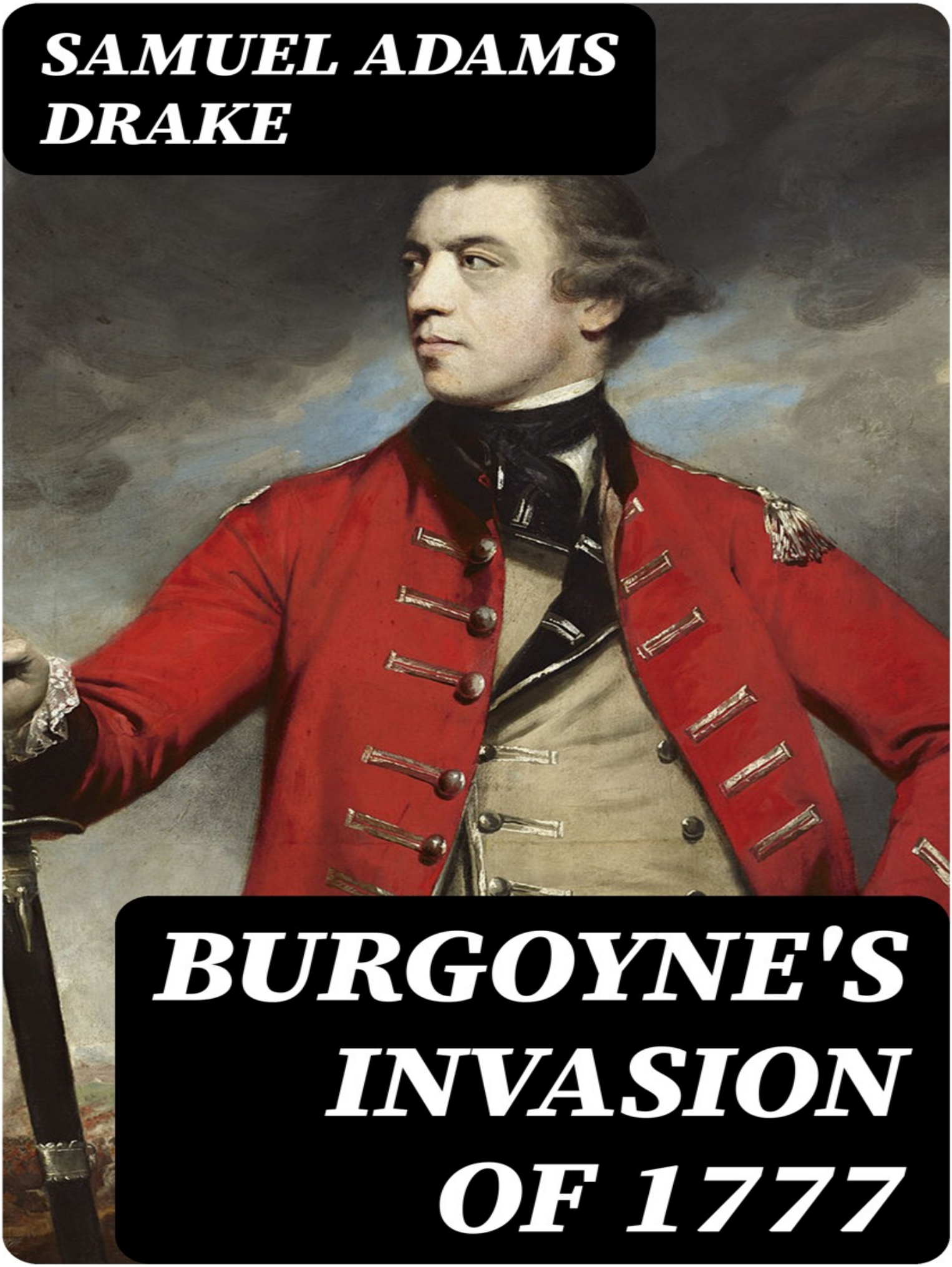
SAMUEL ADAMS DRAKE



BURGOYNE'S INVASION OF 1777

Samuel Adams Drake

Burgoyne's Invasion of 1777

With an outline sketch of the American Invasion of Canada, 1775-76

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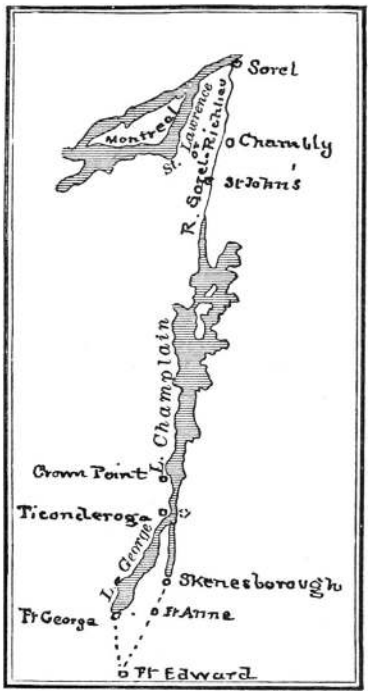

MILITARY MAP, LAKE CHAMPLAIN.

INTRODUCTION

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Among the decisive events of the Revolutionary struggle, Burgoyne's campaign deservedly holds the foremost place, as well for what it led to, as for what it was in inception and execution—at once the most daring, most quixotic, and most disastrous effort of the whole war.

Burgoyne was himself, in some respects, so remarkable a man that any picture of his exploits must needs be more or less tinted with his personality. And this was unusually picturesque and imposing. He acquired prestige, at a time when other generals were losing it, through his participation in Carleton's successful campaign. But Burgoyne was something more than the professional soldier. His nature was poetic; his temperament imaginative. He did nothing in a commonplace way. Even his orders are far more scholarly than soldier-like. At one time he tells his soldiers that "occasions may occur, when nor difficulty, nor labor, nor life are to be regarded"—as if soldiers, in general, expected anything else than to be shot at!—at another, we find him preaching humanity to Indians, repentance to rebels, or better manners to his adversary, with all the superb self-consciousness that was Burgoyne's most prominent characteristic.

To the military critic, Burgoyne's campaign is instructive, because it embodies, in itself, about all the operations known to active warfare. It was destined to great things, but collapsed, like a bubble, with the first shock of an adverse fortune.

This campaign is remarkable in yet another way. It has given us the most voluminous literature extant, that treats of any single episode of the Revolutionary War. In general, it takes many more words to explain a defeat than to describe a victory. Hence this fulness is much more conspicuous upon the British than upon the American side of the history of this campaign. Not only the general, who had his reputation to defend, but high officials, whose guiding hand was seen

behind the curtain, were called to the bar of public opinion. The ministers endeavored to make a scapegoat of the general; the general, to fix the responsibility for defeat upon the ministers. His demand for a court-martial was denied. His sovereign refused to hear him. It was thus meanly attempted to turn the torrent of popular indignation, arising from the ill success of the expedition, wholly upon the unlucky general's head. Burgoyne's heroic persistency at length brought the British nation face to face with the unwelcome fact, which the ministers were so desirous of concealing,—that somebody besides the general had blundered; and if the inquiry that Burgoyne obtained from Parliament failed to vindicate him as a captain, it nevertheless did good service by exposing both the shortcomings of his accusers, and the motives which had guided their conduct with respect to himself.

Besides the official examination by the House of Commons, we have several excellent narratives, written by officers who served with Burgoyne, all of which materially contribute to an intelligent study of the campaign, from a purely military point of view. These narratives are really histories of the several corps to which the writers belonged, rather than capable surveys of the whole situation; but they give us the current gossip of the camp-fire and mess-table, spiced with anecdote, and enlivened with the daily experiences through which the writers were passing. And this is much.

In his defence, General Burgoyne vigorously addresses himself to the four principal charges brought forward by his accusers: namely, first, of encumbering himself with a

needless amount of artillery; secondly, of taking the Fort Anne route, rather than the one by way of Lake George; thirdly, of sending off an expedition to Bennington, under conditions inviting defeat; and, lastly, of crossing the Hudson after the disasters of Bennington and Fort Stanwix had taken place.

The real criticism upon Burgoyne's conduct, so far as it relates to the movement of his forces only, seems to be that from the moment when the march was actually to begin, he found himself in want of everything necessary to a rapid advance. Thus, we find him scarcely arrived at Skenesborough before he is asking Sir Guy Carleton for reënforcements to garrison Ticonderoga and Fort George with, to the end that his own force might not be weakened by the detachments required to hold those fortresses against the Americans, when he should move on. It would seem that this contingency, at least, might have been foreseen before it forced itself upon Burgoyne's attention. Yet it was of so serious a nature, in this general's eyes, that he expresses a doubt whether his army would be found equal to the task before it, unless Carleton would assume the defence of the forts referred to above.

At this time, too, the inadequacy of his transportation service became so painfully evident, that the expedition to Bennington offered the only practicable solution to Burgoyne's mind.

These circumstances stamp the purposed invasion with a certain haphazard character at the outset, which boded no good to it in the future.

Carleton having declined to use his troops in the manner suggested, Burgoyne was compelled to leave a thousand men behind him when he marched for Albany. Carleton, the saviour of Canada, was justly chagrined at finding himself superseded in the conduct of this campaign, by an officer who had served under his orders in the preceding one; and, though he seems to have acted with loyalty toward Burgoyne, this is by no means the only instance known in which one general has refused to go beyond the strict letter of his instructions for the purpose of rescuing a rival from a dilemma into which he had plunged with his eyes wide open.

The Prelude with which our narrative opens, undertakes first, to briefly outline the history of the Northern Army, which finally brought victory out of defeat; and next, to render familiar the names, location, and strategic value of the frontier fortresses, before beginning the story of the campaign itself.

Few armies have ever suffered more, or more nobly redeemed an apparently lost cause, than the one which was defeated at Quebec and victorious at Saratoga. The train of misfortunes which brought Burgoyne's erratic course to so untimely an end was nothing by comparison. And the quickness with which raw yeomanry were formed into armies capable of fighting veteran troops, affords the strongest proof that the Americans are a nation of soldiers.

So many specific causes have been assigned for Burgoyne's failure, that it is hardly practicable to discuss all of them within reasonable limits. The simplest statement of the whole case is that he allowed himself to be beaten in

detail. It seems plain enough that any plan, which exposed his forces to this result, was necessarily vicious in itself. Moreover, Burgoyne wofully misestimated the resources, spirit, and fighting capacity of his adversary. With our forces strongly posted on the Mohawk, St. Leger's advance down the valley was clearly impracticable. Yet such a combination of movements as would bring about a junction of the two invading columns, at this point, was all essential to the success of Burgoyne's campaign. To have effected this in season, Burgoyne should have made a rapid march to the Mohawk, intrenched himself there, and operated in conjunction with St. Leger. His delays, attributable first, to his unwise choice of the Fort Anne route, next, to Schuyler's activity in obstructing it, and lastly, to his defeat at Bennington, gave time to render our army so greatly superior to his own, that the conditions were wholly altered when the final trial of strength came to be made.

What might have happened if Sir W. Howe had moved his large army and fleet up the Hudson, in due season, is quite another matter. The writer does not care to discuss futilities. In the first place, he thinks that Burgoyne's campaign should stand or fall on its own merits. In the next, such a movement by Howe would have left Washington free to act in the enemy's rear, or upon his flanks, with a fair prospect of cutting him off from his base at New York. Of the two commanders-in-chief, Washington acted most effectively in reënforcing Gates's army from his own. Howe could not and Carleton would not do this. From the moment that Burgoyne crossed the Hudson, he seems to have pinned his faith to chance; but if chance has sometimes saved poor

generalship, the general who commits himself to its guidance, does so with full knowledge that he is casting his reputation on the hazard of a die. As Burgoyne did just this, he must be set down, we think, notwithstanding his chivalrous defence of himself, as the conspicuous failure of the war. And we assume that the importance which his campaign implied to Europe and America, more than any high order of ability in the general himself, has lifted Burgoyne into undeserved prominence.

PRELUDE

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I.

THE INVASION OF CANADA, 1775.

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Canada's attitude.

England took Canada from France in 1759, and soon after annexed it to her own dominions. Twelve years later, her despotic

acts drove her American colonies into open rebellion. England feared, and the colonies hoped, Canada would join in the revolt against her. But, though they did not love their new masters, prudence counselled the Canadians to stand aloof, at least till the Americans had proved their ability to make head against the might of England.

That England would be much distressed by Canada's taking sides with the Americans was plain enough to all men, for the whole continent would then be one in purpose, and the conflict more equal; but the Americans also greatly wished it because all New England and New York lay open to invasion from Canada.

Nature had created a great highway, stretching southward from the St. Lawrence to the Hudson, over which rival armies had often passed to victory or defeat in the old wars. Open water offered an easy transit for nearly the whole way. A chain of forts extended throughout its whole length. Chambly and St. John's defended the passage of the Richelieu, through which the waters of Lake Champlain flow to the St. Lawrence. Crown Point[1] and Ticonderoga[2] blocked the passage of this lake in its narrowest part. Ticonderoga, indeed, is placed just where the outlet of Lake George falls down a mountain gorge into Lake Champlain. Its cannon, therefore, commanded that outlet also. Fort George stood at the head of Lake George, within sixteen miles of Fort Edward, on the Hudson. These were the gates through which a hostile army might sally forth upon our naked frontier. Much, therefore, depended on whether they were to be kept by friend or foe.

Ticonderoga.

In natural and artificial strength, Ticonderoga was by far the most important of these fortresses. At this place the opposite shores of New York and Vermont are pushed out into the lake toward each other, thus forming two peninsulas, with the lake contracted to a width of half a mile, or point-blank cannon range, between them: one is Ticonderoga; the other, Mount Independence. Thus, together, they command the passage of the two lakes.

Ticonderoga itself is a tongue-shaped projection of quite uneven land, broad and high at the base, or where it joins the hills behind it, but growing narrower as it descends over intervening hollows or swells to its farthest point in the lake. That part next the mainland is a wooded height, having a broad plateau on the brow—large enough to encamp an army corps upon—but cut down abruptly on the sides washed by the lake. This height, therefore, commanded the whole peninsula lying before it, and underneath it, as well as the approach from Lake George, opening behind it in a rugged mountain pass, since it must be either crossed or turned before access to the peninsula could be gained. Except for the higher hills surrounding it, this one is, in every respect, an admirable military position.

The French, who built the first fortress here, had covered all the low ground next the lake with batteries and intrenchments, but had left the heights rising behind it unguarded, until Abercromby attacked on that side in 1758. They then hastily threw up a rude intrenchment of logs, extending quite across the crest in its broadest part. Yet, in spite of the victory he then obtained, Montcalm was so fully convinced that Ticonderoga could not stand a siege, that he