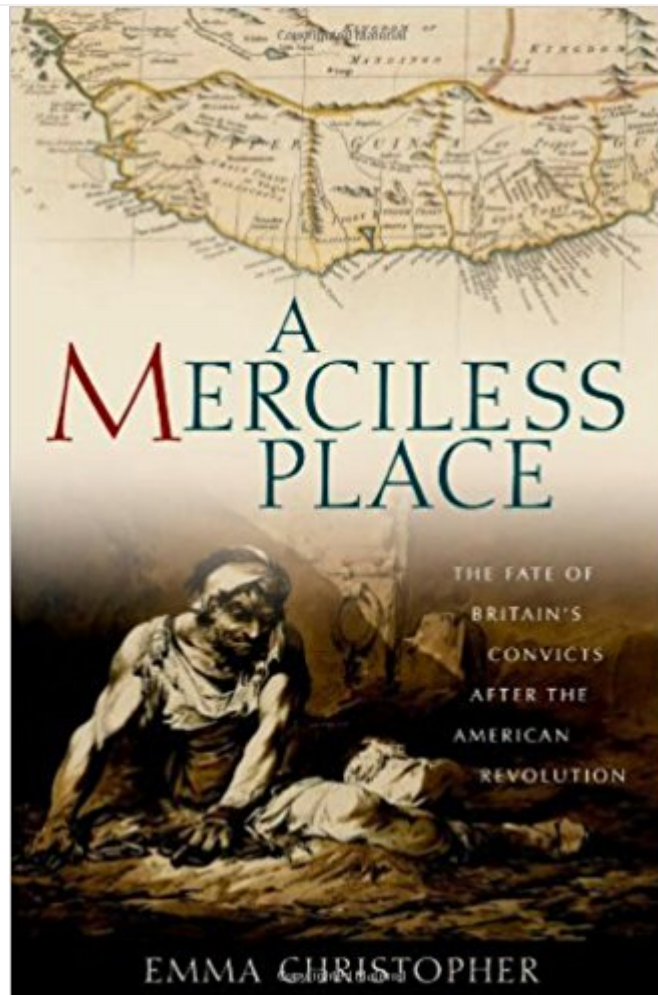


# {essays in history}

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## A Merciless Place: The Fate of Britain's Convicts after the American Revolution



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### Reviewed Work(s)

*A Merciless Place: The Fate of Britain's Convicts after the American Revolution.* By Emma Christopher (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Pp. 432. Cloth, \$29.95.

Historians who study convict transportation in the British Empire can essentially be divided into two groups: those that study the transportation of convicts to America, and those that study the transportation of convicts to Australia. Though there is an obvious transition in where the convicts were sent, few historians have attempted to illuminate the period between the American Revolution, when convicts stopped being sent to the American colonies, and the founding of the penal colony in New South Wales, Australia in 1788. In writing *A Merciless Place*, Emma Christopher fills a significant void in the literature by exposing several disastrous attempts by the British government to offload convicts to West Africa.

Christopher begins the text with a discussion of the American Revolution's impact on crime in Britain. While the war served as a conduit for the temporary employment of working class Britons, its inglorious conclusion at Yorktown in 1781 and the subsequent demobilization of the army meant that a number of soldiers would be returning to metropolitan areas without work. Coupled with an influx of loyalists, the author hints that the large increase in the number of unemployed meant that crime was on the rise. Meanwhile, the mechanism which was in place to exile convicted felons had been stalled by the war effort, and thus the number of convicts particularly in London began increasing exponentially.

According to the author, the government did not sit idly by while this was happening. A host of plans were considered regarding what to do with the convicts, but only a few were actually attempted. Convicts had been sent to West Africa, particularly Senegambia in small numbers during the 1760s, and the continuation and enlargement of that scheme seemed logical to government officials. In practice however, the transportation of convicts to the coast was a politically tenuous matter.

The Company of Merchants Trading to Africa (a private company modeled after the Royal African Company), vociferously lobbied against the introduction of convict soldiers to the region. The company believed that the convict soldiers would be more of a liability than an asset, as their iniquity would portray whites as weak-willed to the African neighbors. Compound this with the threat of the convicts inciting a rebellion, and the potential damage to the profitable African slave trade could be incalculable.

The middle chapters of Christopher's text discuss the African experiment in great depth and reveal the absurdity of the whole venture. Malaria and other diseases claimed the lives of many of the transported convicts within days of their arrival, and the few that survived were subjected to a lack of food and clothing, and brutal punishments. Desertion was common. One soldier, Captain Kenneth Mackenzie, used both convicts and Africans as slave laborers on a plantation outside of one of the coastal forts. Christopher notes that the Company of Merchants again grew concerned, this time because if plantation staples, "could be produced in Africa, why were millions of Africans being shipped to the Americas to produce these items for the European market?" (174)

The author then links the failures of the plans to create a convict colony in West Africa with the final push toward the plan to settle convicts at Botany Bay, an area first explored by Captain James Cook in 1770. Though historians have had a healthy debate about the Australian founding, and the fortune of the convicts sent to New South Wales, Australia, Christopher reveals no doubt that the Australian penal colony was much less deadly than the attempts to settle convicts on the African continent.

The reader is thus left with a new and profound understanding of colonial settlement in the Pacific that is supported by Christopher's impressive research of primary source materials. Not only has the author mined archives across the old British Empire, she has also been to the African sites where these convicts lived, worked and died, and thus she is uniquely qualified to tell their story. While Christopher may at points get caught up in the story telling of the backgrounds of the prisoners, this text is nevertheless groundbreaking and would be of interest to anyone who wanted to learn more about how punishment built an empire. It also

reveals that forced migration was not a one-way phenomenon in Africa, as convicts briefly served as part of the mechanism for the expulsion of African slaves to the Atlantic World.

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