

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Craig Yirush. *Settlers, Liberty, and Empire: The Roots of Early American Political Theory, 1675-1775*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. ix + 277 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-19330-6; \$25.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-13246-6.

Reviewed by Robert M. Calhoun (University of North Carolina, Greensboro)

Published on H-Albion (May, 2012)

Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth

The shelf life of a paradigm on the coming of the American Revolution turns out to be sixty years. Craig Yirush's new book closes a historiographical epoch begun by Bernard Knollenberg's *The Origin of the American Revolution, 1759-1765* (1950), the book that inaugurated the neo-Whig interpretation of the Revolution in the 1950s. *Settlers, Liberty, and Empire* is a landmark volume in another respect. As a study in the history of political thought, it harkens back to Randolph G. Adams's *Political Ideas of the American Revolution* (1922). And looking to the future, Yirush writes in the idiom of his own generation of postmodern social historians, nowhere more intentionally than his designation of New World political actors as "Settlers."

The discovery at the heart of *Settlers, Liberty, and Empire*—and the achievement that centers the book securely between past and present—is its redating of the prerevolutionary tipping point backward in time from 1760-76 to the early and mid-eighteenth century (the 1720s to the 1750s). During the quarter century leading up to Knollenberg's 1759 opening of the prerevolutionary era, Yirush demonstrates, a deposit of political ideas generated by Restoration politics and by the Revolution of 1688 acquired critical mass. Determining the content of that deposit is the first of Yirush's several scholarly accomplishments. In part 1 of the book, in opening chapters "English Rights in an Atlantic World" and "The Glorious Revolution in America," he closely analyzes a generous sample of twenty-seven documents (possibly as much as 5 percent of the documents forged in the English crucible and tested in British American colonial politics). These include dissenter tracts, coronation oaths, common law rulings, British and Irish statutes, assertions of royal prerogatives, appeals to feudal law and an ancient constitution, leveler tracts, proprietary and royal colonial charters, and Privy Council rulings. In his account of an emerging settler consciousness, Yirush finds: "a view of Empire crystallized in English America which

was based on the equal rights of all of the King's subjects; the grounding of those rights outside the realm in the efforts and risk taking of the settlers themselves; the confirmation of these rights in charters and other royal grants; the subsequent acquisition of territory from the natives by purchase or conquest; and the transformation of what the settlers saw as a 'wilderness' into flourishing civil societies" (p. 77).

Part 2, the middle and longest section of the book, then examines four settlers' understandings of the nature of empire. First up is the Massachusetts veteran of the Dominion of New England fiasco, Jeremiah Dummer, whose *Defense of the New England Charters* (1721) described and judged the fallout from Charles II's and his brother's, James Duke of York, revocation of the New England colonial charters. Next, Yirush discovers John Buckley, son of Gershom Buckley, the ablest and most fearsome colonial defender of the Dominion, and a Connecticut political leader who became the spokesman for settler efforts to dispossess the Mohegan tribe of land use of twenty thousand acres in central Connecticut that their ancestors had acquired as a reward for fighting against the Pequots in the 1630s. By referring to "Buckley's critique of Native American rights," Yirush is making an observation about the obscurity of the author *and* of a text that was published bizarrely as a lengthy preface to *Political Meditations* (1725) by the Connecticut poet and future governor, Roger Wolcott. Yirush's third settler statement is by the elder Daniel Dulany, *The Right of the Inhabitants of Maryland to the Benefit of the English Laws* (1728), who was a much more politically prominent and cosmopolitan figure than either Dummer or Buckley. The fourth and final settler articulation of colonial liberty in mid-eighteenth-century British North America is by the relatively well-known Virginia planter and burgess, Richard Bland, author of *The Colonial Dismounted: Or the Rector Vindicated. In a Letter Addressed to His Reverence Containing a Dissertation upon the Constitution of*

the Colony (1764). By this account, colonial political leaders moved, during the half century from the Peace of Utrecht (1713) to the Peace of Paris (1763), from collecting and reading scores of English political documents to constructing from the raw material in the documentary record complex and systematic ideological pronouncements. More than the colonial responses to the Grenville and Townshend programs, Yirush argues, *that* prior process of political maturation and *that* capacity for systematization fueled the American Revolution of 1776.

Of course, the demarcation between pre- and post-1760 Atlantic world political thought is more nuanced and halting in *Settlers, Liberty, and Empire* than this brief summary suggests. The author's more nuanced argument and measured narrative fills part 3 of the book, chapters entitled "In Search of a Unitary Empire" and "The Final Imperial Crisis." That search, he stipulates, had been going on even as Dummer, Buckley, Dulany, and Bland fought their political battles for settler rights, beginning with Martin Bladen's work for the Board of Trade in the 1720s and culminating in Lord's Halifax's tumultuous tenure as president of that board from 1748 to 1761.

This attractively written, venturesome book is going to start several academic conversations—not the least the author's hope of persuading the profession to substitute the term "settlers" for "colonists"—because Yirush makes several intelligent, counterintuitive choices. At 277 pages, this is not a BIG book, not big like J. G. A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), but big like, say, volume 2 of *Barbarism and Religion*, Pocock's revisionist study of eighteenth-century political culture in Scotland. *Settlers, Liberty, and Empire* could easily have been a hundred pages longer, much to the book's benefit. When Yirush recommends to his readers Lee Ward, *The Politics of Liberty in England and Revolutionary America* (2004), he already knows that a longer book on the roots of early American political thought would complement and overlap Ward's magisterial study. The stark conciseness and precision of his book sends a signal more pointed than a conventional preface or introduction. Indeed, the first five pages of *his* introduction (on Massachusetts colonial agent Jasper Maudit) is an artful prologue in disguise. Teachers should schedule one class session for those five pages alone.

But I cannot imagine how teachers will set up discussion of part 3, "Revolution," after students have struggled through the heart of darkness character of the six preceding chapters. All of the great multivolume series on American history have foundered on the 1688-1763

period (the old New American Nation Series of Harper and Row, the Louisiana State University History of the South, and for all we know the still-in-progress Oxford University Press narrative history of the United States). Those decades thrust up no compelling narrative, making it difficult and awkward to contextualize the mini-narratives of, for example, young Ben Franklin in Boston and Philadelphia; Jonathan Edwards in Northampton, Massachusetts; or young George Washington surveying the Ohio Valley and the Great Dismal Swamp. The importation of a political print culture confronted Yirush with a seemingly impossible task. Softening or domesticating that strangeness with vignettes or commentary would have made for a different and less painfully candid book. Did he choose not to let readers off the hook? Or did the available sources do that for and to him? Dodge that conundrum at your peril.

For that matter, Yirush does not fall back on an *apples and oranges* analogy when he moves from specific documents in the first two chapters to complex idea systems in the next four. Here the closing two chapters provide their own counterintuitive guidance. Yirush devotes generous attention to James Wilson's understanding of "the conquest doctrine on which both [Sir Edward] Coke and [Sir William] Blackstone ... based the authority of Parliament over the dominions" (p. 245). Does Yirush mean that *Calvin's Case* (7 Coke Report 1a, 77 ER 377) predetermined the outcome of the imperial constitutional debate or that Blackstone's *Commentaries* (1765-69) brought the British concept of the state to fulfillment just in time to drive colonial settlers over the cliff? Arguably, those two external contingencies—Coke long in the past, Blackstone a generation away from happening—provided the glue holding together Dummer's and Buckley's concepts of settler liberty and Dulany's and Bland's Whiggish imperialism.

At least one conundrum remains: why Yirush passed up the chance to quote Henry McCulloh's admonition that "Experience hath shown that it is extremely difficult to enforce the execution of any Law made contrary to the general Bent and Disposition of the People; but how much more so in America it must be to enforce a Law made here [in London], and put into Execution in *America* not only contrary to the general Bent and Disposition of the People but likewise contrary to the very Genius and Constitution of some of their Governments; wherefor in passing Laws of this Nature, 'tis most humbly submitted, whether it may be more proper, and better answer the End there in proposed, so to form the law, as that the People should not have too great a Temptation to resist, and act contrary to it." [1] Surely no British opera-

tive in the colonies better knew, understood, and appreciated land hungry settlers than McCulloh, whose repeated massaging of the phrase “the general Bent and Disposition of the People” perfectly expressed the settler political motivation and consciousness at the core of Yirush’s interpretation. How McCulloh put this concept together, how land speculation in North Carolina civilized both a private businessman like McCulloh and royal governors like his friend and patron, Arthur Dobbs, is crucial to understanding how the two Daniel Dulanys, father and son, Richard Bland, and his friend and ally Landon Carter fused together and harmonized their trust in the empire with their insistence that it remain an empire constrained by law and constitutionalism. McCulloh’s patronage of James Iredell—who left behind a mountain of agonized memoranda on this gelling of imperial duty and Britanic love of liberty—is just one body of historical evidence hinted at, but not explicitly acknowledged and analyzed in Yirush’s four great chapters on early to mid-century Whiggish constitutionalism.[2]

Another hundred pages would have allowed Yirush

to deal not just with *identity* in settler political thought, which he does with brio, but also with *character*—that older neo-Whig historical preoccupation that came alive in the 1950s in the scholarship of Edmund S. Morgan, Bernard Bailyn, Jack P. Greene, and Douglass Adair that Yirush knows well and has employed with implicit effect. In eighteenth-century usage, character meant both personal integrity and also reputation and credible public self-presentation. Choosing his battles thoughtfully, Yirush chose to subordinate character to identity. Reversing those priorities remains a road less travelled.

Notes

[1]. Quoted in J. M. Bumsted, “‘Things in the Womb of Time’: Ideas of American Independence, 1633-1763,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 31 (October 1974): 549.

[2]. See Robert M. Calhoon, *Political Moderation in America’s First Two Centuries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 128, 133-135; and Don Higginbotham, ed., *The Papers of James Iredell*, vol. 1 (Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1976), xxxvii-xc, 8-11, 251-268, 370-412, 420-423.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Robert M. Calhoon. Review of Yirush, Craig, *Settlers, Liberty, and Empire: The Roots of Early American Political Theory, 1675-1775*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. May, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33000>



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