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Mark Puls, *Henry Knox: Visionary General of the American Revolution*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Pp. vi, 282. ISBN 978-1-4039-8427-2.

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Mark Puls, a former journalist for *The Detroit News*,<sup>1</sup> has written the most detailed biography of Henry Knox in the past half-century. “If George Washington was the indispensable man of the Revolution,” he asserts, “then ... Knox was his indispensable man” (251). Using skill, innovation, and determination, he essentially created the artillery arm of the Continental Army and played a significant role in each of Washington’s victories. In the postwar years, Knox as secretary of war advocated military reforms that shaped the long-term development of America’s defense structure. However, according to Puls, for two centuries historians have overlooked Knox’s important accomplishments.<sup>2</sup>

Henry Knox, a descendant of Scottish reformer John Knox, experienced a childhood of hardships and substantial responsibilities. Forced to work for a Boston bookseller at age nine, when Knox’s father abandoned the family, he eventually owned his own bookstore, where he read many military manuals, as well as books on the history of war. In 1775, after several years in a militia artillery company, Knox served as a volunteer at the siege of Boston, impressing George Washington with his engineering and organizational skills. On Washington’s recommendation, the Continental Congress promoted the twenty-five-year-old Knox to colonel and appointed the self-taught artilleryman as head of the almost nonexistent Continental artillery corps. This was the beginning of Knox’s meteoric rise in the American army, as the Revolutionary War opened up great opportunities for young and inexperienced soldiers. In December 1776, the Congress appointed him brigadier general.

In clear and direct prose but without any maps, Puls covers Knox’s service in the War of Independence. In an epic winter trek, Knox brought fifty-nine cannons from Fort Ticonderoga to the American lines near Boston, which forced the British to evacuate the city. He subsequently rendered valuable service during the retreat from New York City and at the battles of Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, and Monmouth. However, he suffered a major setback at the Battle of Germantown, when his artillerymen spent precious time in a failed effort to take control of the Chew House, which contributed to the breakdown of Washington’s complicated plan of attack.

“Throughout the war, he remained at Washington’s side in a supporting role. As a strategist, he was well read and by all accounts possessed strong judgment. In planning for battle at councils of war, he leaned on the side of caution. Even when faced with tremendous political pressure, Knox insisted that the American army refrain from staking all in one decisive battle” (254). Indeed, in those councils of war, Knox, Nathanael Greene, and other generals prevented Washington from launching a suicidal attack on Boston in February 1776 and advised the commander-in-chief against a very risky attack on Philadelphia in October 1777. They also convinced him to retreat from Manhattan Island when facing encirclement by the British army and navy in September 1776.<sup>3</sup>

As the war progressed, Knox developed a system of field, siege, and garrison artillery of 3- to 32-pounders. His leadership of the Continental artillery reached its apex with the successful siege of York-

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1. And author of *Samuel Adams: Father of the American Revolution* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

2. The other leading candidate as Washington’s chief advisor is Nathanael Greene. See Terry Golway, *Washington’s General: Nathanael Greene and the Triumph of the American Revolution* (NY: Henry Holt, 2005) and Steven E. Siry, *Greene: Revolutionary General* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2006).

3. The best study of Washington’s weaknesses as a tactician is Edward G. Lengel, *General George Washington: A Military Life* (NY: Random House, 2005).

town in October 1781, as the American and French guns outdueled the British artillery and forced the surrender of Lord Cornwallis's army. Promoted to major general at age thirty-two, Knox succeeded Washington as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army when the Virginian resigned in December 1783.

In his well-paced narrative, Puls additionally covers Knox's postwar career as secretary of war in the Articles of Confederation government and the Washington administration. Knox again demonstrated very good administrative skills as he expanded the army, called for frontier fortifications in the west, negotiated several treaties with Indian tribes, established defenses along the East Coast, and started the U.S. Navy. Puls also asserts that Knox's failures, such as the two military expeditions he sent against the Indians in the Northwest Territory, were caused by incompetent subordinates.

Furthermore, Puls emphasizes Knox's far-sighted leadership when he proposed a small regular army of soldiers devoted to the defense of American liberty, an academy to train officers, and a national militia of adult male citizens. As a staunch nationalist, Knox was also one of the first leaders after the Revolutionary War to advocate a new constitution to create a stronger national government. And he drafted the plan that created The Society of the Cincinnati,<sup>4</sup> a postwar fraternal organization for the Continental Army's officer corps, with membership that could be passed to the eldest male descendant. Critics, however, saw this as an effort to create an aristocratic order opposed to republican values.

Puls's narrative is especially strong on personal relationships. He weaves into the military drama Knox's wartime relationship with his wife, Lucy, daughter of a leading Boston loyalist, and their enormous grief as nine of their twelve children died before reaching adulthood. He also traces his close relationship with Washington, who took an instant liking to Knox's jovial personality and enjoyed his friendship throughout the war and for many years afterward. The friendship, however, broke down during the Quasi-War with France in 1798 when Washington wanted Alexander Hamilton, instead of Knox, to be selected as the highest-ranking major general in the army.

Missing from this portrait of Knox is any indication of the ideological world in which he emerged as a dedicated rebel leader. In the past fifty years, historians have written extensively on the ideological origins of the American Revolution.<sup>5</sup> Had Puls used this scholarship to provide a fuller context for many colonists' opposition to Britain's imperial legislation and their concomitant support for revolution, he could also have shown how ideological issues continued to influence men, including Knox, involved in the postwar government.

Just months before his death at age fifty-six, Knox wrote: "Years roll away, and soon we shall be numbered among those who have been atoms upon this atom of a globe and very soon after, it will be forgotten that we had here any existence" (246). Indeed, despite Knox's impressive military and civilian careers, Puls argues that historians have for 200 years overlooked his accomplishments. Although that overstates the case, Knox has in fact received less recognition than he deserves. Several factors explain this. Most significantly, according to Puls, the reputation of George Washington simply overshadows Knox and other important rebel leaders. Moreover, the Founding Fathers receiving the most attention are signers of the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution. And, too, the destruction of all the U.S. War Department records by fire in 1800 has limited research on Knox's postwar career.

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4. Not "The Society of Cincinnati" (184, 188, 201, 241).

5. Covering, in particular, republicanism, Lockean liberalism, the Scottish moral sense philosophy, French Enlightenment thought, the Protestant tradition of dissent, and English juridical rights. See, e.g., Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 1969), Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), and Isaac Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U Pr, 1990).

Puls's life of Knox offers solid judgments but not a new interpretation. His conclusions largely echo those of North Callahan a half century ago.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, this is a convincing portrait of a distinguished citizen-soldier who, by his great accomplishments, well served the young American republic.<sup>7</sup>

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6. *Henry Knox: General Washington's General* (NY: Rinehart, 1958).

7. Some factual errors: Puls refers to British artillerymen as grenadiers (31), but grenadiers were actually elite assault troops. He asserts that, after its surrender, General John Burgoyne's army boarded ships in Boston bound for England (111). In fact, despite terms of surrender calling for the troops' parole with the stipulation that they not return to North America during the war, only Burgoyne and two aides were allowed to sail to England. The rest of the army remained prisoners until the end of the war. Puls also incorrectly asserts that Alexander Hamilton could not run for president because he was "foreign-born" (242). The Constitution states that a non-natural-born citizen could be elected president if he was a citizen at the time of the adoption of the Constitution. Finally, Hamilton died the day after, not "within minutes" (245) of, being shot by Aaron Burr.