



D. H. Robinson. *The Idea of Europe and the Origins of the American Revolution.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Illustrations, tables. x + 433 pp. \$100.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-886292-5.

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Historiographical debate over the origins of the American Revolution has experienced something of a comeback in recent years. The *New York Times*'s 1619 Project has underlined the defense of slavery as one of the core motivations for plantation owners' desires to break from the mother country. Worldwide Black Lives Matter protests that followed George Floyd's murder gave this debate an added sense of urgency. Yet not all historians are convinced by the project's claims: Sean Wilentz, Victoria Bynum, James McPherson, and others have proposed that the focus on slavery has been overdone. No doubt there will be more contributions to the origins debate as the 250th anniversary of independence looms closer.

The Idea of Europe and the Origins of the American Revolution is one such contribution. Unlike the 1619 Project, however, its author, D. H. Robinson, spends little time on the role of slavery and slaveholders. Instead, this highly impressive work offers a genuinely new paradigm through which to view the years leading up to 1776. Americans made the fateful decision to secede not for the economic reasons offered over a century ago by Charles Beard and the Progressive historians; they were not the "radicals" drawn by Gordon S.

Wood; and their motivations cannot be ascribed solely to civic republican ideals of virtue and liberty favored by the "canonical intellectual histories" of Bernard Bailyn and J. G. A. Pocock (p. 15). Instead, Americans had seen themselves for a long time before the Declaration of Independence as intimately connected to European geopolitics, took a deep interest in the balance of power across the ocean, and were disappointed by the metropolitan Tory government's failure to shoulder its responsibilities in defending continental liberties against the overweening power of France and Spain.

Robinson is at pains to stress that the inner workings of historical actors' minds can never with certainty be understood: "we cannot know what [they] were really up to, even if they themselves knew, because no source can provide that knowledge" (p. 125). Yet he provides so much evidence for his reframing that such an admission does his vast research a disservice. To make the case for a Whiggish, "continentalist" approach to grand strategy on the part of the colonists, the author goes right back to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century debates on England's role on the European continent. He underlines the import-

ance of the English classical republican James Harrington's *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656) in setting the tone of this discourse, by making possible the idea of a metropolis that traded with its colonies through a relationship characterized by balanced interests and mutual support.

Thus, over one hundred years later, revolutionary pamphleteer John Trenchard wrote that "trade and naval power" were "the offspring of civil liberty only, and cannot subsist without it." Robinson demonstrates the salience of these ideas right up to the Revolutionary War and beyond, suggesting that the American conversion to independence happened very late indeed, when Patriots convinced themselves that the empire could no longer defend their interests in the restrained way that they had so long admired. Even in August 1775, after the outbreak of fighting, Thomas Jefferson preferred to live "in dependence on Great Britain, properly limited, than on any nation upon Earth" (p. 364). Earlier that year, John Adams had admitted that "an absolute independence on Parliament, in all internal concerns and cases of taxation, is very compatible with an absolute dependence on it, in all cases of external commerce" (p. 360).

Robinson's *tour d'horizon* takes in every foreign policy question posed in the Atlantic World during the eighteenth century. To give just a couple of examples, it spends an impressive amount of time on the effect on metropolitan and colonial opinions of Sweden's 1772 reversal to absolutism and of the British government's failure to support the Republic of Corsica against what colonists viewed as French attempts to impose Catholic "universal monarchy" not only on that Mediterranean island but throughout the French sphere of influence—including in America. It was only once the metropolitan authorities appeared unwilling to defend colonists' rights to manage their own "internal concerns" that British Americans were moved to compare themselves with the

disappointed Corsicans and to question their own future in the empire (p. 330).

Robinson's eclecticism of analysis is more than matched by the variety of sources referenced, extending to twenty-five pages of correspondence, pamphlets, contemporary books, plays, paintings, and statues. Unusually there is no list of secondary works—they are referenced only in footnotes—but if there had been, it might have added another one hundred pages to an already dense publication. The erudition is masked by a lightness of touch in the author's writing style. At times, however, he can be perhaps a little too knowing, with scant explanation of terms, such as the "blue-water tradition" and "republican monarchy."

At others, Robinson is rather dismissive of previous historians' theses, claiming for his own work a definitive, unimpeachable analysis of prerevolutionary debates: his aim, he explains, is nothing less than to "move away from the categories of race, class, sect, and gender which continue to dominate early American social and political historiography, and to replace them with a compelling hermeneutics of language" (p. 99). Interpretations of colonial history focusing on "relations between classes and genders ... racism and material cultures," the author suggests, "are so thoroughly at odds with the discursive evidence that they might as well be a species of philosophic history" (p. 124). Thus, "as a body of people, the British-American public ... defies class analysis"; although "wealth was a way of gaining admission to the colonial public sphere ... the culture of the colonial middle class was not defined by capitalism" (p. 115). One is left wondering about the extent to which this argument holds for British Americans everywhere—for example, in the slave economies of the South, where ownership of property in humans was a key determinant of social status.

Furthermore, because the discourse under investigation here was led primarily by white, male,

anglophone professionals, Robinson spends minimal time on the thought of other inhabitants of the thirteen colonies. We hear next to nothing from Native Americans, the enslaved, Canadians, inhabitants of the Caribbean, or French or Spanish colonists. The reader is left unable to judge how well his narrative stacks up against either the divergent views of modern scholars or those of contemporary protagonists.

Yet if Robinson had attempted to deal with any more currents of thought with the rigor with which he has approached *The Idea of Europe and the Origins of the American Revolution*, he would have needed to fill many more volumes. For the sheer ambition of this work's archival research it should feature regularly on undergraduate and postgraduate eighteenth-century North American history book lists. Established academics, independent scholars, and all those interested in the prerevolutionary debates should also read this book. It offers a genuinely fresh perspective, and a convincing one at that.

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