

Americomania and the French Revolution Debate in Britain, 1789-1802, by Wil Verhoeven, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, 387pp., £65.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-107-04019-9

Review

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Attention to the Anglo-American relationship in the wake of American independence has risen markedly in recent years, resulting in the publication of books such as those by Peter Marshall (2012), Joseph Eaton (2012), Ella Dzelainis and Ruth Livesey (2013), and Frank Prochaska (2012). The bicentenary of the War of 1812 extended this trend, producing not only analyses of that conflict from the standpoints of individual nations, but also those which discussed it from more than one national perspective, by scholars such as Troy Bickham (2012) and J.C.A. Stagg (2012). Wil Verhoeven's *Americomania and the French Revolution Debate in Britain, 1789-1802* is a vibrant and strikingly original contribution to the discussion about the post-revolutionary, transatlantic nexus, reinforcing the growing consensus that British interest in the United States did not wane in the post-colonial period. While, as Marshall (2012) showed, in the decade after the securing of American independence British government ministers and indeed opposition politicians in Parliament largely 'lost interest in America' (p. 312), he and others also demonstrated that enduring transatlantic ties meant that wider British public opinion continued to pay substantial attention to the new republic.

In *Americomania*, Verhoeven argues that the United States became a central trope and issue in the British debate on the French Revolution. In particular, he demonstrates that it featured in this dispute, both as an ideal to be emulated or rejected, and as an actual location for potential emigrants to embrace or discard. "America" was now at once real and the stuff utopian dreams are made of; a place

on the map as well as a projection of the social imagination' (p. 12). The British were very far from having achieved 'closure' on the loss of the thirteen colonies by the latter years of the eighteenth century, as is evident from the vitriol with which the United States was discussed by many loyalists – Verhoeven's eighth chapter is aptly subtitled 'The Demonization of Jacobin America' – and his claim is that 'The American Revolution may have been as contested in the 1790s as it had been during the imperial crisis' (p. 12). Yet the debate on America in the 1790s was not so much a reprise of the argument that had been had in the 1760s and 1770s, but a struggle over the meaning and role of the United States in a world turned upside down by the French Revolution. To radicals and reformers, increasingly disappointed by the trajectory of events in France, it represented a model of various political and social ideals that they hoped would characterise Britain in the future; and also a real place on the map, which offered the prospect of asylum from the repressive Pittite regime of the 1790s at home. Meanwhile, to British counter-revolutionaries, America represented moral laxity and political corruption. It also represented treachery – in itself, the thirteen British colonies which had become the United States of America; in contemporary emigrants whom it lured to abandon Britain for new lives within it; and in reformers who were duped into believing its political system worth losing the benefits of the British constitution to gain. Verhoeven's central contention is that British 'Americomania' was the result of the combination in the 1790s of three factors: the revolution in France, the burgeoning of the press in Britain, and the emergence of enterprising land speculators in Virginia and Kentucky who traded energetically through agents in the financial centre of London.

One of Verhoeven's most innovative achievements in this book is to show what happened when political idealism and geographic realism combined, as vested interests of different kinds circulated in the British press engravings of farmland showing enviable agricultural landscapes with idealised American society at work, and maps and town plans setting out the lineaments of harmonious urban centres

which did not in fact yet (or ever) exist. His linkage of the American land market with the British print market is enlightening. He argues that the debate over the French Revolution was at least partly responsible for the substantial expansion of the British press in the 1790s, and that this offered unscrupulous American land-jobbers and their British agents, either naïve or equally crooked, the opportunity to inject quantities of inaccurate and often fictitious material promoting emigration. Emigration then joined the ends of this circle by becoming a significant issue between loyalists and radicals in the political war of ideas. Second, aside from his remarkable exposition of the alchemy between political idealism and geographic realism, there is also wonderful value to be gained from Verhoeven's close readings of the sketches, maps, political pamphlets and novels to which he draws our notice. Thomas Pownall's sketches, painted by Paul Sandby and others (1761, 1768), 'Hector' St John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), Gilbert Imlay's *Topographical Description of the Western Territory of America* (1792), William Winterbotham's *Historical View of the United States of America* (1795), the anonymous novel, *Berkeley Hall* (1796) and George Walker's *The Vagabond* (1799), are only the works paid most and closest attention here, but there are various other publications examined profitably during the course of Verhoeven's argument. Third, his reconstruction of their production and publication history is also highly illuminating. The difference, for instance, between Crèvecoeur's original Loyalist text and the republican, utopian vision of America that eventually circulated widely in Britain, is crucial.

Verhoeven is at his best, then, as a literary historian. I am not always so convinced by his political history. His contention that the Revolution in America should share with that in France the credit for the political debate in Britain in the 1790s is welcome, if surely no longer new. He employs too readily, however, a simple notion of 'the French Revolution debate' in Britain in the 1790s between radicals and loyalists. The book in fact adds to the evidence that this 'debate' was a

complex phenomenon, something that is acknowledged in a lengthy note on pp. 35-6. The very notion of a 'debate' has been questioned and complicated by Mark Philp (1993, 2013) in particular; moreover, it cannot now be seen as simply polarised (p. 59), but rather as a spectrum which embraced stubbornly opposition Whigs, and also multiple varieties of conservatism and reformism. In his wilder moments, Charles James Fox certainly offered hope to political radicals that he supported their ideas and activities (p. 31), but there is little hard evidence that he based ambitions for the sovereignty of 'the people' on more than a rather slim sector of society. Indeed, it is not clear whom Verhoeven himself means by 'the people', whose voice he suggests was 'finally heard in Britain' in the 1790s (p.34). The claim that his book demonstrates that 'there are valid historical reasons for characterising the French Revolution and the social and political upheaval it caused in Britain as the "British Revolution" of the 1790s' – an odd phrase that is used repeatedly but never really interrogated – is inflated, not least because it is a reconstruction of the literary and print story of the decade, rather than a social or constitutional history. Again, the terms 'Whig' and 'Tory' are also used rather too loosely – and 'Jacobins' versus 'Tories' is a very free description of the British political debate in the 1790s (p. 33) – despite the sensitive tracing of political nuances on pp. 270-5, which is ignored elsewhere. Minor quibbles include the facts that the press-gang was a long-established naval recruitment method, not an instrument of Pittite repression, however hated it was in the 1790s (p. 51); and that John Wesley was not a Dissenter, nor a Friend of America, nor an associate of Richard Price or Joseph Priestley (p. 74); and the use of 'Britain' in the book's title, despite a quick disclaimer (p. 7) that in fact the book is about political debate in England, for reasons of space. Why not just say 'England'?

Verhoeven's assertion of 'Americomania' in this period is also worth discussing. It's a terrific title, of course; but does it actually reflect the reality of the 1790s? Ironically, in a book of generous length, enviable intellectual range and depth

of research, I wonder if its scope is necessarily too restricted to establish this point. While the list of publications he examines here is substantial and well chosen, can it be sufficient to constitute a 'mania', a phenomenon Verhoeven contends was 'first and foremost ... *discursive* rather than a sociohistorical or demographic process' (p. 9)? Yet, according to one calculation, 15,000 Britons emigrated to the United States during the 1790s: hardly primarily a discursive process.¹ Conversely, although the originator of the term 'Americomania' was a contemporary opponent of emigration (p. 275), it would be worth exploring to what extent this very substantial British emigration to America in the 1790s was voluntary. Of the 'exodus' of political radicals who made the voyage, many had little choice in the matter but were all but forced to go, either, like Joseph Priestley, by popular harassment or, like the Irish rebels released from imprisonment without trial in 1801, by the British state. Of those who had a choice in the matter, Verhoeven himself discusses the 'Pantisocrats', Coleridge and Southey, who looked very carefully at the prospect of emigration but did not eventually emigrate. Winterbotham, another of Verhoeven's subjects, and shown here to have been instrumental (wittingly or otherwise) in propagating false information about American towns and property for sale, had every reason to emigrate after his release from four years' imprisonment in Newgate, during which he produced his four volume *magnum opus* on the United States. He did not: instead he married Mary Brend of Plymouth, a defence witness at his trial, and returned to minister at the Baptist chapel in Plymouth until 1804, when he moved to Shortwood Baptist Church in Gloucestershire. Jon Mee (2013) has shown that Mary Wollstonecraft, who did not follow her brother to America, and Robert Merry, who did emigrate, had similar doubts about the likelihood that the United States would in fact prove to be the utopia they hoped to find there.

This is not to dispute the presence of America as a significant influence in the political debate in Britain in the 1790s. But I also wonder whether it is fair to award so

¹ Durey (1997), pp. 3, 299 note 3.

much credit for its emergence in that debate to Gilbert Imlay's *Topographical Description* (p. 162), however clear it is as a result of Verhoeven's work here and elsewhere (2008) that Imlay's text should be accepted as a key element in the debate in 1792. What, for instance, of Paine's focus on America in his *Rights of Man, Part Two*, published three months before Imlay's promotional tract (Philp, 1993)? What of the impact of the new American constitution, ratified in 1787 and discussed in detail by John Adams in his *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States* (1787-8), and by respondents to that work? And, if Crèvecoeur should be credited with establishing America as a 'utopia' in the political terms of the 1790s debate, ought we not to take note of the precursors of that notion in those who portrayed America as an 'asylum' in the 1770s – Paine, in *Common Sense* (1776), and other British radicals for several years previous to that?² The two ideas are not of course identical, but they are surely related, not least in the minds of those most likely to have been susceptible to either. And, outside politics, the extensive existing transatlantic networks of trade, family and religion surely promoted considerable British interest in America for its own sake and not merely for what it implied for Britain itself.

This is a book overflowing with stimulating ideas, vividly and arrestingly if not always elegantly or precisely written, which richly extends our comprehension of utopianism, of the British debate on America in the 1790s, of emigration, of publication history, and of postcolonial Anglo-American relations. Given the significance of the Anglo-American relationship in the more than two centuries since, it must be important to understand how it began, in the early years of the independent United States of America. This book adds handsomely to that understanding.

² Macleod (2013), p. 26.

- Troy Bickham, *The Weight of Vengeance: the United States, the British Empire, and the War of 1812* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
- Michael Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1997).
- Ella Dzelainis and Ruth Livesey (eds), *The American Experiment and the Idea of Democracy in British Culture, 1776-1914* (Farnham, Surrey, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).
- Joseph Eaton, *The Anglo-American Paper War: debates about the new republic* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)
- Emma Macleod, *British Visions of America, 1775-1820: republican realities* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013).
- Peter Marshall, *Remaking the British Atlantic: the United States and the British Empire after American Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
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- Mark Philp, 'The Role of America in the "Debate on France" 1791-5: Thomas Paine's Insertion', *Utilitas*, 5:2 (1993), pp. 221-37.
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- J.C.A. Stagg, *The War of 1812: conflict for a continent* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Wil Verhoeven, *Gilbert Imlay: Citizen of the World* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008).

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