LAWRENCE HENRY GIPSON’S EMPIRE:
THE CRITICS

Ed. by WILLIAM G. SHADE

IN 1936 Charles McLean Andrews, then the foremost of American Colonial historians, wrote after reading the manuscript of the first three volumes of Lawrence Henry Gipson’s, The British Empire before the American Revolution, “I want to say how highly I value the work in question. It is unique in its scope and thoroughness and in more ways than one is a remarkable production. I had the privilege of reading it in manuscript and recognized at the time the breadth, originality and ripeness of the treatment. There is nothing written on the subject that approaches it in comprehensiveness and artistry of execution. To students of the Anglo-colonial relationship it will be indispensable.”

This monumental series, now numbering fourteen volumes with yet another planned, was conceived in the 1920’s and the first volumes appeared in 1936 when their author was at an age when most men contemplate retirement rather than moving forward on a project of such magnitude. After over thirty years, the text has been completed and it is clear that the series represents not only the mature consideration of a major topic by a master historian, but as Esmond Wright has put it, “the ne plus ultra of the imperialist view” of the origins of the American Revolution.

The “imperialist view” of the American Revolution can be traced back to the Tory historians of the eighteenth century, but is generally associated with that generation of historians in the early twentieth century including Herbert L. Osgood, George Louis Beer, and Andrews who attempted to free the study of the Revolution from the Whiggish assumptions and patriotic distortions of the nineteenth century historians by viewing the Revolution within

1 Charles M. Andrews to Caxton Publishers, copy in Gipson Collection, Lehigh University.
an imperial context. Gipson has gone beyond his mentors by emphasizing the diverse internal development of the many colonies and by concentrating to a greater extent than anyone else on the crucial decades immediately preceding the Revolution.

As the following reviews of Samuel Eliot Morison reveal, the project was eagerly received and its great importance realized from the time of the appearance of the first volumes.

**SAMUEL ELIOT MORISON**

"The vogue of the multivolumed histories seems to be returning. Last year, Charles M. Andrews successfully launched the first two volumes of a magnum opus that is to carry the English colonies to the American Revolution and now Mr. Gipson has brought out the first installment of a ten- or twelve-volume historical survey of the British Empire on the eve of the American Revolution.

"The general reader need not shy off from this work and imagine that it is not for him; nor should he be put off by metropolitan book store clerks who smile faintly at the mention of a publishing house in Caldwell, Idaho. Each volume is short, handy, and intensely interesting: packed full of the sort of data that make Mr. Sullivan's histories of our own times so interesting. The work may be described as an extended report on the social and economic organization of the old empire, section by section occupations, commerce, manufacture, the way people lived, religion, immigration and emigration, the dynamic aspects of politics in the colonies; all phases of life except education, art, literature and amusement, are given due attention. The description is compiled almost wholly from manuscript sources and contemporary imprints, which Mr. Gipson selects with skill and quotes in a manner to give one a feeling of real contact with the times. Volume I is a masterly account of Great Britain and Ireland around 1750. Not even in Mr. Trevelyon's histories can one find anything that cuts so deep as this description of England in the days when she was not

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only the world’s greatest wealth-producing community, but an agricultural country whose average harvest was sufficient to feed the island for five years. The chapters on Scotland after ’45, and on Ireland emerging from the gloom of the conquest period, yet emphatically under the Protestant ascendancy, are impartial and enlightening.

“Volume II, ‘The Southern Plantations,’ includes chapters on Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, the British West Indies, and Bermuda; Volume III, ‘The Northern Plantations,’ includes not only the Middle Colonies and New England, but Newfoundland and the Hudson’s Bay Company. Again, these volumes are largely descriptive; but in describing the dynamic forces in each colony Mr. Gipson often goes thirty or forty years behind 1750, and drops many a hint as to sources of future trouble. Particularly commendable is the writer’s inclusion of colonies that did not become part of the United States (Nova Scotia is reserved for the next volume), since most American histories overlook these integral parts of the old empire, which were subject to the same disadvantages and ‘oppressions’ as the thirteen colonies that revolted. Among the most interesting and novel sections are those on the iron industry, which recent researches in Pennsylvania have shown to have been much more extensive around 1750
than any one supposed; on white pine logging in New Hampshire; on the rum business in Massachusetts; on life in the great manors along the Hudson; on the splendor and chronic indebtedness of the Virginia planters.

"Every considerable library on American and British history will require Mr. Gipson's volumes as an indispensable work of reference, and most readers will be so captivated by the lively reports of this intelligence and humane historical surveyor, as to look forward with impatience to future volumes on the struggle for the Ohio Valley, and the East India Company, Guiana, British Honduras, and the other far-flung dominions of that strange, conglomerate empire out of which the United States cut its way in 1776. . . .

"Overlapping as he does the close of Parkman's 'Half-Century of Conflict,' and the early chapters of the classic 'Montcalm and Wolfe,' Mr. Gipson challenges comparison with that greatest of American historians. As a writer of historical narrative he is not in the same class. He has no feeling for scenery or local color; movement is likely to be sluggish where it should be brisk; picturesque episodes, such as the youthful Washington's wilderness journey with Christopher Gist, seem to be studiously neglected. But he has a far keener sense than Parkman for those economic and social forces that interest all modern readers. His introductory chapter in the dynamics of British imperialism in America is worthy of Beard. Through research in British and Spanish archives he has opened up new information on English activities in Trans-Appalachia; and by covering the region south of the Ohio, the Spanish as well as the French sphere of influence, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Cherokee as well as Wyandot, Delaware, Miami and the Six Nations, he has produced a more balanced account of the North American frontier in mid-eighteenth century than any earlier historian. Indeed there is no other single volume to which one may turn for information on the interplay of forces and events on the southern frontier, where buckskin and not beaver was the currency.

"Mr. Gipson's conclusions parallel Parkman's. The period that he chronicles was one of rising power and prestige among the Indian nations of what one might call the Bourbon axis, France and Spain. The thirteen English colonies disorganized, democratic,
unable to present a common front in face of the most obvious
and admitted aggression, seemed destined to be flung back on
their own coastlines, while the Bourbon powers captured the West
and held the Appalachian passes. Yet the English colonies pre-
vailed, although very tardily and reluctantly supported by the
British government (then in an appeasing mood), and became
a great and expanding nation. They won the race for empire be-
cause they were largely composed of free and self-governing
people, selected without reference to race or religion. French
Canada and Louisiana and Spanish Florida were conquered be-
cause their population was limited by racial and religious restric-
tion, and because their enterprise was restricted by an authoritarian
government. 'There were no tribunes of the people, no instru-
mentalities designed to produce or cultivate political awareness;
... all power descended from above.' Louisiana, even more than
Canada, 'was the prey of hungry exploiters who came in the
disguise of officials.' It is both timely and refreshing to be re-
mined that authoritarian regimes, despite their advantages for
getting things done and for striking hard and sharp, often come
off worse in the end. . . .'

The scope of the series drew many such comparisons of Gipson
with previous historians who had written in a grand manner. An
early reviewer likened the first volumes on the empire in 1750
with Elie Halévy's study of England in 1815 which served a
somewhat similar function in his multivolume history of nine-
teenth century Britain.6 Other comparisons were inevitable, but
most often, as the reviews of Crane Brinton show, it was the
earlier work of Francis Parkman which served as the rule by
which the achievement of Gipson was measured.

Crane Brinton6

"The writing of history, we are often told, has in the modern
world suffered from over-specialization. Historians, now mostly
mere professors, write exhaustive monographs read only by their
colleagues, or dull textbooks read only by their pupils. They have

6Review by Donald Barnes in Mississippi Valley Historical Review
left the task of writing history designed for cultivated adults, a
task once accomplished by the Gibbons, the Macaulays and the
Taines, to shallow popularizers and to shallower historical
novelists.

"Now it is true enough that there has grown up an academic
professional history that aspires to be a kind of social science,
and that therefore is not unduly worried if it does not directly
touch the great public. But it is by no means true that the old
leisurely, many-volumed history meant to be read contemplatively
and soberly is dead. Winston Churchill, who has kept so much
alive, has helped keep this kind of historical writing alive. It
is not dead even among professional academic historians, as Pro-
fessor Gipson has long been proving by his example. . . .

"In earlier volumes, Professor Gipson has shown that he fully
realized the importance of economic and cultural history. In this
volume (VI) he is by the very nature of his subject limited to
the traditional core of historical writing: war and high politics.
He describes with great care and detail the youthful Washington's
defeat at Fort Necessity, Braddock's defeat on the Monongahela,
and the failure of Shirley, Johnson and Loudoun to drive the
French from their "encroachments" on the province of New York,
all of them British defeats or stalemates.

"On the one successful British aggression in these years, the
seizure of Fort Beauséjour near what is now Amherst, Nova
Scotia, and the subsequent 'transfer of population' in Nova Scotia,
Professor Gipson is especially thorough. Nowhere else in relatively
brief compass is there so good an account of the dispersion of the
Acadian population. His final chapters on the European origins
of this particular World War (it was World War III or IV,
depending on how you count) are almost inevitably less fresh,
and contain less new material, but they display the virtues of
clarity and judiciousness we have come to expect from Professor
Gipson.

"Now this is, obviously, by no means the first many-volumed
historical work to deal with the old British Empire. Professor
Gipson would probably, and quite justifiably, maintain that his
work is not identical in scope and subject with that of Parkman,
for instance, who wrote of the struggle between France and
Britain for the New World. Yet even were his subject and Park-
man's identical, Professor Gipson would be wholly justified in setting to work, some two generations after Parkman, to give his own account of the men and events Parkman had dealt with.

"There are at least two good reasons for this. First, the study of history is in some sense cumulative. There is clearly a constant accumulation of new facts, and it is just possible that there is a growth of human wisdom in the understanding of these facts. Second, whether or not there is this cumulative understanding, there is a kind of compulsion upon each generation to revise, at least in part, the historical interpretations made by preceding generations. Professor Gipson's latest volume illustrates very well both these reasons why we are never done with the writing of history.

"New facts have simply poured in since Parkman wrote. Professor Gipson has the gift, without which he could hardly have dared embark on this task, of ferreting out these facts from manuscript and printed sources, and from the published investigation of hundreds of specialized scholars. It might be thought that modern improvements in libraries, indexing, cataloguing, microfilming and similar techniques would have made this task of research easier than it used to be. Actually it is unlikely that improvement in technique has done more than barely keep pace with the increasing complexity and mass of materials the historian has to handle. Ability at research is still a gift, and in spite of the criticisms of soulful snobs, a high, valuable, and relatively rare gift.

"These new facts should, of course, in themselves make necessary new interpretations. And they often do. It would seem, for instance, that we now have enough facts so that we can agree—so that even Frenchmen can agree—that Jumonville was not 'assassinated' by Washington. But the facts are helped by their very human interpreters. There seems to be a kind of common-sense Hegelianism by which one generation is driven to assert the opposite of what its predecessor had asserted. Thus Professor Gipson tries to redress the balance for Braddock. Indeed, he avoids the traditional phrase 'Braddock's defeat.' He puts the tactical blame on Gage, of later Boston fame, for not taking the precautions he should have taken as leader of the vanguard, and the strategical blame on Governor Dinwiddie of Virginia, who seems to him
largely responsible for the disastrous lack of Indian allies to scout for Braddock.

"More, however, than the healthy desire to contradict goes into the kind of interpretation Professor Gipson gives to the expulsion of the Acadian. Here there enters the whole spirit of our age. To nineteenth-century historians the expulsion of the Acadians was not only shocking but unique, a strange and loathsome aberration in the benign course of Anglo-Saxon expansion. By contrast, Professor Gipson is cool and matter-of-fact. He does not condone British policy, and he does not minimize the sufferings of these eighteenth-century 'displaced persons.' He does, however, think British policy no aberration, but the natural result of the existence in a critical battle zone of a population irrevocably committed to the ousting of the British from that zone. Obviously, he has lived through an age of many—and worse—mass transfers of population. None the less, one might wish for just a bit more compassion. And surely Professor Gipson might at least have mentioned Evangeline.

"Professor Gipson's colleagues, from the publication of his first volume, have urged the general public not to be alarmed by the scale of his work, by its professional air and its critical apparatus, by its lack of deliberate literary embellishments. This injunction should be repeated. Professor Gipson is not at all hard reading. His sixth volume is full of material of the very greatest interest to a thoughtful person today. True to his professional training, Professor Gipson does not emphasize 'parallels' with the present, but these parallels are there—in the 'undeclared war,' in the rival colonial jurisdiction, in the countless difficulties of cooperation among the partially independent provincial authorities, in the career of the quisling Thomas Pichon, in the astonishing irresponsibility and buck-passing among the provinces to which the unwanted Acadians were sent, in the whole circumstances of this great World War of the mid-eighteenth century....

"With the eighth volume Lawrence Henry Gipson's history of the old British empire reaches its climax at the Peace of Paris in 1763. The climax of action, at least for American readers, had come in the previous volume, with the victory of Wolfe over Montcalm at Quebec in 1759. The last three years of the war, however, if they lack unified dramatic interest, were of decisive importance.
"While the British quietly mopped up the rest of the French overseas empire, they managed by economic aid to Continental allies and by the commitment to the Continent of a relatively small but very well-trained force of British troops—and by great good luck in the death of Empress Elizabeth, which took Russia out of the war against Britain’s hard-pressed ally, Prussia—to win a very decisive victory. By this victory they appear to have made both the American and the French Revolutions inevitable.

"Mr. Gipson is too sound and cautious a historian to indulge in such retrospective prophecies. He sticks to his last. This volume has the virtues we have come to associate with his work—careful, unhurried piling up of detail sifted through careful research, through exploration of byways neglected by more general historians, the whole put together in a narrative rather deliberately undramatic; but—for the real lover of history—never dull.

"This is history on the scale, and at the level of concreteness, that brings the past back as no discussion of trends, forces, cycles and patterns ever can. It is, of course, history writing that by no means deserves to be called old fashioned, unless you are willing to label as old fashioned those other current writers of history in many volumes, Sir Winston Churchill and Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison. . . .

"The work is now an established part of American historical writing, a piece in the grand manner and on the grand scale nowadays mostly reserved for collaborative undertakings necessarily lacking in the stamp of a single personality. Mr. Gipson’s own stamp is on this as on the other volumes: complete mastery of the sources, great skill in analysis and description, an almost deliberate avoidance of the dramatic (the Freudian might say, because of an obvious revolt from the father-figure, Parkman) and an insistent thesis. The thesis, briefly summarized, holds that the British victory over France in ‘the great war for empire’ was basically won by the home government using British armed forces and British administrative and economic resources, won indeed almost in spite of the undisciplined, self-centered, shortsighted, bickering colonials in North America. It is a thesis that has offended some of Mr. Gipson’s more patriotic colleagues; he does not, however, for the most part distort it into an exclusive,
oneway form of causation, but qualifies and amends it in concrete cases.

"He continues to dig up some fine bits of evidence in support of this thesis. Here in the present volume, for instance, is a passage from archival material to show that the colonists themselves recognized the fact that they lacked the discipline necessary for garrison duty. The Massachusetts Assembly in 1755 is asking for British regulars to garrison posts on the Massachusetts frontier:

Our People were not calculated to be confined in Garrisons or kept in any particular Service; they soon grow troublesome and uneasy by reflecting upon their Folly in bringing themselves into a State of Subjection when they might have continued free and independent.

"In [the ninth] volume Mr. Gipson is engaged in one of those general surveys of the whole British Empire, by now vastly engaged after the Peace of Paris in 1763, which he clearly enjoys doing, and in which he is at his best. Systematically, beginning with the trans-Appalachian lands just ceded by France, he moves from west to east, ending with the complicated struggles in India that followed Clive's victory at Plassey. There are isolated bits of action, indeed wars, notably in India and on the new American frontiers but for the most part Mr. Gipson is engaged in the congenial task of describing, colony by colony, the administrative, constitutional, geographical, and economic frame and the problems that crop up within that frame. A final summarizing chapter sets the stage for the two volumes to come, in which one expects Mr. Gipson to make his contribution to that old, old problem: just what did go wrong in the relations between the British government and an important part of the people of the thirteen North American Colonies?

"To the amateur of historical writing, the present volume presents a neat opportunity to compare Mr. Gipson and his great—in some senses overshadowing—predecessor, Francis Parkman. In his fifth chapter, 'The great Indian uprising, 1763' Mr. Gipson goes rapidly but carefully over the exact ground covered in Parkman's first book, the 'conspiracy of Pontiac.' Pontiac himself
comes off diminished and localized a bit, by no means the center of a vast web, and there are other more detailed bits of revision. But what will strike the reader mostly is the vast difference between the styles of the two historians, a difference perhaps not wholly to be attributed to differences in personality. Parkman is the dramatist, Gipson the analyzer. It would be over-simplifying, and indeed misleading, to put the contrast as one between the artist and the scientist. For the lover of history, Gipson is steadily interesting, even though he never lifts his voice. But some sort of emotion comes out of Parkman’s pages that does not come out of Gipson’s, something for which the vest blanket-word remains ‘romance.’ But ours, clearly, is not a romantic age. . . .

“On the whole, it should be a consolation and a strengthening to realize that the problems we face today are far indeed from being new ones. Such a realization can come from the study of almost any kind of history, but it can come best from the study of a period in sufficient detail to make that period as real and as vivid—almost—as the world we live in, the world we also mostly learn about, not through direct experience, but through newspapers, periodicals, books and radio. Professor Gipson’s work admirably serves such a purpose.”

Not all reviewers applauded Gipson or favorably compared him with his predecessors. Certainly one of the most controversial volumes was the sixth of the series and the first under the title, \textit{The Great War for the Empire}, which Gipson dedicated to the many British soldiers who fell on the North American continent in that conflict. Patriotic passions flared, as Brinton mentioned, and this book, which is in many ways a key to the series, received more than one intemperate, hostile review. The reviewer in the \textit{Mississippi Valley Historical Review} thought it filled with “oppressive minutiae.” He went on to accuse Gipson of “distortion,” “bias,” and “special pleading.” “The evidence,” he wrote, “does not, as a rule, lead to or support the generalizations. . . . [This] volume is distinguished among modern works for its frank and unabashed partisanship.”

\footnote{Review by Curtis P. Nettels in \textit{Mississippi Valley Historical Review} (June, 1946), pp. 137-140.}
editor of the *New York Times* seemed to justify Gipson's use of evidence, but charges of bias and Toryism did not die easily although other reviewers praised the volume and criticized those holding to "the Evangeline school of American history."9

As part of the conservative and nationalistic mood of the 1950's, writing on the American Revolution took on a patriotic cast in the histories of the so-called "Neo-Whigs."10 During this decade two further volumes of Gipson's series appeared and one might have expected a repetition of the earlier charges and denunciations. Certainly there were scholarly controversies such as that with Edmund Morgan over the Stamp Act,11 but generally the "Neo-Whigs" respected the magistral scholarship of Gipson and proposed to build upon his series rather than tear it down.12 Gipson's short volume, *The Coming of the Revolution, 1763-1775*, was well received;13 and Bernhard Knollenberg, who contributed generally favorable reviews of the two volumes in the series to *The William and Mary Quarterly*,14 wrote Gipson, "I spent last week reading volume 8 of your great *The Great War for Empire* as preparation for reviewing it for *The William and Mary Quarterly*. It has been a long time since I have had so pleasant and satisfying a two days."15

There is little reason to believe that the reviews by Louis Wright and Stanley Pargellis (neither a neo-Whig) of the volumes which appeared in the 1950's did not represent a growing consensus.

8 *New York Times*, April 21, 1946. See also: Gipson to the editor of the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, November 1, 1946, in Gipson Collection.
15 Bernhard Knollenberg to Lawrence H. Gipson, February 18, 1954, Gipson Collection.
“This is history on the grand scale, one of the most important historical enterprises of our generation, and historians to come will have cause to thank Professor Gipson for the mass of fresh information which he has gathered from original sources. He has searched the archives of the world for manuscript material and obscure documents which might throw light on the history of this period. If his emphasis at times appears to concentrate upon military history, it is a result of the importance of the military actions of those years; for military decisions determined in a large measure the course of economic and social history.

“Professor Gipson’s theses concerning the development of the British Empire are already familiar from his previous volumes. In Volume VIII he again emphasizes that one must make a sharp differentiation between what we usually refer to as the ‘French and Indian War’ and the ‘Seven Years’ War’ on the continent of Europe, closely connected as those conflicts were. The present volume, the author says in his Preface, will not interest those who hold to a fixed tradition that the French and Indian War ‘was a somewhat localized North American conflict’ nor those who refuse to make a distinction between the Seven Years’ War in Germany and the nine years of hostility between the British and French empires.’ To unravel the strands of diplomacy and military actions in the last three years before the Peace of Paris is the author’s aim.

“This task is unusually complicated. Military actions extended over most of the globe: Europe, North America, the West Indies, Asia, and Africa. The political maneuvering both in England and on the Continent involved many different goals and ambitions which frequently shifted and changed. The real aims of politicians were often not the same as their publicly asserted intentions. In the 1760’s, as in the 1950’s, politicians often used words to obscure their meanings, and one can never be certain that a public pronouncement by Pitt, Lord Shelburne, or any other politician can be taken at face value. Perhaps the present reviewer is too cynical in such matters, but it appears to him that Professor Gipson is sometimes inclined to place too high a value upon the

statements of cabinet ministers like Lord Shelburne. But he has performed a great service in clarifying a mass of detail, both political and military, and he has given adequate documentation for his own generalizations so that future students can refer to the sources and draw their conclusions if they disagree with those reached by Professor Gipson. Only the scholar who has attempted to explore the difficult terrain traversed by Mr. Gipson can realize the immensity of his task and the magnificent contribution which he has made.

"As Professor Gipson has interpreted the events described in these eight volumes one is left with the impression that the great war for the Empire was almost a benevolent British enterprise, that Great Britain's defense of the North American colonies from such predators as the French and the Spaniards was altruistic, and that the Peace of Paris was a reflection of British generosity toward her late enemies. In all fairness, Professor Gipson himself does not go that far, but his reaction against an old-fashioned type of chauvinistic American history has led him to emphasize the other point of view so greatly that his generalizations are certain to provoke vigorous debate. That is one of his many important contributions. Professor Gipson has explored so much new territory and charted so many new trails through manuscript sources, that the path of his successors will be infinitely easier."

Stanley Pargellis

"Gipson's methods of research begin now to be understandable. He uses printed and manuscript sources available in North America; contemporary works (his note praising Caraccioli's *Life of Robert Clive* for its documents and warning against its prejudiced narrative is a model of its kind); unpublished source materials, especially in the chapters on the Floridas, the Ceded Islands, and India (where, when Harmsworth Professor at Oxford, he had opportunity to use the Public Record Office); and recent monographs. That he has not been able to see everything he would be the first to admit. That he is not unopen to criticism by specialists in some particular arena has been obvious since his first volume.

Gipson cannot be cited as an authority when a specific matter of detail is involved. His is the kindly judgment—on the king, whose power was still very great; on the ministry, for which able men were hard to find in the 1760's; on colonial administrators, almost all of them conscientious and capable; and on writers of monographs and doctoral dissertations. However Gipson is to be appraised in the end for this extraordinary undertaking to which he has devoted a quarter of a century, it will be hard to deny his contention that the old Empire possessed, within its bureaucratic limitations, the most flexible and imaginative government of its age.

"Small demurrers and criticisms will not hurt Gipson, nor will sweeping condemnations of him as a Tory historian. What will hurt him will be his own lack of sympathy, if that should emerge, with American colonials. He gives two indications in this volume of his approach: one, failure of British constitutional machinery to make provision for sincere differences of opinion outside Great Britain, and the other, lack of first-rate statesmen among ministers of cabinet council rank. What he must do now, following his own technique of telling a unified story though it violates the chronology of the series, is to go back to the 1740's and trace both the fancied and the real objections of Americans to British rule."

The charge of Tory partisanship mentioned by Pargellis deeply bothered Gipson who traces his own ancestors back to the revolutionaries who broke with the Crown in 1776. As the review of Richard B. Morris shows, Gipson attempted to lay these charges to rest in his final volume, which includes the summary Pargellis believed necessary. This review also points up the important role assigned by Gipson to slavery something tragically neglected by most historians of the Revolution.

Richard B. Morris

"With this volume, the thirteenth, Lawrence Gipson brings to a close his magisterial study 'The British Empire Before the American Revolution,' launched in 1936 after a dozen years of

\footnote{Saturday Review, June 17, 1967, p. 32. Reprinted by permission.}
historical sleuthing. There remains only a bibliographical supple-
ment.

"Like other imperial historians, Dr. Gipson has devoted con-
siderable attention to that large segment of the empire that lay
outside the North American mainland. This was the old empire,
where honor and prestige vied with trade and revenue in determin-
ing policy-making. How else can one explain Britain's tenacity in
holding onto Gibraltar, a rock of trivial value in the eighteenth
century but destined to loom large in her imperial destinies?
Gipson makes clear the issues raised by Gibraltar (upon which the
peace negotiations following the American Revolution nearly
foundered), as well as the administrative changes that took place
in the vast subcontinent of India, where the most important figure
was Warren Hastings. Dr. Gipson portrays him rather sympa-
thetically, in accordance with recent revisionist scholarship.

"Slavery hovered over much of the empire on the eve of the
Revolution. Dr. Gipson deals sympathetically with the early anti-
slavery movement, which was sparked by the evils of the slave
trade in West Africa, and was led by men like Adam Smith and
Granville Sharp in England and Anthony Benezet and Arthur
Lee in America. Jefferson was historically accurate when he im-
puted to the Crown responsibility for the continuation of the slave
trade, despite the wishes of the various British colonies. When
Jamaica in 1774 placed heavy restrictions on the commerce, the
Earl of Dartmouth, secretary of state for the colonies, declared:
'We cannot allow the colonies to check or discourage, in any de-
gree, a traffic so beneficial to the nation.'

"For those who have carelessly labeled Lawrence Gipson a
Tory historian, the concluding volume of this series should serve
as a necessary corrective. If the reader, after being richly in-
structed in the details of the administration and the internal prob-
lems posed by each of the diverse colonies, closes this book with
a better understanding of the complex issues facing British rulers
by the year 1776, the author himself seems to broaden his own
horizons as he pushes forward with his research. True, he regrets
the schism between the English-speaking peoples; but he does not
apologize for the shortcomings of British statesmen, nor does he
take away from George III that blame which Whig historians
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have traditionally, and quite rightly, placed at his door. There was no place under the eighteenth-century British constitution for the kind of autonomous position within the empire that the Americans demanded. . . .

“Dr. Gipson may still feel repelled by the tone of the ‘muscular radicals,’ the term used by his old mentor, Charles M. Andrews, to describe Patriots like James Otis and Patrick Henry, but he recognizes that the political philosophy of the Great Declaration represented a culmination of Enlightenment thought. To Dr. Gipson the coming of the Revolution reflects the growing strength of American nationalism and the growing awareness on the part of the colonials of the importance of common action. He might have pointed out that the American Patriots created the first great federal system of government, and also the first great common market. And it is a tribute to their vision that both have endured.”

During this decade the final four volumes of text appeared and reviewers of all ages and “schools” of interpretation have lauded Gipson’s achievement. The review of volume thirteen by John Shy (who was not yet five years old when the first volumes appeared) admirably summarizes Gipson’s conclusions and typifies the general reception accorded the final volumes of the series.

JOHN SHY

“With the main project already completed in twelve volumes, Volume 13 of Professor Gipson’s great work on the British Empire, 1748-1776, inevitably comes as an anticlimax. It would be a mistake, however, to overlook it or to be put off by a glance at its contents. The first 166 pages complete the historical narrative by surveying those parts of the Empire that did not revolt in 1775—‘The Empire Beyond the Storm’ to use the author’s label; then follows a 54-page summary of the whole series; and at the


end are more than 200 pages on historiography. The previously announced bibliographical guide will appear in a subsequent volume.

"One naturally turns first to the brief summary essay, wondering how the author will condense the leisurely and uncontentious argument that he has taken almost four decades and about two million words to deploy, whether he has changed his mind since he wrote *The Coming of the Revolution, 1763-1775* fourteen years ago, and if the pressures of concision will sharpen his well-known point of view. Professor Gipson, it must be said, is a remarkably consistent scholar: he reads and absorbs virtually everything that bears on his own work, but he neither changes his basic conclusions nor engages in any but the gentlest and most judicious disagreement with those who do not share his conclusions. The first British Empire remains for him prosperous, polyglot, and astonishingly free; it was held together by a common culture, a realistic sense of mutual interest, and officials who governed by persuasion rather than force. But by 1760, with the removal of the French threat weakening colonial interest in the old system, a number of the more secure and self-confident American colonists had begun to play the game by new rules. Certainly British leaders made some errors in responding to this altered situation, but these came later and were minor factors in comparison with the change in American attitudes produced by something approaching total victory in a world war. Mutual suspicion 'gradually mounted to such a point that heated emotion on both sides swept away any possibility of a cool, objective attempt to find a peaceful solution to the major problems of political inequality within the Empire.' Professor Gipson has toyed with various might-have-beens in the later volumes of his work, and here for the last time he raises the question of inevitability, but refuses to answer it. There is, however, a deterministic quality in his summary, for essentially his explanation of the Revolution rests on an analysis of imperial power relationships and the psychological conditions that they created. He does not develop or even depend on the argument, traditionally Tory and implicit in the main body of his work, that the internal social and political condition of the colonies may explain otherwise peculiar American perceptions and behavior. Likewise, little stress is placed on the state of British politics in
the 1760’s in order to explain the vagaries of British colonial policy. . . .

“...The last section, on historiography, brings its own surprise. Not a long essay on the literature of the Empire and the Revolution at all, it is instead sixty-two brief sketches of men, from Bubb Doddington to Robert E. Brown, whose works ‘have in some measure affected the public view’ of the British Empire before the American Revolution. Disappointment at what seems an unimaginative approach to the historiographical problem gives way, as one reads, to interest and even amusement, for the author has chosen a format that brings himself, if not into the foreground, at least into the middle distance where we can see him more clearly. Praising here, chiding there (judiciously and gently as ever), telling us that Namier’s famous lecture on ‘Monarchy and the Party System’ was not actually delivered the way it was eventually published, using a footnote to point out a good review in an obscure journal that scores heavily against a major book, the author indulges himself in the shop talk of a life’s work, and in years to come this section will be counted—perhaps like Bermuda—as one of the lesser but not least attractive parts of Professor Gipson’s spacious Empire.”

While Gipson’s work has been widely acclaimed, it is difficult—and perhaps impossible at this early date—to judge the ultimate impact of The British Empire before the American Revolution upon American’s understanding of their revolution. In his analysis of Gipson’s series, Bernard Bailyn tried to deal with what he called the “curious” reputation of Gipson’s series among historians and its limited popularity with the reading public. His answer, which is undoubtedly correct, reveals as much about our time as it does about the 18th century.

“Neither the lack of literary brilliance nor the inevitable unwieldiness of so big and panoramic a book accounts fully for the diffused impact it makes. More important is an element of a different order, central to the entire work, which emerges with particular clarity in the two volumes now published. In these latest additions especially one can see how undeviatingly Gipson has carried forward into the mid-20th century attitudes, formulations and historical concerns that first made their appearance at the end of the 19th century.

“It was then that the first spokesman for the ‘imperial’ school of 18th-century American historians, H. L. Osgood, struck out against the superpatriotism and parochialism of the received tradition and declared that ‘our early history had an imperial or British side, as well as a colonial or American side.’ . . . Lawrence Gipson is the ultimate inheritor—and his ‘British Empire Before the American Revolution’ is the ultimate fulfillment—of this tradition of historical writing. . . .

“Readers of the whole series will know how strenuous and sustained an effort the author has made to cover all of the topics of importance. Yet in these final volumes one sees the severe limitations within which the book was written. . . . The central thread in this interpretation is the development of formal public institutions—organs of imperial government on the one hand and local legislative bodies on the other. But institutions do not fight each other. ‘Rising’ assemblies proved in other colonies to be quite compatible with continued imperial control. The conclusion and logical fulfillment of this story lies not in the independence of the mainland colonies but in the further evolution of the other colonies into the British empire of the 19th century and the commonwealth of the 20th. In the imperial frame of reference the Revolution is an aberration, and is explicable only in terms of institutional abstractions or of the aberrant behavior of troublemakers and the dispossessed.

“What is missing from the imperialist writings on the background and origins of the Revolution are politics and ideology. Government is discussed at length, and beliefs are referred to re-

peatedly (though most often as rhetoric, propaganda and the verbal disguises of self-interest). But nowhere in this literature is there a systematic account of the informal structure of authority, of the shape of the struggle for power, of the rivalries, factions and interests that swarmed around and through the agencies of government. . . .

“The American Revolution was above all else an ideological revolution, and it is in ideological terms essentially that its origination is comprehensible. A complex tradition of ideas, fused into a coherent whole largely in the very early years of the 18th century, came into conjunction with a peculiar structure of informal politics in America to create, already by midcentury, a latently revolutionary situation. There was no period of ‘equilibrium and tranquillity’ for the people who actually lived through the middle years of the century . . . while popular leaders were proclaiming their affection and admiration for England and the British constitution, they were arguing a half-century before there was a revolutionary crisis, that British officials were deliberately seeking to destroy the balance of the constitution and engross the whole of public authority. The problem is less why there was a revolution than how this explosive amalgam of politics and ideology first came to be compounded, why it remained so potent through years of surface tranquillity, and why, finally, it was detonated when it was.

“But these are questions that could be perceived only when the foreground history of headline events had been fully depicted and only when the development of formal public institutions had been fully reconstructed. If future historians eventually manage to see further than their ‘imperialist’ predecessors, it will be in large part because they are seated on the shoulders of these giants. Gipson has fulfilled in grand style, with absolute integrity, a tradition of history that greatly deepened and broadened our understanding of American origins.”

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