

## Review Essay

Liam Riordan, *Many Identities, One Nation. The Revolution and Its Legacy in the Mid-Atlantic* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. A volume in the Early American Studies series. 392 pages, 6 1/8 x 9 1/4 , 27 illus. Cloth ISBN 978-0-8122-4001-6

Writing any history of the Revolutionary War and its effects on national identity requires entering into a conversation layered some of the most powerful and enduring narratives and interpretative frameworks of the historical profession.<sup>1</sup> It also means acknowledging recent Native American histories and challenges from Atlantic World and African Diaspora studies that assert alternatives to the “exceptional” understanding of our national origins.<sup>2</sup> Liam Riordan acknowledges these challenges and his relationship to a third category of analysis: the potentially parochial context of community studies that often conflate local history and national attributes. Yet, with these predominate narratives in mind, he argues that everyday life in three towns along the Delaware River from 1770-1830 reveals that the nation was composed of local struggles over power that held religion, popular sovereignty, ethnicity, and gender in uneasy tension. Overshadowing such local contests, however were efforts of trans-regional political and religious organizations through which “respectable, white, Protestantism came to present itself as normal—and with special claims to being American—by the 1820s (10). Riordan draws illustrative sources from personal correspondence, local newspapers, church bulletins, and census information. He uses several local personalities as examples of how individuals navigated local political and religious environments and he clearly demonstrates the religious culture in these towns. Choosing 1770-1830 allows Riordan a nuanced analysis of how colonial parochialism managed the urgency required by the Revolution as well as the nation building and millennial movements that followed.

Other than the banks of the Delaware River, the towns share little in common. New Castle, Delaware was a port town with a significant population of sailors, workers, and freed blacks from the lowest order of colonial society. The port at Burlington, New Jersey linked overland traffic between New York and Philadelphia and its trade helped Burlington’s residents become the wealthiest in the Mid Atlantic region. Above the falls at Trenton, Easton Pennsylvania was the youngest settlement and populated largely by Scots-Irish and German immigrants. While Riordan asserts that all three towns were built on sites previously used by Native Americans, Easton’s existence was the only one still contested in the decades before the Revolution. Thus, from New Castle to Easton, we engage with very different

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *Faces of Revolution: Personalities and Themes in the Struggle for American Independence* (New York: Knopf, 1990); John Butler, *Becoming America: The Revolution Before 1776* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001); Jack P. Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity from 1492-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in America* (New York: Norton, 1988) Gary Nash, *The unknown American Revolution : the unruly birth of democracy and the struggle to create America*, (New York: Viking, 2005); Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1991)

<sup>2</sup> Many of these are discussed in the review by Joyce Chaplin, “Expansion and Exceptionalism in Early American History,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 89., no. 4, (Mar, 2003), 1431-1455; see also Michael McGerr, “the Price of the ‘New transnational History,’” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 4 (Oct, 1991), 1056-1067.

populations of settlers with distinct community structures adapting to very different neighbors.

In the late colonial era and through the Revolution, Riordan demonstrates that each community had outsiders who faced social and political marginalization because of their ethnic or religious identification. Despite a large free black population in New Castle and a few who achieved wealth, respectability, and enfranchisement after the war, skin color trumped individual achievement as African Americans were summarily disenfranchised by the 1830s. Burlington's affluent Quakers were reviled as pacifists and loyal patrons of the British Crown. Despite the existence of less affluent or patriotic Quakers, as a group they were labeled 'patriot pariahs' and effectively pushed out of politics during and after the war (51). The German population in Easton suffered "long-standing Anglo-American prejudice against Pennsylvania Germans," and the Philadelphia ruling elite's determination to marginalize dissent in its western provinces (79). In each case, the war catalyzed porous borders of colonial group identity and affected how they engaged with the new nation.

In the transitional decades after the war, Riordan effectively argues that religion, unmoored from its public ties to politics, became a social tool to organize and delineate groups in and around these towns. African Americans in New Castle eschewed white patronage from Methodists and started the independent African American Methodist Church and the Union Church of Africans. Germans in Easton maintained ethnic solidarity after the war. Riordan uses the examples of folk art production in Easton to demonstrate how old-world ethno-religious ties complimented new national commitments in art depicting both citizenship and baptisms in German-style images. While Quakers never regained their pre-war numbers of solidarity, a significant number of Quaker women asserted their spiritual authority as "Public Friends" after the war. They took leadership roles within the church and the travel, autonomy, and communion with other Quaker women facilitated by these positions. In each town, these individuals used the early years after the Revolution to define their religious worship in very specific ways that affirmed autonomy in local communities.

Played against these local manifestations, Riordan demonstrates how a post-war millenarianism propelled much of the trans-regional religious re-organization of the period. While he touches on them only briefly, Riordan discusses the itinerant and revivalist preachers like Francis Asbury who trekked through New Castle and Burlington bringing multi-day revivals that competed with and sometimes lost out to other local amusements and diversions. In contrast to these spectacular events, Presbyterians and (Anglicans turned) Episcopalians sought to unite individuals largely through organizations that distributed bibles, promoted literacy, and sought to downplay denominational differences. The bible distribution efforts, initiated by the Bible Society of Philadelphia, networked through urban nodes to local societies and often women's auxiliaries. Many local elites found new public significance through the bible distribution movement. Women, particularly emerging middle-class women, also found public roles volunteering for societies. The millenarian call fueled conversion efforts and facilitated efforts to bring the New Republic under the aegis of an "over-arching American Christianity that would support the new national social order (133)." It is largely through the members of these distribution networks that the idea of "respectable" Anglo-Protestantism came to present itself as the norm for American society.

Riordan highlights how political parties sought to subordinate local interests in national organizations. These efforts often brought as much dissent as unity in the party building and organizing efforts through the 1820s. From Jefferson to Jackson, he traces how local parties rallied along ethnic and religious lines to choose local and state candidates and

assert party preferences in local newspapers and around local issues. He also demonstrates how these river towns were in large part politically anomalous in their states. Despite these independent tendencies, Riordan argues that communities followed several national issues and understood their implications on national identity. For example, despite negligible black populations in Burlington and Easton, the towns held meetings over the Missouri Controversy where Republicans defied the national party and decried the possible consequences of allowing slavery to extend into the West.

In the introduction he asserts that the middle colonies have been underrepresented in our larger historical narrative of revolution and nation building, but Riordan's study overlaps with eminent histories of the region, particularly studies of Pennsylvania's political struggles and the wartime challenges to Quaker pacifism.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we learn little new when Burlington's Quakers were pushed from public prominence during the war. Likewise, the ethnic solidarity of the German and Scots-Irish in Western Pennsylvania and the region's political struggles are well documented and summarize Easton's situation. Studies have long established how the colonial Pennsylvania hinterlands fought for enfranchisement and representation.<sup>4</sup> These studies become a challenge to Riordan's political analysis of all three towns when he neglects to mention the debates over the Bill of Rights: as significant a political battle as the Constitutional conventions and as incendiary as the local rebellions sparked by the federal proposals in the 1790s. Considering his general thesis that these towns often diverged from their state's political culture, the exclusion of such a significant political debate seems a glaring omission in the analysis of local political culture.

Lingering in the margins of analysis are Native Americans and the larger context of the Atlantic World. Initially, Riordan presents Easton's constant communication with neighboring Delewares and describes an intriguing environment where the leadership of the Iroquois confederacy sought control over its allies near Easton just as colonial Pennsylvania's government sought to manage its western residents. He describes the nebulous position of "cultural brokers," like Conrad Weiser and "Christian Indians" who negotiated between Native and colonial worlds without achieving acceptance in either. Yet, Riordan rarely mentions Native concerns after asserting that the Revolution sanctioned armed assault on Native Americans near Easton. Though he mentions that the Bible Society of Philadelphia published in Native American languages, he neither reveals the fate of Christian Indians after the Revolution nor their location in the post-war nation building.

Likewise, trans-Atlantic and Atlantic World communication are mentioned throughout the book, but the relevance of this contact remains unrealized. He uses the term cosmopolitan to describe elites incorporating national identity in their approach to managing "localist" or regional distinctiveness (83). Yet, these terms are no longer inclusive of the ongoing discourse that average North Americans maintained with the larger world. Riordan refers to the trans-Atlantic relationships that supposed 'localists' maintained during and after the Revolution. Residents in distant Easton not only made references to their own German histories, but also understood the implications of international bible distribution efforts on millennial conversion. New Castle African American use of African identities alludes to

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<sup>3</sup> Steven Rosswurm, *Arms, Country and Class: The Philadelphia Militia and 'Lower Sort' During the American Revolution, 1775-1783* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> John B. Franz and William Pencack eds., *Beyond Philadelphia: The American Revolution in the Pennsylvania Hinterland* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998); Owen S. Ireland, *Religion, Ethnicity, and Politics: Ratifying the Constitution in Pennsylvania*, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995)

larger African Diaspora communication. He also alludes to a more fluid racial reality when Irish indentured servants and African slaves were synonymously satirized in the colonial era. After the war, despite its racially descriptive moniker, Riordan demonstrates that the African Methodist services were attended by lower-order whites—often sailors—who engaged with the emotionally charged services along with fellow black Christians. This particular association between white and black is left largely unexplored in the narrative. Even Native American alliances with the British during the Revolution indicate an understanding and manipulation of International diplomacy to affect local reality. These references indicate that local versus national objectives were significantly influenced by an international context that may further enrich our understanding of how Anglo-Protestantism became the predominant national idiom in the New Republic.

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