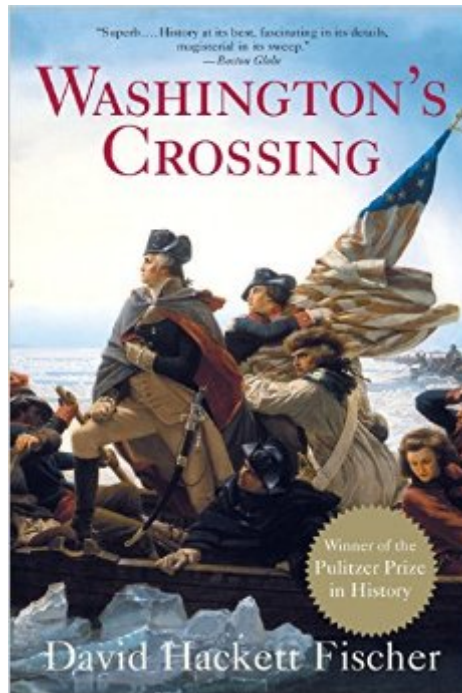


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Washington's Crossing (Pivotal Moments In American History)



Synopsis

Six months after the Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution was all but lost. A powerful British force had routed the Americans at New York, occupied three colonies, and advanced within sight of Philadelphia. Yet, as David Hackett Fischer recounts in this riveting history, George Washington--and many other Americans--refused to let the Revolution die. On Christmas night, as a howling nor'easter struck the Delaware Valley, he led his men across the river and attacked the exhausted Hessian garrison at Trenton, killing or capturing nearly a thousand men. A second battle of Trenton followed within days. The Americans held off a counterattack by Lord Cornwallis's best troops, then were almost trapped by the British force. Under cover of night, Washington's men stole behind the enemy and struck them again, defeating a brigade at Princeton. The British were badly shaken. In twelve weeks of winter fighting, their army suffered severe damage, their hold on New Jersey was broken, and their strategy was ruined. Fischer's richly textured narrative reveals the crucial role of contingency in these events. We see how the campaign unfolded in a sequence of difficult choices by many actors, from generals to civilians, on both sides. While British and German forces remained rigid and hierarchical, Americans evolved an open and flexible system that was fundamental to their success. The startling success of Washington and his compatriots not only saved the faltering American Revolution, but helped to give it new meaning.

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Customer Reviews

On a number of occasions I have recommended David Hackett Fischer's "Paul Revere's Ride" as one of the finest American history books I have ever read, a display of deep research, perceptive analysis, and a highly compelling prose narrative. With "Washington's Crossing" Fischer has matched his earlier book. Just as the title incident in "Paul Revere's Ride" served to signify Fischer's broader study of the earliest days of the American Revolution and the battles at Lexington and Concord, here Emmanuel Leutze's 1851 painting "Washington Crossing the Delaware" is the emblem chosen to represent the most crucial days at the end of 1776 when that Revolution seemed on the edge of collapse, but George Washington and his army in battles at Trenton and Princeton and in the little-known actions afterwards reversed the course of the war and set the British on the path to ultimate defeat. Although most Americans probably have at least a passing familiarity with Washington's surprise victory over the Hessians at Trenton on the day after Christmas, 1776, Fischer's account highlights an equally crucial, yet barely remembered, battle at Trenton a week later when the American forces withstood a counterattack by Lord Cornwallis's forces, setting the stage for a daring overnight march by Washington around the British army to win another victory at Princeton. Over the next several weeks, the British and Hessian occupation of central New Jersey collapsed as the Americans, heartened by the events at Trenton and Princeton, struck repeatedly and successfully at detachments of foragers who discovered that the supposedly pacified countryside was suddenly hostile territory. Within a few months British generals who had believed the rebellion almost crushed found that the path to victory had vanished in the snow and mud. Fischer presents vivid portraits of the generals and common soldiers on both sides of the conflict, while dispelling old myths. The Hessians at Trenton were not awakened from drunken sleep after Christmas carousing. The American army, although sometimes short of clothing and food, was well-armed and typically enjoyed a battlefield superiority in artillery. Washington comes across as a far more complex and flexible character than he is usually depicted (in a lengthy appended essay, Fischer surveys more than two centuries of artistic representations of Washington and the victories at Trenton and Princeton), but the real heroes of Fischer's narrative are the ordinary soldiers of the Continental Army and the local militias. He argues persuasively that these men were genuinely motivated by their ideals of liberty (although a New Englander of Glover's Marblehead Regiment might differ from a Pennsylvanian frontiersman or a Virginian planter as to exactly what constituted liberty and a proper society) and it is they, not just the generals riding boldly across painted canvases, who deserve much of the credit for maintaining the Revolution and seizing the initiative to take the war to the British and Hessian garrisons and thus reverse the course of events. And Fischer highlights a consequence of the American commitment to the ideals of liberty: while

Hessians and even British troops were regularly offered to take no prisoners, the Americans in general during these campaigns treated their prisoners with compassion and even generosity because of their belief that it was the right thing to do. In his closing, Fischer writes: "The most remarkable fact about American soldiers and civilians in the New Jersey campaign is that they ... found a way to defeat a formidable enemy, not merely once at Trenton but many times in twelve weeks of continued combat. They reversed the momentum of the war. They improvised a new way of war that grew into an American tradition. And they chose a policy of humanity that aligned the conduct of the war with the values of the Revolution. They set a high example, and we have much to learn from them. Much recent historical writing has served us ill in that respect. In the late twentieth century, too many scholars tried to make the American past into a record of crime and folly. Too many writers have told us we are captives of our darker selves and helpless victims of our history. It isn't so, and never was. The story of Washington's Crossing tells us that Americans in an earlier generation were capable of acting in a higher spirit - and so are we."

Washington's Crossing is at once both rich with detail and eminently readable, scholarly, yet approachable. In it, the author covers the period from which Washington took control of the Colonial army, through the disastrous, nearly fatal campaign in New York, to the Battles of Trenton, Princeton, and finally the forage war skirmishes that rage through the end of the winter of 1776-77. He illustrates how this winter campaign of Washington's was much more than the small, symbolic victory that it has often been characterized as; that it in fact had a major impact on the war by destroying the Howe brother's strategy of ending the Revolution through conciliation, and reviving the spirits of the Americans to fight on. Fischer begins with an examination of the make up of the Colonial army, with its wide sectional and cultural differences, and examines the daunting task Washington had in forging it into an effective fighting force capable of fighting the world's most professional and successful army. He then goes into some detail describing the make up and culture of the British army and the Hessian forces that the Americans faced, giving a context to the challenge. Washington emerges from his pages as a genius simply for being able to adapt to the situation at hand and create and lead what became the Continental Army. Fischer is vividly descriptive in his portraits of Washington and his officers, the Howe brothers and their principle officers, and the commanders of the Hessian forces. In addition, he provides the perspectives of common soldiers from all the armies, private citizens, members of the Continental Congress, and Tom Paine, the Revolution's propagandist who was pivotal in the success of the winter campaign. Washington's Crossing is rich in illustrations and contains adequate and readable maps.

It has copious note, an excellent bibliography, and several fascinating and useful appendices that add many additional layers of information to the text. I would rank this as one of the most informative, well-written, and fascinating books that I have ever read on the American Revolution, and I would consider it essential to a full understanding of the Revolution. Fischer has crafted a masterpiece that you cannot afford to miss. This book receives my highest recommendation. Theo Logos

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