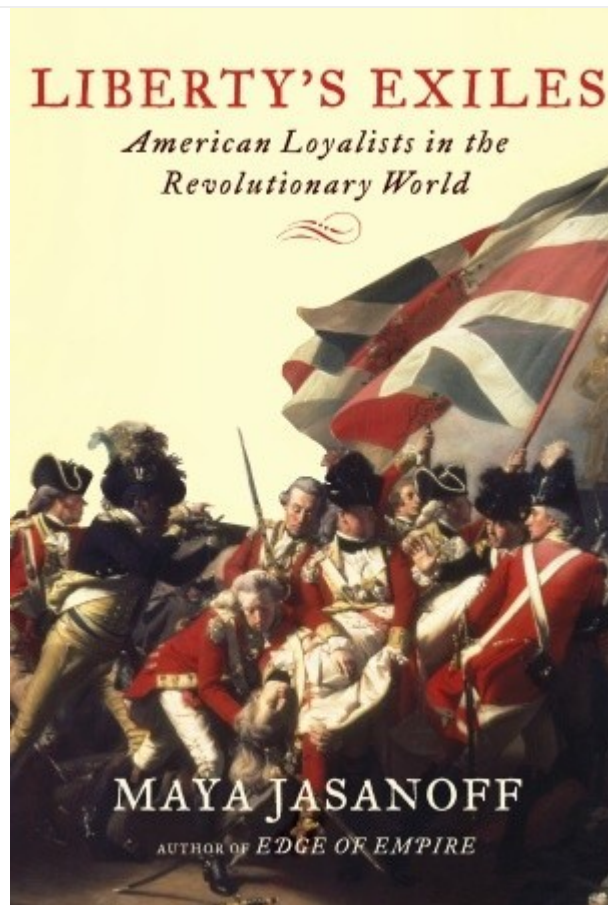


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Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World



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Reviewed Work(s)

Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World. By Maya Jasanoff (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011). Pp. xvi + 460. Cloth, \$30.00.

In *Liberty's Exiles*, Maya Jasanoff offers a generally welcome addition to several areas of historical study, particularly those concerned with the American Revolution and British imperialism. She aims “to provide the first global history of the loyalist diaspora,” although she notes that no volume could discuss each of the tens of thousands of loyalist refugees who fled to various parts of the British Empire after 1783 (8).

Methodologically, Jasanoff uses geography—“every major loyalist destination”—to help focus her narrative (16). The result is rich and diverse, ranging variously from locales and destinations such as New York and Jamaica, New Brunswick and Sierra Leone, the Bahamas and Bengal. Jasanoff does not shy away from the painfully human elements that defined exile for so many. She writes of the “everyday sadism” of slavery in Jamaica, of the “plentiful shower of tears” that accompanied familial reunion, and of the allure that one former American, William Linnaeus Gardner, experienced when he met an Indian woman whom he eventually married—to the joy of both parties, it seems (249, 314).

Jasanoff writes that Gardner was “another colorful piece in the kaleidoscope of empire, refracting and revolving its subjects in an interconnected world” (342). The crisp clarity of such a description is as forceful as the individuals with whom Jasanoff populates her narrative. There is no shortage of detail in these pages; environment, religion, and of course war are woven together in ways that reflect the overlapping complexities, pains, and joys of her subjects.

One significant question can and should be posed of the narrative, and specifically its thesis. Jasanoff argues, beginning in her introduction and then continuing throughout the book, that the American background of British loyalists created what she terms the “spirit of 1783.” This stands in contradistinction to the global influence of the American Revolution, which Jasanoff terms the “spirit of 1776” (11). As constructed by Jasanoff, the “spirit of 1783” — she sets the phrase in quotation marks throughout the book— consisted of three points: support for British imperialism, a “clarified commitments to liberty and humanitarian ideals,” and resistance to “centralized, hierarchical government” (12-13). With this

typology firmly in place by the end of her introduction, Jasanoff traces the confluence of these three factors upon British imperial history through the early nineteenth century. Yet the narrative is haunted, in an unresolved fashion, by the ghost of the French Revolution. On the one hand, we are told that the “spirit of 1783” stood against the spirit of the French Revolution because the former offered a “more limited version of liberty under the crown and hierarchical stability” (13). On the other hand, the “spirit of 1783” appears to have been a rather unstable historical force. Jasanoff writes that the French Revolution played a strong part in “sharpening the edges of the ‘spirit of 1783,’” resulting in the intensification of hierarchical authority in Britain and its colonies during the 1790s (306). Jasanoff then proposes that when revolt broke out in Freetown, Sierra Leone, the citizens there were unique among other loyalists in maintaining “a commitment to liberty and humanitarian initiatives” (307). Having been founded under the influence of the “spirit of 1783,” it appears that by 1800, the same confluence of forces that had previously posed an alternative to 1789 was now coming apart (11). It seems that the “spirit of 1783” was just as likely to embrace the “spirit of 1789” as it was to resist it. This makes one wonder whether the “spirit of 1783,” however convenient as a heuristic, is a helpful historical description.

This unresolved, methodological quandary is paralleled by the valuative language that Jasanoff sometimes uses. As with her model of the “spirit of 1783,” her descriptions sometimes lack historical sensitivity and nuance. She notes, for example, that abolitionist William Wilberforce decried the 1800 rebellion in Sierra Leone by denouncing its leaders and supporters as Jacobins. Jasanoff uses this protest to describe Wilberforce as “anti-democratic” and “paternalistic” because he, like others, “ran up against the ‘spirit of 1783’” (306). But as her own narrative makes clear, there was no “spirit of 1783” that either filled or possessed American loyalists with a three-point ideology of imperialism, humanitarianism, and opposition to centralization. What is more, there was no clear teleology of democratic development in either the American colonies or revolutionary France. Surely, then, it is unfair to critique someone such as Wilberforce for not embracing a series of changes that, especially from his own point of view, could not be discerned as tending in any one direction. *Liberty's Exiles* leans quite strongly in the direction of Whig historiography. By relying upon teleology to describe historical change,

action, and reaction, Jasanoff fails to really engage the most important element of concern in British society at the time: the French Revolution. British voices of concern are, at best, disregarded; at worst, they are slighted. Historical events may very well yield migratory bodies in search of new homes, but such changes do not yield spirits that march their way through history in a progressive and straightforward line. Jasanoff is at her best when she elucidates the tragedies born of 1783. She falls short when she tries to explain the influence of 1783 as a singular “spirit” of advance. She is nonetheless to be thanked for drawing attention to a large body of genuinely global evidence that ought to preoccupy historians for many years to come.

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