Book Reviews


In his new book, Lovewell’s Fight: War, Death, and Memory in Borderland New England, Robert Cray explores the relatively obscure event known as “Lovewell’s Fight,” a 1725 battle during Dummer’s War in which Captain John Lovewell led an armed expedition against the Pigwacket Abenaki of Maine. While Lovewell had proven himself a competent and able military commander on previous occasions, the same could not be said in 1725; the Abenaki decimated Lovewell’s unit. But Cray argues that Lovewell’s Fight took on a life of its own after the fact, becoming both a myth and legend that “resonated among eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New Englanders” (p. ix). In particular, the death of Lovewell and his men became the archetype for New English “heroic tale[s]” (p. 2) in which New Englanders were vastly outnumbered, they opposed an alien threat to their way of life, and their commander died a death worthy of remembrance. Cray even suggests that Lovewell’s Fight was New England’s Alamo, Thermopylae, or Little Big Horn (pp. 2–3). Yet, he attempts to untangle such myths from reality, to understand the “long shadow of Lovewell’s death” and “how early New Englanders fought and remembered the battle” (p. 5). Cray thereby utilizes the conflict to “prompt people to think about early American history” and to consider how the peoples of New England “chose to remember and to forget” (p. 173).

Cray wisely gives only a brief, obligatory account of Lovewell’s final expedition in chapter 1; the rest of his book revolves around the larger context of that conflict. In the second chapter, he recounts the history of Lovewell’s home community—Dunstable, Massachusetts—and describes the way of life in a town on the margins of the New England colonies and Abenaki homelands. As a borderlands community, Dunstable, and its residents, bore the brunt of Native frustrations and violence amid crises like King Philip’s War (1675–76),
King William’s War (1689–97), Queen Anne’s War (1702–13), and Dummer’s War. These repeated conflicts created a bitter animosity between New England and Abenaki peoples, exacerbating the “unsettled state of borderland life” and exemplifying the conditions that set Lovewell and his men against the Abenaki in 1725 (p. 49).

In chapter 3, Cray situates the conflict within the broader obsessions New Englanders had with “rescuing the [Lovewell] dead from desfilement, securing the remains, and properly burying them” during the early eighteenth century (p. 60). As Cray observes, English frontier settlers faced death and destruction at every turn, from war against the French and their Native allies—including the Abenaki—to smallpox epidemics, from drought to attacks from without (pirate raids along the eastern seaboard) and within (African slave revolts). These events, compounded by religious and political insecurities, fed into a regional anxiety over “the treatment of the dead” (p. 69).

The rest of Cray’s work examines how Lovewell’s Fight was etched into the popular memory of New England, beginning in 1725 with the Reverend Thomas Symmes’s sermon “Lovewell Lamented,” which transformed that event into “an essential battle narrative endowed with patriotic pride and religious faith” (p. 89). Much like historian Jill Lepore did in her book on the memory of King Philip’s War, Cray dissects the works of authors who wrote about the Lovewell incident during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—including Timothy Dwight, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau—to illustrate “memory construction at work” (p. 138). Cray finds that over the centuries, the historical events surrounding the battle and its participants were transfigured and reimagined as the barometer by which one could measure the “Christian values . . . courage and discipline” of New England’s “men in arms” (p. 168). In essence, Lovewell and his men emerged as “the sine qua non of the early New England soldier,” the model that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century troops were forced to emulate (pp. 168–69).

Cray also traces the popular memory of Lovewell’s Fight as memorialized in sermons, historical verse, amateur history books, maps, and other commemorations. His analysis demonstrates how the episode lived on despite having to compete with narratives of the American Revolution and the Civil War for its place in regional memory. In the end, Cray determines that “what happened in Pigwacket in 1725 mattered” a great deal to people both at the time and for centuries to come (p. 5).
However, Cray's thorough exploration of both Lovewell's Fight and the memory of it remains one-sided. While this is hardly detrimental to his work, it is a missed opportunity. Unlike Lepore's magisterial book, Cray's gives little consideration to the Native experience of and perspective on the conflict. As he argues, “what appeared small to the courts of Europe seemed large in the New England borderlands,” but that region included Native peoples as well as English settlers (p. 11). He also admits that the community of Dunstable lay “near well-worn trails to Abenaki interior villages,” and even when not at war, Abenaki and New England peoples frequently interacted with one another (p. 55). Such intimacy between Native and European peoples—between two culturally distinct societies—on the fringes of an empire no doubt informed the ways in which they respectively remembered and memorialized their encounters with each other. Consequently, Lovewell’s Fight might actually provide an inroad into understanding cross-cultural exchanges, not only in terms of violence but in the myriad perceptions and recollections of such events. With that said, though, Cray’s work is quite insightful, meticulously researched, and gripping to read, all of which make it a testament to a scholar in his prime.

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In Connecticut Unscathed, Jason W. Warren offers a unique contribution to the study of the conflict historians remember as King Philip’s War. Warren positions the heightened struggle of 1675–76 as an episode within a larger “epoch of violence between Native peoples since the arrival of Europeans” (p. 4). He notes that while the familiar moniker highlights rising tensions between the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies and their Indian neighbors, it fails to capture either the Wampanoag sachem Philip’s waning influence within the diverse Native coalition or Connecticut’s role in the war.