



**Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy.** *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000. xviii + 357 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-1732-2.

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## **Pursuits of Interest : A West Indian Approach to the Movement for American Independence**

Pursuits of Interest: A West Indian Approach to the Movement for American Independence

Professor Andrew O'Shaughnessy's latest book examines the political, economic, social, geographic, and military factors that prompted the British West Indian colonies to remain loyal to the crown during the movement for American independence. Since previous Caribbean historians responded to Eric Williams' seminal economic analysis, *Capitalism and Slavery*, by concentrating their studies on the period after 1783, and most Americanists virtually ignored West Indian affairs in their works, no historian had yet probed how the island colonies' politics influenced the continental rebellion. This is surprising, since the British West Indies, according to O'Shaughnessy, "played a crucial role in the origins and the development of American Revolution" (p. xi). The thesis of his book is that white Britons in the Caribbean failed to support colonial independence because of their close cultural and social affinity with the metropole, their reliance on military and naval forces to defend against slave revolts, and their dependence on British sugar markets and capital finance. In addition, O'Shaughnessy also cites three "short-term reasons" why the West Indies remained loyal, including their differing responses to parliamentary legislation, the indifference of white society to revolution before 1774, and the role their powerful lobby had in isolating North American political agitators in London (p. xv). Last, he denies that there was a "latent desire for rebellion among the white colonists of the British West Indies" or that a unified op-

position to the crown ever existed during the war, and suggests, contrary to the works of such historians as Jack Greene, that "fundamental differences" existed between the mainland and island colonies (p. xvi).

*An Empire Divided* is organized into nine chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter explores the culture of white colonists in the British Caribbean, arguing that most considered themselves to be "sojourners" rather than permanent residents of the islands, and that the strength of this identification with the metropole contributed to their failure to support colonial independence because it precluded the "development of a nationalistic creole consciousness" (p. 4). Paralleling the methodology of Peter Wood, O'Shaughnessy entitles the second section "Black Majorities," and shows that, with the exception of South Carolina, the West Indies differed from the continental American provinces in their willingness to jettison some of their civil liberties to ensure the continued presence of the military and naval forces necessary to quiet their restive populations of maroons and slaves. The third chapter examines the widespread reliance in the island colonies on sugar monoculture and shows how fierce competition from the French producers who dominated sales in continental Europe forced British planters to rely on their monopoly of the domestic market to turn a profit. Despite the importance of trade throughout the northwestern Atlantic, the willingness of smugglers to exploit the cheaper price of French sugar for sale to northern provincial merchants also became a continuing source of "friction" between the British West

Indies and the mainland provinces and explains the divergent reactions of these colonists to the Molasses Act and the Sugar Act (p. 58).

O'Shaughnessy asserts in the fourth chapter that white colonists in the British Caribbean differed from continental American whigs by remaining "aloof from the growing imperial crisis" from the repeal of the Stamp Act to late 1774 (p. 81). Instead, rebellious slaves were "the real Sons of Liberty during the 1760s and 1770s," but the unease they created among elites ironically drew island planters closer to Britain (p. 108). He adapts the name of Wallace Notestein's classic political history for his section entitled, "Winning the Initiative." Here O'Shaughnessy maintains that the rise of West Indian legislatures in the antebellum period, and their subsequent refusal to break with Parliament, "demonstrates the inadequacy of explaining the American Revolution in terms of the rise of colonial assemblies" (p. 111).

Chapter six investigates the crisis that evolved into an "imperial civil war," showing that the "belated intercession" of the island colonies' political interests resulted not from republican scruples over imperial policies, but from a realization that the nonimportation and nonexportation resolutions passed by the Continental Congress in late 1774 threatened famine and slave rebellion in the Caribbean (p. 135). The effects of continental war created "groans" from West Indian elites, and while their response was ambivalent, the necessity of arming slaves amid the growing threat of invasion threatened the prevailing social order and created tensions that remained after 1783. Nevertheless, the need to safeguard Britain's valuable West Indian colonies siphoned resources away from the main campaign against the American patriot armies and contributed to the ultimate military defeat of the loyalist forces. In the ninth chapter, O'Shaughnessy maintains that "the other road to Yorktown" was through St. Eustatius. When Admiral George Rodney's fleet sacked the wealthy, if troublesome, Dutch island, it allowed Admiral Francois De Grasse's French ships to slip out of the Caribbean and arrive unmolested to blockade General Charles Cornwallis' army at Yorktown. Thus, Rodney's strategic blunder in the Dutch West Indies "led directly to the British defeat at Yorktown and the loss of North America" (p. 214). The "Revolutionary Legacy" of American independence was dramatically different from the social and political interests that bound the island

colonies to the empire before the war. The conflict weakened the institution of slavery in the British Caribbean, but "the causes were political, not economic," and resulted from "West Indian demands for a full resumption of trade with the United States" which "clashed with the traditional mercantilist principles of colonial policy" (pp. 238-239). Moreover, the growing free population of blacks challenged the prevailing social system and assumed an increasingly important role in local economic affairs. These self-confident assertions of autonomy by islanders of African descent paved the way for the abolitionist movements in both the United States and Britain while the contradictory impulses of West Indian elites for self-rule within the empire remained unresolved.

O'Shaughnessy's book is well organized, clearly written, and includes a useful select bibliography. Its assertion that West Indian developments, while exceptional, merit equal attention to events on the mainland represents a challenging addition to the historiography of the American Revolution and its approach should serve as model for scholars anxious to view the movement for colonial independence from an Atlantic perspective. Political events occupy center stage, but geographic, economic, military, and social matters all receive balanced treatment. One of the most impressive features of O'Shaughnessy's scholarship is his research, properly grounded in a disparate, and extended, assortment of archives, that allows his analysis to shift smoothly from discussion and comparison of affairs in Britain, America, and the West Indies. He probably exaggerates the magnitude of Rodney's blunder at St. Eustatius in order to highlight the importance of the war in the Caribbean. Blame for the naval debacle should also be assigned to the British ministry, for neglecting to send significant reinforcements to North America after allowing De Grasse to sortie out of European waters unopposed, and Admiral Thomas Graves, whose outnumbered squadron failed to break through the French fleet to relieve Cornwallis.[1] These minor criticisms, however, should not discourage professors from placing O'Shaughnessy's wonderful book on graduate students' reading lists for years to come.

#### Notes

[1]. Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (New York and Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1982), 560-561, 564.

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