great majority of the colonists remained loyal to the mother country. They only needed to see a large occupying army to come forward.

Conditions in America failed to support London's initial optimism. Indications that the colonists might mount substantial resistance persuaded the British that more force was required. Before serious negotiations could begin, they insisted, the rebels had to accept their dependent status. The king selected a series of generals to restore imperial authority. Each one trumpeted his ability to put down the rebellion. General Thomas Gage, who arrived in Boston in 1774, assured George III that the Americans "will be Lions, whilst we are lambs, but if we take the resolute part they will undoubtedly prove very meek."

The American lions who fought at Bunker Hill might perhaps have planted seeds of doubt in London, but British political leaders were unable to accept a negotiated settlement that might undermine the sovereignty of Parliament, and they doubled down on military coercion. They certainly did not want to tell the king what he did not want to hear. New commanders came forward—among them John Burgoyne, Henry Clinton, and Charles Cornwallis—but however brave and determined they may have been, the American troops always managed to slip away to fight another day. The years passed with little to show for Britain's immense expenditure of resources. Little wonder that a member of the House of Lords, the 4th Earl of Jersey, declared in 1777, "The fault must be laid somewhere to account for the miscarriage of an undertaking which has been given out as impossible to fail."

The harshest criticism for the British failure to end the American Revolution fell upon two men who at one crucial moment during the war seemed most likely to succeed: Richard and William Howe. In *The Howe Dynasty*, her impressive account of the rise of the Howe family from relative obscurity early in the eighteenth century to positions of prestige and power during the reign of George III, Julie Flavell provides fresh insight into a privileged society that supported a distant war with little chance of success.

Indeed, the British perspective on the conflict is

one of the book's greatest strengths. American readers may think that independence was largely the result of Washington's dogged determination not to be defeated, but Flavell urges them to consider the other side. In her narrative the British leaders turn out not to have been incompetent fools. Like so many imperial officials over the centuries, however, they were locked into traditional, self-serving assumptions about their own power that blinded them to the social and cultural realities in distant dominions.

Although Flavell's account introduces many different family members over several generations, she shows that the Howes' greatest successes and failures depended chiefly on three brothers who became national celebrities. George Howe served with distinction during the Seven Years' War and died in 1758 leading his troops against the French near Fort Ticonderoga in upstate New York. His courage earned him the respect of the colonists, and the Massachusetts legislature gratefully funded a monument in his honor at Westminster Abbey. Richard gained fame as an admiral, while William became the commander-in-chief of the British army in America. They were aristocrats and members of Parliament, and it came as no surprise that after Gage was called home in 1775, the king selected Richard and William to end the rebellion. Although William had earlier expressed reservations about the rationale for a full-scale war in America, he put them aside when presented with the opportunity to command a huge expeditionary force. Like other British military officers, he assumed that restoring order in the colonies would not be difficult. "I may safely assert," he declared, "that the insurgents are very few, in comparison with the whole of the people."

Whatever his original expectations about the war may have been, the situation proved to be a nightmare for William. Even after his forces had driven Washington's army from New York City in 1777, his actions came under intense attack. Other British generals, such as Clinton, claimed not only that the entire operation had been too

slow to achieve its goals, but also that Howe had not aggressively pursued the retreating American troops at a moment when he could have ended the rebellion in a single bold stroke. British commentators asserted that his extraordinary caution contributed to Washington's surprising successes at Trenton and Princeton. Critics wondered why he had not foreseen the possibility that the Continental Army might cross the Delaware River and seize exposed British outposts.

Rumors spread in England that Howe was lazy, more interested in wine and cards than in bringing the war to a rapid conclusion. Some even suggested that the general spent too much time in the arms of an American mistress or that he wanted the conflict to drag on so that he and his brother might increase their family's wealth. An English newspaper jeered:

> Awake, arouse, Sir Billy,
> There's forage in the plain.
> Ah, leave your little filly
> And open the campaign.

Others wondered whether the shock of seeing so many British soldiers killed at Bunker Hill in 1775 had had a psychological effect on Howe. Perhaps the experience had compromised his will to fight. Even the cabinet member in charge of the war, George Germain, had second thoughts about the man chosen to crush the rebellion. Nothing was going right. John Adams declared to his wife, Abigail, "I would not be an Howe, for all the Empires of the Earth, and all the Riches, and Glories thereof."

Some charges against Howe had no merit. Others, however, were more serious, and there is no question that they have compromised his reputation. At a moment when British victory might have been possible, he seemed to waste time with ponderous preparations. His campaign to take Manhattan, for example, provided detractors in England with unsettling evidence. The transports carrying the British army arrived in New York Harbor in late June 1776, but the assault did not begin for another

month. Howe argued that he needed more troops. To be sure, he eventually executed a brilliant amphibious landing on Long Island, outflanking and trapping Washington's troops. This was the crushing blow that the British believed would end the war. One officer confidently announced, "Everything seems to be over with [the insurgents], and I flatter myself now that this campaign will put a total end to the war."

Celebration was premature. Just when it seemed that the Continentals had been routed, Howe curiously ordered the assault to stop. When critics asked why, he provided confusing answers. He admitted that British soldiers had been on the verge of a glorious victory. They attacked the exposed American positions, he reported, "with such eagerness...that it required repeated orders to prevail upon them to desist from the attempt." How could a general discourage such enthusiasm? Considering the circumstances, Howe offered an unpersuasive explanation: "I would not risk the loss that might have been sustained in the assault." According to the military historian Piers Mackesy, "The decision was a misfortune." In an inspired maneuver of his own, Washington escaped across the East River.

Whether a bolder campaign could have ended the war is a matter of speculation. But the extreme caution that marked Howe's performance during the Battle of Long Island (also known as the Battle of Brooklyn) recurred again in later engagements. Ironically the entire episode taught Washington a valuable lesson: there was little to be gained and a lot to be lost in a full-scale battle with the British. Soon after saving the American army, he wrote, "We should on all occasions avoid a general action, or put anything to the risk, unless compelled by a necessity into which we ought never to be drawn."

Howe failed to regain the full confidence of his superiors in London. The king and his cabinet planned a grand strategy in 1777 to end the revolution. One British army under the

command of Burgoyne would march down from Canada to Albany, while a second force under Howe would secure the Hudson Valley, thus cutting New England off from the southern colonies, which were viewed as less committed to independence from Great Britain.

Operations on such a vast scale invited disaster. Instead of joining Burgoyne's force, Howe decided to transport most of his troops to Pennsylvania, where he expected strong loyalist support. The campaign achieved no significant strategic goals, and after Howe had occupied Philadelphia for some months, his army returned to New York City. In the meantime, Burgoyne had surrendered at Saratoga, a defeat that helped persuade France officially to recognize the independence of the United States.

On the British side the entire episode sparked another round of acrimonious self-analysis during which all the parties involved blamed the others for the failure. Joseph Galloway, an American loyalist living in London, placed the major responsibility for the debacle on Howe. The British general, he insisted, was guilty of "blunders so gross—so contrary to the least degree of military knowledge, that their possibility almost exceeds the utmost extent of our belief. Blunders as fatal to this kingdom as their cause is inexplicable."

Galloway's strident comments were clearly over the top. But a bizarre incident that occurred just before Howe resigned his command in 1777 suggests that he was remarkably insensitive to the growing frustration in England about a war that seemed to be going on too long. When news of his departure circulated among his officers in Philadelphia, they decided to honor him with an extravagant festival called the Mischianza. The main event was a medieval tournament in which British officers observing the rules of chivalry jousted before an audience of young local women dressed in Turkish costume. A spirited contest between the Knights of the Blended Rose and the Knights of the Burning Mountain ended in a tie. The party cost a huge amount of

money and lasted long into the night. Flavell notes:

> Although a few in Britain were persuaded that the elaborate send-off reflected well on a general who returned with no overall victory to show, for most it only served to confirm the impression that the army was not doing enough to win the war and was given over to pleasure and amusement.

Like a good defense attorney, Flavell counters the charges that have sullied Howe's reputation. If she does not quite rate his performance above mediocre, she convincingly demonstrates that he was no more responsible for Britain's defeat than were the king's advisers or other commanders sent to America. Howe may have spent time at the gaming tables and in the company of local women, but these interests never compromised his attention to military detail. The failure to support Burgoyne resulted from miscommunication of strategic aims by cabinet members in London. To be sure, Howe was slow to mount campaigns and hesitated at critical moments to adopt more aggressive tactics, but this was at least in part because it was so hard to replace British soldiers at such a distance.

He had an impossible assignment. As the historian Andrew O'Shaughnessy observed, the British generals lost "not as a result of incompetence and blundering, but because of insufficient resources, the unanticipated lack of loyalist support, and the popularity of the Revolution." The territory occupied by the insurgents was just too large for the British to control. And of course, Howe and the king's friends in Parliament underestimated American resolve. They assumed that belated reforms associated with taxation and commerce would be sufficient to restore imperial rule.

The concessions were always too little, too late. As Benjamin Franklin explained to Richard Howe during a last-ditch negotiation on Staten Island in 1776, the refusal of the British to entertain the possibility of American independence, coupled with their reliance on

brutal military force, destroyed any chance that the colonies would return to subservience: "These atrocious Injuries have extinguished every remaining Spark of Affection for that Parent Country we once held so dear." And then, in an assessment of the war that expressed sorrow as well as defiance, Franklin declared:

> Long did I endeavour with unfeigned and unwearied Zeal, to preserve from breaking, that fine and noble China Vase the British Empire: for I knew that being once broken, the separate Parts could not retain even their Share of the Strength or Value that existed in the Whole.

Flavell's reconstruction of the Howe family—she calls it a dynasty—is much more than an account of the experiences of Richard and William during the American Revolution. She argues persuasively that several strong-willed, intelligent women propelled the entire family to social prominence and helped their brothers and sons win parliamentary elections and gain promotions in the army and navy. The Howe women have gone missing from the histories of this period largely because no one bothered to look through the rich materials in which their hopes and fears found expression. Two figures stand out in this story: Charlotte (1703–1782), the mother of Richard and William, and Caroline (1722–1814), their sister. During the 1750s Caroline began a correspondence with Lady Georgiana Spencer, a leading aristocrat, that lasted some fifty years. Flavell explains that "today the correspondence between Caroline Howe and Lady Spencer, as she was known, is believed to be the largest single private collection of letters in the British Library."

These letters and other family documents reveal a world of privileged people, ambitious, insecure, and competitive. They describe card parties where the women played for large stakes and country outings that amused the members of the English ruling class. It takes a genealogical chart to follow the comings and goings of these elite families as they intermarried and maneuvered for favor at court. Their lives may have seemed an endless round

of entertainments. But they were much more. These gatherings allowed aristocratic women such as Charlotte and Caroline to exercise what Flavell calls "many informal levers of influence."

The members of elite families understood the rules of the game. Rumors served the pursuit of power. A timely word in the ear of a leading cabinet minister or a scandalous piece of gossip shared over tea could determine whether a favored relative received a promotion in the army or a parliamentary nomination. Driving these often frenetic maneuvers was a sense of fragility, an unspoken fear that an unfortunate turn of luck might negate years of striving. An ill-advised marriage or an affair that became too public could ruin the best-laid plans for advancement.

In this perilous society the Howe women acted as publicity agents for the men in their family. Beyond this uncompromising goal, Caroline had no independent ambition. As Flavell observes, she was "no more a feminist than she was a political reformer." Caroline focused much of her life on her brothers' careers. For her, the visits to the country estates of powerful government figures, the viperous card parties, and the gossipy afternoon teas provided opportunities to praise William and Richard, or more often to defend their reputations as the American war failed to yield quick victory. The direct evidence for Caroline's success in this treacherous world is surprisingly thin. Since her letters seldom describe the details of court intrigue, we learn only that she attended events where she undoubtedly encountered scores of parliamentary leaders and their wives. With rare exceptions, it is hard to gauge whether her charm and guile had their intended effect.

Caroline is remembered today—at least in the United States—for her celebrated meeting with Franklin in London on the eve of the American Revolution. Soon after British leaders had publicly humiliated him for allegedly encouraging the insurgency in Boston, he received an unexpected invitation to play chess with Caroline. Just before Christmas 1774 he

accepted. One match followed another, and although no one knows who emerged the winner, Franklin reported that he found her charming and intelligent. “I had never conceiv’d a higher Opinion of the Discretion and excellent Understanding of any Woman on so short an Acquaintance,” he exclaimed. Coming from Franklin that was high praise.

Soon the conversation turned to the American crisis, and Caroline asked, “What is to be done with this Dispute between Britain and the Colonies?” Franklin answered, perhaps a little disingenuously, that they had “no clashing Interest to differ about. It is rather a matter of Punctilio [minor details], which Two or three reasonable People might settle in half an Hour.” Soon thereafter Richard entered the conversation, urging Franklin to put forward a plan that could serve as the basis of negotiation. But however well meant, the games of chess did not bring about reconciliation. Howe insisted that the colonists accept the sovereignty of Parliament. Franklin knew that would never happen.

Flavell’s account of the Howe dynasty invites provocative questions about how the members of the British ruling class perceived the larger world that they were so eager to control. About the same time that Caroline played chess with Franklin, for example, she attended a grand Christmas party. It offered participants—all of them from England’s wealthiest and most powerful families—“the usual indoor diversions of eating, drinking, cards, billiards” and “skating, foxhunting, and riding.” No one apparently gave much thought to the events then occurring in Boston. One complacent aristocrat described the character of London’s elite society at that moment as “very gay, and not in the least concerned about what is passing on the other side of the Atlantic.” There was no reason for concern. After all, Great Britain was unquestionably the world’s dominant commercial and military power. The interests and welfare of the distant subjects of the Crown seldom figured in how the sprawling empire was run.

**T.H. Breen**

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