

No Despicable Enemy. 1779: The Continental Army Destroys Indian Territory.

Author: Gavin K. Watt

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Reviewed by Peter W. Johnson UE

This lengthy book represents ‘the end of an era’, as author Gavin K. Watt is retiring from further research and writing after an astonishing fifteen books. Recognized as an authority on the American Revolution and the Northern Department in particular, he has been practically in a league of his own. For those who have known Gavin either personally or through his books, there is the sense that this final book should be a special farewell...and it is.

Before one tackles the text, one is confronted by the bold, stark cover photograph. The image by Geoffrey R. Harding shows Philip Craver representing a member of the Six Nation’s Indian Department. Arguably it is the most striking design on any of Gavin’s books.

Several of Gavin’s books incorporate Period quotations as part of the book title and the latest is no exception. *No Despicable Enemy* refers to a remark by Rebel General Sullivan who was cautioning against underestimating the capabilities of the loyal Native Nations.

Gavin is not in the business of writing fairytale endings. From a Six Nations and Loyalists’ perspective 1779’s Sullivan Campaign was a disaster. Had the events occurred closer to our century, words such as “genocide” might have been bandied about. The intent of the campaign was to drive the loyal Native Nations out of the War by destroying their settlements and crops, and as is noted several times, the Rebels became well acquainted with the fertile landscape and crops they were destroying and undoubtedly bookmarked those areas for future settlement. Nevertheless a primary goal of driving the loyal nations from supporting the British did not work. Raiding continue long afterwards with an added thirst for revenge.

Gavin does not deliver historical events out of context. A considerable space is devoted to explaining what was going on elsewhere in America and even farther afield. One of the gloomier aspects was the entry into the War of France and Spain. Allied to the Rebel Cause, they put considerable strains on the British across the globe. It also helps explain why the British response to the invading Sullivan Army was so tepid. British resources were too stretched and Governor Haldimand needed extra military support that was not available in sufficient numbers.

One side event which seldom gets coverage is Joseph Brant’s Raid on Minisink in Orange County. It was notable if only for the distances covered. The Rebels planned an ambush but premature firing by a Capt. Tyler gave it away and those planning the ambush became the ambushed. Capt. Tyler was among the casualties. (Gavin doesn’t mention it, but Capt. Tyler’s first name was the unusual “Belazeel”, used for at least four generations in that family. Capt. Tyler’s sister married a Loyalist and I am descended from her).

The one notable battle of the Sullivan Campaign was Newtown. The loyal Native Nations and Butler’s Rangers were involved and the result was not encouraging. This reviewer has memories of participating in the Newtown Bicentennial in 1979. A relief force of King’s Royal Yorkers was organized later but far too late to challenge the Rebels who had retired south by then. Fortunately Ft. Niagara was never attacked. The Sullivan Campaign was a technical success but failed to remove the loyal Native Nations from the War.

As with Gavin’s other books, this one features extensive notes, a fulsome bibliography and an index- all indications of dedicated research. This book demands the full attention of the reader, and that attention given is rewarded amply. As with Gavin’s earlier books, this is another not to be missed.

