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Paul A. Gilje. *Free Trade and Sailors' Rights in the War of 1812.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. xii + 425 pp. $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-02508-0; $29.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-107-60782-8.

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The Ideological War of 1812

The War of 1812 has long been among the least studied of America's conflicts, and that is reflected in a still murky (and contentious) understanding of why the war was fought. The rallying cry for the war, eloquently encapsulated in Commodore David Porter's flag atop the *Essex,* was "Free Trade and Sailors' Rights," that is, economic freedom and respect for the inalienable rights of sailors. Most historians regard this slogan as little more than a cover for lust for land and a desire to crush Indian tribes hindering American expansion. Gilje does not necessarily disagree with this characterization, but he reminds us that the phrase carried tremendous emotional resonance with Americans in the early nineteenth century, and their conceptions of what constituted free trade and sailors' rights are crucial components of understanding the war as experienced by the generation that fought it. *Free Trade and Sailors' Rights* is about much more than just the War of 1812 itself; it is an exploration of political culture in the early republic and the often competing visions of political elites and ordinary Americans.

Gilje, a professor at the University of Oklahoma, is among the foremost authorities on American maritime culture. His study of sailors' perceptions of liberty in the Revolutionary era, *Liberty on the Waterfront,* is the definitive study of Jack Tar and his world available today, winning the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic Best Book Prize and the North American Society for Oceanic History John Lyman Book Award in 2004. He expands on that book's themes here. Although political and military elites receive their due, *Free Trade and Sailors' Rights* goes beyond the usual cast of characters in analyzing the war. In addition to James Madison, Henry Clay, David Porter, and John Quincy Adams, we see the perspective of common sailors and ordinary Americans' perceptions of the British threat. While Henry Clay and James Madison might have been only concerned with seizing Canada, Jack Tar rallied to the American flag with genuine patriotic enthusiasm, having lived with the ever-present threat of being pressed into the British Navy and recognizing that Britain's trade policies limited his ability to find work. The book's strength lies in its ability to show how both groups, political elites and ordinary Americans, conceptualized the war and understood the new nation's role in the world.

Gilje places the war in the context of the post-Revolutionary era, noting how the previous generation's efforts to throw off British oppression and secure liberty were ever-present in the minds of Americans in 1812. The outbreak of war comes a full two hundred pages into this work, and Gilje is at his best when analyzing the political culture that was in place prior to the conflict. Free trade and sailors' rights both carried ambiguous meanings for American in the years immediately following the Revolution. The Revolutionary generation and their heirs hoped to implement ideas dating back to the Enlightenment about how commerce could transform international relations. Many Americans who fought for independence believed they were ushering in a new era, in which trade between nations would be entirely unfettered by tariffs or restrictions. Others, however, saw free trade as merely the end of mercantilism while still others argued that the rights of neutrals to trade with warring nations was paramount. Regardless of the definition, there was a widespread belief in the early republic that the United States was leading the way in a transformation of international relations.

As for the sailors' rights part of the slogan, seamen in the early republic carried a certain social stigma. They were widely regarded, not without reason, as rowdy, uncontrollable, and irresponsible. However, they also played a crucial role in the American Revolution, and the piteous fate of American citizens forced to serve in the Royal Navy highlighted for Americans their own moral superiority as compared with British cruelty. Gilje ex-

plores the evolving definitions of citizenship in this era, and draws on depictions of sailors in popular culture and a growing body of legislation for safeguarding Americans at sea to demonstrate that American awareness of its seamen and their place in society were on the rise prior to 1812.

Gilje does not ignore the fact that other motives drove the declaration of war with Great Britain. However, territorial ambition and even national honor lacked the emotional resonance of free trade and sailors' rights. That was the cause that defined the conflict for many Americans, even after the Treaty of Ghent ignored both, a fact opponents of the war were quick to point out, though with limited results. The slogan posed a problem for Federalists. Though opposed to the war itself, they could not challenge the ideals encapsulated in Porter's flag, and instead focused on accusing the Republicans of hypocrisy, declaring a war that did nothing to aid free trade or American seamen in order to seize Canada and Florida, then abandoning both principles in favoring of ending the fighting. However, despite a series of battlefield disasters, Madison and the Republicans managed to paint the war as a heroic victory for the infant nation, and Americans came to believe that the war had vindicated the idea of free trade and sailors rights even as it ignored both in bringing the conflict to a close.

The slogan continued to resonate with Americans in the aftermath of the war, but only for a time. Banners and campaign speeches continued to tout free trade and sailors' rights as late as the 1850s, but by then the cry's meaning had become so muddied it amounted to little more than a buzzword. A westward focus and growing sectional tensions overshadowed what had driven Americans to war in 1812. By putting the war in the context of American history from the Revolution through the outbreak of the Civil War, Gilje gives a far more comprehensive survey than simply explaining why the war was fought or who won (the British, he contends, but Americans managed to ignore that). *Free Trade and Sailors' Rights* offers a study of the War of 1812 in American culture, political evolution, and memory. With a host of studies being written for the bicentennial focusing on the political and military history of the war, this work makes an excellent contribution by studying the war from the perspective of both high and low culture. While military historians will certainly find it useful in defining the conflict, anyone interested in social or cultural history in the early republic should take the time to read this important work.

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