

REVIEW - Britain and the Seventy Years War, 1744–1815: Enlightenment, Revolution and Empire. By Anthony Page. Palgrave Macmillan. 2015. xiv 282pp

War formed the backdrop to Britain's long eighteenth century. Some historians have described it as a 'second hundred years war', but given that there was a remarkable period of peace between 1713 and 1739, it makes more sense to divide these wars into two phases. Anthony Page's new book focuses on what he terms the 'Seventy Years War', an almost-continuous series of conflicts between Britain and (mostly) France, which started with the shambolic response to the Jacobite rebellion and culminated in the triumph of Waterloo, paving the way for a century of imperial dominance under the Pax Britannica. From the perspective of a Victorian Whig historian, this rise to international pre-eminence seemed linear and inevitable, but Page reminds us that it did not appear this way to people living through the eighteenth century. France was Europe's leading military power, with immense resources and a population three times that of Britain. The danger of a French invasion recurred throughout the period and on several occasions came very close to happening. If the Duke of Wellington famously described the battle of Waterloo as 'a damned nice thing – the nearest run thing you ever saw', Page suggests that the same could be said of the whole Seventy Years War (p. 59).

With this in mind, Page offers a novel perspective on the period. On the one hand, this is a military and imperial history. After a gallop through the wars themselves, he examines the nature of the state and the armed forces that made success in war possible. He nuances John Brewer's familiar narrative of the 'fiscal-military state' by emphasizing the fundamental role of the navy in Britain's military strategy, imperial power and industrial base. This was instead a 'fiscal-naval state', in which a large, permanent and expensive navy contrasted with an army that was kept to a minimum in peacetime and expanded to full strength only when required (the reason why Britain's wars tended to get off to a slow start). This is not just a conventional military history, however, since Page offers an excellent introduction to the social and cultural history of the military – something that is a notable growth area in the historiography of the period – and tells us much about the lives of ordinary redcoats and ratings.

The second half of the book thinks about the wider cultural, political and religious contexts of these wars. This is not a history of 'war and society' that just focuses on wartime civil society, since Page makes it clear that the influence was two-way. War had an all-pervasive influence on domestic culture, but it was also fundamentally informed by its political and intellectual context. Britain could only pay for, recruit, locate and deploy its combatants in a way that was acceptable to its political system and its public sphere. It is currently fashionable in cultural studies of the century to emphasize that Britons encountered war vicariously through newspapers, plays, letters and songs, but Page is clear about the extent to which people had a more direct experience of military service. As just one example, many of the great historians of the age served in the military, including William Robertson, Adam Ferguson, David Hume and Edward Gibbon (p. 167). Given the focus on war, this is necessarily an international account of British history. Whereas British Studies in the USA tends to emphasize a transatlantic imperial narrative, this is notably more global than that. Page is based at the University of Tasmania and believes that British history should 'be done in an Australian accent' (p. x). Australia appears more often than you might expect in these pages – the conclusion begins by noting that its first steam engine arrived just as Wellington was preparing to face Napoleon in 1815 – but the overall effect is to reorient Britain's story from the northern and western hemispheres to encompass the south and the east. As we embark on 'The Asian Century',

Page's accessible new book makes a striking claim for the continued relevance of Georgian Britain.