

Richard Buel Jr., *In Irons: Britain's Naval Supremacy and the American Revolutionary Economy* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 1998).

This book not only addresses the much neglected subject of the economy of the United States between 1775 and 1783 but offers a challenging reappraisal of the American Revolutionary War. Richard Buel Jr. contends that the economy of the war years is inadequately studied because of the lack of data series so beloved by economic historians. He dramatically reconstructs the war economy with farm ledgers and merchant accounts to show that there was an initial "collapse of the agricultural sector" which threatened the patriots with defeat because "agriculture held the key to the outcome of the war." (xi) Valley Forge (1777) was just the first of four winters of scarcity which culminated in the mutinies in the continental army of January 1781. The worst years were 1778-79. Buel differs from the standard accounts by finding that the sufferings of the army and the depreciation of the continental currency were not due so much to the Continental Congress but to a decline in grain production in the mid-Atlantic states, "the principal grain region of the infant republic," which fell to "no more than a twentieth of its prewar surplus." (29)

Buel attributes the food shortages to the successful blockade of North America by the British navy between 1775 and 1781. He dismisses the traditional explanation that agricultural production declined because of labour shortages induced by demands of the army: the adult male population was far from being fully mobilized while the size of the potential labour force increased during the war. Not only were exports and imports severely impeded by the naval blockade but every major port was captured by the British at some stage of the American War. This was highly significant, although it is a point undeveloped elsewhere, since the ports were key arteries in the export led economy of colonial America. The impact of conquest often devastated the hinterlands around the ports as happened after the British conquest of Philadelphia in 1778. The continental navy and the state navies were unable to mount effective resistance, for reasons the author discusses at length, while their strength declined after 1779. The shortages caused by the British naval blockade and the capture of major ports were compounded by enemy privateers, the demands of the French allies, the difficulty of dealing with French merchants who lacked the credit of their English counterparts and the inept attempts of a desperate government to control the revolutionary economy.

Fortunately, agricultural production began to revive in 1780 which "laid the basis for a limited economic recovery in the following year that was to provide a necessary precondition for the victory at Yorktown." (185) Buel contends that this was partially a consequence of the states and the continental government abandoning price fixing, legal tender laws and embargoes in favor of "more liberal approaches" to the market place. (147) He credits in particular Robert Morris, as superintendent of finance, with "a vision of a market-oriented war economy that

would recirculate money raised from taxation and reestablish public credit through an impost.” (235) He therefore dissents from John E. Crowley’s *The Privileges of Independence: Neomercantilism and the American Revolution* (1993) which views Robert Morris as a neomercantilist. The economic revival was also assisted by the arrival of the French army who bought specie and by the rise of direct trade with France. The naval blockade off Newport and Rhode Island began to relax owing to the damage sustained by British navy during the hurricane of 1780 and the relocation of war ships. This set the stage for the crucial resurgence of the economy of the mid-Atlantic region especially around Philadelphia whose revival was also helped by the virtual elimination of competition from Baltimore, where British military efforts began to concentrate and from St. Eustatius which was conquered by the British in January 1781. Trade increased with the Caribbean, most notably with Cuba, and farmers planted more crops in expectation of hard currency payments.

In Irons represents a major contribution to the history of the American Revolutionary War. It successfully integrates the economic, social and military aspects of the war in a compelling account. It challenges the view that the sufferings of the continental army were due to a republican ideology suspicious of standing armies advanced by Charles Royster’s *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (1979). It shuns the often parochial accounts of the domestic front by introducing the larger context of Europe and the Caribbean. It gives particular emphasis to the importance of trade with the Caribbean relative to Europe. Indeed, this dimension might usefully be expanded. The British abandonment of Philadelphia was not, as the author claims, simply to retrench in New York but to free troops for the conquest of St. Lucia which was the gateway to the French naval headquarters at Martinique.

The claim that the British naval blockade was effective contradicts the views of American naval historians like David Syrett in *The Royal Navy in American Waters 1775-1783* (1989). Similarly, John A. Tilley wrote of the poor quality and bickering of the admirals who commanded the North American station in *The British Navy and the American Revolution* (1987). He concludes that their mission was a failure. Unfortunately, Buel does not provide much evidence of the British naval blockade itself but rather asserts its role in the collapse of the trade and agricultural production. Nevertheless, his argument does reinforce the recent work of British naval historians like Daniel Baugh and Nicholas Rodger who have respectively questioned the traditional belief that Britain lost naval supremacy during the last five years of the war and that the navy was badly administered by Lord Sandwich. The British navy did after all defeat the French navy in the Battle of the Saints (1782) but the new government of Lord Shelburne was determined to sign a peace with the United States.

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