

## Experiencing Empire: Power, People, and Revolution in Early America

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This insightful volume of essays, written in honor of T. H. Breen, grew out of a conference in June 2013. While the authors engage with some of the major concerns of Breen's large body of work, including consumerism and the American Revolution, the central theme of the collection is the experience of empire more broadly. The volume is divided into three sections, bookended by an introduction by the editor, Patrick Griffin, a conclusion by Breen himself, and an appreciation of Breen's work by Joyce Chaplin. While most of the collection deals with Britain and the North American Colonies, its authors also take us to the streets of Paris, the Senegal River, and St. Louis.

Griffin's introduction covers a great deal of ground, introducing and framing Breen's work for readings as well as drawing connections between that oeuvre and the works of Jack P. Greene and Peter Onuf. His overview of their contributions to the field is a worthwhile read for any scholar, but perhaps particularly helpful for earlier-stage graduate students in the throes of general exams because it draws clear connections between various, seemingly discrete sub-fields. Griffin elucidates an 'imperial-revolutionary' moment, the period from 1763 to 1787, wherein the 13 North American colonies transformed from enthusiastic participants in the British Empire, to revolutionaries against it, and then to the creators of their own budding empire. In this vein, the rest of the collection dwells on these themes in greater detail by exploring what it meant to live under empire, how it became possible to rebel against it, and the initial stages of reconstituting the United States as a new empire in its own right.

The first section, 'Empire and provincials', deals most explicitly with the many ways in which men and women who we might consider imperial subjects influenced, shaped, and experienced empire in the 18th century. Timothy Shannon's essay cleverly takes Breen's work on consumer culture in the British Empire and reverses the direction of movement. Here, we have a study of how one Scotsman used the 'baubles of America' to forge a career in mid-18th century Edinburgh. Peter Williamson, a bookseller and coffeehouse proprietor, used his own experiences as a captive of Native Americans during the Seven Years' War to claim expertise on the customs and habits of Native Americans. He exhibited his own knowledge, along with material goods purportedly from America, at his Edinburgh coffeehouse. Williamson's use of Americana did not end there: he unsuccessfully marketed a 'reaping machine' from the colonies and somewhat more

successfully published a book on his captivity and a travelogue of North America. Shannon skillfully uses the career of Peter Williamson to show not only how empire was marketed and bought in Britain, but also how empire and enlightenment could work hand-in-hand.

The story of the many failed attempts to produce wine in the colonies is the subject of Owen Stanwood's contribution. Vintners were unable to produce wine (or at least wine of acceptable quality) in Britain until recently, and as a result British drinkers relied on wines imported from the Continent or the Spanish and Portuguese Atlantic islands. Attempts to take advantage of the more hospitable climates of Britain's colonies therefore abounded. Several projects relied on recruiting French or German migrants who had grape-growing and wine-making skills. Ultimately, none of these schemes succeeded in producing enough drinkable wine to sustain a profitable export business, though there was some praise for its quality. In Stanwood's hands, however, these stories become a window into how imperial projectors thought the empire should work. The empire was to be an integrated but unequal space, in which colonials produced agricultural goods for consumption in the metropole. Moreover, in terms of individual agency, each projector thought he could make a handsome profit out of the enterprise. That being said, the reasons for failure are still somewhat unclear. Whether the geography and climate were too different, or whether grape-growers and wine-makers were insufficiently skilled to adapt their vines and techniques to different climes is uncertain. The answer to these questions might be unknowable. Even though these were clearly unsuccessful imperial projects, we might regard the inability of the colonies to produce wines as a long-term gain for Britain. After all, British purchases of wines helped form lasting commercial connections with other European nations and enabled Britain to accumulate trade connections that would later be used to sell British manufactured goods.

Patricia Cleary and Ian Saxine's contributions leave the Atlantic coastline and show the inland reach of empire. Cleary's piece, one of the few to incorporate gender into its analysis, addresses sex, and in particular illicit sex, in colonial St. Louis. Colonial authorities – both Spanish and French – in the 18th century sought to regulate and prohibit miscegenation, but in pursuing this goal, Cleary shows that they ignored extramarital or adulterous relationships between European men and women. The reluctance or failure of colonial authorities to police sexual relations that produced white babies shows the limits of what the state could achieve and the role white colonists had in shaping their societies. Ian Saxine shows how the Wabanakis of what is now Maine used colonists' anxieties over absentee land speculators to their own advantage. Confirming grants to frontier colonizers provided the Wabanakis with a powerful negotiating tool that allowed them to shape Massachusetts's Indian policy from the latter 17th century through to the mid-18th. Again through this essay, we see in this example how the policies of empire were shaped by contestation and negotiation on the ground that could empower people in unforeseen ways.

The second section, 'War, revolution, empires', delves more deeply into the practices of empire emanating from the metropolises, in these cases London and Paris. The first essay in this section is James Coltrain's study of the British construction of Fort Stanwix in upstate New York during the Seven Years War. Coltrain argues persuasively that the British approach to building the infrastructure of empire proved more 'efficient and effective' than that of their French rivals. Fort Stanwix was constructed near an important portage route to keep the French out of the region, and by focusing on quick construction the British were able to do just that. Rather than wait for laborers, tools, and supplies sent from the metropole, British military engineers could hire or purchase what they needed from local suppliers. The end result of the decentralized approach of the British in this case was the far more rapid construction of a structure that could keep the local population within the orbit of the British Empire, though it lacked the permanency or cultural influence of its counterpart French forts.

John Law's scheme and French imperialism in the Senegal River region are the subjects of Christopher Hodson's contribution. He pushes us to rethink the relative accomplishments of imperial schemes, judging them by the effects they had when they were operative rather than considering their eventual success or failure. In an intriguing analysis, he considers Law's System as an imperial venture to pacify the French people, which reshaped how they thought about money, authority, and the monarchy in the early 18th century. Obviously the Mississippi Bubble unraveled eventually, but it had far-reaching effects even in its

failure. Hodson also links Law's System to France's empire. Contemporaries expected Law's plans to spark French colonization efforts with improved financial backing. Moreover, imperial ventures and Law's System emanated from similar challenges and impulses – the problem of imposing control on indigenous populations, whether French or African, which resisted those impulses. And just as Law's System had very real effects on the people of France despite its collapse, the French efforts to exert greater influence in Africa, though they never fulfilled their goals, had very real effects on the people who lived in the region.

The final essay in this section is Michael Guenther's analysis of the London printer John Almon and his political networks. The subject here is less imperial projects than the informal networks of communication and information that existed alongside the formal workings of empire. Almon studiously cultivated a wide web of informants in the 1760s and 1770s who could keep him abreast of the latest political news, both at home and in the colonies, which he could then use to boost his sales and further extend his network of contacts. The system created by Almon served not just to bolster his print business; it also created an infrastructure for radical politics and opposition to the ministry that became important in the 1770s. Guenther's essay gives a vivid illustration of the ways in which communication, patronage, and publishing intersected to form a prop of oppositional politics. He also plays close attention to the geography of Georgian London and rewards his readers with an insightful discussion of how the spaces of life and forms of sociability interacted. One question, or avenue, that could be pursued further is the relationship between the 'infrastructure' of democratic revolution – as Guenther explores here – and the ideology of oppositional politics. On the basis of his activities, we can assume Almon was a heartfelt believer in opposition Whig ideology and later more radical politics. But how did his ideology or political belief affect his business and printing activities? Did anything get excluded because he disagreed with its content, or were his ideology and activities better characterized as a 'big tent' opposition in this period?

The third section turns attention away from the various experiences of *ancien regime* empire and towards the new empires of the Age of Revolutions. The essays here refocus our attention on three major problems of the imperial-revolutionary transformation: the fallout of war (loyalism), the ambiguity of the revolutionary movement (slavery), and the meaning of bygone times and understanding of historical change (nostalgia). The essays in this section also deal far more closely with the 'internal' or discursive world of historical actors than those in the previous sections.

Donald F. Johnson's essay 'Forgiving and forgetting in postrevolutionary America' opens the third section. Here, Johnson's subject matter is both the question of how loyalists reintegrated into post-revolutionary American society and the problem of how the generation of the Revolution and early republic remembered and wrote about the issues surrounding loyalism. According to Johnson, early historians' revisionist accounts of the American Revolution painted the British Army as an aggressive, intimidating, and predatory force that imposed itself upon Americans. As part of this image of occupation, the messiness and complexity of the wartime experience, as well as the contradictions of the revolution itself, were swept under the proverbial rug. Under this rubric, it was possible for loyalists to claim they had been intimidated or pressured into collaboration, thereby providing a path for their continued participation in post-revolutionary society. The narrative of a nefarious occupying army also provided a unifying trope for all Americans and served a useful purpose for nation building. Moreover, the historical fiction created by this first generation of Americans helped to define the new nation: in contrast to the corrupt, morally degenerate British Empire, American patriots could contemplate their nation as not only distinct from but also more virtuous than their former imperial overlords.

The internal contradictions of the Revolution are, in fact, the subject of the next essay, David N. Gellman's 'Abbe's ghost: negotiating slavery in Paris, 1783-1784'. Using the story of John Jay's household in Paris and the death of an enslaved woman, Abbe, whom the Jays had taken with them, Gellman explores the foundational generation's views on slavery in real, human terms, not simply as abstract ideas. One element that comes through particularly clearly is the interpersonal nature of the master-slave relationship. Abbe's relationship and status in the Jay household was the result of long-running negotiations with both John and Sarah Jay. In Gellman's rendering, the story of Abbe and the Jays is almost synecdochal for the complex of

ideas, relationships, and politics surrounding slavery and abolition that characterized the first years of the new nation. While Jay was negotiating to secure Americans' property rights in slaves, he was simultaneously enacting his own anti-slavery views at the domestic level. According to Gellman, Jay 'preferred to negotiate the terms of black freedom domestically as a matter of morally sanctioned long-range planning' (p. 206) instead of as result of revolutionary instability. In this bifurcation between public support of property rights in persons and private commitments to anti-slavery, Gellman sees Jay as helping to smooth the transition to a new, imperial nation by handling its foundational ambiguities and contradiction. Nevertheless, whatever actions men like Jay took, the new nation they were building was still formed on the basis of the inequalities of the colonial period. The continued existence of those inequalities tested the revolutionary generation's ability to create a nation of liberty for all truly.

The final essay in this section continues considering the themes of memory and understandings at the transitional moment of the revolution. Seth Cotlar examines nostalgia in the early-19th century to better understand how Americans of that era thought about their past and themselves. Cotlar takes the career of John Fanning Watson, a Philadelphia antiquarian, to emphasize the importance of nostalgia in American culture in the early republic and antebellum periods. In his analysis, nostalgia emerged in the early-19th century as a 'new, even modern way of telling and reckoning with time' (p. 215) in a world with an increasing rate of change socially and materially. Social, economic, and demographic change were all visible in the objects Watson collected and noted in his nostalgic activities. Indeed, they were as varied as the front porches of small Pennsylvania towns where families congregated as the used to in Philadelphia, to stories of the vanishing of Native Americans. The nostalgia articulated by antiquarians like Watson allowed them to express ambivalence or uncertainty about their changing world; it enabled them to challenge the doctrine of inevitability that was becoming associated with modernity and change. However, Cotlar concludes that nostalgia was never formulated into a coherent counter-narrative to antebellum narratives of progress. Rather, it enabled Americans to reckon with and understand the nature and costs of the changes that were enveloping their society.

A conclusion to the collection of essays is written by Breen himself. Breen takes the opportunity of reflecting on the essays to pose a question – what time was the American Revolution? Asking the question gives the opportunity to reframe our understanding of the revolutionary-imperial moment in less teleological terms. Breen offers a tripartite redefinition of imperial time. Instead of seeing the years 1760 to 1773 as a run-up to revolution, he prefers to view them as a general crisis of imperial rule throughout the Atlantic World. This period was superseded by a second stage, in which a colonial rebellion became a 'genuine political and social revolution' (p. 234), from 1774 to 1783. Finally, the post-war years did not lead inexorably or inevitably to the Constitution of 1787, but rather should be seen as a post-revolutionary moment in which ordinary Americans were coming to terms with life under a new, experimental regime. The payoff for this reframing of the periodization of the American Revolution offers new subjects for interpretive attention. From this perspective, the run-up to revolution and independence can now be better seen as part of a comparative story of imperial rivalries and ambitions in the Atlantic world. Moreover, the role of ordinary people, not just political leaders, becomes more central to our telling of these years. Finally, and most thought-provokingly, this revised periodization highlights the promise and energy of their post-revolutionary society during the immediate post-war years.

Joyce Chaplin's appreciation of Breen's long and productive career brings to a close the volume. In her hands, the concerns and interests that have run throughout Breen's work, especially power and liberty, are drawn out and analyzed. Breen's volume of work is impressive, and Chaplin helps us to see the connections between his varied interests. Altogether, these essays show that empire was never a stable force implemented from the metropolitan centre. It was created, contested, and negotiated by men and women throughout the imperial world, including on the periphery. Perhaps the contribution is best summed up by Hodson's comment on the need to rethink the failure of French imperial projects: the struggle to 'root the French Empire deep within the sinews of indigenous societies ... *was* empire' (p. 129). This phrase highlights the significance of the interplay between center and periphery that characterized imperial relations. It can also be read in terms of Breen's own long-standing contributions to explaining the workings of power and liberty

throughout empire.

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