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Review of "Congress's Own: A Canadian Regiment, the Continental Army, and American Union" by Holly A. Mayer

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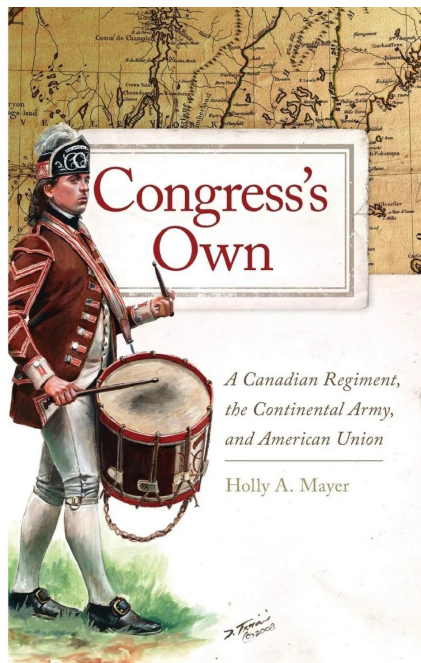
Book Reviews



Holly A. Mayer. *Congress's Own: A Canadian Regiment, the Continental Army, and American Union*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2021. Pp. 391.

A year before the Declaration of Independence, the nascent Continental Army embarked on its first major military campaign: to invade the British Province of Quebec, commonly referred to at the time of the Revolutionary War as Canada. Defeated at Quebec City on New Year's Eve 1775, the American forces would eventually retreat south the next spring along with hundreds of Canadian volunteers and refugees who had joined the Patriot cause. By 4 July 1776, the creation of a new country founded on ideals of liberty and self-determination had ironically followed the failed conquest of its northern neighbour. Yet national boundaries between what would become the United States and Canada during this era very much represented a borderland region where trade and enterprise frequently crossed, where allegiances and ambitions were uncertain and where the opportunity for a wider continental union seemed tantalisingly possible for at least some revolutionary leaders. In *Congress's Own*, Holly Mayer, Professor Emerita of History at Duquesne University, pushes the geographic borderland concept in a compelling new direction by arguing that the Continental Army itself represented a figurative regimental borderland, a space where individuals from different backgrounds with diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic and regional identities cooperated and competed over their visions for a new nation possessing continental aspirations. In a persuasive and discerning analysis, Mayer explores the character and contradictions of the early American military community through the intriguing existence and fascinating experiences of the 2nd Canadian Regiment,

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also known as Hazen's Regiment or Congress's Own.

Formed in early 1776 during the Quebec campaign, the regiment originally comprised anglo-Canadian and franco-*Canadien* volunteers but soon recruited officers and soldiers from all thirteen states, including many foreign-born inhabitants. The progress of creating a multiethnic, multilingual battalion, as Mayer describes, represented in microcosm “a borderland of culturally diverse Continentals within an effective but contentious regiment that reflected the Continental Army and the emerging nation it served” (p. 16). Mayer explores the meaning of this regiment as both a unique military formation that fought in campaigns throughout the entire

Revolutionary War as well as a social community that brought together a mix of officers, soldiers, refugees and their families. Using a rich set of sources including official correspondence, private letters, court martial cases and postwar pension applications, Mayer delves into the personal lives of many of these individuals while examining their experiences and motivations in the context of larger military movements and political forces. From defeats and victories on the battlefield to disputes over officers' reputations and honour to the new kinship ties that bound individual members, Mayer explains how such a diverse (and at times “infernal”) unit formed a collective regimental identity that managed to endure the chaotic war years through several army reorganisations.

If the regiment to an extent represented aspects of the whole army, and even more broadly the project of the American union, then its commanding officer Colonel Moses Hazen embodied the regiment's complexities and contradictions as an individual. A Massachusetts-born veteran of the French and Indian War and a land developer in Quebec, Hazen had joined the American forces during the 1775 invasion after some uncertainty over where his loyalties rested. Congress rewarded his services with a colonel's commission and authorisation to raise

the 2nd Canadian Regiment (the 1st was recruited and commanded by Colonel James Livingston). As Mayer details in her analysis of his writings and actions, Hazen demonstrated the promise of revolutionary virtue as well as its limits. His rhetoric expressed enthusiasm for the cause while he connived personal business pursuits. Although a native of New England, he identified as a foreigner and a Canadian but would never realise his ambition of bringing Canada into the union. He used his reputation to advance his and his regiment's interests even as superiors and subordinates frequently challenged his honour. As much as he and his troops fought well on the battlefield, Hazen also engaged in legal battles over the course of several courts martial for among other charges, "ungentleman and unofficer-like Conduct" (p. 212). Given the importance of officership to the study (Mayer includes an impressive appendix of every officer in the regiment), it would have been very useful and interesting for a deeper analysis of how honour and gentlemanliness were defined in eighteenth century military culture. Nevertheless, through the experiences and struggles of Hazen, his officers and many of the nearly 1,900 soldiers who would eventually serve in the regiment, Mayer offers fascinating perspectives into the political, personal, disciplinary and economic aspects of Continental Army life.

The organisation of the book roughly follows the chronology of the Revolutionary War, and some knowledge of the conflict's timeline helps readers to track the regiment's progress across different campaigns. With exceptional detail and prose, Mayer traces the regiment's history from early struggles over sustainable recruitment to a strengthening esprit de corps in battles with the British and Loyalists to the internal conflicts and rivalries that frequently threatened unit cohesion and command hierarchy. By 1781, other non-state-based regiments in the Continental Army were dissolved, including the 1st Canadian, with most Canadian and foreign soldiers incorporated into Hazen's 2nd Canadian Regiment, now renamed the Canadian Old Regiment. At times, some commentators called the contentious unit "infernal," but as Mayer argues this label also captured its complex reputation as a fierce fighting unit largely composed of ethnically diverse foreign volunteers led by often quarrelling, ambitious officers (p. 153).

A compelling theme throughout the book is the importance of naming, particularly the informal identification of the regiment as Congress's Own. Unlike most other Continental Army battalions which were affiliated with a specific state, Hazen's Canadian

Regiment had no home—or at least its nominal home of Quebec remained in British control. Without a state population to draw volunteers and a state government to provide funds, the regiment was allowed to recruit throughout America while Congress itself allocated the much needed (and frequently requested) money and supplies. Congress disowned its inclusion in the honorific title, concerned over the perception that the federal legislature possessed its own military force, and anxious not to be associated with the “infernal” regiment’s scandals, rivalries and transgressions. Yet Mayer makes a key argument that a continued willingness of veterans to identify as members of Congress’s Own signaled a step in the transformation of an assorted collection of foreign and Canadian volunteers into citizens invested in the American project. As Mayer turns to important veteran issues and early nineteenth century pension applications, she further demonstrates that former soldiers believed patriotic service meant Congress still held a duty to care for its old regiment.

In addition to being a valuable contribution to social and military studies about the Revolutionary War, *Congress’s Own* is an outstanding regimental history that goes beyond the confines of a narrow examination of a single unit. Readers learn much about the organisation, administration, movements and personalities of this particular regiment, but they are also introduced to a new perspective on the Continental Army and the struggles over forming a national union. As Mayer writes, Congress’s Own constituted “a regimental community of relationships and interests bound by joint orders, shared experiences, and common goals within a borderland of contested and negotiated opportunities, loyalties, and identities. This borderland community contented with the governance of military versus civilian members and the intersection of institutional and interpersonal dynamics” (p. 184). The book will be of immense interest to scholars and students of early American and Canadian history, the politics of Patriotism and Loyalism and eighteenth-century military cultures. Drawing on concepts of borderlands and community, Mayer reminds historians that a borderland is not only found between the lines on a map. In a figurative sense it can be uncovered in the interactions of people of diverse backgrounds with different motivations as they formed a new community and forged new identities over the course of a destabilising and destructive war.

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