

Guy Chet, "The Literary and Military Career of Benjamin Church: Change or Continuity in Early American Warfare" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 35, No. 2 (Summer 2007).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

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**The Literary and Military Career of Benjamin Church:  
Change or Continuity in Early American Warfare**

**By**

**Dr. Guy Chet<sup>1</sup>**

Much of American scholarship on the colonial era has focused on the cultural and political transformation of Englishmen into Americans in thirteen of Britain's American colonies. This is one way of solving the problem of the American Revolution -- explaining why on earth these people rebelled?<sup>2</sup> In the field of military history, this investigation has produced histories depicting colonists as "Indianized" sharp-shooting frontiersmen fighting as irregulars (avoiding large-scale combat and focusing on small-scale hit-and-run engagements).

A battle scene in the movie "Last of the Mohicans" illustrates this cultural transformation: after a treacherous Indian guide led the English into an ambush, the Redcoats tried to get into a tight formation to offer massed fire, but their Indian assailants were just too quick; they swirled around the English and picked them off with firearms, tomahawks, clubs and knives. Eventually the Indians were defeated by other Indians and by Daniel Day-Lewis, an Indianized English settler who had learned how to fight like an Indian, using individual wit, quickness and strength, as

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<sup>1</sup> I owe a debt of gratitude to Ms. Susan Leath, my research assistant, for her assistance on this project.

<sup>2</sup> After all, eighteenth century Americans had perhaps the most comfortable living standards and lowest taxation rates of any European civilization.

well as individual marksmanship, rather than relying on a preordained system for the production of massed fire.

This is not to suggest that scholars who support the notion of “American tactics” have taken their histories from James Fenimore Cooper, but like him, they suggest that English colonists were militarily transformed during the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from defensive-minded collectivists to offensive-minded individualists. Whether focusing on tactics or logistics, these scholars hold that exceptional frontier conditions in North America transformed English colonists into exceptional Englishmen, alienated from the mother country by a uniquely American martial culture. Understandably, this story-line has been used as an allegory for a much wider cultural transformation -- Americanization -- that explains not only the American victory in the War of Independence, but also the birth of American democracy, nationhood and separatism.

The burden of proof that is attached to this type of Turnerian argument is considerable: one ought to demonstrate that the frontier experience can legitimately be presented as the American experience, despite the fact that only a fraction of Americans experienced frontier life firsthand.<sup>3</sup> The question, simply stated, is whether the east coast, including colonial governments and military establishments, was shaped more by forces of Americanization (coming from the west) or by forces of Anglicization (from the east).

Benjamin Church and Robert Rogers, the legendary Indian fighters of King Philip's War and the French and Indian War, occupy an exalted position in the historiography of the American way of war. They represent bookends for the transformation that Englishmen supposedly underwent in America during the span of the colonial era. What Church invented (by borrowing from Indians), Rogers perfected. The author's original intention, in *Conquering the American Wilderness*,<sup>4</sup> was to find

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<sup>3</sup> A second challenge with which such scholars have to deal is the well-documented and rich tradition of irregular warfare in early-modern Europe, which challenges the notion that it was American conditions and Indian tactics that forced Euro-Americans to develop light and irregular martial practices.

<sup>4</sup> Guy Chet, *Conquering the American Wilderness: The Triumph of European Warfare in the Colonial Northeast* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).

the instructional mechanism by which the knowledge acquired by Church was disseminated among colonial officers from one generation to the next.

An examination of the performance of colonial forces, however, indicates becomes clear that English soldiery did not improve over time with exposure to Indian tactics. In fact, a comparison between the first generation of military commanders (European veterans) and the supposedly “Americanized” commanders of the later colonial wars reflects poorly on the latter. The colonists' military ordeals during the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries did not lead to a reevaluation and transformation of their military or tactical doctrine. Rather than revitalizing the settlers' military establishments, these episodes highlighted the ongoing degeneration of colonial armed forces.

It was, in fact, this poor performance of colonial forces in King Philip's War (1675-1676) and King William's War (1689-1697) that led eighteenth century colonial magistrates to address the shortcomings of their own military forces through a greater reliance on British forces and imperial administrators. Thus, English military achievements in America during the eighteenth century reflected an increasing degree of British participation in planning, administration, and command. Moreover, British tactical victories during the Seven Years War indicate that the British army was more successful than colonial forces in countering the challenges of wilderness warfare.

American colonists remained committed to the accepted principles of European warfare -- massed deployment of troops and defensive tactics. Their military manuals, their training and their actions on the field indicate that settlers did not adopt a new and more offensive philosophy of war. Over time, however, lack of funds, lack of training and declining professionalism among officers prevented colonial forces from executing this conventional, conservative military doctrine effectively in battle situations.

Dealing with the legend of Benjamin Church in this context is essential, since so much of modern scholarship is focused on him as a starting point of this major transformation in American military culture. Most specialists would concede that Church had an undistinguished career until the summer of 1676, when he and other commanders started to accumulate tactical victories over Indian forces. At that point the remaining mutinous tribes were already starving, weakened, politically isolated, and on the run from English and Indian forces. That was when

Church won his fame. What is important to recognize about Benjamin Church is that even though he certainly saw himself as an innovator and a teacher, his superiors and colleagues did not heed his exhortations and advice. They continued to use European manuals to train their units. Church was indeed popular in New England for his victories, as were other more conventional commanders who became successful in those late stages of the war, but he did not shape new training habits or inspire new fighting practices in Plymouth or elsewhere in New England. His lessons were, for the most part, ignored by his contemporaries and by his successors.

The question, then, is how did Church gain his reputation as the father of American tactics? Several respected academics have credited him with creating a new and uniquely American form of English warfare and any Google search on ranger tactics will inevitably lead to entries on Church. Finally, the US Army Rangers website starts its unit history with Church's exploits in King Philip's War (he is seen as the unit's spiritual father). What is striking about this wide-ranging credit is that Church seems to have won it posthumously. His memoirs, *Entertaining Passages relating to Philip's War*, written in part or in full by his son Thomas, offer a narrative that, understandably, highlights Church's successes and places him at the center of the story of the war. However, *Entertaining Passages* was published forty years after King Philip's War (1716), so nobody could have read and learned from Church for at least four decades, unless it was by word of mouth. The second edition of Church's memoirs was published in 1772, almost a hundred years after the war. A third edition appeared in 1825, one year before the publication of Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*. The year after the publication of *Last of the Mohicans*, a fourth edition of Church's memoirs appeared in print (1827); a fifth in 1829; a sixth in 1834; a seventh in 1842 and an eighth (in two volumes) in 1865 and 1867. A ninth edition appeared in 1975 in anticipation of the Revolutionary bicentennial, and a digital version was made in 1999. So at least in terms of popular consumption and public interest in Church's exploits, his story and legacy were products of the Jacksonian era more than the colonial period.

When one examines accounts written by others about Church and this war, one finds the same pattern. In *New England's Crisis*, a collection of poetic accounts of the war published in 1676 by Benjamin

Tompson, there is no mention of Benjamin Church.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Increase Mather's *Brief History of the Warr With the Indians in New England*, also published in 1676, mentions Church only twice, plus once more in the Postscript.<sup>6</sup> He is first mentioned in a July 1676 entry -- the closing stages of the war -- in which Mather states that Church recruited Indians to hunt other Indians. His second mention is in an August 1677 entry, after the conclusion of the war. There is nothing in this account of the war about Church being the conqueror of Philip. In contrast to these contemporary accounts, virtually all modern narratives of the war place Church at its center.

Church's stature as a commander and as the originator of a new and uniquely American way of war seems to tell us more about American attitudes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries regarding American nationalism and exceptionalism -- the belief that the United States and Americans were different from Europe and Europeans -- than it tells about Church's career or about American military culture in his own times. Indeed, these same characteristics of American culture in the nineteenth century were responsible for the immense popularity of James Fenimore Cooper's novels, as well as Francis Parkman's ethno-nationalist histories and Frederick Jackson Turner's approach to American history.

When one examines the literary career of Robert Rogers, a similar pattern emerges. Publications by him or about him appeared in 1765, 1769, 1770, 1831, 1860, 1884, 1885, 1906, 1914, 1917, 1933, 1946, 1953, 1956, 1957, 1959, 1961, 1969, 1977, 1983, 1985, 1987, 1988, 1994, 1995, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2004 and 2005. It is evident that both of these characters loom much larger in our

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<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Tompson, *New Englands crisis. Or A brief narrative, of New-Englands lamentable estate at present, compar'd with the former (but few) years of prosperity. Occasioned by many unheard of cruelties practised upon the persons and estates of its united colonyes, without respect of sex, age or quality of persons, by the barbarous heathen thereof. Poetically described. By a well wisher to his countrey* (Boston: Printed and sold by John Foster, 1676).

<sup>6</sup> Increase Mather, *A brief history of the warr with the Indians in New-England, (from June 24, 1675. when the first English-man was murdered by the Indians, to August 12. 1676. when Philip alias Metacomet, the principal author and beginner of the warr, was slain.) Wherein the grounds, beginning, and progress of the warr, is summarily expressed* (Boston: Printed and sold by John Foster, 1676), 42, 46.

consciousness, from the mid-nineteenth century to today, than they did in their own time. Howard Peckham himself, who celebrated Rogers's Rangers and claimed that the British would have crushed the American rebellion had they followed Rogers's advice on irregular warfare, said that Rogers was forgotten in the annals of the British army and in the annals of American history until Francis Parkman rescued him from obscurity in 1884 (in *Montcalm and Wolfe*), portraying him as the embodiment of the military transformation of Englishmen into Americans.<sup>7</sup>

It is telling that Peckham was careful to say that unlike the British, Americans “*absorbed* the lessons of Rogers' experience,” and thus were able to perplex and eventually defeat the British.<sup>8</sup> He did not claim that the Americans actually used Rogers's military treatise or his “Rules of Discipline” as a guide or training manual. They did not. Rogers and his lessons were indeed lost on his successors, as Peckham acknowledges. For Peckham, the process by which this frontier martial culture was transmitted east to become America's martial culture was mysterious and non-linear. Peckham's careful choice of words indicates that he could not point to a chain of instruction, leading from Church through others to Rogers and from Rogers to American Revolutionary commanders.<sup>9</sup> He was convinced, however, that this instructional mechanism was there

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<sup>7</sup> Howard Peckham, “Introduction,” in Robert Rogers, *Journals of Major Robert Rogers* (New York: Corinth, 1961), viii-ix. Following his success in Parkman's narrative, Rogers appeared in juvenile literature for boys. In 1935, he finally won a spot in the Dictionary of American Biography and in 1937 he became the hero of Kenneth Roberts's novel, *Northwest Passage*, which became an amusing Spencer Tracy movie in 1940. That movie sparked a slew of publications that has only intensified with time, highlighting Rogers's accomplishments and outlining his centrality in American military history.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>9</sup> Further indication that this chain of instruction was not there can be found in Sandra Powers's recent study of the military treatises and manuals found in the possession of American officers during the second half of the eighteenth century. The memoirs and treatises of Benjamin Church and Robert Rogers were not listed among her findings. [Sandra L. Powers, “Studying the Art of War: Military Books Known to American Officers and Their French Counterparts During the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century,” *The Journal of Military History* 70 (July 2006): 781-814]

somewhere in the ether of American life and that it imbued American culture by osmosis.

The belief that America was different from, and even antithetical to, Europe has been a resilient constant in American culture and American historiography in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Historians who have made the case for American exceptionalism usually portrayed American culture either as a product of exceptional conditions here that produced new cultural and social customs, or as a product of America's isolation, which preserved old European practices and beliefs as these were being swept away by modernity in the Old World.

The recent rise of Atlantic History has expanded the scope of American scholarship in ways that challenge both these explanations for American exceptionalism. Rather than isolated outposts of European civilization, American colonies and frontier settlements are seen today as integral components of European Atlantic economies and as engaged participants in an Atlantic culture increasingly shaped by European markets, goods, technology, customs, and values.<sup>10</sup> In this new configuration, the Atlantic represents not a barrier that separated and distinguished Americans from Englishmen, but a bridge that connected them to their families, businesses, news, gossip, fashions, technology and literature, including military literature and military culture.<sup>11</sup>

The transmission of European military culture to the periphery of the empire was a characteristic of this transatlantic English civilization.

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the works of T. H. Breen and Carole Shammas on colonial consumer culture and material culture (Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2005]; Shammas, *The PreIndustrial Consumer in England and America* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1990]) or the works of Craig Keener and Wayne E. Lee on Native American appropriation of European technology and military expertise (Keener, "An Ethnohistorical Analysis of Iroquois Assault Tactics Used against Fortified Settlements of the Northeast in the Seventeenth Century," *Ethnohistory* 46.4 (Fall 1999): 777-807; Lee, "Fortify, Fight, or Flee: Tuscarora and Cherokee Defensive Warfare and Military Culture Adaptation," *The Journal of Military History* 68.3 [July 2004]: 713-770).

<sup>11</sup> Guy Chet, review of John Grenier, *The First Way of War: American War Making on the Frontier, 1607-1814* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). [*The American Historical Review*, (February 2007): 183-184]



When examined within the context of imperial history, the story of warfare, politics, literature and culture in British North America reads as a process by which colonies, including these thirteen colonies, “gravitated toward England’s cultural and administrative sphere of influence, rather than attempting to liberate themselves from it.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Chet, *Conquering the American Wilderness*, 6.