



“the future Grandeur and Stability of the British Empire lie in America”

COLONISTS RESPOND to BRITISH VICTORY in the FRENCH & INDIAN WAR (1754-63)

A Selection from News Reports, Letters, Sermons, Images & A History

__CONTENTS__

	PAGES
■ Benjamin West, <i>The Death of General Wolfe</i> , oil on canvas, 1770..... National Gallery of Canada	1-2
■ A Town’s Celebration of Britain’s Victory in French Canada <i>The New Hampshire Gazette</i> , 19 October 1759	3
■ Benjamin Franklin on the British Victories Letters: 1760, 1763	4
■ Sermons on the British Victories..... Massachusetts: 1759, 1763	4
■ Poetry on Victory and Peace “Ode to Peace,” 1763	5
■ An American Looks Back at 1763..... David Ramsay, <i>The History of the American Revolution</i> , 1789	6

Benjamin West *The Death of General Wolfe* oil on canvas, 1770

A key victory in the French and Indian War was the defeat of the French in Canada in September of 1759, in the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, also known as the Battle of Quebec. Not only did that triumph enable the British to take control of all of Canada and eventually all of North America east of the Mississippi River, it also produced the event that the painter Benjamin West would later turn into an iconic image of imperial glory. The revered British commander,

General James Wolfe, died in the Battle of the Plains of Abraham just as the word of victory was delivered to him. West captures this moment in a work that was controversial in its day, for it violated the conventions of traditional history painting. Instead of togas, the figures wear late-eighteenth-century dress, and instead of swords they carry muskets. Under a sky from which storm clouds are clearing and against a background of massed troops, light falls on three groups of men. At the center is the dying Wolfe, reclining Christ-like in the arms of his officers. On the right are two soldiers wringing their hands over the demise of their commander, and on the left a group of officers peer down on Wolfe as an American scout announces the victory and an Indian ponders Wolfe's passing.



Benjamin West (1738-1820) was the tenth child of a Pennsylvania Quaker family. Proud, ambitious, and artistically talented, he could find no suitable art teacher in America and went to Italy as a young man to study Renaissance art. He traveled to London in 1763 to continue his studies just in time for the forming of the Royal Academy, which blessed the visual arts in Great Britain with the prestige of the crown. West became a favorite of George III and a mentor for American artists in London before, during, and after the Revolution. He mastered history painting, a genre that teaches civic virtue through the depiction of stories already known to the viewer, usually stories from classical Greece and Rome. Working within this genre, he elevated General James Wolfe into the pantheon of British and colonial heroes.

1. How does West use light and shadow in this painting?
2. How has West structured the painting to direct the viewer's eye to General Wolfe?
3. What elements in the painting establish General Wolfe as a hero?
4. Why did West include a Native American in this painting? Compare his posture and dress with that of the other figures. What is his function in the painting?
5. West includes an American scout in the painting. Why is his coat green? What function does he play in the painting? Why is he positioned next to the Native American?
6. How does this painting represent the new redrawn map of empire?
7. In what ways is this an "American" painting?
8. James Wolfe became a hero both in Great Britain and the colonies. From the evidence in this painting, what did he represent to the British? to the colonists?

¹ Reproduced by permission of the National Gallery of Canada. 152.6 x 214.5 cm. Transfer from the Canadian War Memorials, 1921 (Gift of the 2nd Duke of Westminster, England, 1918). From the museum site: "To depict the death of Wolfe at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759, West grouped the figures around the fallen general as in a Lamentation of Christ. The artist rejected the convention of representing contemporary heroes in antique armour (see Joseph Wilton's marble bust of Wolfe), paying scrupulous attention to the details of their uniforms, and to the native costumes based on Woodlands aboriginal artifacts in his possession. The picture created a sensation at the Royal Academy in London, in 1771." See cybermuseum.gallery.ca/cybermuseum/search/artwork_e.jsp?mkey=5363.

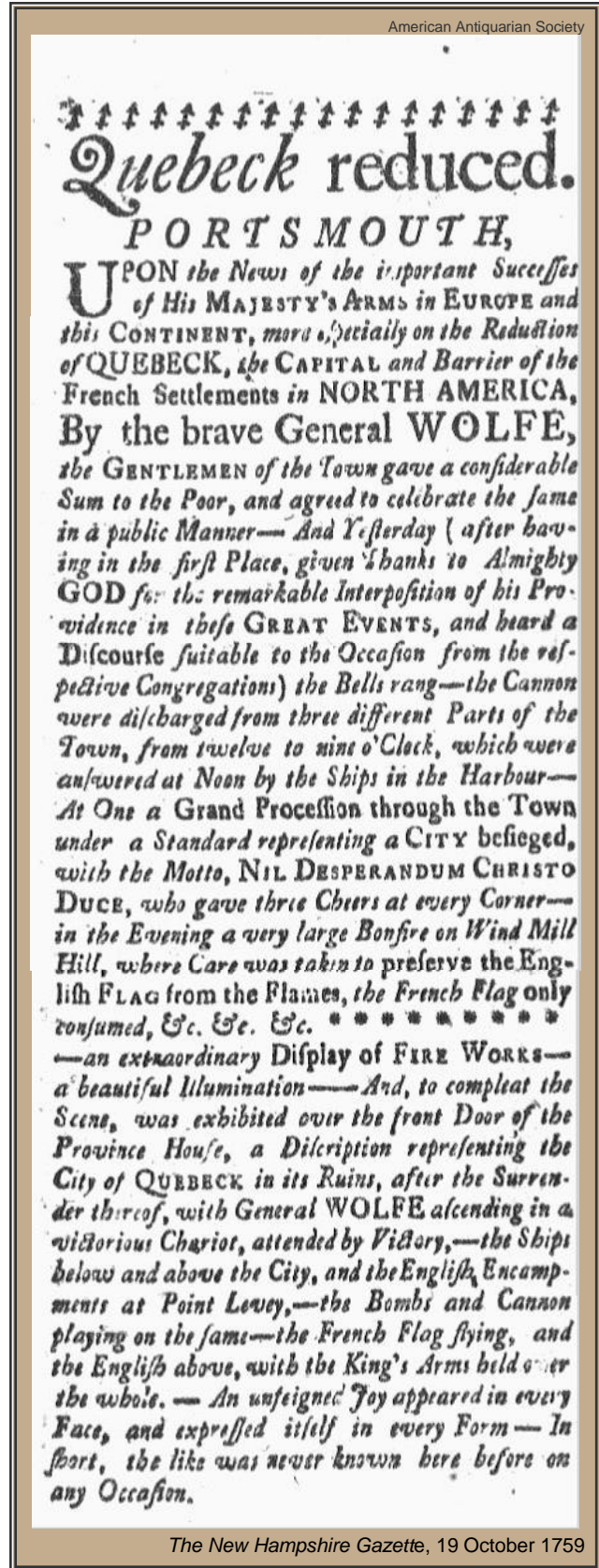
■ “Quebeck reduced.”

The New Hampshire Gazette, 19 October 1759

Like Portsmouth, New Hampshire, many New England towns reported ebullient celebrations of the British victory in the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, Quebec, Canada, on Sept. 17, 1759, at which the renowned General Wolfe was killed.

Upon the News of the important Successes of His MAJESTY'S ARMS in EUROPE and this CONTINENT, more especially on the Reduction [defeat] of QUEBECK, the CAPITAL and Barrier of the French Settlements in NORTH AMERICA, By the brave General WOLFE, the GENTLEMEN of the Town gave a considerable Sum to the Poor, and agreed to celebrate the same in a public Manner — And Yesterday (after having in the first Place, given Thanks to Almighty GOD for the remarkable Interposition of his Providence in these GREAT EVENTS, and heard a Discourse [sermon] suitable to the Occasion from the respective Congregations) the Bells rang — the Cannon were discharged from three different Parts of the Town, from twelve to nine o'clock, which were answered at noon by the Ships in the Harbour — At One a Grand Procession through the Town under a Standard [banner] representing a CITY besieged, with the Motto, NIL DESPERANDUM CHRISTO DUCE,¹ who gave three Cheers at every Corner — in the Evening a very large Bonfire on Wind Mill Hill, where Care was taken to preserve the English FLAG from the Flames, the French Flag only consumed, &c. &c. &c. * * * * * — an extraordinary Display of FIRE WORKS — a beautiful Illumination — And, to compleat the Scene, was exhibited over the front Door of the Province House, a Discription representing the City of QUEBECK in its Ruins, after the Surrender thereof, with General WOLFE ascending in a victorious Chariot, attended by Victory, — the Ships below and above the City, and the English Encampments at Point Levey, — the Bombs and Cannon playing on the same — the French Flag flying, and the English above, with the King's Arms held over the whole. — An unfeigned Joy appeared in every Face, and expressed itself in every Form — In short, the like was never known here before on any Occasion.

¹ Latin: “Nothing is to be despaired of with Christ as the leader.”



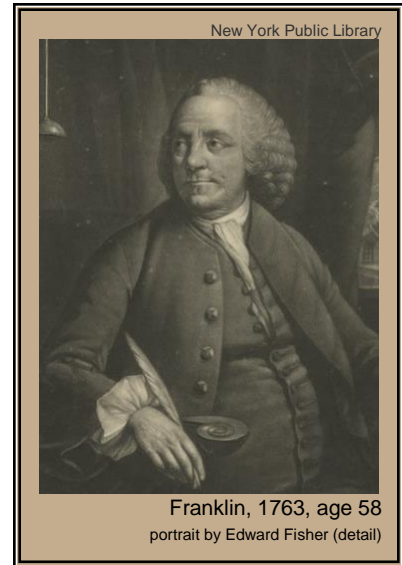
■ Benjamin Franklin on British victories in the French and Indian War¹

No one can rejoice more sincerely than I do on the Reduction [defeat] of Canada; and this, not merely as I am a Colonist, but as I am a Briton. I have long been of Opinion that the Foundations of the future Grandeur and Stability of the British Empire lie in America, and tho', like other Foundations, they are low and little seen, they are nevertheless broad and Strong enough to support the greatest Political Structure Human Wisdom ever yet erected.

Letter to Henry Home (Lord) Kames, London, 3 January 1760

I congratulate you sincerely on the signing of the Definitive Treaty, which if agreeable to the Preliminaries, gives us a Peace² the most advantageous as well as glorious, that was ever before obtain'd by Britain. Throughout this Continent I find it universally approved and applauded, and am glad to find the same Sentiments prevailing in your Parliament and the unbiass'd Part of the Nation. Grumblers there will always be among you, where Power and Places are worth striving for, and those who cannot obtain them are angry with all that stand in their way. Such would have clamor'd against a Ministry not their particular Friends, even if instead of Canada and Louisiana they had obtain'd a Cession of the Kingdom of Heaven. But Time will clear all Things, and a very few Years will convince those who at present are misled by Party Writers that this Peace is solidly good, and that the Nation is greatly oblig'd to the wise Counsels that have made it.

Letter to William Strahan, Virginia, 9 May 1763



■ Clergymen on British victories in the French and Indian War³

. . . Immortal WOLFE! untimely but gloriously fallen! . . . Fallen far from thy native, beloved country and every near relative! Untimely for thy country, which needs such as thou wast to conduct and inspire her armies and lead them to victory! But still fallen gloriously for thy self and for that country which gave birth to such a commander! Fallen in the service of thy king, and of that country so dear to thee and for which thou wouldst readily have laid down more lives than one! . . .

. . . Yea, we may reasonably expect that this country, which has in a short time and under many disadvantages become so populous and flourishing, will, by the continued blessing of heaven, in another century or two become a mighty empire (I do not mean an independent one) in numbers little inferior perhaps to the greatest in Europe, and in felicity to none.

Rev. Jonathan Mayhew, sermon, Boston, 25 October 1759

Now commences the Era of our Quiet Enjoyment of those Liberties which our Fathers purchased with the Toil of their whole Lives, their Treasure, their Blood. Safe from the Enemy of the Wilderness, safe from the griping hand of arbitrary Sway and cruel Superstition. Here shall be the late founded Seat of Peace and Freedom. Here shall our indulgent Mother, who has most generously rescued and protected us, be served and honored by growing Numbers with all Duty, Love and Gratitude, till Time shall be no more.

Rev. Thomas Barnard, sermon, Salem, Massachusetts, 25 May 1763

¹ The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, American Philosophical Society & Yale University, Doc. 624148; permission pending.

² Treaty of Paris ending the French and Indian War, signed 10 February 1763.

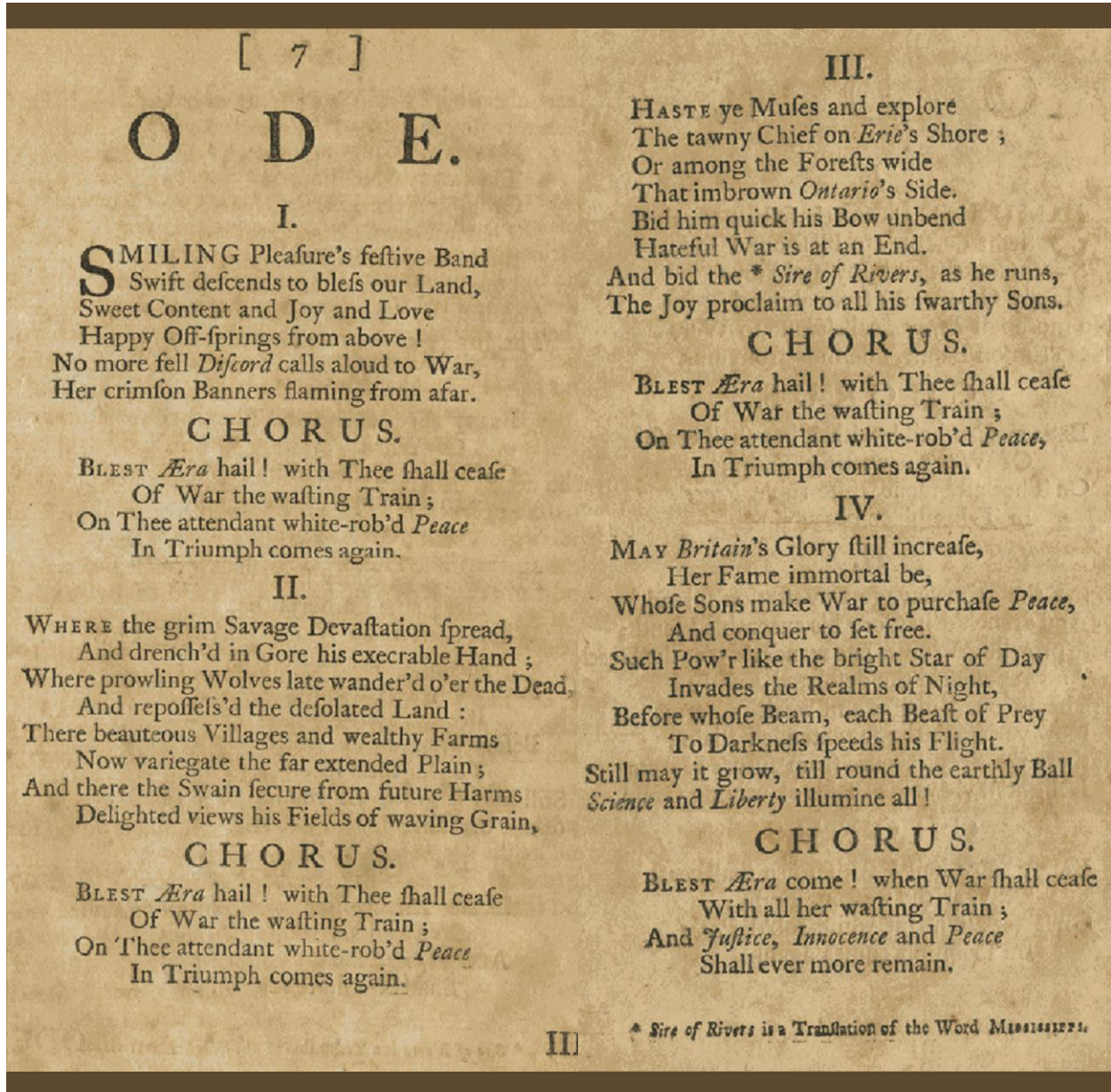
³ Early American Imprints: Doc. #8417, 9334; courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society with Readex/NewsBank.

— “May BRITAIN’s Glory still increase” —

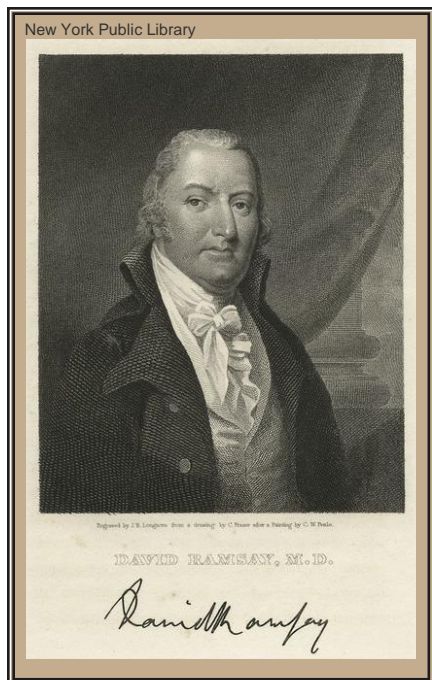
ODE on PEACE

CELEBRATING VICTORY IN THE FRENCH & INDIAN WAR, 1763

Paul Jackson, a Pennsylvania physician and a veteran of the French and Indian War, composed this poem to be read at the May commencement of the College of Philadelphia, where in the 1750s Jackson had been a trustee and a professor of Greek and Latin.



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AN AMERICAN LOOKS BACK AT BRITISH VICTORY in the FRENCH AND INDIAN WAR, 1763

■ **DAVID RAMSAY**, *The History of the American Revolution*, 1789.

A South Carolina physician, Ramsay served as a surgeon in the Revolutionary Army. After the war, he served in the Continental Congress under the Articles of Confederation (1782-83, 1785-86), and wrote his Revolution history in the late 1780s, as the new nation was crafting its final Constitution.

The addition to the British empire of new provinces, equal in extent to old kingdoms, not only excited the jealousy of European powers but occasioned doubts in the minds of enlightened British politicians whether or not such immense acquisitions of territory would contribute to the felicity of the Parent State. They saw, or thought they saw, the seeds of disunion planted in the too widely extended empire. Power, like all things human, has its limits, and there is a point beyond which the longest and sharpest sword fails of doing execution. To combine in one uniform system of

government the extensive territory then subjected to the British sway appeared, to men of reflection, a work of doubtful practicability, nor were they mistaken in their conjectures.

The seeds of discord were soon planted and speedily grew up to the rending of the empire. The high notions of liberty and independence, which were nurtured in the Colonies by their local situation, and the state of society in the new world, were increased by the removal of hostile neighbors. The events of the war had also given them some experience in military operations and some confidence in their own ability. Foreseeing their future importance, from the rapid increase of their numbers and extension of their commerce, and being extremely jealous of their rights, they readily admitted, and with pleasure indulged, ideas and sentiments which were favorable to independence. While combustible materials were daily collecting in the new world, a spark to kindle the whole was produced in the old. Nor were there wanting [lacking] those who, from a jealousy [suspicion] of Great-Britain, helped to fan the flame. . . .

Till the year 1764, the [British commercial] colonial regulations seemed to have no other object but the common good of the whole empire. Exceptions to the contrary were few and had no appearance of system. When the approach of the Colonies to manhood made them more capable of resisting impositions, Great Britain changed the ancient system under which her Colonies had long flourished. When policy would rather have dictated a relaxation of authority, she rose in her demands and multiplied her restraints.

From the conquest of Canada in 1759, some have supposed that France began secretly to lay schemes for wresting those Colonies from Great Britain which she was not able to conquer. Others allege that from that period the colonists, released from all fears of dangerous neighbors, fixed their eyes on independence and took sundry [various] steps preparatory to the adoption of the measure. Without recurring to either of these opinions, the known selfishness of human nature is sufficient to account for that demand on the one side and that refusal on the other, which occasioned the revolution. It was natural for Great Britain to wish for an extension of her authority over the Colonies, and equally so for them, on their approach to maturity, to be more impatient of subordination and to resist every innovation for increasing the degree of their dependence.

The sad story of colonial oppression commenced in the year 1764. Great-Britain, then, adopted new regulations, respecting her colonies, which, after disturbing the ancient harmony of the two countries, for about twelve years, terminated in a dismemberment of the empire.