

*Cornwallis, Soldier and Statesman in a Revolutionary World*

Richard Middleton, Yale University Press, 2022

Like all abstractions, empire is best understood when considered in terms of individuals, their motivation and experience. The current cult of attacking the British empire, a new iteration of the Communistic Cold War critique, pushes particularly hard on Britain in the late eighteenth century, not least as on top of Britain's 'tyranny' as the opponent of American 'destiny,' comes the villainy of being the world's leading slave trader.

If, in contrast, your historical interest and commitment extends to more than name-calling and statue destruction, there are some fine books to consider in order to provide the necessary perspectives of context, contingency and character. 2021 brought us Andrew Roberts' very well-observed biography of George III, a major work of scholarship and insight, and 2022 follows with a study of one of his leading generals.

There are instructive parallels between the two men. Each man is damned in public recollection with reference to British failure in the American War of Independence, with the surrender of Cornwallis' besieged army at Yorktown in 1781 the precipitant to final failure. And yet, each man amounted to far more, both in public and in private capacities.

An experienced academic who has written fruitfully in particular on the Seven Years' War (1756-63), Middleton shows what you can still produce in retirement and without the ready resources of academic life. He makes perceptive comments on Cornwallis' command in America, a subject recently also helpfully covered by Stan Carpenter, but Middleton puts this in the context of a career of imperial service that includes posts of responsibility in Britain, Germany, India and Ireland. Indeed, it is this very range that helps make Cornwallis of particular interest. Unlike George II who never forgave his younger son, William, Duke of Cumberland, for his major and humiliating defeat by the French in 1757, George III did not see Yorktown as a reason to disgrace Cornwallis, and, instead, played the key role in helping the latter survive not only defeat but also the bewildering changes of ministry in 1782-4. Indeed, Cornwallis was sent in 1785 on a confidential mission to seek to improve relations with Frederick the Great of Prussia.

Appreciating his efforts on that mission, George in 1786 appointed Cornwallis Governor-General and Commander-in-Chief in India and awarded him the Garter. More British units were sent to India in 1786 and 1788. In India, where he took personal command of operations against Mysore in 1791 and 1792, Cornwallis won territory from Hyderabad and Mysore, most significantly cutting off the latter from the sea, and thus weakening the potential for any alliance between France and Mysore, which, indeed, France had pursued in the early 1780s and to which Napoleon was to return in the late

1790s. In Ireland, Cornwallis in 1798 crushed just such an attempt to repeat the situation that had caused defeat in America, forcing the French invading force to surrender at Ballinamuck.

He was able to benefit from and apply experience, writing in 1787 'no man in India can be more convinced than I am of the importance of cavalry to our armies' and later that year:

'I found, in the extensive field in which I acted during my command in the Southern provinces of America, very great advantage from mounting about eighty or an hundred men on ordinary horses, to act with the cavalry,'

and proposed that this method be followed in India.

Cornwallis very much pressed for professionalism, urging in 1790 that British officers destined to command *sepoy* units:

'should come out at an early period of life, and devote themselves entirely to the Indian service; a perfect knowledge of the language, and a minute attention to the customs and religious prejudices of the *sepoys* being qualifications for that line which cannot be dispensed with ... how dangerous a disaffection in our native troops would be to our existence in this country.'

Cornwallis was not solely a military figure, but also a proconsul of empire. In India, he had a programme to reform the East India Company presence, notably introducing a land settlement and a legal code as well as attempting to root out corruption and bureaucratic inefficiency. In Ireland, he supported Catholic Emancipation as a necessary means to ensure loyalty and secure success for the Act of Union. He argued in 1792 that he could not be 'an efficient member of Administration' as he did not possess 'such powers and habits of parliamentary debate as would enable him to do justice to a good cause, and defend his measures as well as those of his colleagues.' He was certainly no Wellington, and few British generals of the eighteenth century subsequently held senior non-military governmental office, although James, Viscount Stanhope had done so under George I.

Having none of the arrogance of Napoleon, and being, unlike the latter, committed to the system which he served, Cornwallis comes across as a figure of interest and probity. He was an honourable man who sought to understand those with whom he fought. Middleton has written both a biography and an important work of history. It deserves attention in the vexed debate about British imperialism.

(853 words)

Jeremy Black's most recent book is *The Importance of Being Poirot*.