



1777: Tipping Point at Saratoga by Dean Snow.

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In this strong addition to the recent spate of works on its subject,¹ anthropologist Dean Snow (Penn State Univ.) offers a lively narrative based on firsthand accounts and archaeological finds made since his initial excavations at the Saratoga National Historical Park in 1971:

The artifacts and archaeological features we had uncovered related directly to the actions of real individuals, some of whom we could name and come to know better through their writings. I was struck by the profound humanity of the words of men and women who had experienced the tragic reality of war on both sides here in 1777.... My purpose here is to lead the reader to a deeper understanding of the people involved in the brief but momentous culmination of the Saratoga Campaign. (vii–viii)

Snow's microhistory centers on the events of a month (15 Sept.—17 Oct. 1777) as experienced by specific individuals. Many of his subjects, including Benedict Arnold, Simon Fraser, James Wilkinson, and the British and American army commanders John Burgoyne and Horatio Gates are well known. Most of the others are not, however, and they provide the most interesting insights into the decisive Saratoga campaign. They include enlisted personnel, both regulars and militiamen, on each side, junior officers (some of them German), camp followers, and local residents. Among the more memorable are Patrick Henry's son John, who lost his sanity after fighting at Bemis Heights; John Becker, a patriot-leaning civilian who fled his home as the two armies approached; and Daniel Taylor, a Loyalist executed for serving as a British courier. Women who accompanied British soldiers appear as well; the names of some are known—for example, Baroness Frederika Riedesel and Harriet Acland—while others are not. Like many wives, a "Mrs. Harnage" and a "Mrs. Reynals" feared for their officer husbands, since the Americans targeted officers in particular. Archaeological evidence reveals that at least one British woman was herself killed during the American attack on the Balcarres Redoubt.

Snow divides his book into five chapters of varying lengths. His introduction and first chapter, "The Opening," sketch the background of the campaign and indicate the book's broader themes. Chapter 2, "The Battle of Freeman's Farm," is now the clearest, most detailed available account of that engagement. Notwithstanding the conventional wisdom about the colonists' reliance on guerrilla tactics, Snow's readers are treated to a panorama (enhanced by detailed maps) of British and American units surging back and forth across the battlefield in European-style linear formations. The same narrative style enlivens chapter 4, "The Battle of Bemis Heights," and the account of General Burgoyne's unsuccessful retreat in chapter 5, "The End Game." The latter features a carefully detailed description of how the rapidly growing American Army methodically encircled and wore down the British. Snow astutely observes that General Gates made a mistake in negotiating surrender terms by making the

1. See, e.g., Theodore Corbett, *No Turning Point: The Saratoga Campaign in Perspective* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2012); Douglas R. Cubbison, *Burgoyne and the Saratoga Campaign: His Papers* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2012); Michael P. Gabriel, *The Battle of Bennington: Soldiers and Civilians* (Charleston, SC: History Pr, 2012); Bruce M. Venter, *The Battle of Hubbardton: The Rear Guard Action that Saved America* (Charleston: History Pr, 2015); and William A. Griswold and Donald W. Linebaugh, eds., *The Saratoga Campaign: Uncovering an Embattled Landscape* (Hanover: U Pr of New England, 2016).

first offer, instead of waiting for Burgoyne do so. This led to relatively favorable terms for the British, causing Congress to revoke the agreement, something Snow does not cover.

Besides his thorough account of the Saratoga campaign's two major battles, Snow gives welcome attention to *la petite guerre*. Chapters 3, "The Middle Game," and 5, each some one hundred pages long, chronicle the numerous skirmishes and small engagements where the Americans further bloodied Burgoyne's weakened army and scooped up a steady stream of POWs. These accounts reveal the haphazard nature of combat.

Like many militiamen ... [the twenty soldiers] were armed with fowling pieces, but they set out with rum-fortified determination, skulking as silently as drunken men could across no-man's land. It was still wet and rainy, but the waning gibbous moon provided enough gray glow through the clouds to let the men find their way forward. When they got to within a few yards of the British pickets their leader blew an old horse trumpet and they charged forward yelling, stumbling, and laughing. "Ground your arms or you are all dead men," shouted the group's leader at an unexpectedly large number of British pickets. The astonished regular British soldiers could only conclude that they were facing a large American raiding party, so they complied, dropping their muskets and raising their arms in surrender. The drunken militiamen paraded over thirty humiliated British captives back to the American lines in their clownish gear, lucky that they had not all been killed. (172)

The Oneida Indians were especially effective guerrilla fighters and terrified British and Loyalist combatants. Historians have noted that Native Americans inspired fear among the colonists, but Snow demonstrates that the same was true of their British opponents. Indeed, one of the leitmotifs of the book is the similarities between the two armies, starting with the commanders. For instance, both Burgoyne and Gates had senior subordinates—Maj. Gen. Friedrich Riedesel and Gen. Benedict Arnold, respectively—who disagreed with what they felt were increasingly tentative decisions as the campaign progressed. Burgoyne delayed attacking the American positions, hoping General Henry Clinton's force would join him from the south, and then hesitated to retreat to Canada. Gates, meanwhile, vacillated daily between holding his position and falling back to Albany, never adopting the aggressive tactics supported by Arnold. He also alienated some officers by concealing a serious gunpowder shortage until more ammunition arrived, which seemed to show a lack of faith in them. Snow notes that Burgoyne and Gates immersed themselves in "minutia" as the days passed to escape the weight of responsibility that bore down upon them (187). Gates, for example, included a reward for a lost horse in his daily orders, as if it merited the same attention as winning the battle.

The similarities between the armies did not end with their leaders. The British occupied their camp so long that it took on the appearance of a permanent frontier settlement. Gates, on the other hand, commanded so large a force that, by the end of the campaign, it constituted the fourth largest city in the colonies, after Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. Factionalism was rife in both armies, especially in Burgoyne's polyglot army of Britons, Germans, Canadians, Americans, and Indians. German and British soldiers—both officers and enlisted men—hated each other and there was friction even among the different branches of Burgoyne's army. Artillery commander Maj. Gen. William Phillips instructed his gunners to conserve shot and powder using their best judgment, regardless of the orders of infantry field officers. While the Americans all spoke English, there were rivalries between soldiers from different colonies, especially "Yankees" and "New Yorkers," and supporters of different officers.

The author's scholarly expertise extends well beyond archaeology. For example, he is able to distinguish between "standard time," "local solar time," and "modern daylight time" in specifying precisely when events occurred (x) and when the rising or setting of sun and moon influenced visibility.

As promised, Dean Snow has opened a unique perspective on the “momentous culmination” of the decisive Saratoga Campaign by highlighting the human dimension of combat. *1777: Tipping Point at Saratoga* warrants the serious reflection of all students and scholars of the American Revolutionary War.²

2. Oxford University Press has created a useful website containing documents, electronic maps, detailed timelines, and other materials to supplement those found in the book – www.miwsr.com/rd/1712.htm.