

WHITE DEVIL: A TRUE STORY OF WAR, SAVAGERY, AND VENGEANCE IN COLONIAL AMERICA

by **Stephen Brumwell**

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Abstract

Stephen Brumwell's book titled, *White Devil: A True Story of War, Savagery, and Vengeance in Colonial America*, looks mainly at the events leading to and following the devastating October 4, 1759 raid on the Abenaki village of St. Francis (present-day Odanak) by Robert Rogers and his rangers. Brumwell examines the interaction between different cultural groups locked in alliances or in conflict, whose social lives were regulated or influenced by their own distinct societal, political and cultural values. The phenomenon of "cross-cultural interaction" on the frontier separating New France and New England played a very important role in the conduct of diplomacy and warfare. He also underlines the significance of Robert Rogers' innovative tactics as an increasingly more relevant component of British military strategy in North America.

Résumé

L'œuvre de Stephen Brumwell intitulée White Devil: A True Story of War, Savagery, and Vengeance in Colonial America, traite des événements précédant et suivant le raid dévastateur subit par le village abénaki de Saint-François, perpétré le 4 octobre, 1759 par Robert Rogers et ses Rangers. Brumwell examine l'interaction des différents groupes culturels engagés dans des alliances ou des conflits, dont la vie sociale de chacun étaient régie ou influencée par des valeurs sociétales, politiques ou culturelles distinctes. Le phénomène «d'interaction interculturelle» sur le front pionnier séparant la Nouvelle-France et la Nouvelle-Angleterre a joué un rôle très important dans la conduite de la diplomatie et de la guerre. Il souligne également l'impact des tactiques de Robert Rogers en tant que composant de plus en plus pertinent de la stratégie militaire britannique en Amérique du Nord.

British-born scholar and journalist Stephen Brumwell's book titled, *White Devil: A True Story of War, Savagery, and Vengeance in Colonial America*, is an effective narrative of the events leading to and following the devastating October 4, 1759 raid on the Abenaki village of St. Francis (now Odanak) by Robert Rogers and his Rangers. The successful raid, carried out deep into New France on the banks of the St. Francis River during the Seven Years' War, not only became a celebrated victory in the British colonies and in Britain but also a humiliating defeat for France, New France and their Native allies. It underlined the French colony's inability to defend itself against attacks coming beyond its southern Appalachian frontier. In order to reach the Abenaki mission and carry out this attack, Rogers and his 200 Rangers and Stockbridge Indian allies had to sail northward on Lake Champlain, land on the shore of Missisquoi bay, travel down the St. Francis and cross northward to what is now the Eastern Townships. The expedition's dramatic return trip to New Hampshire across the Eastern Townships' wilderness became the stuff of legend and still strikes the imagination of many today.

From the start, Brumwell succeeds to thrust the reader into a foray of events that will keep them reading on and on. His refined and very entertaining style of writing makes for a gripping, incisive, and very descriptive narrative. The author does not shy away from describing the atrocities and cruelties performed by the belligerents on both sides of the conflict, nor does he cut corners when providing details relating to the suffering endured by Rogers and his men during their many campaigns and missions. Though clearly not aimed at scholars but rather at American colonial history enthusiasts who value narrative, this essay does provide, to some extent, a comprehensive analysis of the events and the players. Brumwell's work is an examination of the interaction of different cultural groups whose lives are each regulated or influenced by their own distinct societal, political and cultural values.

The story begins in 1754 with the dramatic abduction of Susanna Johnson and seven of her household – including her husband and children - by an Abenaki war party, near Fort Number Four (what is now Charleston) in New Hampshire. The long and arduous trek through the forest endured by Mrs Johnson and her family was made even more difficult by the fact that she gave birth the day following her capture, while the party and their prisoners were on their way to the village of St. Francis. Her condition may have led the Abenakis to surprise Mrs Johnson by letting her benefit from a

somewhat more humane treatment. However, Brumwell is quick to point out that what seemed to be pity may have been more linked to finding ways to bring prisoners safely and in relatively good condition to their village in order to be enslaved or adopted by the tribe.

In the first chapter, titled "Conflict and Coexistence," Brumwell uses the Johnsons' journey as prisoners to describe the geography of the Lake Champlain and Richelieu River watershed, and the phenomenon of "cross-cultural interaction" on the frontier separating New France and New England. He takes great pains to describe the British and French fortifications that the Johnsons saw as they were being transported to New France. He introduces the reader to the troublesome but very interesting history of the Abenakis. Traditionally established near the New England coast, the tribe saw some of its members being transplanted in New France, on the banks of the St. Francis River. The acrimonious relations between the Abenakis and English colonists, and the diplomatic games being played by both the French and British to secure Native allies into their respective camps had brought a heavy toll on the Abenakis. Brumwell takes considerable time in describing the social and ethnic composition of the Abenaki population of St. François, which was, over time, being transformed by war, migration and the influx of individuals of origins other than Abenaki. For example, Susanna Johnson's Abenaki master, an important member of the community, was Louis-Joseph Gill, the son of captured New England colonists adopted into the tribe. He also examines the Celtic origins of some of the British settlers moving into the New Hampshire frontier, many of them poor Scotch-Irish from Ulster. One of them was Robert Rogers, born in 1731 in the province of Massachusetts Bay. It is clear that Natives and European colonists, both French and English, did not see themselves as constituents of monolithic socio-cultural blocks. Each society experienced the complexities of hosting individuals of various ethnic or cultural origins. This phenomenon does away with the simplistic perspective of monolithic Native and colonial societies, i.e. French, English, and Amerindian. It emphasises a more dynamic, organic and never-ending process of exchanges, disputes and understanding permanently sets in.

Though the raid on the Abenaki mission took place during the later years of the Seven Years' War or French-Indian War, Brumwell clearly considers it linked to a complex web of events in which a somewhat limited number of actors repetitively played crucial roles against each other, and through which the nature changed from

being primarily based on political and ethnic allegiances to becoming increasingly personal. In the second chapter, Brumwell's description of the encounters taking place before the actual outbreak and early years of the war introduces the reader to the many players of both sides who were crucial to the raid and its aftermath. These would include Colonel William Johnson, who would subsequently become Superintendent of Northern Indians, Pierre de Rigaud Marquis de Vaudreuil, New France's last Governor, and most important of all, Robert Rogers. Though Brumwell does not add anything new to our knowledge of Rogers' character and sometimes shady behaviour, he does provide a very vivid description of his *personae*.

The third chapter titled "The Ranging Way of War" concentrates on the military situation of British colonies in 1757 and how the rangers came to be an important part of the New England's military strategy and tactics. The British had in fact failed miserably against the Marquis Louis-Joseph de Montcalm at Fort William Henry on the shores of Lake George, and had not yet moved to strike at the Fortress of Louisbourg on Isle Royale (Cape Breton Island). As Brumwell illustrates, the English colonials' mood was quite grim in early 1758 as the increasing number of British regulars had failed to successfully influence the outcome of the military campaign against New France. In fact, some colonials seriously doubted the regulars' ability to fight on the frontier. It became clear that the only effective troops on the British side had been the American rangers. Consequently, from then on an increasing attention was dedicated to the development of tactical principles that would enable the British military to match and subsequently defeat their French and Native counterparts. This shift in perspective ensured that the "ranging way of war" be promoted within the ranks of British regulars and that some regular troops join ranger units. It fell upon the young captain Robert Rogers to instruct and teach the techniques of guerrilla fighting. Thus, it was in 1757 that Rogers wrote his "Rules of Ranging". Included in one of the Appendices to his book, Brumwell strongly underlines the importance of these rules and how they came to become a relevant component of British military tactics for the remainder of the Seven Years' War. The detailed examination of the "Battle on Snowshoes" in March 1758, just west of Lake George, New York provides a vivid illustration of the hardships endured by both sides. The bitter cold, the deep snow and the harsh realities endured by the combatants underline the difficulties of waging war on the frontier conditions. In addition, Brumwell

takes a close look at Rogers' role during this battle in attempt to make us understand the man's character and personality. Not surprisingly, Rogers is portrayed as a very tough fighter and a courageous and efficient leader capable of tactical originality and quick decision-making. However, Brumwell is quick to pinpoint Rogers' self-serving interpretations of some of his less successful actions or endeavours. An interesting note, the author also brings the reader to appreciate the cultural diversity found within the rangers' rank and file. Though men of "Britain's Celtic fringe" were relatively numerous among rangers, Native Americans and, surprisingly, men of African descent were also included in the rank and file.

In the next chapter, Brumwell looks at the later stages of the British North American campaign. With Jeffrey Amherst as Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in the colonies and the "energetic presence" of Brigadier-General James Wolfe, things were to change favourably for New France's imperial rival. In July 1758, Amherst had successfully led the siege against Louisbourg. In 1759, Prime Minister William Pitt made it clear from London that the year was to bring forth major military operations against New France and that the rangers were to play an important role. During summer, Amherst's successful northern advance via Lake Champlain saw the fall of Fort Carillon (Fort Ticonderoga) and other French fortifications. By September, Wolfe's army's expedition up the St. Lawrence would eventually bring defeat to Montcalm's army outside the fortified city of Québec on the Plains of Abraham. Though Amherst and Wolfe had been critical of the rangers' composition and their appearance of ill-preparedness for combat, both, however, were willing to have the capable Rogers among their ranks. Indeed, his military prowess had enabled him to be promoted by Amherst's predecessor as Commander-in-Chief of British forces, Major-General Abercromby, who had recognised his success by elevating him to the rank of Major.

Brumwell successfully supports his interpretation and analysis by examining military officers' journals and military reports. He also consults colonial newspaper accounts to provide us hints of the mood of the era. His use of the military correspondence enables him to effectively bring a world-wide imperial conflict to a more personal level. Brumwell helps the reader understand the intricate relations between the different people involved. He also spices up the narrative with anecdotes taken from personal correspondence which reveal much about the characters of men like Robert Rogers, Major-General Amherst, the Marquis of Montcalm and such.

However, the most important and most interesting part of Brumwell's work is found in the three chapters dedicated to the actual preparation, conduct and aftermath of the raid. In this section, the author provides a detailed account on how Robert Rogers convinced superior officers of the value of his plan, organised his expedition and chose his men. Brumwell introduces the reader to some of Rogers' men, many of them who, like him, were of Celtic origins. He goes on to describe the gear and equipment used by Rogers and his crew, whether it be British regular rations or the rangers' own peculiar *accoutrement*, which included newly ordered Indian leggings.

It is also in this section of his book that Brumwell's narrative style and use of evidence are most effective. On September 13, 1759, the same day as Wolfe's victory on the Plains of Abraham, Rogers quit camp from Crown Point to lead his expedition of 200 men towards the Abenaki village of St. François, deep in the heart of New France. Oblivious to the news of Wolfe's and Montcalm's deaths, the red coats' victory against French regulars, Canadian militia and Native allies, Rogers left traveled north more down Lake Champlain and landed ten days later on the shores of Missisquoi Bay to cross various tributaries of the Yamaska River watershed to finally reach the St. Francis river and cross it eastward around today's city of Drummondville. In true British style, the rangers were not using canoes to travel the waterways but whaleboats, which they had to hide once they were no longer on Lake Champlain. These watercraft were ill-suited for the task, however the rangers had little choice for these were standard issue material for both regulars and militia. Having to cross mosquito-infested swamps and sinuously trek 100 miles through mountainous terrain when heading toward St. Francis, Rogers' men narrowly escaped French and Indian patrols that had a feeling that a large raiding party was on the prowl. By September 29th, there was not doubt in the minds of the French that Rogers' party had the intent to strike a severe blow to New France. But the French had no idea where this strike would take place.

If reaching the Abenaki village of St. Francis had been perilous enough, the return trip after the attack was to be most gruelling. Brumwell recounts the harsh suffering endured by Rogers and his men. Knowing that irate Abenakis, Canadians and French were in pursuit of them, it was decided that the party be divided into groups of 20 men in order to avoid getting caught. This decision was to be costly for many of Rogers' men. Some parties were ambushed and

massacred by their pursuers before being able to meet at the rendezvous point on the Connecticut River. Others were forced to eat human flesh in order to survive. According to Brumwell, Rogers' men knew only too well that hunting game would be dangerous to the point of making the rangers' presence conspicuous to the point of risking being captured. Some were reduced to boil and eat leather garments. The gruesome conditions endured by Rogers and his rangers during their flight are well documented. Brumwell aims at exploring the validity of this information and tries to see if these events actually occurred by looking carefully at the reports of those involved.

According to Brumwell, a detailed map prepared by Rogers himself and intended to illustrate his itinerary to General Amherst still exists. It is reportedly very precise and provides detailed information about the expedition. What is most interesting for those of us living in the Eastern Township or northern New England is the author's knowledge of the topography and layout of the area. Any reader who is somewhat familiar with the area's geography will quickly grasp the difficulties endured by the raiders.

The last two chapters look at the aftermath of the raid and its significance on history. They examine how those who survived the raid were able to benefit from it. For instance, Rogers died in London a poor man, but not before remaining loyal to the British Crown during the American Revolution, being able to promote himself and experience relative success through the publication of his memoirs. Other officers, French or British, also lived to fight another day.

On the whole, Brumwell succeeds in bringing to life the events leading and following Rogers' Rangers' raid on the Abenaki village of St. Francis. The quality of the narrative quickly captures the reader's attention and the effective use of the evidence provides a solid basis for discussion. However, numbered endnotes would have been very much appreciated as a complete bibliographical listing of the sources used would have been helpful to the reader. This book is highly recommended for anyone who wishes to learn more about the tragic raid and understand its social, ethnic, cultural and historical legacy.

