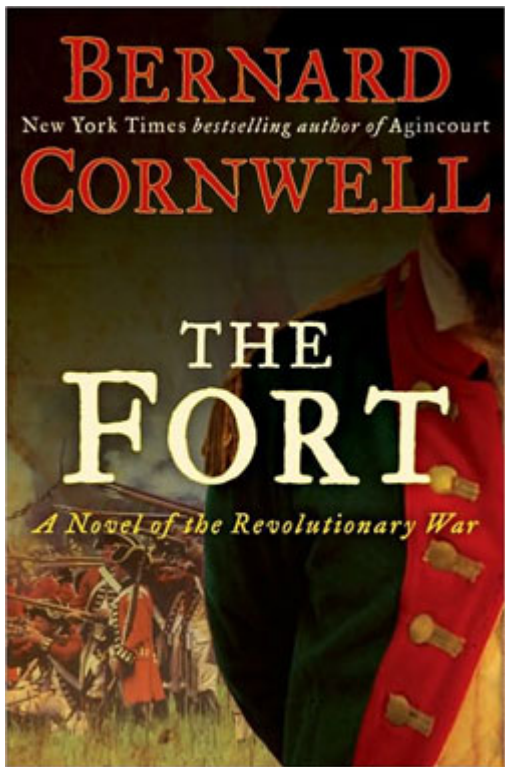


## To Captivate, Kill, or Destroy



To captivate, kill, or destroy. These were the watchwords of the Massachusetts Council's orders to their army in the summer of 1779. For the first time since March 1776 when the British had evacuated Boston, redcoats were again on Massachusetts soil, establishing a garrison to command Penobscot Bay. The British also hoped to rally loyalists and the disaffected to this stronghold. The revolutionary government of Massachusetts chose to expel these invaders from their eastern territory as a matter of policy and pride.

In July 1779, 900 men and over forty ships sail from Boston for Majabigwaduce, a peninsula and river on the Maine coast. The expedition results in confrontation between two weak forces—neither able to dislodge the other. On paper, the Massachusetts force looks like it should make short work of the British, and had the Americans attacked immediately, they might have carried the day. Instead, their leaders' hesitation and lack of tactical vision gives the British precious time to strengthen their position. The story ends with the Massachusetts's ships burning along the riverside, its naval force completely destroyed. By some accounts it is the worst naval defeat in the history of the United States before Pearl Harbor.

Bernard Cornwell's *The Fort* recreates the tragic tale with a narrative marked by vivid characters, dramatic tension, political pathos, and subtle questions about the war at the heart of the American Revolution. Cornwell's characters drive the story and provide the historical moral and argument. He weaves together the British and Massachusetts strands of the tale, achieving an

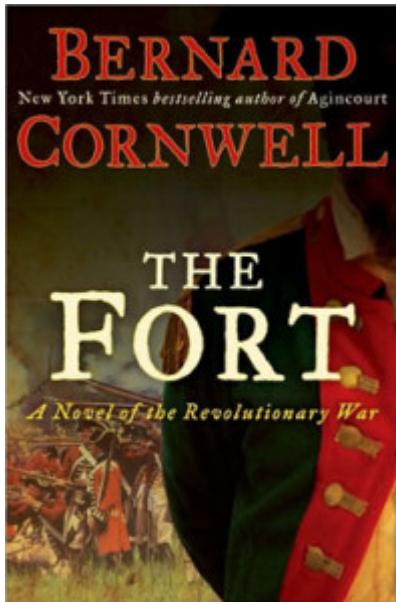
admirable narrative balance between the combatants. His chosen protagonists embody the conflicting interests at the heart of the Revolutionary War. Brigadier-General Francis McLean is an old soldier commanding a force of 750 green Scottish recruits and three small ships. In Cornwell's telling, McLean is a man who knows his craft and his duty. He is assisted by Dr. John Calef, a loyalist refugee seething with rage against the rebels who forced him from his Boston home. Cornwell offers Brigadier-General Peleg Wadsworth, the Harvard-educated schoolmaster turned soldier, as the counterpart to both McLean and Calef. A veteran of the Continental army and George Washington's staff, Wadsworth now serves in an army raised by his home state. Leaving his young family, the patriotic and professional Wadsworth serves under Solomon Lovell, an aging politician perhaps better suited to serving as a church deacon than general of an expeditionary force. Lovell's command is complicated by the naval contribution of Captain Dudley Saltonstall, the commodore of a fleet of privateers, ships from the Massachusetts navy, and the Continental frigate *Warren*. The scion of an old Massachusetts family, Saltonstall is ill-tempered, aloof, and draws his commission and authority from the Continental Congress.

The Massachusetts expeditionary forces revel in their home field advantage, exuding the fervor and confidence that their patriot ideology and particular religious worldview instill. But military inexperience and division over tactics doom their efforts. For the British, luck and stalwart professionalism save the day. Cornwell emphasizes the vices and virtues of the respective causes in a counterpoint between patriot Paul Revere and the young British Lieutenant John Moore. Revere, the middle-aged and inexperienced lieutenant-colonel of the Massachusetts Artillery, exudes the zeal of a radical and the confidence of a military autodidact. Moore, a well-connected gentleman of only eighteen years, presents the foolhardy bravery of youth and its maturation into professional military skill. Revere's brief military career spectacularly collapses in the Penobscot Expedition, while this minor engagement on the Maine coast marks the beginning of Moore's rise as a transformative and heroic officer in the British army. Poetry immortalizes them both—Revere for his midnight ride and Moore for his tragically heroic death in the Napoleonic Wars as a lieutenant-general at Corunna in 1809.

Cornwell's narrative moves briskly and he has an attentive eye for detail. No ship's spar or canvas shroud goes unnamed. He captures the feel of fog settling over the rocky coast on a chill summer morning. His imagination recreates the sound of young kilted Scots fixing bayonets to their heavy Brown Bess muskets. In a prefatory note and bibliographic afterword, Cornwell makes clear what he has drawn from the historical record and what he has invented or altered for the sake of story. I was particularly impressed by his simple trick of announcing that most of his characters actually existed. The only fictional characters are British enlisted soldiers (save one, William Lawrence, a real diarist and artillery sergeant) and any character with a surname starting with F. The resulting forest of Frobishers, Fiskes, Filmers, Fennels, Fletchers, and Freers made the real historical actors stand out. The sound of extant muster rolls and orderly books and army reports echo behind his descriptions of camp

life and movement.

Most strikingly, Cornwell captures the multivalent nature of the Revolutionary War. The hatred sown between patriots and loyalists unfolds with his narrative. Wrangling among his characters reveals the competing interests between militia, state troops, and Continental officers. He shows how allegiance to a faction in the war depended on a mix of family, location, ideology, or a sense of home. He suggests the profound disruption the war inflicted and shows how the heavy hand of war wrung allegiance from folk who would rather have been left alone to their fields and fishing.



Bernard Cornwell, *The Fort: A Novel of the Revolutionary War*. New York: HarperCollins, 2010. 468 pp., \$25.99.

*The Fort* is a good, page-turning read, but its deeper value lies with its message about the American Revolution. Even in the compact narrative of the Penobscot Expedition, which presents a definitive beginning, middle, and end, Cornwell suggests the length and uncertainty of the Revolutionary War. The War for Independence as a whole just doesn't fit a proper and satisfying dramatic structure. By focusing on only a section of the war, Cornwell the storyteller finds himself in good company. Consider David McCullough's *1776* or David Hackett Fischer's *Washington's Crossing*, both of which focus on the satisfying arc of the beginning of the war. The events of the spring of 1775 open the historical opera with a bang: Paul Revere's midnight ride, farmers standing at Lexington and Concord, Washington's heroic acceptance of command. Early 1776 gives the rising action. The seat of war shifts to New York. Washington prepares for the full hammer-blow of British military power. Congress debates and declares independence. But the 1776 campaign around New York City and the near-collapse of the Continental army and patriot resistance in the flight across New Jersey sing the notes of catastrophe, building dramatic tension. The resolving climax comes with Washington's daring and miraculous Christmas victory at Trenton and then at Princeton in the first weeks of 1777. With the cause renewed, the narrative winds up, concluding with Congress recruiting a

proper, professional Continental army with soldiers enlisted for three years or the duration of the war. It's an arc both historically compact and aesthetically satisfying—McCullough and Fischer end their narratives and analysis there. Though they eschew invention, their factual accounts answer the same demands as Cornwell's fiction.

Such narrative choices are understandable, since the story of the Revolutionary War splinters in 1777—American defeat at Philadelphia offsets a Continental victory at Saratoga. The war moves south and grows messier politically. The Continental Congress flirts with failure and bankruptcy. Yorktown offers a conclusion in 1781, but not finality. Both historical participants and present readers have to wait until 1783 for a proper end to hostilities. It's fair that writers have to choose their starts and stops—it's the luxury of history to reify the narrative outline imposed by events, by participants' memories, or the demands of art. But in the messiness of the moment, it is never so clear.

For this I commend Cornwell. Though he focuses on a single, compact event in the Revolutionary War, he hints at its nature as a military struggle and the foundations of revolutionary movement. Because he is focused on a military campaign, however, he inevitably privileges war-fighting, and the professional, effective British regulars stand as heroes for their diligence and attention to duty. Cornwell allows his Americans to claim the laurels of military honor in the character of Wadsworth—the veteran Continental officer—who combines the qualities of military skill and political virtue. Cornwell shows how fickle the gods of battle can be, but also suggests the real power and persistence of the Revolution.

The Revolution, to mix John Adams and Chairman Mao, was in the minds and hearts of the people, but it also grew from the barrel of a gun. But those guns were not always aimed at British regulars. The War for Independence continued because of the resilience of patriots' political institutions and the cooperation they could extract or the coercion they could project. The committees and legislatures of the Revolution drafted and mustered the young, marginal, and poor for long terms of military service their betters disdained. They collected taxes and supplies to keep armies in the field. As John Shy insists, their militias, though inconsistent on the battlefield, were excellent gunmen for harrying loyalists and maintaining the authority of revolutionary governments. The Glorious Cause could suffer catastrophic defeats in battle and the occupation of seaport cities, but so long as its political apparatus survived and maintained the people's grudging support, the war for independence could continue.

Cornwell weaves this understanding through *The Fort*, showing that any one event could entirely consume its participants, present a decisive military outcome, and yet have remarkably little effect on the course of the revolutionary struggle.

To captivate, kill, or destroy was not—is not—enough.

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