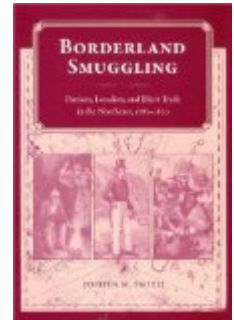


Joshua M. Smith. *Borderland Smuggling: Patriots, Loyalists, and Illicit Trade in the Northeast, 1783-1820.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. x + 160 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-2986-3.



Reviewed by Chris Magra

Published on H-Maritime (December, 2006)

Joshua M. Smith has produced the latest word on the early American contraband trade. He has looked at a specific geographic location where smuggling is known to have occurred, the border between New Brunswick and Maine, and he sounds the political depths of this illicit trade. The result of Smith's efforts is a rich chronological catalogue of smuggling at the turn of the nineteenth century and a provocative argument: smugglers, and not nation-states, were the ones who defined the real limits of early American regional borders.

In order to demonstrate the various ways smugglers contested the border between the United States and British territory, Smith examines how political authorities on both sides attempted to police the border and the methods illegal traders used to defy these authorities. From the American Revolution, to Thomas Jefferson's Embargo Act, to the War of 1812, British and American governments established a borderline between Canada and the United States. Customs officers were established on both sides to collect taxes and prevent contraband from entering either side, and military forces were then mobilized to

defend this invisible boundary. Yet all of these efforts failed to curtail smuggling because "it was an activity participated in eagerly by all levels of society" (p. 2). Loyalists traded with Patriots during the American Revolution, while Patriots sold masts to the Royal Navy (pp. 7-9). U.S. customs agents and military men sent north to prevent American flour from entering British territory during Jefferson's Embargo "often allied themselves with the smugglers" (p. 55). American soldiers were paid to look the other way with liquor and money during the War of 1812 (p. 85). In addition, Smith has found numerous incidents in which British customs officials either engaged in smuggling themselves, or they established protocols by which smugglers could circumvent the very regulations the customs men were technically enforcing. Indeed, having surveyed a mountain of evidence, Smith maintains that "it is difficult to find a group that found smuggling immoral" (p. 15). By various means, including kidnapping and armed resistance, in addition to the active participation of law enforcement officers, American flour entered British territory illegally and British gypsum, or plaster used as a fertilizer, flowed

through American waters into U.S. fields as contraband. Thus, the U.S.-Canadian border meant very little to entrepreneurial men in both regions, and Smith concludes that interregional commerce tends "to diminish the importance of borders" (p. 16).

While Smith does an excellent job telling us where smuggling occurred and why, he does not tell us how much smuggling occurred. If only a small percentage of the population was directly involved in illicit maritime activities, then what, if any, political significance should we attach to smuggling? This is by no means clear. Yet, Smith attaches great meaning to the contraband trade. We are told, for example, that "smuggling was inextricably linked with the process of border formation, compelling the state [American and British] to exert considerable efforts to control its borders" (p. xiii). For whom, we might ask, was illicit commerce linked to border formation? Did hinterland lumberjacks in both regions maintain that their respective national borders were at all contested? Moreover, it seems as though smuggling went on continuously on the islands in Passamaquoddy Bay, yet Smith makes no attempt to quantify the extent of these everyday smuggling activities. This severely complicates his attempt to argue that smuggling can be seen as a form of individual and collective "resistance" to state-sponsored trade regulations such as Jefferson's Embargo (p. 51). If we do not know the extent of smuggling activity in the region prior to, during, and after the passage of such legislation, then it is not clear how we can refer to such ubiquitous activity as a form of resistance. These are problems Smith's book does not address. Of course, quantifying the extent of smuggling in any region is inherently problematic: such illicit trade is largely invisible on customs records and naval officer shipping lists. While it can be found in court records, the extent of smuggling remains very difficult to quantify. Thus, it is possible that we should not expect anyone to tell us how much smuggling occurred or how many people were di-

rectly involved in this activity. *Borderland Smuggling*, then, tells us as much about smuggling along the Maine/Canada border as we can know. For that, U.S. and Canadian maritime, economic, and political historians will find this a stimulating read.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-maritime>

Citation: Chris Magra. Review of Smith, Joshua M. *Borderland Smuggling: Patriots, Loyalists, and Illicit Trade in the Northeast, 1783-1820*. H-Maritime, H-Net Reviews. December, 2006.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12612>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.