DeLee on Anderson, 'Down the Warpath to the Cedars: Indians' First Battles in the Revolution'

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The phrase “the American Revolution” tend to focus the mind of military historians on the actions and activities of the thirteen rebellious colonies against the British Army along the easternmost parts of North America. Works such as Kathleen Duval’s *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution* (2015) and Colin Calloway’s *The American Revolution in Indian Country* (1995) deepen the conflict by investigating the role that the War for American Independence played in the lives of Native Americans along the interior boundaries of the continent. In a more geographically focused manner, Mark R. Anderson’s *Down the Warpath to the Cedars: Indians' First Battles in the Revolution* explores Native American participation in the colonist’s ill-fated attempt to wrest Canada away from royal control. Through meticulous research into what Anderson claims were the “first Indian battles of the Revolutionary War,” this work shifts the focus of Native American participation northward from the Gulf South and upstate New York to their involvement in the invasion of Canada (p. viii). Through a chronological telling of the surrender of the American Fort Cedars, Anderson asserts that Native Americans participated in, or avoided, the American Revolution based on their own self-interest, complicating Jefferson’s claim that the king of England employed “merciless Indian savages” against the colonists.

While the book focuses on the role of Native Americans in the Revolutionary War, the sources used are primarily of European or American creation. Anderson relies on the collected papers of individuals and governments, both Canadian and American, to detail the construction and defeat of Fort Cedars and to understand the role that Native Americans played in the engagements. The book begins in 1775, as both American and British agents attempted to forge new alliances with the tribes of the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy and the Seven Nations of Canada. While most tribes or villages initially agreed to remain neutral, this neutrality did not prevent individual Indians from joining either the American or British forces. A Native American could decide to participate in the conflict to gain a social or economic benefit that would be recognized by one’s tribe or village, and Native American villages often viewed such actions as acceptable under their neutrality agreements. While the reasons that tribes and individuals acted independently of each other is lightly discussed within the work, the endnotes provide ample direction for readers who wish to dive further into the topic. By relying on a chronological approach to detail the events and shifting alliances, Anderson shows how Native American neutrality and participation allowed the American forces to invade...
Canada, but also aided in causing the rebel retreat from the area.

Following the capture of Montreal, Canadians began to seek Indian allies to assist in pushing the American invaders out of the area. The Americans responded to this threat by building a fort in an area known as the Cedars along the St. Lawrence River to limit the effectiveness of the recruitment. But in May 1776, a force composed of primarily individual Indians who acted outside of their villages’ diplomatic agreements assisted British and Canadian forces in capturing Ft. Cedars, the American soldiers inside, and the relief column sent to help defend the fort.

Through the middle section of the book, Anderson relies heavily on the concept of “parallel warfare” utilized by historian Peter MacLeod in discussing the behavioral expectations of Indian, British, and American soldiers during and after a battle.[1] The British attempted to control Indian behavior by restricting the plunder and enslavement of American soldiers, with limited success, and used the threat of unrestrained Indian violence to shape the outcome of battles and secure early capitulation of the American fort. At the same time, Indians also controlled their application of violence in the attack on Ft. Cedars and subsequent skirmishes, as they would refuse to purposefully inflict harm on Native Americans on the opposing side. As most of the Native American groups in the region were involved in either the Six or Seven Nations confederacies, the individuals who had joined either side would often attempt to warn each other or purposefully avoid harming another Indian. While this controlled violence was meant to help maintain the peace between the various tribes in the confederacies, the American campaign in Canada—of which the Battle of Fort Cedars was a part—weakened those preexisting alliances and encouraged new defensive pacts.

Toward the end of the book, Anderson highlights how perceptions of the behavior of Indian forces during the French and Indian War shaped how captured Americans perceived the events that occurred around them during the battle and following their defeat and imprisonment. While British-aligned Native Americans displayed restrained violence following the engagements, and the overall American casualties were minor, Anderson displays how the label of “massacre” was applied to the event as a means of propaganda to instill fear in the American forces in Canada.

While the preface of the book alludes to the fact that the participation of Native Americans in the Ft. Cedars engagement should complicate acceptance of Jefferson’s claims in the Declaration of Independence, there is merely a single paragraph that seeks to explain why that is the case. While the explicit explanation may be lacking, Anderson accomplishes his goal to “incorporate Native agency as much as possible” through detailing how Native American tribes and individuals decided for themselves whether to become involved in the American Revolution during the invasion of Canada (p. viii). Anderson does not cast doubt on whether the British were attempting to align tribes against the rebellious colonies, but instead forces the reader to recognize how perceptions from the previous war shaped claims about the behavior of Indians in the current war, perceptions that often clouded the reality of the situation. To counter the narrative of an Indian “massacre,” Anderson provides a meticulous, by-name accounting of the postbattle status of each of the American participants in the Ft. Cedars engagements to highlight the lack of deaths and injuries of the so-called massacre.

This work provides two important services, the first by using in-depth research to analyze an unknown engagement in an understudied campaign of the American Revolution. In doing so it provides its second service, illuminating how Native American communities attempted to shape their
future during a conflict that was not their own. While some discussions in the book on Native American warfare culture are underdeveloped, the reader can still come away with a clear understanding of how the mixing of European and Indian perceptions of combat shaped and influenced the outcomes and memories of the battle. It is difficult to decide whether this book serves better as a traditional military history by outlining the sequence and participants of the engagement or as a glimpse into the diplomatic relationships that existed and were created along the frontier as a new nation was founded, as it accomplishes both tasks extremely well.

Note

[1]. D. Peter MacLeod, *The Canadian Iroquois and the Seven Years’ War* (Toronto: Dundurn, 1996).


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