



E. A. Reitan. *Politics, Finance, and the People: Economical Reform in England in the Age of the American Revolution, 1770-92.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. viii + 278 pp. \$74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-52620-4.



Reviewed by Roger Hainsworth

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Following the Money

The wits of Versailles rejoiced in 1783. The much-hated English had lost their American colonies, and such a humiliation, considering the country's politically volatile past, must surely be followed by an internal revolution. Ironically, while there would be no revolution in England, there was one in France. A further irony: that revolution's violent course would postpone even peaceful political change in England for more than a generation. Another cause for rejoicing at Versailles was the belief that the vast costs of the war would enfeeble England for decades. (Prophets of doom were not confined to Versailles. In Vienna the emperor Joseph II complacently relegated Great Britain to the ranks of a second-rate power, a Sweden perhaps. Fortunately for Joseph and his empire, this analysis proved unsound.)[1] In fact it was the French government that the burden of war enfeebled, and this brought a French revolution in 1789. In contrast, within a decade not only was the British government financially capable of waging war on France; it was able to finance the martial efforts of other members of anti-French coalitions.

Just how Britain recovered from the drain on her resources imposed by the War of Independence, together with war with France, Spain, and the Netherlands, is a story with many strands. One, of course, relates to the fact that while Britain lost the burdensome costs of her North American empire (Canada excepted), she retained the profits. The United States remained an ever-expanding market for her manufactured goods. It would be generations before the United States ceased to be a major part of Britain's "invisible" empire: the empire of commerce. Wealth through commerce expanded between 1783 and 1793 and Britain recovered remarkably quickly.

Professor Reitan has here given us an absorbing analysis of another important strand in the story of Britain's recovery: financial reform through parliamentary action. Increasing mercantile wealth within Britain would not have sufficed to carry through what deserves to be considered as the true "first world war," a war that was two decades long (1793-1815), if the British government had not been able to mobilize that wealth effectively as a

sinew of war. To do this the organization and practices of the treasury as well the taxation system needed to be drastically improved; it was too patent that Britain possessed a customs organization and practices that might have occasioned head-shaking among the inhabitants of Bedlam. Finally the national debt, a nightmare for all government ministers and the monarch they served, had to be somehow brought under control and set on a course of reduction. This would have been a formidable program at any time, but time was limited. Although the legislators and public servants involved could not know it, they had only a dozen or so years before the storm smote them. Moreover, as Professor Reitan demonstrates very effectively, the story of financial reform was complex because it was entangled with other kinds of reform, of which one was at least closely related—the king’s civil list—and another that was not: political reform, including the suffrage and borough representation.

Reitan does not ignore these other clamors for reform, but rather skillfully disentangles them before getting to grips with the financial reforms that are his target. He does this in only two hundred or so pages of text, but his analysis is cogent and his mastery of the sources enviable. British historians have written a wealth of books and articles about this period during the past fifty years but they appear to take British recovery for granted or perhaps the expectable result of the expansion of British commerce, and either they concentrate on the war itself, or on the politics of the interwar period and after, or on political reforms that, as we have seen, did not happen. However, they needed to “follow the money.” Reitan has done this assiduously and future historians will be in his debt.

The foundation of his book is a magnificent archive that has not been mined systematically before: the reports of the Commissioners of the Public Accounts. The commissioners were seven men independent of Parliament and unsalaried, set up as the result of Lord North’s initiative in 1780. They had initially four objectives: to inform Parliament and public of the real state of the country’s accounts; report balances in hands of public accountants; identify defects in the management of public fi-

nances; and propose ways of preventing the accumulation of balances in collectors’ hands in the future. They were to sit for a year. In fact they long outlived North’s government and while earning respect from all parliamentary factions, became what Reitan calls “the point men of economical reform (p. 65).” North’s great contribution was to choose men experienced in business and law, rather than parliamentarians. Chief among them was Thomas Anguish, accountant-general of the Court of Chancery, who wrote all the reports save one. However all involved seem to have been assiduous, indefatigable, and efficient, uninfluenced by party or personal profit, and when individuals left for other duties (Piggott was to become an attorney general) they were replaced by men of equal caliber. As report succeeded report, their scrutiny embraced one problem area after another, from the first report on receivers of the land tax of 1780 to the fifteenth of 1787 relating to the customs (out ports and fees). Along the way they relentlessly delved in to the financial practices of the navy, the army, the treasury, the customs and excise, and the apparently overwhelming problem of the national debt. Report after report laid bare the defects of the collection and management and expenditure of Britain’s revenues and made cogent recommendations for their reform. Reitan points out that regardless of factional strife in the legislature, no bill drawn up on the recommendations of the Commissioners for the Public Accounts ever failed to pass into law (p. 67).

Professor Reitan’s description of their labors makes for remarkable reading, and his analysis of their impact is absorbing. This book is well furnished with all appropriate scholarly apparatus, including a most useful bibliography, and the author places it firmly in the context of other relevant historical writing from the late seventeenth century to the Victorian era. It deserves to be in the library of every student of the period.

Note

[1]. H. M. Scott, *British Foreign Policy in the Age of the American Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1990), 389; also cited in Wilfrid Prest, *Albion Ascendant: English History, 1660-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 317.

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