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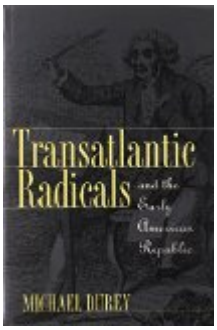
Michael Durey. *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997. xi + 425 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-0823-2.



Reviewed by Paul K. Longmore

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In this thoroughly researched study, Michael Durey examines the activities of late-eighteenth century English (and Welsh), Scottish, Scotch-Irish and Irish radicals within the British Isles. He traces the subsequent exile of 219 of them to America between 1784 and 1806. Finally, he reports the political engagements and impact of some of those refugees in the early republic.

Durey's subjects are far from being a monolithic group. Instead, they constitute a category linked primarily by fierce alienation from the imperial Britain of their day and by the experience of exile. Otherwise, they were diverse in ethnicity, religion, and even politics. In their particular, British geographical locales, they opposed what they perceived as the loss of traditional liberties, whether English rights or Scottish, Scotch-Irish or Irish self-determination. In ideology, many took Thomas Paine, with his vehement denunciation of hereditary hierarchy, as their political mentor. Most were also strongly influenced by outsider religious views, usually dissenting Protestantism, whether Presbyterian or Unitarian or sectarian, but for some of the Irish, Roman Catholicism. And a large percentage were professionals, merchants, or artisans, who may have suffered from blocked opportunities toward upward mobility.

In his first three chapters, Durey recounts the political involvements and occasional conspiratorial plottings of, in turn, the English, Scottish, and Irish radicals. That tripartite geographical division may lead readers who are not deeply versed in British political history to lump these dissidents together by country. In fact, Durey shows that there were many variations and divisions within each region. Covering all of the British Isles and tracing the doings of dozens of historical actors, these chapters--almost half the book--offer a richly, sometimes bewilderingly, detailed narrative of late-eighteenth century British radicalism.

Thwarted and threatened by the authorities, many dissidents found themselves sentenced to exile--or they pragmatically escaped into it to avoid prison or the gibbet. Durey describes the several waves of political refugees (Chapter Four: "Into Exile"), noting the significance for their personal and political futures of the timing of their departures from the British Isles and of their ar-

rivals in the United States. Nearly all were young adults when they made the transatlantic crossing, but the conditions they left or met varied, and as they aged in exile many of them modified their views and endeavors. Again they were not a monolithic group. As with all immigrants, these transplants endured the hardships of the passage (Chapter Four) and of adjustment to the new land (Chapter Five: "Land of Opportunity?"). At home, they had looked to republican America as a model. Some succeeded here. Some failed. A few eventually returned home. Many found themselves disappointed with a society that fell short of their expectations. The America they had imagined was not the America in which they had to live.

The vast majority of the exiled radicals seem to have withdrawn from public affairs to try to live quietly. Only about one-fifth continued their political activism in the young republic. It is this latter group, the subject of Durey's final two chapters, who will perhaps be of greatest interest to readers of this list.

Many of the refugees who involved themselves in American politics arrived with considerable experience in publishing and radical journalism. Skilled polemicists, they applied their talents to public issues from the mid-1780's through the teens of the next century. As newspaper writers and editors, book publishers and sellers, printers and translators, they were centrally positioned to help transform the public discourse of the new nation, democratizing it, vulgarizing it, making it accessible to an ever more-literate public, an ever-widening electorate. Their role in democratizing the American press helped bring to an end elitist Federalist domination of public sources of information.

In both style and substance, the radical journalists assaulted the pretensions of the gentlemen who expected to govern the republic. The most shocking of their attacks on elitism was their relentless iconoclasm against President George Washington, a figure who had hitherto remained virtually sacrosanct. Hostile to anything that smacked of British monarchy, the exiled radicals sought to discredit Federalist exploitation of the great man's reputation and public veneration of him. In the process, they pulverized his image in a way that disturbed many native-born Americans but helped delegitimize explicit elitism in American politics.

The exiles' anti-elitism reflected their political ideology. Egalitarians (at least initially), they advocated limited government, low taxes, and participatory democracy. Importing these radical British political principles with them, they found like-minded allies and a congenial home in the radical wing of the Republican Party. Indeed, they played a key role in founding and building the party and in promoting the perspective of its radically democratic contingent. They were also instrumental in bringing about the presidential election of their political hero, Thomas Jefferson, and in producing the Revolution of 1800.

The trouble was that while Jefferson's heart may have beat in time with the radicals' rhetoric, his head told him to act pragmatically in order to hold the wings of the Republican Party together and to reach out to moderate Federalists. The relationship of the exiles to Jefferson's administration presented two historical ironies. Some of them accused moderates such as James Madison of misleading the President or misrepresenting his views and implementing policies that they favored but that he opposed. This spin on events reprised the pre-Revolutionary radicals' claim that George III's ministers had deceived the king and distorted or violated his true sentiments. And in the end, the more radical of the exiles lost influence within the administration they had been pivotal in electing, as they sank into political irrelevancy.

But here again one must note that the exiles did not constitute a unitary group. Some, such as James Thomson Callender, held fast to their radical beliefs and fierce tactics and ended up as, in

effect, internal political exiles, shut out of American politics just as they had earlier been excluded from British. Meanwhile, others, such as Mathew Carey, tempered their views and methods, fit into the moderate wing of the Republican Party and the mainstream of U.S. politics, and established themselves as prosperous citizens, the sort of successful immigrants American mythology has always elevated as models for later arrivals and vindicators of the promised land. In one other important and ironic respect, the politically active exiles divided. Many in the southern states became slaveholders and defended slavery; those farther north continued to oppose slavery as they had done before going into exile.

Durey's exiles stand as the first instance of what would become a pattern in American political history: A group of immigrants brought with them politically radical "European" ideas and militantly injected themselves, their perspectives, and their tactics into American politics and reform movements. That in turn provoked nativist hostility against what was condemned as their introduction of un-American beliefs. Critics not only denounced the exiles' temerity in telling native-born American what to think, they also excoriated them as enemies of American values and institutions, ultimately attempting to repress them through the Alien and Sedition Acts. All of this presaged the activism of later political transplants and reactions to them. Despite nativist venom and legal persecution, these first immigrant radicals, Durey shows us, forever changed the style and substance of American politics.

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