Birthplace of an Army: A Study of the Valley Forge Encampment.


This monograph treats the various aspects of the Valley Forge experience of George Washington’s Continental army. The book offers an interpretation of the significance of that experience which warrants a more substantial study than this slender volume allows.

Trussell argues that the Valley Forge experience was a turning point of the war akin to the Battle of Saratoga because it was here that the Continental forces developed into a genuine organized army for the first time. At Valley Forge they “had become an army — proficient in the skills of their trade, cohesive and responsive to their leaders . . . competently and responsibly led.”

This monograph discusses the Valley Forge experience under six headings: “The Road to Mount Joy,” “Unless Some Great and Capital Change Takes Place,” “The Poor Sick, Suffer Much . . . This Cold Weather,” “It was a Continual Drill,” “The People,” and “Highlights and Special Events.” The first chapter deals with the road to Valley Forge. The others deal with different aspects of the long winter’s experience: shelter, subsistence, clothing, remedies and experiments, underlying causes of shortages, the weather, medicine and health, provisions for defense, organization, training and weapons, crime and punishment, enlisted men, the officers, and the commander in chief.

The chief failings of this book are that it is too brief and that the conclusion drawn by the author about the significance of the Valley Forge experience is not developed adequately throughout the book. This work posits an interesting thesis: that the unifying and organizing lessons of Valley Forge were a turning point in the war and in the Continental army’s ability to fight it. That thesis is significant and ought to be stressed more effectively in the structure of the work. That thesis is so important that it warrants a more complete study than this brief monograph assays.

One of the most interesting passages of the book is the section on the weather at Valley Forge, because it contradicts the popular misconception of what made Valley Forge such a severe test for Washington’s army. Based upon an exhaustive study of diaries, letters, and other records which cover all but two weeks of the winter of 1777-1778, Trussell shows that the weather was not particularly
severe. In fact, "the temperature was above freezing the entire time except for the last thirteen days of December, eleven days each in January and February, and five days in March" (p. 37). Judged by the standards of the winters of 1976-1977 and 1977-1978, this does not appear bad at all.

A particularly interesting section of the book is that devoted to medicine and health. The problems of shortages of supplies and the conflict between the general hospitals and the flying hospitals were an intriguing story that should have been handled in greater detail.

One sympathizes with the people at Valley Forge. However, the reader wishes that the author had greater skill at bringing the real-life struggle and drama of that experience to life. There are the makings of a really human story in the experience of Valley Forge. Unfortunately, Trussell seems to lack the literary imagination which would have made a highly readable human drama out of this stodgy, though scholarly, work.

On balance, this is a great little book. Unfortunately the promise of the thesis and possibilities of the story are not fully realized by the cramped style and slender treatment they are rendered by this account.

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Satisfied with two hundred years of survival, it is sometimes difficult to imagine the importance of our nation’s first federal elections. A few “wrong” moves in the 1780s, however, would have altered our present situation beyond recognition. Jensen and Becker should be congratulated for providing an accessible look into the workings of the victors, as well as at “the murmurs of partial discontent” which might have prevailed.

This, the first of three volumes, contains the material from Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and South Carolina. Although Pennsylvania is represented by less material than is Massachu-