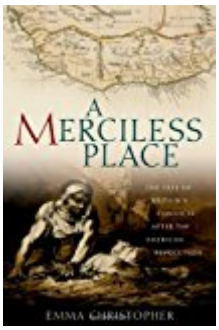
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Emma Christopher. *A Merciless Place: The Fate of Britain's Convicts after the American Revolution.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 448 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-978255-0.

Reviewed by Christienna Fryar

Published on H-Empire (April, 2014)

Commissioned by Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

One of the highlights of teaching British history survey courses to American undergraduates is the opportunity to present the American Revolution from the perspective of the losers. To most students in the United States, the Revolutionary War represents the triumph of American liberty over British tyranny and oppression, and this narrative leaves little room for considered examinations of the motives behind the British policies that so angered North American colonists. The ramifications of the Revolution for Britain, often left out of our origin myths, are similarly fruitful ground. How did Britain itself recover from such a humiliating and costly defeat? And how did its empire bounce back from such a significant territorial loss to become one of the largest empires in history?

A series of recent works have added to our understanding of the ways Britain's recovery shaped and bolstered future imperial endeavors. In *Moral Capital* (2006), Christopher L. Brown suggests that abolitionism was one way that the British attempted to reclaim the moral high ground lost during the 1770s and early 1780s. Other works have shown how the conflict between Britain and the United States set in motion migrations that launched post-Revolution imperial expansion. In the case of Maya Jasanoff's *Liberty's Exiles* (2011), the far-flung Loyalist diaspora played a key role in post-Revolution ideological and geographical reconfigurations of the empire. Emma Christopher's book, *A Merciless Place: The Fate of Britain's Convicts after the American Revolution*, highlights another dispersal mechanism--convict transportation--that simultaneously drove imperial expansion.

Christopher's book focuses on one problem created by Britain's defeat: where to send prisoners who would have previously been sentenced to transportation to North America. While we know the eventual destination, Christopher examines the years in between as British administrators sent convicts to numerous commercial outposts and fledgling colonies in Africa—the "merciless place" of the title--and Central America. Hers is a narrative of administrative scrambling and prob-

lem-solving as she catalogs the post-Revolution adjustments that British society was forced to make in the realm of criminal punishment. Convict transportation to new locales often created more problems than it purported to solve: in each destination, the presence of convicts threatened to undermine or demolish the fragile arrangements that held together these nascent outposts.

There are several parts to Christopher's narrative, which, while mainly about convict transportation to West Africa, covers the entire period from the de facto end of transportation to North America in 1776 to the first voyages to Australia in 1788. The American Revolution created a host of unanticipated problems for British society: the elimination of the North American colonies as potential repositories for prisoners led to vast overcrowding in British prisons, a crisis that required a host of creative solutions. First, undersecretary and penal reformer William Eden sanctioned the transformation of unseaworthy vessels into prison hulks anchored on the Thames. However, the drafty weather, hard labor, and poor diet turned these hulks into highly visible cesspools of disease. Concern about rebellion in the hulks, as well as the shocking violence and Newgate prison breach of the 1780 Gordon riots, led Eden to return to one of his old proposals. Despite deeply flawed and unsuccessful attempts in the late 1760s to use convicts in Senegambia, he had suggested in 1771 that Africa might be a prime location for convicts. Now, after the revolution, Eden and others decided that the Gold Coast's slave forts would be a good place to send the convicts.

These forts were owned by the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa, but Company agents strongly opposed plans to send convicts to their forts. They believed that staffing their forts with thieves would compromise fort security. Furthermore, agents believed that the presence of unsavory white criminals would weaken the entire slaving enterprise by undermining the reverence Africans supposedly had for morally upright and dignified white Europeans. The government sidestepped these objections by using the convicts as part of army regiments (the 101st and 102nd Independent Companies of Foot) that supported the forts and attempted to prize away similar outposts from competing European nations. Yet because an assignment in West Africa was seen as something of a punishment for regiment commanders, or at least an assignment that would bring little prestige to an ambitious officer, regiment commanders George Katenkamp and Kenneth Mackenzie were not told they were going to West Africa until days before they set sail. In other words, making convict transportation to Africa a reality required convincing disgruntled Company agents and cajoling (and in many cases, deluding) army regiment leaders. The only people enthusiastic about the venture were the colonial administrators who remained in London.

The first convicts, sent under the command of Katenkamp and Mackenzie, left Britain in June 1781. Almost immediately, the venture ran into problems. Katenkamp died in January 1782, before the regiments even reached their intended destination. Although he was replaced as commander by 21-year-old Lieutenant George Cranstoun, his death left a critical governing void in an operation in need of strong leadership. Once in their posts at Cape Coast Castle, the regiments faced numerous problems. Just two days after the convict soldiers arrived at Cape Coast, acting governor Jerome Weuves tasked both units to attack the profitable Dutch slave fort of Elmina, which was only a few miles away. The tactical plans underestimated Dutch fortifications, and the inexperienced troops were no match for Dutch cannons. Cranstoun was injured during the attack, leaving Mackenzie as the sole leader of the two regiments.

Mackenzie soon revealed himself to be a major liability, someone entirely unsuited to his assignment. Company officials and at least one British Army officer questioned Mackenzie's battlefield decisions and accused him of cowardice.

His men mutinied against him frequently. Mackenzie faced mass desertions, and he was often cruel to his men. For example, he punished deserters by confining them to small prisons called "slave holes"—although according to Christopher, these were likely not the same spaces where slaves were held. Even worse, Mackenzie placed some of his men under the command of one of the convicts (and possible relative), William Murray. (Murray was known by a variety of aliases, including William Mackenzie and Kenerth M'Kenzie; Kenneth Mackenzie denied any relation.)

Christopher also suggests that personal greed motivated Mackenzie, no doubt exacerbated by the disappointment in his West Africa posting and the meager financial rewards it offered. For one of Mackenzie's moneymaking schemes, he planned to use slaves to cultivate the same cash crops produced in the British Caribbean. Cultivating sugar or cotton in West Africa potentially eliminated the need to ship slaves to the Americas and also aligned with abolitionist ideas to this effect. Mackenzie's financial desperation thus led him to develop schemes that threatened the foundation of the British presence in Africa. Mackenzie's sorry saga in West Africa ended gruesomely. He accused William Murray of organizing a mutiny--the available evidence does not allow Christopher to confirm or deny Mackenzie's suspicions—and sentenced him to death without any kind of trial. He then had Murray tied to a cannon muzzle and forced a convict to fire the weapon. Mackenzie was convicted of "wilful murder" in 1784 and sentenced to death, although he was pardoned in 1785. The 101st and 102nd companies were disbanded soon after Mackenzie's departure, and the convict-soldiers became indentured servants for the Company.

Colonial administrators searched for new places to send convicts, including Maryland, Honduras Bay, the Mosquito Shore, and southwestern Africa. These all failed to become viable options; indeed, a few of these locations never received convicts. By the mid-1780s, British administrators had not found appropriate places to send convicts, and, in this context, James Matra's 1783 suggestion of New South Wales reemerged as the only possible destination for Britain's convicts. Yet there was no declared end to the African transportation project. As Christopher notes, if Australia had failed, the British would have looked for yet another location, and other African sites may well have been selected.

Christopher has chosen a narrative approach for ***A Merciless Place***. She simultaneously tracks the political and administrative decision making that led to the West African transportation experiment and uses a microhistorical approach to highlight several key figures who experienced this new version of an old punishment firsthand. The book returns frequently to the stories of convict transportees William Murray and Patrick Madan, as well as two overseers of the convict regiments in Africa, Kenneth Mackenzie and Joseph Wall. While this approach makes for an engaging read, Christopher's biographical tilt frequently obscures her argument.

It is not clear, for example, whether Christopher believes that the convict experiment failed because of Mackenzie's poor leadership or because the entire enterprise was flawed from conception. Without question, Mackenzie was ill-suited for the job. He did not have the leadership skills required to command unwilling troops, and he was too worried about his financial fortunes. But the narrative raises other, larger issues that Christopher could accord more analytical weight. For example, before the 101st and 102nd companies set sail for West Africa, the British Army reassigned the best men in these units to other regiments, leaving Katenkamp and Mackenzie with the least qualified men, all before adding the convicts. Furthermore, Christopher suggests, the commanders themselves were seen as lesser officers. Staffing the regiments bound for West Africa with

the worst troops, lesser officers, and convicts seems a recipe for failure, regardless of the quality of Mackenzie's leadership. The book's later focus on Joseph Wall, who inflicted extended and at times lethal floggings on his men, partially corrects for the overemphasis on Mackenzie, but it still represents a foregrounding of biography over analysis. Similarly, Christopher does not do enough with the idea, hinted at throughout, that convict transportation fundamentally destabilized the fragile power structures and economies of the colonies chosen.

Nonetheless, despite the limitations of the narrative approach, Christopher has written an important book that enriches our understanding of the transformations the American Revolution forced upon Britain and its empire. Through the lens of convict transportation, ***A Merciless Place*** reveals how haphazard and desperate solutions to a domestic crisis could in fact expand an empire.