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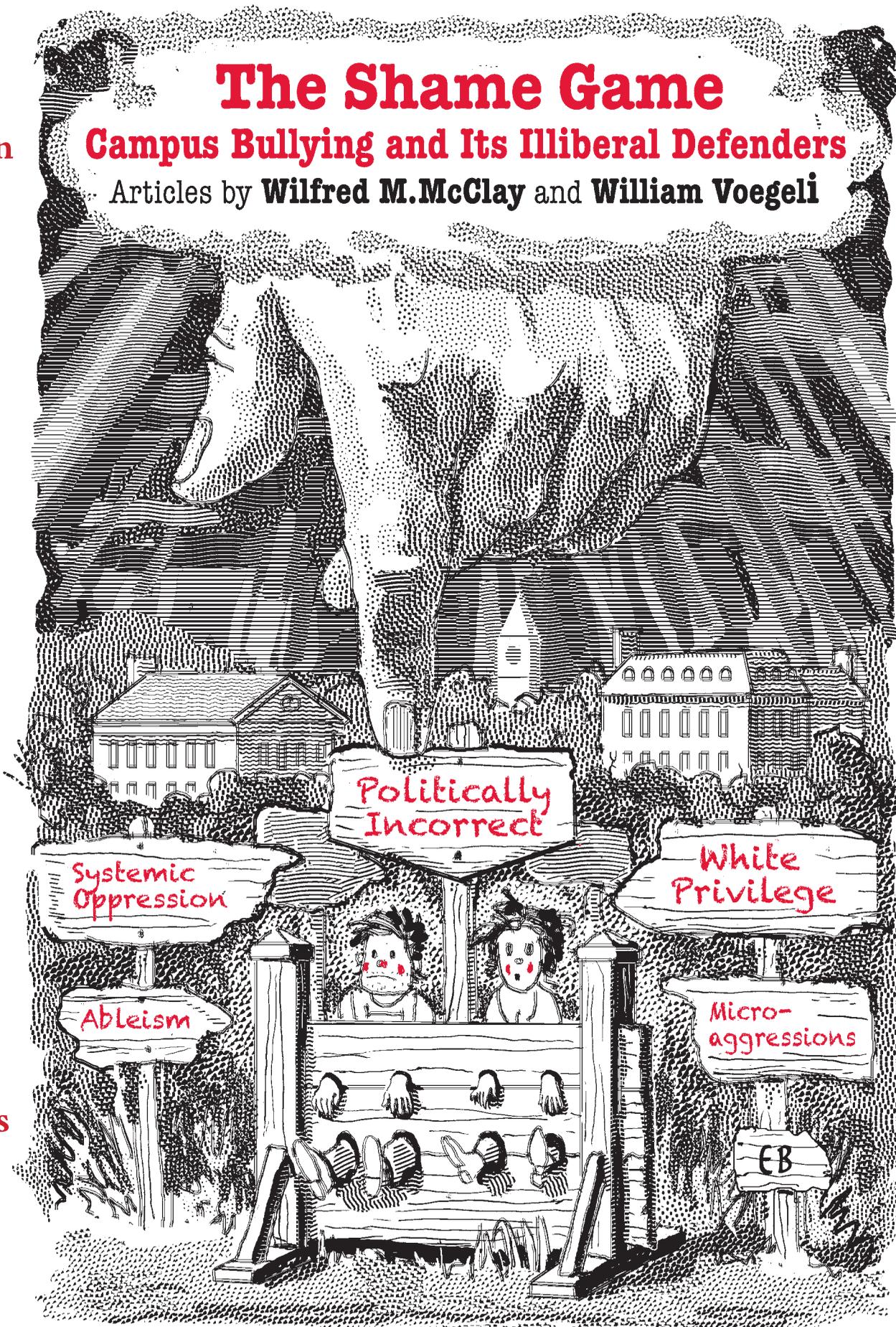
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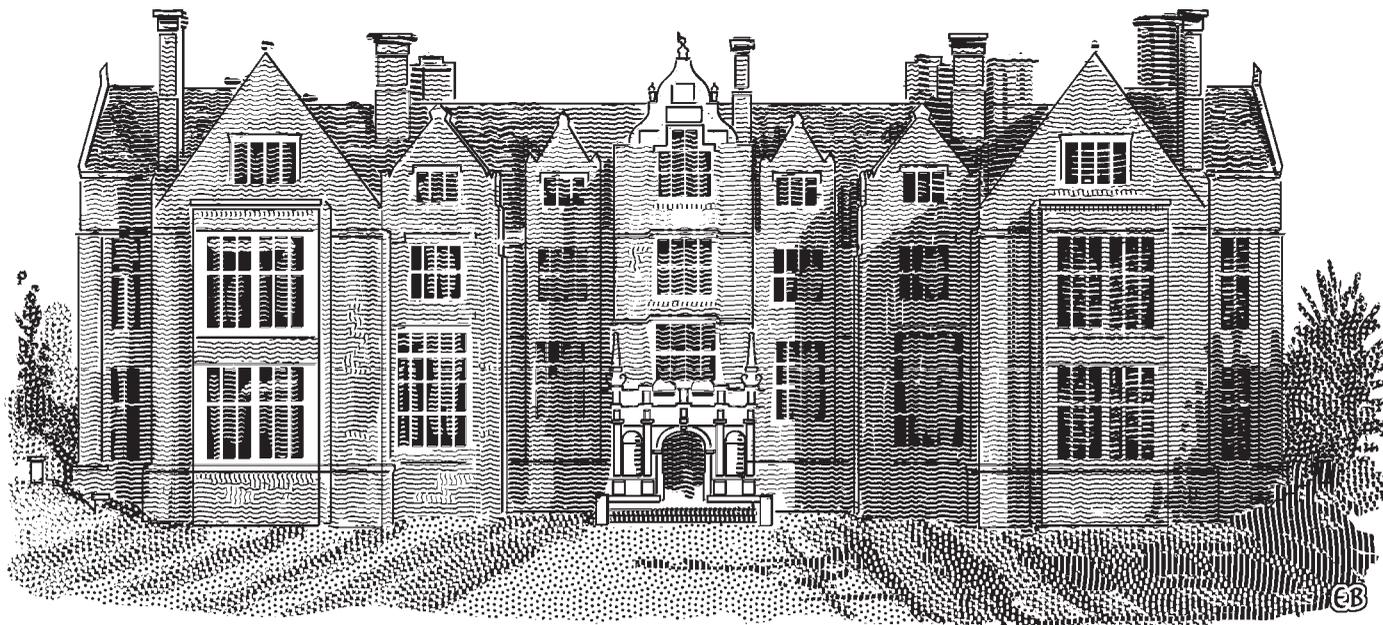


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WHO LOST THE COLONIES?

An Empire on the Edge: How Britain Came to Fight America, by Nick Bunker.
Alfred A. Knopf, 448 pages, \$30 (cloth), \$17.95 (paper)



Wroxton Abbey, Oxfordshire, ancestral home of Lord North

A MONTH BEFORE THE CONTINENTAL Congress voted in favor of independence, Pennsylvania delegate Robert Morris complained bitterly about the stupidity with which the government of Lord North was pushing the American colonists toward a total break with the British Empire. The Americans “have been driven into it step by step with a reluctance that has been manifested in all their proceedings,” Morris grumbled, “yet I dare say our enemies will assert that it was planned from the first movements.” The British did increasingly misread the situation after 1773. Rather than search for ways to open up potential divisions among the colonists, the British government assumed that using the Coercive Acts of 1774 to make a punitive example of Massachusetts in the aftermath of the Boston Tea Party would provide the object example that would lead the other colonies to fall into line.

When, later that year, the First Continental Congress exposed the error of that calculation, the British simply doubled down on their bet. Persuaded that the colonists were already arming for independence, King George III’s government decided that military repression was the only path left. Although colonial moderates like Morris, John

Dickinson, and John Jay were desperately hoping that the British would make some serious conciliatory gestures, the government’s response was so rigid and repressive that these patriots agreed that independence was necessary, even though that was hardly their first choice.

The history of the American movement toward independence has been the subject of countless books and articles. This is, after all, the story of the birth of our republic, and American scholars have long been deeply invested in its explanation and interpretation. Yet within this massive corpus of literature, attention to the British side of the story has remained fairly limited. Of course, some aspects of that story are familiar. One has to know the basic sequence of parliamentary legislation, from the Revenue and Stamp Acts of 1764-65 down through the punitive Coercive Acts. It helps to know something about the problems King George faced in forming a stable ministry, until his relation with Lord North gave him a durable chief minister who proved an artful manager of the House of Commons. And of course one needs to understand why the competing American and British views of the imperial constitution could prove so irreconcilable.

YET FOR ALL THIS, FEW AMERICAN SCHOLARS of the Revolution have displayed great interest in parliamentary politics and factional maneuverings “at home,” as many colonists still described England. Nor have British scholars sought to correct the imbalance. The loss of America seems a mild diversion in the grand history of the British Empire or when set next to the heroic struggle against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France in the quarter century following the fall of the Bastille in 1789.

It is striking, then, that the last two awards of the lucrative George Washington Prize for the best book on the American Revolution have gone to British-born authors who view this event from an avowedly imperial perspective. The 2014 prize went to Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy, an Oxford-trained historian who now directs the Robert H. Smith Center for International Jefferson Studies at Monticello, and whose *The Men Who Lost America* is a sparkling biographical analysis of the careers and strategies of the British military and political leaders who waged the War of Independence. The 2015 prize went to Nick Bunker, who took up writing history after a prior career as a journalist for the *Financial Times* and as an investment banker in the Far East.

An Empire on the Edge is tightly focused on the three years that separate the sacking in June 1772 of the Royal Navy schooner *Gaspee* by a disciplined gang of vengeful Rhode Islanders from the fateful decision that sent the Redcoats marching to Lexington and Concord in April 1775. But it is also a brooding meditation on the political and military mediocrities whose imprudent decision-making carried the American colonists down their path to the political independence that Robert Morris first lamented and then celebrated.

FOR ALL OF US WHO FIND DOWNTON Abbey a tiresome soap opera lacking any dramatic interest, *An Empire on the Edge* should offer a much more compelling account of British aristocracy in the heyday of its political glory (etched so brilliantly in David Cecil's *The Young Melbourne* [1939], which covers a slightly later period). Bunker's sense of time, place, and manner is beautifully developed. He starts his book in a crumbling British fort along the Mississippi River, and then offers sketches of the latter-day New England Puritans, who were always such a pain in the imperial backside, and the complicated affairs of the East India Company in its Bengali haunts. Drawing on his own background in global finance, he explains the marketing vicissitudes of the East India Company and its links to the London credit crisis of 1772.

But perhaps his most revealing sketch appears in the Epilogue, where we visit Lord North's tombstone at Wroxton in north Oxfordshire to be reminded of the reigning values and attitudes that enabled families like his to govern their own parochial corners of England. From that proprietary sense of local lordship, Bunker implies, came the political obstinacy that doomed any effort by British officials to come to grips with the stubborn, self-righteous temperament (in the literal sense of preserving one's own rights) that dominated colonial politics. To capture that worldview Bunker draws deeply on private and official correspondence, the records of parliamentary debates, and the popular British press to answer the question that most agitates him: why did policymakers in London, as well as key officials in America, like Governor Thomas Hutchinson of Massachusetts, prove so inept in imagining the likely consequences of impe-

rial decisions that rarely received the scrutiny they deserved?

Bunker does not present an attractive group portrait. The least capable member seems to be General Thomas Gage, the military commander in North America and Hutchinson's replacement in 1774. Gage had long experience in North America, and he married into a prominent New Jersey family (his bride, Margaret Kemble, glamorously dressed *à la Turque* in a noteworthy portrait by John Singleton Copley). Gage should have possessed a much more sophisticated grasp of the challenges he faced and the other tactics he might have pursued. Instead he committed his force to being besieged in peninsular Boston and then allowing his troops to make a disastrous expedition to Concord.

THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THIS GANG of imperial overlords fare little better. Though Lord North proved a great manager of Parliament, even when pressed by opposition members to imagine how the Tea Act might disrupt American politics, he willfully clung to the settled path of maintaining parliamentary sovereignty. His deeply religious stepbrother, Lord Dartmouth, was an earnest public servant who became the second secretary of state for America in 1772. Like North, he worked hard at maintaining his aristocratic status—"nobility was a career at which men and women had to work," Bunker wryly observes—but here, again, his "unworldliness" and his innate tendency to confuse "the New Testament's teachings with those of his own social class or party" stripped him of the capacity to do the hard political thinking required to solve the American problem. Then there was the solicitor general Alexander Wedderburn, a Scotsman with a "vindictive nature." In January 1774 Wedderburn subjected Benjamin Franklin to a savage examination before the Privy Council, accusing Franklin of having conspired against Governor Hutchinson through the release of his private correspondence. Every colonist who learned of Franklin's humiliation in "the Cockpit" was profoundly offended, and Franklin himself drew the appropriate conclusions about the government's intentions.

Bunker's account of the workings of the British Empire in the mid-1770s makes for great reading. It fills a gap in the existing American understanding of the final crisis

of the Revolution, and on terms that reveal Bunker's own exasperation with the limitations of the British ruling class's imperial mind. Indeed at many points in this book the author echoes a theme that dominates Bernard Bailyn's influential explanation of the Revolution: that the glacial, closed, aristocratic world of Georgian politics could never have responded adequately to the upstart challenges that the Americans presented.

YET THERE IS ONE SENSE IN WHICH NICK Bunker's portrayal of the looming crisis of independence seems, if not flawed, then at least skewed. He adds two appendices to his book. The second, on the value of money, need not concern us here. But the first, on "The Meaning of Treason," should. Were the Americans acting treasonously, in ways that would compel British decision-makers to act as they did? Bunker concludes that they were. "Try as he might, it would be very hard for any lawyer in London, whatever his political persuasion, to deny that this was so," he concludes. And his depiction of colonial resistance only confirms that point.

Yet this conclusion presupposes that the views of London officials were legally correct. However flawed their political judgments, Bunker concludes, there was a legal validity to the imperial position. This judgment in turn requires ignoring the corresponding validity of the American position—the ideas worked out not only by John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, whom Bunker does notice, but also by a phalanx of colonial polemicists overlooked in *An Empire on the Edge*. Americans had developed their own positions a decade earlier, in the constitutional quarrel of the mid-1760s, and those arguments were just as self-confirming as the analyses of the imperial lawyers. In critical respects, notwithstanding their common origins, American and British understandings of law and constitutionalism had already diverged. And this, perhaps, is why the empire was already on edge well before the vengeful Rhode Islanders stormed the *Gaspee*.

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