



## *Lovewell's Fight: War, Death, and Memory in Borderland New England*

by Robert E. Cray.

Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 2014. Pp. xii, 213. ISBN 978-1-62534-107-5.

Review by Rodney G. Thomas, Spanaway, WA (rodneygthomas@outlook.com).

An old military aphorism warns that “if everything is going well, you are about to be ambushed.” On the morning of 9 May 1725, Capt. John Lovewell’s third expedition against the Abenakis people was going well. His command had nearly reached one of their known hunting stops and indications were that the Abenakis were present in numbers and unaware of Lovewell’s approach. Preparing for the attack, Lovewell ordered his men to drop their packs before their advance. In the lore of the battle in the North Woods that day, this was a major mistake. The Abenakis found the packs and readied their forces to counter the advancing Lovewell.

A nearly day-long fight ensued over a few miles, leaving Lovewell and several others dead, some severely wounded, and the rest ensconced in individual firing positions. The Abenakis left the New Englanders in their positions and returned to their homes north of the battlefield as evening approached. Lovewell’s survivors returned home the next day, some with dishonor and none with distinction.

Historian Robert Cray (Montclair State Univ.) retells the story of Lovewell’s fight after years of research into where the battle took place and its persistence in present-day memory. His interest in Lovewell grew from a re-reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1832 story “Roger Malvin’s Burial,” especially its preface: “Lovell’s Fight” (ix). Cray’s investigations yielded not one but two narratives. The first concerns New Englanders’ use of Lovewell for inspiration and the impact of battle on men in early colonial warfare. The second, based on the author’s exhaustive research into relevant primary sources, carries the reader along with Lovewell deep into the North Woods and beyond.

The first two chapters—“Captain John Lovewell’s Fatal Expedition” and “War and Survival in Dunstable, Massachusetts”—introduce the causes of the battle, its participants and strategic setting, and the state of conflict before and afterward. Chapter 3, “Death and Burials in Dummer’s War,” details typical memorials of the dead at the time. Chapter 4, “Scripting the Fight,” explores the crafting of the literature of the battle and its participants, especially the carefully constructed sermons, that turned defeat into glory, death into sacrifice, and service into honor. Most compelling and useful here is Cray’s comparative discussion of other “defeat-into-victory” tales regarding, for example, the Alamo and the Little Big Horn.

Chapter 5, “Social Welfare and Lovewell’s Men,” unlike other heroizing battle narratives, exposes the true primary motive of Lovewell’s (and many others’) expeditions—the desire for bounties awarded in exchange for human scalps. The author gives an unvarnished account of the practice by all parties involved. If no bounty scalps were available, colonial legislatures and ruling bodies settled on a claims practice that entailed some financial support for soldiers and their families.

The sixth and final chapter, “Remembering Lovewell through the Centuries,” describes how “Lovewell became a significant figure in regional folklore” (7). This process was closely tied to nationalism and civic pride. Carefully devised stories commemorated the man but also obscured

important lessons about raising and maintaining a capable common defense force. Consequently, lessons had to be relearned by several successive generations.

Cray identifies a key weakness in Lovewell's preparation for and conduct of the battle—a lack of unit cohesion.

No one considered removing or concealing the seriously wounded. Physically hoisting and carrying them on the arms and shoulders of the roughly nine healthy individuals was impossible. No one wished to stay behind to defend Robbins and the others either—their fear of returning Indians was too great, the odds too daunting.... But Lovewell's leadership lessons worked poorly here. A decimated troop bloodied from an extended battle and lacking provisions was focused on individual survival. (25)

Disintegration in units like Lovewell's was commonplace, despite relentless training to prevent it. Cray's meticulous research into the details of the battle and its aftermath informs his later exploration of how unit dissolution was turned into a tale of glory. His explanation of this metamorphosis is the great strength of the book. It reminds readers that failure is a constant companion of military actions and that attention to its causes is not only prudent but essential.

Robert Cray deserves our thanks for his concise, insightful, and illuminating story of a small-unit ambush almost three-hundred years ago.<sup>1</sup>

---

1. One criticism: the book has only a single (inadequate) map; readers unfamiliar with the lay of the land will have to turn to other sources to grasp pertinent topographical details, troop movements, etc.