Published on *Reviews in History* (https://reviews.history.ac.uk)

When London Was Capital of America

Review Number: 971
Publish date: Friday, 1 October, 2010
Author: Julie Flavell
ISBN: 9780300137392
Date of Publication: 2010
Price: £20.00
Pages: 320pp.
Publisher: Yale University Press
Place of Publication: New Haven, CT
Reviewer: Leonard Schwarz

The ‘shock city’ of the 18th century , London was always interesting to onlookers, but between 1763 and 1776 it was particularly interesting. It was the capital city of one of the most successful Great Powers, one that had just emerged the winner in the war with France. Britain had on the whole let others do the European fighting while it conquered the more desirable parts of the world, both in India and North America. When fighting ceased in 1763 it appeared to be dominant in the West, with the decision pending whether to return Guadeloupe or Canada to the French, the other dominant European power. In the East, Britain’s dominion stretched ever wider, and over-reached that of France. Who would not want to be a citizen of it?

The (to Londoners) benighted provinces of New England might have their own ideas, but the wealthy inhabitants of the American South, such as South Carolina, as well as the even wealthier plantation owners of the West Indies knew that there was only one city that mattered, and that was London. Within Europe and in terms of licking a man into shape and removing his rustic, provincial, not to say colonial ways, it rivalled Paris. Indeed Mercier, the great 18th-century biographer of Paris, declared that London, alone among European cities, could measure up to Paris. The pre-eminence of London was unaffected by the American Declaration of Independence: ‘This great city is an epitome of the whole world’, wrote Benjamin Rush from Philadelphia to his son in 1810. ‘Nine months spent in it will teach you more by year “eyes and ears” than a life spent in your native country’ (p. 1).

Julie Flavell has written a book on North Americans in London in this period, when wealthy and well-connected Americans took it for granted that they were a part of this empire, with some even attempting to ignore the Declaration of Independence (it was something that the French insisted upon and surely most people would ignore it). The book is on the whole about rich Americans, such as Henry Laurens, a slave-owner from South Carolina, with a fortune of his own, who did his best to behave honourably – though not that honourably – to his black slave. Other Americans include fortune hunters like Stephen Sayre, who behaved as dishonourably as any fortune-seeking Londoner of the time. Originally from Long Island, Sayre declared that he could not ‘bear the thoughts of living in America or starving in England’, and he was as good as his word. He became a Wilkite, a sheriff for the City of London, had a succession of devoted mistresses and in 1775 he married a heiress. So far, nothing exceptional, but then he was arrested, and released on a charge of high treason and caught up in the American Revolution, with his bank failing. Beside all – not necessarily above – these people stood Benjamin Franklin, about whom a good deal could be said.

Whether a man (it was usually a man) was a slave owner from the South or a planter, maybe absentee, from the West Indies, was not of great concern to Londoners. They were all wealthy slave owners, and even historians find it difficult to distinguish between absentee slave owners from the American South and absentee slave owners from the West Indies (p. 250). They might be well-integrated, such as William Beckford, twice Lord Mayor of London, the absentee owner of some 22,000 acres and 3000 slaves in Jamaica, but in England a radical politician and leading Wilkite, they might even be that former London printers' apprentice and evidently well-connected Benjamin Franklin – they were all regarded as native Englishmen. 'No taxation without representation' was, after all, the cry of English people everywhere, whether they were in North America or in England.

Julie Flavell has written a good book about them all. This reviewer is in no position to judge the American side of the story, but the side referring to England, particularly to London, rings true. This is not Hogarth's London – that was in any case earlier – there appears to be only one reference to him, and that in passing. This is, on the whole, the town of the nobility and the ambitious.

Yet, and this is to the author's credit, she does not omit the poor. There is a whole chapter on Henry Laurens and his black servant, Robert Scipio, whom he brought over before the Somerset case in 1772. The Port of London – one of the world's greatest – had sailors of all races and colours. It imported goods, such as tobacco and spices, from everywhere; its sailors, like those of the Navy, also came from everywhere. It is surprising that somebody as well informed as Flavell does not mention Rediker – unless she should quietly disapprove of the approach. It is more surprising that she does not mention the work of Linda Colley, more particularly *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh* (1) unless it be that Elizabeth Marsh's ordeal mostly took place in India at a slightly later date. One suspects that the publisher insisted upon some pruning, or at least a word limit. This is the more likely, as the endnotes are full of references, some of them quite recent.

Julie Flavell is one of those who insist that no separate 'American' identity pre-existed the Revolution, that Londoners accepted Americans as they did provincials, that the slave states of the South had more in common with the West Indian islands, and that if people in London thought about it all (mostly they did not) it was to make a distinction between New England (provincial, ridden with Puritans, generally backward and inclined to burn witches, if they were only allowed to do so – in fact rather like Scotland without the clans) and the civilised states to the south.

This is clearly a book that Julie Flavell took some trouble to research, and enjoyed writing. She has done it well. Now for a few criticisms, written from the point of view of somebody who is by no means an historian of America, but of England, particularly of London.

In the first place, there is too much use of Dorothy George's *London Life in the Eighteenth Century*.(2) This is indeed an excellent book that has deservedly remained in print since its publication in 1925 – she is a model to all subsequent historians of London, and I am writing as one. It is hard to do better, but the work is a little dated now. The *Old Bailey Online* is used but reference to some more work by Hitchcock and Shoemaker would have been welcome, though admittedly, it is not easy to see where it would have fitted.(3) In her guide to further reading the author also mentions Rudé's *Hanoverian London* (though she does not make much use of it). Rudé was indeed a fine scholar, who regularly blazed new trails, and the obvious man to turn to when writing a new book on 18th-century London, but *Hanoverian London* shows signs of being written in a hurry, and was not among Rudé's finest efforts.(4)

Secondly, a reliance on Hecht, *The Domestic Servant Class in Eighteenth-Century England* (5) is not a good idea, although one can see how such reliance came about. Several books and articles have been published since then, although the latest, Caroline Steedman's *Labors Lost. Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England* ((6) probably appeared when this book was in press. Contrary to a common opinion, most houses only had one maidservant, if that.

Thirdly – this can only be the criticism of an English reviewer – the book is a little too 'American-centred'.

It is not difficult for an English reviewer to take for granted that North Americans felt at home in London before 1776, particularly the likes of Henry Laurens, a self-made man and member of the slave-owning gentry of South Carolina, or even a universal man such as Benjamin Franklin, a former London apprentice, who fitted everywhere. This may be a little harder for some traditionalist Americans to accept, and an introduction, aimed mainly at European readers, would have been welcome. The way that Americans – and for that matter Beckford – seem to have reacted to John Wilkes is noticeable.

Fourthly, there is the database of Americans living in London before 1776. Flavell has published separately describing this.(7) That article was written at a fairly early stage of the research, did not look beyond the Franklin and Laurens' papers, and estimated the number of Americans in London during the early 1770s as up to 829, at a 95 percent confidence level. Since then, Flavell has done more research, found more Americans, and comes up with a figure 'closer to one thousand', if one includes West Indian planters.(8) Very likely, but having co-authored an article on the subject, an extra paragraph in the appendix would not go amiss, however conservative the estimate.

But these are all comparatively minor quibbles. This is a good book, that lives up to expectations.

Notes

1. Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh* (London, 2007).Back to (1)
2. Dorothy George, *London Life in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1925).Back to (2)
3. http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/ [2]> [accessed 9 July 2010].Back to (3)
4. George Rudé, *Hanoverian London 1714-1808* (London, 1971).Back to (4)
5. J. Jean Hecht, *The Domestic Servant Class in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1958).Back to (5)
6. Caroline Steedman's *Labors Lost. Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England (Cambridge, 2009).*Back to (6)
7. Julie Flavell, 'Using capture-recapture methods to Reconstruct the American population in London', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*,23 (2001), 37–53.Back to (7)
8. For whom, see Trevor Burnard, 'Passengers only: the extent and significance of absenteeism in eighteenth-century Jamaica', *Atlantic Studies*,1 (2004), 189.Back to (8)

Other reviews:
New York Times
http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/01/books/review/Wulf-t.html [3]
Guardian
http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/aug/29/julie-flavell-when-london-was-capital-of-america-review [4]
Sehepunkte
http://www.sehepunkte.de/2011/02/17523.html [5]

Links
[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/5028 [2] http://www.oldbaileyonline.org/
[3] http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/01/books/review/Wulf-t.html
[4] http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/aug/29/julie-flavell-when-london-was-capital-of-america-review
[5] http://www.sehepunkte.de/2011/02/17523.html