



Fall 2005

The Seven Years' War in New York State: Introduction

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Shannon, Timothy. (2005) The Seven Years War in New York State: Introduction. *New York History* 86: 413-416.

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Abstract

Ask the average person on the street about the Seven Years' War and you are likely to get a blank stare. Try again, only this time call the conflict "The French and Indian War" and you might get a faint smile of recognition. Take a different approach: ask random strangers their opinion about *The Last of the Mohicans*. Many will tell you they loved it, although they will more likely be thinking about Daniel Day-Lewis than James Fenimore Cooper.

Such has been the fate of one of the most important events in early history. In 2004, the 250th anniversary of George Washington's surrender at Fort Mifflin passed quietly, recognized mostly by historians, reenactors, and local institutions in southwestern Pennsylvania already familiar with the story. A year later, the anniversary of Braddock's Defeat passed under similar circumstances. The coming years will bring similar anniversaries at places whose names evoke North America's colonial past: Ticonderoga, Niagara, Louisbourg, and Quebec. Museums, historical societies, and various other organizations have launched symposia, conferences, and exhibits to honor the occasion, and there is even a PBS television production scheduled for broadcast in early 2006. But no single event commemorating the 250th anniversary of the Seven Years' War in America is likely to capture national interest in the way the Bicentennial did in 1976 or Ken Burns's *Civil War* series did in 1990. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

New York State, Seven Years' War, French and Indian War, The Last of the Mohicans

Disciplines

European History | History | Indigenous Studies | Military History | United States History

Seven Years' War in New York State Introduction

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Why is this so? Americans like their history red, and this was a war steeped in tomahawks, swords, muskets, and artillery. Throw in some hardy colonial frontiersmen, conniving Frenchmen, know-it-all Brits, and menacing Indians, and you have a package ready for sweeps week

at the History Channel. Instead, the American Revolution, the Civil War, and World War II get all the glory: big fat bestselling biographies, glossy magazine cover stories, and documentaries dripping with *gravitas* paid for by corporate sponsors. In the public celebration of American wars, the Seven Years' War is decidedly B-list, a wallflower hanging around the punch bowl with the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and World War I.

The popularity of *Last of the Mohicans*, both the novel and its film adaptations, may be part of the problem. Fenimore Cooper wrote frontier adventure stories; the great success of Michael Mann's 1992 big-screen version was that it extracted the heart-pounding sense of excitement and romance from a book whose prose has become all but unreadable for modern tastes. Neither Cooper nor Mann attempted to engage the wider causes or issues behind the war, nor address cultural or ideological differences between its participants. In novel and film, the protagonists and antagonists literally stumble across each other in the forest and join battle because it is the manly thing to do, like Robin Hood and Friar Tuck dueling on a footbridge in Sherwood Forest. By comparison, the American Revolution was a thinking man's conflict, a battle of ideas as well as wills, expressed in the timeless sentiments of the Declaration of Independence. To borrow Teddy Roosevelt's famous assessment of another nearly forgotten American conflict, the Seven Years' War was a "splendid little war" because it made for a good tale in word and image, a romantic romp through the wilderness complete with exotic locations, mysterious natives, and stuffy, overdressed aristocrats who got what they had coming to them.

This special issue of *New York History* highlights recent scholarly trends in the study of the Seven Years' War that challenge some of the misconceptions about this conflict. War fell out of fashion as a subject of study for early American historians in the post-Vietnam Era, as did the British Empire. In recent years, the tide has turned. Social historians have found eighteenth-century armies fascinating subjects of study for the wealth of information they can provide about the living and working conditions of the poor and dispossessed. Armies were also avenues for transatlantic migration in the eighteenth century and laboratories for medical science and epidemiology. Academic historians have also

returned to empire as a subject of study, inspired by new cultural histories of nationalism and contemporary issues surrounding the United States' role abroad as the world's sole superpower. Perhaps most influential, however, has been the renaissance in Native American scholarship over the past generation. Indians now figure more prominently in narratives of early American history than they ever have before, and the Seven Years' War was arguably the most significant event to shape their destiny in the eighteenth century.

To historians interested in New York, the Seven Years' War is especially resonant. Most of the war's North American campaigns were fought along New York's waterways bordering Canada, and the colony's relationship with the Iroquois people profoundly shaped the war's origins and outcomes. New York's landscape dictated strategies and tactics that would be used again in the American Revolution and War of 1812. The war also altered forever New York's role in the wider Atlantic World. The colony experienced prolonged military mobilizations, served as the headquarters of the British Army in North America, and grew wealthier on wartime contracts. Before New York could be the Empire State, it had to become the empire colony, the focal point of British military and civil administration in North America. More than any other factor, the Seven Years' War made that transformation possible.

Each article in this issue addresses that transformation in one way or another. In a bit of historical detective work, José António Brandão and William A. Starna shed light on a 1701 Iroquois treaty that put New York at the center of the long Anglo-French contest for sovereignty in North America. Andrew Farry engages in sleuthing of a different kind, ongoing archaeological efforts to reconstruct the contours of British and American military life in colonial New York. Justin DiVirgilio also makes use of archaeological sources in his study of the war's cultural impact on Albany's Dutch character. David Preston returns our attention to the war's wider context as a struggle between indigenous and colonial peoples over land by untangling a fascinating episode of diplomacy and real estate in the postwar Mohawk Valley.

Each one of these articles illustrates the innovative questions, methods, and sources that have revitalized the study of the Seven Years'

War. Collectively, they remind us of the distance between the popular, romantic perception of the war as a grand backwoods adventure and more nuanced scholarly interpretations that emphasize the war's impact on the cultural environment of colonial North America. Ever since Fenimore Cooper put pen to paper, the Seven Years' War has been reduced to a series of trite characterizations: savage Indians, treacherous French, haughty British, and intrepid colonists. The authors of the articles that follow have refused to paint with such a broad brush, and reward us instead with people and interests too diverse for such facile categorization.