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William R. Nester, *The Epic Battles for Ticonderoga, 1758*. Albany, NY, : State University of New York Press. 2008. 276 pp. \$65.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0791473221.

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Three battles in the last “French and Indian War” in North America have garnered the most attention in the centuries since they occurred, mostly because they provide the most drama. Braddock’s Campaign fascinates us because of the hubris left on the battlefield. The Plains of Abraham provides an almost Hollywood ending with the two commanders falling, one at the moment of triumph, the other with the victorious cheers of his enemy ringing in his ears. But for sheer pathos, the Battle for Fort Carillon in 1758 cannot be surpassed. The useless slaughter of English and Scottish soldiers as they struggled through the jagged abattis toward the French lines has held a particular fascination for students of the war. In *The Epic Battles for Ticonderoga, 1758*, William R. Nester attempts to bring this campaign into sharper view. Nester wants us to understand the “broader political, strategic and logistical context in which the commanders and their subordinates made crucial decisions.” (p.7) Although Nester has shaky background chapters and perhaps indulges in a little too much “What if?” history, this all gives way to an excellent description of the Battle for Fort Carillon and a thoughtful analysis of the principal players involved.

At the beginning, Nester tries to place the battle in a realistic context. General Louis Joseph, Marquis de Montcalm Gozon de Saint Veran and his French forces may have won this battle, but “they had hardly conquered their enemy.” They had been able merely to “stave off a likely inevitable defeat.” (p. 3) On the other side, the bloody repulse only serves to underscore the perplexing strategy of William Pitt. Why not simply take Quebec and starve the French into surrender? Why attack these outposts in the first place? Unfortunately, these interesting observations lead into background chapters that perplex and frustrate.

Is it really necessary to go back to Christopher Columbus to give the background for the Battle of Fort Carillon? And how much time must be spent on the sixteenth century in North America? Here it is unclear who Nester’s audience is. If it is meant for those completely ignorant of this historical event, perhaps even of the war itself, then the broad expanse of background may be justified, but I have to ask how many readers so ignorant of this war would begin their education with such a specific work. If the audience is meant to be those already familiar with the war and perhaps the battle, then the background information is too broad and too elementary.

Worse still, the background chapters illustrate the weakness of such chapters for many authors; the focus of the primary research is on the campaign itself and so the author relies on secondary works to provide the background. Both the brevity of some information and the choices Nester made in those secondary works has led him into informational errors and the perpetuation of stereotypes and legends, sadly ironic because Nester tries very hard (and succeeds) in correcting misconceptions about the campaign itself.

The Seven Years War in Europe lasted from 1756-1763, not 1754-1763 (p. 27). Nester attempts to discuss how war in the North American wilderness affected military operations, but how was Wolfe's order to double load on the Plains of Abraham a reaction to warfare in the New World? (p. 35) In describing the British army Nester falls into secondary source traps. Nester asserts that each "British Battalion ideally numbered about 850 men in twelve companies – ten regular companies, one light, and one grenadier." (p. 36) No, the number of companies in British battalions varied greatly, and in fact the standard was nine companies with eight battalion and one grenadier. Some battalion commanders did add light companies as an experiment during the war, but the standardization of light companies for *every* British regiment did not occur until long after. Nester's wording on page 38 implies that the British wore red "leggings" ... they did not.

Part of the difficulty seems to be that Nester is trying to cram a great deal of background information into a small space. The resulting short-cuts create problems. He tells us that British privates made twenty shillings per month (p. 40), but says nothing about the deductions and off-reckonings for food and clothing that reduced the actual pay tremendously. Nor does he indicate how this pay compared to other incomes at the time (and he is unclear about whether provincial pay was in colonial currency or sterling). Nester asserts for soldiers in the field a "half dozen or more to cram into a wedge tent" (p. 40). Generally, five soldiers were *assigned* to a tent, but guard and other duties plus illness reduced the number of soldiers actually present in the tent at any one time. Assignment to a tent did not always mean that number slept together. In both cases Nester provides incomplete or inadequate information on subjects (soldier's pay and sleeping arrangements) that were probably unnecessary to the telling of his story.

Nester also perpetuates myths in this background. The 60th Royal Americans actually did not receive much in the way of woods warfare training (p. 45). It certainly was not consistent through the four battalions. In fact, the commanders of the four 60th battalions were lucky to get any linear tactic training done, let alone added training in woods warfare. This was a legend created and perpetuated by men connected to the King's Royal Rifle Corps in the nineteenth century (For a recent history of this regiment see Alexander V. Campbell, *The Royal American Regiment: An Atlantic Microcosm, 1755-1772*, Norman, OK, University of Oklahoma Press, 2010). In addition, the description of the uniform of the 42nd Regiment is very perplexing and revealing. Nester describes the uniform with a "Scarlet jacket" and a hat with a "border of red, white and green." (p. 45) It has long been understood that the cost of scarlet dye confined that color to officers and the enlisted men wore coats of madder red, and the highlanders wore flat bonnets with no border or a simple red band. The red, white and green checked border did not come in until the warrants of 1768. This was perplexing until I read the footnote connected to this information. Nester used a history of the Black Watch published in 1926! This represents the danger of relying on secondary and outdated sources for background information; one runs the risk of providing inaccurate information or perpetuating myths.

However, having said all that, if readers can get through to chapter three, they will be well rewarded. Once he gets into the actual campaign of 1758, Nester relies mostly on primary documents, and his approach is like night and day to the opening background chapters. Nester again perceptively questions William Pitt's strategy to attack the outlying French forts (Duquesne, Louisbourg and Carillon) in 1758 instead of simply capturing Quebec (something colonial governments had long known was the best approach). Nester provides good backgrounds on the principal characters in the story, including Montcalm, James Abercromby and George Howe, and then focuses on British supply and logistical problems. Based on the letters and reports from the campaign, Nester does an excellent job in showing us that logistics in North America were nothing less than a nightmare for commanders. He follows this up with a study of French plans and logistical issues, convincingly proving that logistics was a nightmare for both sides.

Nester seems to contradict himself at times in this section. He indicates that Abercromby had to squeeze recruits and supplies from “fourteen miserly, cantankerous provinces,” (p. 75) yet three pages later admits that what Abercromby asked of the colonies was “laborious, expensive and frustrating toil of rounding up those men, arms and supplies, and dispatching them to the front.” (p. 78) Perhaps they had a reason to be miserly and cantankerous? Nester does an admirable job showing the difficulties colonies had in procuring soldiers, and then condemns the colonies for having recruit numbers fall short. However, New Hampshire fell short by only sixty men, Rhode Island by forty. Massachusetts fell short the most. On two occasions Nester indicates that Massachusetts Governor Thomas Pownall promised 7,000 and only delivered 2,009 ... “no more than 2,009 to Abercromby” (p. 79) and “After the Massachusetts volunteers finally mustered, they numbered 2,009, less than one-third of the 7,000 troops Pownall had promised” (p. 98). Yet on page 102 he lists five Massachusetts regiments totaling 2,848 men then on page 120 he says “Colonel Jedediah Preble commanded the 5,345 man Right Wing, which included six Massachusetts regiments with 4,054 troops.” Nester never really explains where these additional Massachusetts soldiers came from, nor does he admit that the earlier number of 2,009 was unfair to the Massachusetts effort. Nester is to be commended for using the muster rolls and other documents from Abercromby’s headquarters, but he should have made sure the numbers were accounted for and added up.

The description of the movement of the British army in chapter five is very good. Nester convincingly portrays the difficulty in moving vast numbers of men, artillery and supplies in the American wilderness. Here he does indulge in some “What if?” history. At the very beginning Nester says it is “sometimes as important to explore what did not happen as what did,” and that he would explore “the most likely scenarios had they followed a different path.” (p. 7). Here in chapter five he questions Montcalm’s failure to cover the water approach with artillery (p. 117). What would Abercromby have to do in that case? Nester provides an elaborate sequence of events that might have happened. But it presupposes too many actions that have to fall into place ... French soldiers show backbone to hold that position, Abercromby would have done what Nester guesses ... but George Howe was still alive at that time ... what would he have recommended? That is the problem with “What if?” history; the original actors would have had to follow the proposed words, lines and staging. There are just too many variables.

When he moves back to the firm ground of what actually happened, Nester continues to provide excellent detail and analysis. He dissects George Howe’s “stupid mistake” to take the lead as second-in-command, the first fight, and the death of Howe. Nester shows an astute understanding of the terrain. Nester also shows an astute understanding of what happened in the French lines before the battle. He chronicles the almost criminal fog of war that engulfed Abercromby; no personal reconnaissance (apparently Abercromby never looked at the proposed battlefield himself) and no artillery. The description of the attack is well done, allowing the imagination to capture the frustration and dedication of the British regulars as they clambered through the sharp abatis of fallen trees toward the murderous fire of an enemy behind a barricade easily blown aside by a few artillery pieces, if only their commander had bothered to use them. Nester’s account also emphasizes the contrast between the presence of Montcalm and the absence of Abercromby in determining the outcome. Finally, Nester captures all the confusion of the British withdrawal and leaves the reader as perplexed as many of his officers as to why Abercromby did withdraw.

Nester does an equally good job in assessing the decisions and subsequent actions of both Abercromby, typical able military administrator thrust into a position beyond his capabilities, and Montcalm, professional soldier longing for the orderly and comprehensible battlefields of Europe, yet nonetheless stuck in a world of rough and wild men who operated without honor as Montcalm understood it. It is not hard to shake your head at Abercromby who probably never really understood the magnitude of his

personal failure because he had so many others he could blame. It is equally easy to pity Montcalm as a man of honor sacrificed in an alien land and culture by a king who saw him only as a gesture.

There are problems early on in *The Epic Battles for Ticonderoga, 1758*. There is too much reliance on questionable sources, too many mistakes, too much perpetuating myths which, in most cases, was not really necessary to tell the story anyway. There is also perhaps a little too much “What if?” history. However, once William R. Nester gets into the actual campaign he provides a remarkably good description based on almost entirely primary documents from the campaign. Nester captures the extraordinarily difficult logistical problems faced by all military commanders in North America, he provides us with intuitive understanding of all the principal players involved, and with a good understanding of the terrain, soldiers and conditions, captures the action of the battle with precision. Essentially, if you are willing to overlook the minor inaccuracies of the introductory material, or, in other words, if you are willing to fight through the abattis of the first two chapters, you will be well rewarded with an engaging and thought provoking description and analysis of the campaign and the Battle of Fort Carillon in 1758.

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