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Patrick Griffin, *The Age of Atlantic Revolution: The Fall and Rise of a Connected World*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023. viii + 376 pp. Notes, references, 27 b&w illustrations, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9783000206333.

Review by Micah Alpaugh, University of Central Missouri.

Twenty-one years after David Armitage famously declared “We are all Atlanticists now,” writing a cohesive history of the revolutionary upsurge around the Atlantic basin across the last decades of the eighteenth century and beyond remains a very challenging task.[1] Keepers of the rich historiographies of the American and French Revolutions defend their national interpretations proudly, and integrating broader European uprisings, the Haitian Revolution, and Latin American independence movements presents manifold challenges. While Thomas Paine boldly spoke of an “age of revolutions, in which everything may be looked for,” contemporary historians must navigate treacherous waters in hopes of re-capturing the era’s cosmopolitan zeitgeist (p. 5).

Accomplished U.S. Historian Patrick Griffin takes up the challenge with an integrated survey of the era. Griffin eschews the mostly comparative approach of scholars from R.R. Palmer to Wim Kooster to present instead an integrated account moving from the intensification of Atlantic commerce and warfare across the earlier eighteenth century through the eras of the American and French Revolutions to the wars that spread liberation struggles to Latin America.[2] His perspective much more closely follows Janet Polasky’s conceptualization of *Revolutions Without Borders*, attempting an “entangled’ history highlighting how revolutionaries saw “things in places far removed as intrinsically connected” (pp. 10-11).[3]

Griffin highlights how the Seven Years War and the financial retrenchments that followed provided a common departure for the revolutionary upheavals. A conflict that had been a “War for the Atlantic World” (p. 43) raised the costs of Empire and ultimately forced each government to seek new sources of revenue and squelch the rampant smuggling that lessened its customs income. Author of a recent study of the Townshend Act, Griffin ably describes how revolution ultimately took hold as a reaction against reforms implemented from above.[4]

The Age of Atlantic Revolution struggles, however, to contextualize the place of the American Revolution vis-à-vis later upheavals. Griffin only briefly mentions Britain’s seventeenth-century revolutions or Corsica’s innovative push for independence and constitutional democracy (the Mediterranean island is technically beyond the Atlantic littoral, but not far), then quickly declares the American protagonists “revolutionaries” (p. 83) though such language would not be commonly used until the French adopted the term in 1789. The American Revolution, he claims,

provided a “template” (p. 99) for the French. Indeed, “the whole Atlantic had one narrative of revolution” showing it could “end well” (p. 104). While many French revolutionaries did draw on the American example, they more commonly utilized British precedents and still more distant Roman examples to find analogies for their experience. Indeed, Griffin does not note that it took the French Revolution for America’s war of independence to be seen retrospectively as a revolution in the modern sense, rather than a defense of the colonists’ traditional British rights. For all the real connections and shared inspirations between the two revolutions, flattening the distinctions between them creates interpretative problems.

Griffin’s interpretation of the French Revolution, based overwhelmingly on English-language secondary sources, falls victim to many excesses of Anglo-American historiography. He makes little attempt to delve into the complex chronology and many paradoxes of the coming of the Terror, instead claiming violence somehow “acted as a solvent” (p. 121) to re-order revolutionary politics. He claims state-collapse unleashed “the furies” (p. 124) in an uncontrollable fashion, taking France into a “sovereign never-never land” (p. 126), arguments he would not dare make about America during its war of independence, despite its similar per-capita body count.[5] Claims that the Revolution of 1792 lacked “exhilaration” (p. 122) would not be made after diving into the primary-source material of the era.

The book’s treatment of slavery and the rise of abolitionism is also startling. He excuses America retaining the institution for its being “the only means to remain competitive in the world market” (p. 187), this even as reformers and revolutionaries drew up myriad plans for limiting slavery’s abuses or abolishing the institution, and the British Empire soon shifted towards free labor. To present slavery as inevitable serves in some measure to excuse it since America’s empire of liberty could have taken on other forms (if less addicted to consumer capitalism and human exploitation) in the American South.

Latin America remains poorly integrated into this revolutionary era. Griffin notes how elites remained loyal to the crown during the eighteenth-century waves of unrest elsewhere, while only the Napoleonic invasions of the Iberian Peninsula set Latin America on a path towards sovereignty. Latin American scholars have, however, often preferred to interpret the wars and settlements of the 1810s-20s as independence movements rather than revolutions. While a tempting addition for globalizing the age of revolutions, the diversity of Iberian actors’ motivations (many of whom sought to remain the “True Spaniards”) should give pause to those eager to conflate the 1820s with the 1760s-90s.[6]

The Age of Atlantic Revolution, though seemingly seeking a survey audience, would be difficult to assign in the classroom. While it uses lots of colloquial language, it pre-supposes the reader has an extensive background in each of the many movements under discussion, at most providing brief thumbnail sketches of central events. Despite a lengthy concluding chapter on historical memory and an epilogue, there is little attempt to bring the many threads of the study together. A roving conceptual overview, Griffin’s book displays the ambivalences of a still-underdeveloped Atlantic field that struggles to craft a cohesive master narrative.

NOTES

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- [1] David Armitage, "Three Concepts of Atlantic History," in David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 11.
- [2] R.R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959); Wim Kooster, *Revolutions in the Atlantic World: A Comparative History*, 2nd edition (New York: NYU Press, 2018).
- [3] Janet Polasky, *Revolutions Without Borders: The Call to Liberty in the Atlantic World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).
- [4] Patrick Griffin, *The Townshend Moment: The Making of Empire and Revolution in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).
- [5] Holger Hock, *Scars of Independence: America's Violent Birth* (New York: Crown, 2017).
- [6] See Jaime E. Rodriguez, *The Independence of Spanish America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and "*We Are Now the True Spaniards*": *Sovereignty, Revolution, Independence, and the Emergence of the Federal Republic of Mexico, 1808-1824* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

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