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Andrew McMichael. *Atlantic Loyalties: Americans in Spanish West Florida, 1785-1810.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008. xii + 226 pp. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-3004-4; $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-3023-5.

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Shifting Loyalties in an Atlantic Borderland

In the 1770s, as the American Revolution was beginning, thousands of British loyalists fled from the eastern seaboard of North America and took up new homes in the West Florida backcountry. When the Revolution concluded in 1783, this territory, stretching from the Perdido River to the Mississippi and below the thirty-first parallel to the Gulf, reverted to Spanish control. Thus, from 1783 until 1810, these Anglo-American, English-speaking, Protestant colonists, together with their descendants, their slaves, and a smattering of Spanish and French colonists, lived under Spanish jurisdiction. But as Andrew McMichael writes in this new book, these people were not merely disaffected subjects of the Spanish king, patiently waiting for a moment to "overthrow an alien system." Instead, he argues, there was "an abiding loyalty to Spain on the part of Anglo-American residents that lasted" until 1810. Using a social history approach to give "a more textured picture" of issues like law, crime, land, and slavery, this book reconstructs life in West Florida in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (p. 4). It also explores the subject of political loyalty in early American borderlands.

As McMichael points out, scholars have often cast the story of West Florida's transformation from Spanish colony to American territory by 1810 as inevitable, the logical conclusion of Anglo colonists settling in what was never more than a nominally Spanish-controlled territory. In most conventional perspectives, the supposed loyalty of this Anglo majority to Spain is barely taken seriously, and its evaporation in 1810 features as a foregone conclusion. In most of this book, however, McMichael argues that the Anglos of Baton Rouge actually preferred loyalty to the Spanish Crown over membership in a new American Republic. Furthermore, McMichael asserts, British and American colonists who came to West Florida did not understand that their region was soon to be the United States. Rather, they understood it in the context of Atlantic contests for empire. So, McMichael writes, "the period from 1785 to 1810 marks the social and cultural emergence of an American region within the context of Latin American, African, Caribbean, European, and American social, cultural, and political imperatives" (p. 5). It was an Atlantic borderland, not just a frontier of America.

McMichael's story about loyalty becomes complicated early in the book. In chapter 1, he describes the complex imperial history of West Florida, how it passed from French, to Spanish, to British hands. During the British period, which coincided with the American Revolution, West Florida became a haven for loyalists fleeing the patriots in the American War of Independence. Yet, interestingly, once the Revolution ended, these loyalists no longer cared much about their allegiance to Great Britain, a seeming paradox. Indeed, McMichael describes how British loyalists in West Florida easily transferred their loyalty like so much fungible currency to the Spanish government after 1783, as they "seemed more concerned with surviving on the frontier than with upsetting the political applecart." McMichael does not comment on the irony of a group of people whose migration to West Florida was motivated by firm loyalty to Great Britain, but who then quickly transferred that loyalty in 1783. Instead, McMichael merely observes that "this theme would reassert itself again and again over the next three decades as issues of land, trade, and regional stability trumped issues of national loyalty" (p. 15). Although they had migrated to maintain connection to the British Empire, by 1783 practicality was trumping principle. Loyalty to Spain was "loyalty by default" (p. 16).

But if this was true, McMichael spends most of the next several chapters showing how the Anglo colonists' loyalty moving forward was actually much more than simply a matter of convenience, or "loyalty by default."

Indeed, in chapter 2, McMichael shows how Spanish laws regarding slavery (under the *Siete Partidas*) were actually less advantageous to Anglo slave-owners in West Florida than American slave laws would have been. As he writes, "planters in the Baton Rouge area faced a unique set of problems as they sought to establish their wealth in an area where the institution that supported the main source of their prosperity, plantation slavery, was subject to laws outside the scope of their Anglo experiences and therefore could be perceived as unstable" (pp. 35-36). For McMichael, the *Siete Partidas* made slavery a more "fluid" institution, and he shows how Anglo colonists worried about the Spanish government's commitment to maintaining their slave property (p. 53). And yet many remained loyal to Spain despite this.

McMichael then narrates how West Florida after the Louisiana purchase became a "surrounded borderlands" region–with Spanish territory bordered on all sides by U.S. territory (p. 74). He notes how West Florida residents did not sympathize with American filibusters who came to foment rebellion, viewing them instead as criminals. Consequently, despite the Spanish government's failures to protect residents' property against filibustering campaigns, many Anglo residents in West Florida remained loyal to the Spanish regime.

McMichael marshals convincing evidence to show that residents of West Florida did feel an authentic loyalty to the Spanish government. In his most detailed illustration, McMichael narrates the trial of a group of African slaves accused by their white master of an attempted poisoning. In this case, as in others, slaves could and did defend themselves against charges brought by whites. For McMichael, what is interesting about the case is its implications for the issue of loyalty. We might expect that a legal regime under which slaves had considerable power against their masters might have alienated the white settlers. But as McMichael concludes, "Baton Rouge residents did not express dissatisfaction with the outcome of this trial or of any similar trials in the area. They left no records of protest.... The system of slave law, even with its predilection for giving slaves the opportunity to appear before the bar with a status almost approaching that of a free person, did not cause significant ideological problems for residents during the Spanish tenure" (p. 126).

The last part of McMichael's book deals with the reasons why settlers had abandoned their loyalty to the Spanish Empire by 1810. It was really around 1810, McMichael argues, that the "instability" in the Spanish system became too great for colonists to tolerate. High crime, lawless deserters seeking refuge in West Florida, and filibusters all contributed to an unstable climate that spurred the Anglo settlers to consider leaving the Spanish system. Furthermore, land distribution became less efficient in 1810. Whereas the Spanish system formerly gave Anglo settlers easy access to clear land titles, the system in 1810 "slowed for established planters and stopped altogether for immigrants" (p. 148). By 1810, the settlers were happy to consider the American alternative, and abandon their Spanish loyalty altogether.

Yet even as the Spanish Empire lost control over West Florida and the administration fell apart, the local residents–"non-Spaniards all"–expressed their regret at the end of the Spanish regime, and lamented its passing (p. 166). By 1810, McMichael writes, they joined the American nation mostly because it was "the most convenient blanket available," not because they felt affinity for the new government (p. 175). Still, given how long colonists endured *inconveniences* in order to remain loyal to the Spanish regime in West Florida, this sudden transformation seems abrupt. It seems that McMichael could have done a better job explaining why the colonists once again became so pragmatic about political allegiance in 1810 as they had been in 1783.

Indeed, for all its detailed social history and narrative, Atlantic loyalties could have done more to explain the nature of loyalty in the eighteenth-century American borderlands. Recent work, including Shannon Lee Dawdy's *Building the Devil's Empire: French Colonial New Orleans* (2008) and Andrés Reséndez's *Changing National Identities at the Frontier: Texas and New Mexico, 1800-1850* (2004), has shown, on the one hand, how early modern empires at the margins were often populated by rogues–self-interested, independent operators whose loyalty was pragmatic and situational. On the other hand, as Gordon Wood has written, loyalty was more than just a transient thing in the premodern world. Subjecthood "was no simple political status, but had all sorts of social, cultural and even psychological implications.... The allegiance the ... subject owed his monarch was a personal and individual matter."[1] McMichael's book acknowledges both of these realities. Loyalty was sometimes just a matter of simple convenience for residents of West Florida. At the same time, McMichael suggests that Anglos who professed a Spanish national identity really meant to be Spaniards. Perhaps more attention to cultural questions–language, religion, fashion, diet, etc.–could have illuminated what loyalty and membership in the imagined communities of empires and nations meant (and also did not mean) to the inhabitants of this borderlands region.

Placing the West Florida story in a larger Atlantic context also could have strengthened the book. In the introduction, McMichael labels his case "unique" because its "ruling residents' cultural background did not originate from their ruling country" (p. 6). But the broader narrative of Atlantic history has established that this was in fact very far from a unique circumstance. Other similar cases–Acadia, New Orleans, and Dutch New York–could have shed some interesting light on the issue of colonial populations living under foreign governments in the Atlantic world.

But these quibbles aside, the book will be useful to specialists in early American borderlands and the Southeast. Moreover, we should thank McMichael for raising such valuable questions in the context of a strong case study of shifting loyalties and identities after the American Revolution.

Note

[1]. Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 12.

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