
Anne Midgley. *Charles Hulett, Continental Army Drummer: A Revolutionary Life Reexamined*. Self-Published, Lulu. 2018.

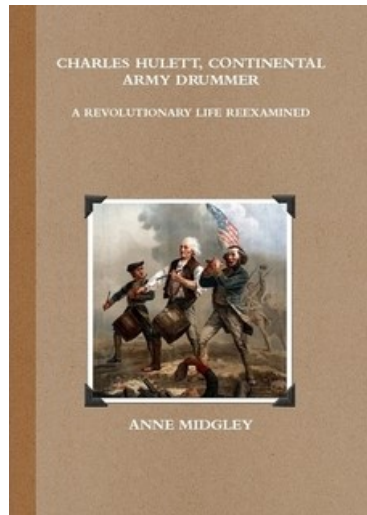
Book Review

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In *Charles Hulett, Continental Army Drummer: A Revolutionary Life Reexamined*, author Anne Midgley explores the life of an eighteenth century American from the colony of New Jersey. *Charles Hulett* is based on the author's master's thesis, and as the title suggests is a micro-history, tracing the experiences of a private soldier during the American War of Independence. The book is divided into three chapters: the first describes Hulett's community and home colony of New Jersey on the eve of war, the second deals with Hulett's service in the Northern Campaign between 1776 and 1779, and the third covers his service in the Southern Campaign between 1780 and 1781. The 145-page book contains an extensive bibliography, which is to be expected of an academic work with master's thesis roots.

Midgley uses Hulett's experience as the medium through which to explore several central themes. What makes the book noteworthy is her placement of Hulett's history in a cultural, military, and geographic context. This is significant first and foremost because Hulett saw service on both sides of the rebel-loyalist conflict. He began his service with the New Jersey Militia and Continental Army, but later switched sides and joined the British Provincial Corps. Hulett was then captured in South Carolina, and ended the War of Independence back in Continental Army uniform.

Charles Hulett was born in the British colony of New Jersey in 1760. Hulett grew up in a religiously and culturally diverse community. As Midgley emphasizes, the Dutch who originally settled the area were remarkably tolerant for the time, and this liberal outlook mostly prevailed under British rule. By the



onset of the War for Independence, New Jersey was home to a slew of protestant denominations, from Anglicans to Quakers. Due in no small part to this cultural diversity, Hulett's home county of Monmouth was quite evenly split in its loyalties when the conflict flared up in earnest. Without a doubt, the makeup of Monmouth County was a contributory factor to Hulett's apparent propensity for switching sides (p. 32, 34–35, 40).

New Jersey, like the other colonies, had a militia system in place at the start of the war. The New Jersey Militia, which Charles Hulett joined in 1776 at the age of sixteen, consisted of local units tasked with defending their counties. Additionally, state levies were sometimes formed from county militia in order to satisfy defensive requirements not covered by the local units or by the national Continental Army. It was as a New Jersey Levy artilleryman that Hulett found himself on the field of battle at Princeton in January 1777. As Midgley makes clear, Hulett did not appear to possess any particular ideological commitment to the rebel cause, but was rather swept up by the turn of events: "By 1777, the men in the ranks of the New Jersey Continental Line did not resemble the Patriot image of the idealistic yeoman, but rather, they came from the poorer members of society, much like the members of the British Army" (p. 42–47, 62).

By any measurable standard, Hulett's first experience of eighteenth century warfare appears harrowing. His unit was engaged in close-quarter fighting with British troops, who bayoneted his commander to death. After Princeton, Midgley considers it likely that Hulett participated in the January-March 1777 "Forage Wars" against the British. Contrary to family oral history, however, Hulett was most likely not among the New Jersey troops who later fought at the Battles of Brandywine Creek and Germantown in September and October 1777. In March 1778, Hulett's service as a New Jersey Levy ended as he was conscripted as a drummer into the Continental Army, which was badly in need of men after the previous winter's privations (p. 58–59, 61–62).

1778 was the year the rebellion became part of a global conflict. It was also an eventful year for Charles Hulett, and it is where Midgley's narrative in particular shines. Her research contradicts the established Hulett history; no doubt eager to show that Charles was loyal to the rebel cause, his pension claim maintains that he was captured at the June 1778 Battle of Monmouth Courthouse, and only enlisted with British forces as a way to escape the hardship of imprisonment in the West Indies. Midgley's narrative refutes this claim. She illustrates, given the details of the British expedition to the West Indies after Monmouth, that Hulett could not have accompanied British forces abroad, nor did the troops sent there return to the American mainland. Indeed, Midgley's research

produces a more nuanced picture of the real Charles Hulett (p. 66–67, 74).

Midgley suggests that it was most likely Hulett's experiences in the Continental Army and difficulties at home which convinced him join the British provincial forces. Ill will between his commanders, demotion from drummer to ordinary private, and a commensurate pay decrease, all contributed to a sense of disillusionment with the rebel cause. Records suggest that a number of Hulett family members were active loyalists, and this may have had a further effect on Charles's change of allegiance. In any case, Hulett was never captured by the British, and one year after his discharge from the Continental Army in early 1779 he joined the New Jersey Volunteers of the British Provincial Corps. As Midgley states: "For many, the war became a matter of personal survival, and it is certain that Hulett weighed practical considerations like the perceived ability of the British provincial corps to feed, clothe, and pay its men against his experience with the Continental Army" (p. 85–86).

It is likely that Hulett soon saw action in the June 1780 battles at Connecticut Farms and Springfield, the last significant engagements in the northern states. Hulett, as a loyalist soldier, may even have aimed his rifle at his former militia comrades. In August, Hulett transferred to the Provincial Light Infantry, which was soon sent to help suppress the rebellion in South Carolina. In September 1781, Hulett's unit fought at the Battle of Eutaw Springs, a pyrrhic British victory that decimated the Provincial Light Infantry, and ended in Hulett's capture. As Midgley indicates, it is likely that Hulett rejoined the rebel ranks after facing the choice of remaining a prisoner of war or switching sides. In any case, Hulett next appears in the historical record only after the end of the War for Independence, on his wedding day in January 1787 (p. 87–88, 92, 102).

As noted, what makes *Charles Hulett* significant is the author's ability to weave a minor player's story into the larger context of the War in the American Colonies. Midgley focuses not only on the colonies, but places Hulett's service, and by extension the American War, in a global context. In so doing, she makes the point that the War of Independence was one aspect of a much wider conflict, itself a continuation of the unfinished power struggle between the European great powers, especially Great Britain and France, after the Seven Year's War. Another central theme of the book is that the War of Independence was not just part of a larger world war, but also America's first civil war. It split local communities apart as neighbors, friends, and even family took sides, whether as rebels or as loyalists. While some communities were fairly united in allegiance or in opposition to Great Britain, many others were deeply divided in their loyalties. More than simply the radical Whig view of a black and white struggle of plucky

underdogs against an overbearing goliath, America's first civil war pitted colonists against each other in a brutal, internecine conflict. Midgley uses the wartime career of Hulett as a convincing example of this interpretation, as he fought for both sides in the war and was a member of a religiously and culturally diverse community that was, at best, ambivalent about its relationship vis-à-vis the British Empire. Ultimately, she illustrates how the real losers of the American War of Independence were the American loyalists, who in many cases lost everything and ended up as refugees abroad. Although the victors branded them as traitors, most of them simply desired to remain loyal citizens of their legitimate government (p. 102–3).

Midgley's book contains another major theme: for the average individual like Hulett, allegiance to the British crown or to the Continental Congress rarely hinged on the esoteric ideals of the enlightenment. Instead, loyalty turned on the mundane or self-centered—one might say pre-nationalist—motives more common to soldiers of the European dynastic struggles of the period. As indicated, these concerns included whether or not an army was able to feed, pay, and clothe its soldiers, or the attitudes of friends, family, and neighbors within the local community. Hulett is representative of the no doubt numerous colonists who switched sides in the war as the situation personally warranted. In other words, ordinary individuals with ordinary concerns, caught up in extraordinary circumstances over which they had little control. *Charles Hulett, Continental Army Drummer* is an excellent book, and offers an interesting and refreshing perspective on the American War for Independence. It should be of interest to any student of American history, Anglo-American relations, or eighteenth century warfare.