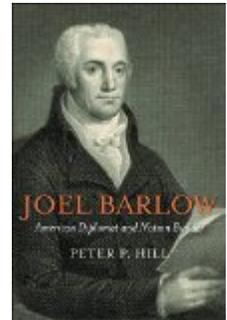


Peter P. Hill. *Joel Barlow: American Diplomat and Nation Builder.* Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2012. 271 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-59797-682-4.



Reviewed by Ian Saxine

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Joel Barlow lived in tumultuous times, but even by the standards of his contemporaries, lived an interesting life. Born in Connecticut in 1754, Barlow was a writer, a soldier in the American Revolution, a land speculator, a traveler, and a diplomat. He died in that last capacity in 1812 in Poland, during an attempt to meet with Napoleon Bonaparte to negotiate a treaty. Peter P. Hill, a historian of Franco-American relations in the revolutionary era, focuses on Barlow's diplomatic career in *Joel Barlow: American Diplomat and Nation Builder*. The globetrotting Barlow lived in Paris during the French Revolution, spent time in London, negotiated the release of American sailors while sent as a diplomat to Algiers (1795-97), and served as American minister plenipotentiary to France from 1811 until his death.

Hill deftly places Barlow's efforts in the larger context of American diplomatic relations with the Barbary states and Napoleonic France. Barlow spent two years walking a diplomatic tightrope negotiating for the release of over one hundred American sailors as consul in Algiers. Barlow

sought to pay what amounted to a ransom to free the sailors while preserving the dignity of the United States and negotiating durable treaties with the Barbary states of Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunis to prevent future seizures of American ships. Hill details how Barlow navigated the personal networks in Algiers, bribing the necessary officials and reaching an agreement with the dey, Ali Hassan. However, Hill's reference to Europe as "the civilized world" and harsh treatment of non-believers and women in Algiers as "barbaric aspects of Islam" sound off-key, especially set against Barlow's ownership of a black slave couple, which Hill suggests, absent evidence to the contrary, were "treated humanely" (pp. 30, 53, 102).

Franco-American relations, perhaps not surprisingly, loom largest in the book. Barlow was an early supporter of the French Revolution, and, despite both the Terror and the rise of Napoleon, remained pro-French till his dying day. Hill, a veteran diplomatic historian, paints a vivid backdrop of the obstacles to smooth Franco-American rela-

tions. As with Great Britain, much of the tension France had with the United States centered on neutral American trade rights during the Napoleonic Wars. Like his task in Algiers, when in France Barlow spent time securing the release of American sailors captured, in this case by French privateers. Often, the French lumped American with British sailors, holding them prisoner until their identity could be proven. Barlow succeeded in arranging for a system to release captured American sailors, but died before he could sign a successful treaty with Napoleon to secure French indemnities for American shipping losses and guarantee American trade rights.

Diplomatic historians will find this book a useful contribution to the literature on early American diplomacy. Military historians can benefit from Hill's analysis of how American maritime commerce and European power politics intertwined in the early national period. Nonspecialists looking for a more comprehensive treatment of early national diplomacy, politics, or even Barlow's full career, will be disappointed, however. While Hill maintains that Barlow adhered to "Jeffersonian principles as he understood them" throughout his life, he does not elaborate on, for example, how the notion of "Jeffersonian" may have changed over time, as Thomas Jefferson's own beliefs evolved over the course of his career (p. 2). Nor does Hill devote much space to Barlow's early involvement with the French Revolution or British radicals. Finally, the book lacks an introduction, or even an explanation why Barlow's life needs another chronicler. Readers seeking a more rounded treatment of this colorful poet and diplomat should consider one of the earlier works, including Richard Buel Jr.'s *Joel Barlow: American Citizen in a Revolutionary World* (2011), Samuel Bernstein's *Joel Barlow: A Connecticut Yankee in an Age of Revolution* (1985), or James Woodress's *A Yankee's Odyssey: The Life of Joel Barlow* (1958).

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Note

[1] The most recent is Richard Buel Jr., *Joel Barlow, American Citizen in a Revolutionary World* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2011). See also Samuel Bernstein, *Joel Barlow, A Connecticut Yankee in an Age of Revolution* (New York: Rutledge Books, 1985) and James Woodress, *A Yankee's Odyssey: the Life of Joel Barlow* (Philadelphia: Lippencott, 1958).

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