

[McCurdy on Flavell, 'The Howe Dynasty: The Untold Story of a Military Family and the Women behind Britain's Wars for America'](#)

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Julie Flavell. *The Howe Dynasty: The Untold Story of a Military Family and the Women behind Britain's Wars for America*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W. W. Norton &

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Historians have long been intrigued by the British military leaders who led the British forces in the Revolutionary War, or as Andrew O'Shaughnessy put it, the "men who lost America." [1] Some of these generals and admirals are unknowable because of their aristocratic stoicism and others because their papers have been lost. The Howe brothers are particularly enigmatic for both reasons, and thus rumors and supposition have played a large role in defining Admiral Richard Lord Howe and General Sir William Howe.

Julie Flavell sheds new light on the Howe brothers by looking at not just the two brothers but the family as a whole, especially their capable and loquacious sisters. This allows her to access the letters of the honorable Caroline Howe and others long ignored by historians. The Howe brothers' missteps in America are thus only one piece of "the story of this celebrated and intrepid military family," which spreads across four wars and spans a century (p. 4).

Flavell explores the rise of the Howes from their roots in Germany to their establishment at Langar Hall in Nottinghamshire. Scrope, second Viscount Howe, and Charlotte von Kielmansegg raised nine children, educating sons as well as daughters in politics and culture as "there was clearly no message that learning was 'unfeminine'" (p. 17). After Scrope's untimely death in 1735, the children married, entered Parliament, and joined the military. George, Richard, and William all headed to North America for the Seven Years' War and earned accolades for their heroic service. Yet their success would have been impossible without the clever politicking of their mother, sisters, and wives. Because "a great deal of public business was also transacted in private settings," Flavell observes, the dinners, parties, and visits "gave women many informal levers of influence" (p. 51). Following Britain's victory in the war, the brothers returned to England with three simultaneously holding seats in Parliament. Wielding both official and unofficial power, the siblings constituted a formidable Howe "interest" (p. 103).

From inside Caroline's residence at Number 12 Grafton Street, the Howes watched events in America build toward revolution. In one of the most compelling chapters of *The Howe Dynasty*, Flavell unearths that it was Caroline who arranged for peace talks between her brother Richard, Benjamin

Franklin, and representatives of the cabinet in late 1774. Over a seemingly innocent game of chess, Caroline orchestrated “this last-ditch and secret government peace initiative” as the British government sought to prevent an imperial rupture (p. 137).

When these efforts failed, Richard and William returned to North America to lead the effort to put down the colonial rebellion. Following bravery at Bunker Hill, William took command of the British army while Richard led the Royal Navy in North America. Despite their success in taking New York in the summer of 1776, the Howe brothers were soon subjected to criticism for not destroying George Washington’s army when they had the chance. In part, this was because the brothers wielded the sword with one hand and an olive branch in the other. In September 1776, Richard again sought peace with Franklin and congressional representatives, but by then, American independence had been declared and negotiation was impossible.

Back in England, Caroline and the other Howe sisters and wives campaigned for the brothers’ reputation, especially once British public opinion turned against William. “It was Caroline’s job to support her brothers at aristocratic gatherings,” and Flavell notes how Caroline even lost her steely self-control in a crowded room when she perceived a slight directed at Richard (p. 260). Yet even indomitable women could not salvage William’s command after the British loss at Saratoga. Although William seized Philadelphia and dealt Washington’s army another blow, his decision to leave the Hudson Valley to General John Burgoyne was assailed in the British press once Burgoyne surrendered and the French entered the war on the side of the Americans. In May 1778, Sir William Howe departed for England, leaving the war to other men.

For the remainder of the American Revolutionary War, the Howes fought for their reputation in London. They demanded a Parliamentary investigation into their leadership, which they received although William was not exonerated. Even Caroline lost her influence. As the Howe interest declined, she was no longer “courted as a woman who had the ear of government ministers” (p. 313). Richard was able to redeem himself if not his family for his heroics at the “Glorious First of June” when he led a defeat of a French convoy in 1794 (p. 348). In the end, the fortunes of the Howe family fell to its women. Richard’s daughter Sophia Charlotte carried on the family line and title, which survives to this day.

The Howe Dynasty is a compelling book that both academic historians and causal readers will find engrossing. Flavell cleverly weaves together family drama, political intrigue, and London gossip into a coherent narrative. She is an artful historian, effectively arguing for Caroline Howe’s role in the 1774 attempt at peace, and she disposes of the old canard that William’s tactical setbacks in the Revolution can be traced to his lust for Elizabeth Loring.

Flavell should be commended for her fresh approach to the Howes, especially for putting the women at the center of the story. Yet, at points, the women disappear as the narrative shifts to events on the battlefield. More troubling is her desire to rehabilitate the Howe brothers. Flavell has a strong command of the Howe historiography and legends that became part of the American memory, and she is conversant with these. However, she seems unwilling to accept that William made some poor choices, instead deflecting blame to Lord George Germain, secretary of state for the American Department, and the British press. Nevertheless, *The Howe Dynasty* is an impressive reinterpretation of one of the most important families of the Revolutionary era.

Note

[1]. Andrew Jackson O'Shaunessy, *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

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