

**Patrick Griffin, ed.** *Experiencing Empire: Power, People, and Revolution in Early America*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017. 280 pp. \$39.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-3988-9.

**Reviewed by** Shira Lurie (University of Virginia)

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**Commissioned by** Joshua J. Jeffers (California State University-Dominguez Hills)

The product of a 2013 conference in honor of T. H. Breen, *Experiencing Empire: Power, People, and Revolution in Early America* offers a scintillating collection of essays that explore the revolutionary era through the framework of empire. With topics ranging from failed vineyards to illicit sex, this innovative scholarship encourages readers to view empire not as an abstraction but as a reality negotiated every time people interact with power.

The collection is divided into three sections. The first, "Empire and Provincials," considers the relationship between those at the core and periphery in the prewar period. Through a diverse array of subjects, this section reminds readers of the gap between empire in theory and practice. Timothy Shannon pays homage to Breen's 1988 essay, "Baubles of Britain: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century," but inverts the narrative, asking instead how the importation of American goods shaped British notions of empire and identity.[1] Shannon observes, "These baubles of America were not the ubiquitous goods of Anglo-American consumer life" (p. 29). Rather, they were unique artifacts, like wampum beads, model canoes, scythes, and even squirrels. These one-of-a-kind commodities encouraged British consumers to view the American colonies as exotic, uncivilized, and culturally inferior, making colonists' cries for equality all the more jarring.

Owen Stanwood challenges the teleology of a slave-powered, plantation-based southern economy by charting the numerous unsuccessful plans to establish vineyards in the southern colonies. Stanwood argues that the persistence of these schemes, despite their failure, suggests an alternate imperial vision: one in which a free "workforce that included European expert laborers" would diversify the economy and create "a better, more virtuous empire" (p. 51). Patricia Cleary examines the lack of enforcement of sexual norms in St. Louis. She contends that fears of miscegenation, as well as pressing challenges to survival, encouraged officials to "tur[n] a blind eye" to the extramarital affairs of European men and women (p. 83). Imperial authorities felt less impetus to police illicit sexual unions when they produced white babies, granting European colonists a degree of control over their community's sexual norms. Ian Saxine explores the negotiation of land policy in Maine between settlers, speculators, imperial officials, and the Wabanaki. When conflict arose between frontiersmen and absentee speculators, colonists relied on Wabanaki-issued land deeds to support their claims. Ironically, legitimacy within the British system pivoted on Native endorsement. "The perennial Anglo-American quest for landed property could, at times," contends Saxine, "be harnessed in the service of Native power" (p. 102).

The second section, “War, Revolution, Empires,” explores the rise and fall of empire and how people projected, interacted with, and undermined state power. Taken together, these three essays argue for the importance of process, not just result, when analyzing imperial projects. James Coltrain uses Fort Stanwix, a British fort between New York City and the Great Lakes, as “a window into the British imperial culture of efficiency and flexibility” (p. 111). Unlike the French who built sophisticated fortifications and sought to cultivate cultural hegemony, the British expended their resources strategically and sparingly, using their simplistic forts “to hold territory and nothing else” (p. 117). While this strategy enabled a military victory in the Seven Years’ War, it did not cultivate a British identity among those living in the area. Christopher Hodson offers a reconceptualization of the French imperial project by examining the effects of its policies, despite their failure. That is, Hodson asks us not to diagnose why the French imperial scheme died but rather to “ask what it did while it lived” (p. 129). For instance, Hodson argues that a failed paper-money policy had important consequences by creating a new status marker and altering the infrastructure, and thereby demographics, of Paris. Michael Guenther tells the story of John Almon, a London printer and political radical, to explore the networks of people, place, and print that animated politics. Almon used his bookshop to cultivate a vast web of connections that yielded political information and influential contacts in London and beyond. Through his correspondence, meetings, and business dealings, Almon reveals the vast network of individuals required to give life to political ideas and movements.

The final section, “The Ghosts of Empire,” examines how Americans made sense of their Revolution. These essays suggest that as one empire gave way to another, Americans reconciled their imperial experience through selective remembering and forgetting. Donald F. Johnson argues that former Loyalists modified their personal narra-

tives to assimilate into the new republic, while those around them forgave previous disloyalty by constructing an American nationalism built on British villainy. Johnson maintains that the postwar period witnessed a “newly imagined war narrative [that] elided the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the often chaotic revolutionary experience” (p. 172). This new narrative depicted British occupation as so violent and inhumane that it excused any collaboration as the product of fear and coercion. David N. Gellman uses John Jay’s public and private dealings with slavery to wrestle with questions of freedom in the postwar moment. As a diplomat in Paris, Jay negotiated a peace settlement that included the return of runaway slaves who had fled to British lines during the war. Gellman sets this story against the backdrop of Jay’s efforts to recapture his own slave, Abbe, who ran away from his Paris home during the peace negotiations. Abbe fell ill in prison and died. Her fate, suggests Gellman, may have encouraged Jay to free a different slave three years later. To Jay, the end of slavery would have to come not through revolution but through the long-term planning and control of white men. Seth Cotlar fast-forwards to the 1820s where he discovers a trend of nostalgia. Cotlar maintains that this nostalgic thinking constituted a method with which an older generation confronted their modernizing present. This technique “enabled such people to locate themselves in time, name the costs of change, and, in some moments, imagine alternative paths into the future” (p. 228).

Patrick Griffin has assembled a collection of essays rich in both variety and substance. Indeed, *Experiencing Empire* demonstrates the unquestionable vibrancy of the “imperial-revolutionary” approach that he lays out in his introduction (p. 6). However, this collection does reflect a larger problem in the discipline of privileging white male expertise. For instance, of the thirteen authors included in the volume, only two are women. As scholars, we can further enrich our field by includ-

ing a more diverse group of voices in our books, panels, and classrooms.

Nevertheless, this collection is a rewarding read for those interested in the lived realities of empire. Readers will undoubtedly see the revolutionary era in a new light.

Note

[1]. T. H. Breen, "Baubles of Britain: The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 119, no. 1 (1988): 73-104.

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