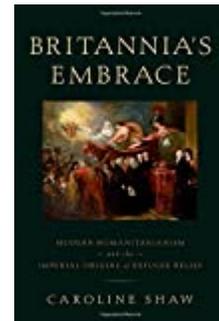


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Caroline Shaw. *Britannia's Embrace: Modern Humanitarianism and the Imperial Origins of Refugee Relief.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 328 pp. \$74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-020098-5.



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“We cannot entertain ... any demand for the expulsion of refugees.... You must be aware that no government which complied with such demands could exist a month in England” (p. 1), the foreign secretary Lord Malmesbury wrote to the Austrian ambassador in 1852. So begins Caroline Shaw’s work, *Britannia’s Embrace*, an insightful new work examining the development and evolution of British refugee humanitarianism from the eighteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century. Shaw has the mixed fortune of having produced a work engaging with contemporary issues and controversies of enormous significance. Indeed, the politics of the last few years on both sides of the Atlantic have shown that the relevance of *Britannia’s Embrace* has only grown since the book’s publication, and will likely continue to grow for some time.

The conservative Malmesbury’s insistence that restricting the flow of refugees would amount to political suicide strikingly illustrates the existence of a powerful impulse in Victorian British society that has largely been overlooked in the historiography. Past accounts of British refugee relief, Shaw observes, tend to emphasize public ambivalence and distaste for foreign refugees arriving on Britain’s shores, treating Britain’s open-door policy as a byproduct of an adherence to liberal precepts

instead of a deliberate invitation to those seeking refuge. Rather, Shaw argues that Britain’s engagement in refugee relief was driven by a widespread popular enthusiasm for humanitarianism. Exposed by the press and activist efforts to the harrowing stories of oppressed and persecuted peoples abroad, Britons were invited to demonstrate the nation’s moral superiority and liberal benevolence by providing sanctuary. Refugee humanitarianism emerged as a fundamental characteristic of Victorian society, Shaw argues, establishing refugee relief as part of “their national, and then imperial *raison d’être*” (p. 3).

Shaw begins her account of this refugee humanitarianism with England’s sheltering of French Protestants fleeing the persecution of King Louis XIV. The provision of shelter and royal patronage was justified on religious and pragmatic grounds. The Huguenots were aided in the name of global Protestantism’s battle with the Catholic menace, and the presence of skilled refugee laborers would in turn enrich the country. The refugee category further expanded in the wake of the French Revolution, as Catholic priests and French royalists fled the political violence in their homeland. No longer justified along religious grounds and the material gains increasingly uncertain, British policy instead came to emphasize the refugee’s victimhood, laying the foundation for

a humanitarian ideology that was universal in scope.

From there, Shaw traces the evolution of refugee relief as it became ever more enmeshed with Victorian British politics and society. Refugee activists found ready allies in the antislavery movement, celebrating the ordeals of fugitive American slaves. Continental revolutionary figures such as Guiseppe Mazzini and Lajos Kossuth enjoyed celebrity status in the press and in tours across the country. In time, Britons became well versed in the stories of the quintessential refugee, whose courage and fortitude in the face of the forces of tyranny confirmed both that refugees were deserving of relief and the righteousness of granting aid. Shaw notes that offering safety to refugees well complemented and demonstrated Britain's midcentury "national commitment to an expansionist liberal ethos" (p. 70). Unable or unwilling to accept the costs of directly intervening in the affairs of foreign powers, Britons accepted the policy of offering refuge as a low-cost alternative.

Refugee relief cost came cheaply to the British in large part because of their empire. Indeed, Shaw contends that "without the ability to offer long-term refuge elsewhere, the British would not have come to advocate refuge as a universal humanitarian norm" (p. 100). But

the empire also posed Britain a number of humanitarian challenges, confronting British moral ideals with complex issues that could not be so easily or cleanly solved. As the century progressed, British resources came under mounting strain, forcing the difficult and delicate task of sorting between truly "deserving" refugees and regular immigrants. At the same time, the public face of the refugee was changing too, politically and racially, as Britons increasingly worried about the growing presence of eastern European anarchists and Jews. Though increasingly strained, the commitment to a universalist refugee policy was maintained, enshrined into law in 1905. But, Shaw concludes, the 1905 law bureaucratized relief, shifting the refugee out of the public eye and depriving relief of its chief strength, the moral force generated by public mobilization.

Caroline Shaw has produced an excellent, well-written history of nineteenth-century British refugee humanitarianism. Effectively and succinctly argued, its chief strength lies in the clarity with which it demonstrates the tensions between liberal British ideals and the complex realities of humanitarian crisis. *Britannia's Embrace* is both highly relevant to the issues of today's refugee crisis and a welcome contribution to the history of empire and humanitarianism.

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