Book Reviews

Ken Miller


On 3 July 1791 George Washington arrived in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The president had journeyed from Philadelphia to celebrate the anniversary of American independence in the town. The Fourth of July was greeted in Lancaster by a cheering crowd of war veterans, local residents, pealing bells, fireworks and parades culminating in a banquet that evening at the courthouse during which the president was toasted by local worthies. Lancaster was notable in that the majority of its population in 1791 was German-speaking (the town's only newspaper was the German-language Neue Unparthesche Lancasteresche Zeitung und Anzeigs-Nachricher). According to the paper both the town's German- and English-speaking residents turned out to see the president and celebrate the independence. Washington, as Ken Miller shows in Dangerous Guests, chose to visit Lancaster in recognition of the central role the town played during the War of Independence. Lancaster was at the center of a network of communities in the American interior where the rebels held captured prisoners during the war. These included Reading, Lebanon, Carlisle and York, Pennsylvania as well as Frederick, Maryland, and Winchester and Charlottesville, Virginia. Of these sites, Lancaster received the largest number of prisoners—mainly British regulars and German mercenaries. Dangerous Guests examines the impact these unwilling new arrivals had on the community. In so doing, Ken Miller makes and original and important contribution to our understanding of the American Revolution.

Dangerous Guests is not so much a study of prisoners of war during the American Revolution, as a community study of Lancaster during the American Revolution. Because the town received thousands of prisoners during the War of Independence wartime captives figure prominently in Miller's analysis, but
his real focus is on the transformation of Lancaster during the Revolution. In order to tell this story Miller begins by briefly summarizing the history of the settlement and development of Lancaster during the colonial period. He presents a picture of a polyglot frontier community, “Philadelphia in Miniature”, comprised of German, English, and Scots Irish settlers, riven by sectarian and ethnic differences. It was a community shaped by war and divided by debates over the use of force between its pacifist and non-pacifist residents. Lancaster County was the scene of the massacre of peaceful Native Americans by the Paxton Boys in the aftermath of the Seven Years’ War.

The coming of the American Revolution transformed Lancaster. The dispute over British rule during the 1760s wrought new political and social alignments—blurring the ethnic and religious differences that had characterized the community during the colonial period. Anglophone and German-speaking Whigs found common cause opposing British rule. The new alliances hardened when the War of Independence began and Lancastrians were called upon to make sacrifices to support the war effort including, notably, supervising and caring for thousands of prisoners. According to Miller the presence of the prisoners compelled the people of Lancaster to demonstrate their commitment to the rebel cause. Many did so and the commitment to the Patriots’ cause as reflected in public displays and patriotic rituals was pronounced. Ethnic divisions were supplanted by questions of political allegiance. English- and German-speaking Patriots came together to manage prisoners and fight in the war. By contrast those they saw as opponents—whether Loyalists or pacifists who sought to avoid the war out of religious conviction—were reviled and sometimes harassed. The persecution of those who were seen as not supporting the war effort bound together those who did. Of course the fervor for the war diminished as the conflict dragged on, and the inter-ethnic cooperation dissipated somewhat after independence. Nonetheless Miller makes a compelling case for the ways in which the War of Independence transformed Lancaster and, by implication, America.

What of those thousands of prisoners of war who were incarcerated in and around Lancaster? While this book presents them more as the objects of the attention and ministrations of the people of Lancaster than as subjects themselves, they figure prominently in Miller’s study. Miller shows that the German prisoners—the infamous “Hessians”—fared somewhat better than their British counterparts. This was owing, in part, to the ethnic composition of Lancaster County, with its prominent German population. As hired soldiers the mercenaries had less of a commitment to suppressing the American rebellion and adjusted better to their status as prisoners than their British born counterparts. Miller demonstrates that the Patriots made a sincere effort to