The benefits of McPhee’s fair-minded approach to his much vilified subject are, therefore, obvious. Above all, it allows space for Robespierre’s character and experiences to develop fully, without being overshadowed prematurely by the Terror. However, the consistently positive light with which McPhee illuminates his subject does also lead to some questionable judgements about the man and his legacy. For example, given the Committee of Public Safety’s opportunistic decision to ally with the colonial lobbyists of the Club Massiac against the Girondins (and therefore against the rights of slave rebels in Saint-Domingue), it is unconvincing to present Robespierre as a committed defender of the rights of slaves and free people of colour without at least trying to explain why he subsequently reneged on this position. The blatant manipulation of Danton’s trial also seems to have been played down in favour of justifying Robespierre’s rambling suspicions with the argument that ‘what Robespierre did not know about Danton’s venality and corruption was even more serious than he suspected’ (p. 190). Finally, what of that key question: was the Terror (and Robespierre’s role within it) justified? McPhee gives a cautious ‘yes’ with his concluding remark that ‘Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety had led the Republic and the Revolution to security. Their achievement was enormous; so were the human costs’ (p. 234). But was the Republic, and in particular Robespierre’s personal vision of what a Revolution should achieve, actually safe by the time of his execution in July 1794? Although France did go on to prove itself to be militarily secure, the tortuous, socially divisive path that the Republic subsequently took towards Napoleon’s coup in 1799 (and beyond) suggests rather that Robespierre and the Terror had failed to secure the social, cultural and political benefits which might have justified the levels of repression and violence meted out across the country.

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In recent years, Loyalist scholarship has undergone something of a renaissance. An important historiographical shift toward Atlantic and New Imperial histories of the period has dramatically altered the place of Loyalists in the story of the revolution. Increasingly they are thought of, not simply as losers of the war, or at odds with the progressive and democratic spirit of the era, but rather as active participants in British imperial expansion and thinking in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This is perhaps best illustrated in the two most important books published on Loyalists in the past decade—Cassandra Pybus’s Epic Journey of Freedom (2007) and Maya Jasanoff’s Liberty’s Exiles (2011).

This volume, the product of a conference held at the University of Maine in 2009, proposes an even greater reconceptualisation of loyalty in the revolutionary British Atlantic. In the introductory chapter (which should be required reading for every student interested in this topic), the volume’s
Editors (and conference organisers), Jerry Bannister and Liam Riordan, lay out an expansive vision of loyalism that represents an emphatic critique of previous scholarship on the subject. They want to move away from an approach that is ‘unduly constricted by nationalistic perspectives’ (p. 3) or particular party interests, and toward a study of loyalism ‘as a multifaceted international phenomenon’ throughout the North Atlantic in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (p. 6). While they concede that loyalism is rooted in a particular English Protestant historical tradition that drew heavily on the public memory of the English Civil War and Glorious Revolution (pp. 10–12), they also understand it to be constantly evolving (and contested), and multi-ethnic and multi-racial. The four themes around which they organise the volume—interpretative frameworks, print culture, slavery, and religion and public memory—are intended to capture this new wide-ranging definition of loyalism.

In Part One, Keith Mason and John G. Reid look at how individuals and groups negotiated their allegiance to the Crown during the revolutionary era. Mason, somewhat surprisingly, ignores the role of the Franco-American alliance in the construction of an American Loyalist identity; instead, he claims that their loyalty was a reactionary and conservative response to the violent social and political upheaval of 1774 to 1776, and failed to have a lasting influence on Loyalist refugees after the war. Reid examines a very different kind of loyalty in the revolutionary Atlantic. In the case of the aboriginal Mi’kma’ki and Wulstukwik societies in maritime Canada, he finds that their loyalty (if the term can be applied to such a relationship) centred on an idea of ‘mutual serviceability’ (p. 78) which emphasised friendship and reciprocity over absolute allegiance to the Crown.

In Part Two, Philip Gould and Gwendolyn Davies explore the way in which loyalist print culture shaped popular loyalism in the British Atlantic during and after the revolution. In his revealing study of how Loyalist writers used eighteenth-century forms of literary criticism to refute, unsuccessfully, Thomas Paine’s Common Sense, Gould reminds us of ‘the degree to which the literary and political histories of the American Revolution were intimately bound up in one another’ (pp. 121–2). In ways reminiscent of Ian K. Steele’s The English Atlantic (1986), Davies argues that newspaper editors in the post-war diaspora community of St John, New Brunswick, used ‘their newspapers to refigure the refugees’ place within an emerging public sphere’ (p. 152). Her findings are similar to what Maya Jasanoff has called ‘the spirit of 1783’ (Liberty’s Exiles, pp. 5–20): writers and readers blended a celebration of imperial commercial expansion and humanitarian ideals with demands for a greater degree of regional political autonomy that shaped Canadian maritime politics into the nineteenth century.

In Part Three, Jennifer Snyder and Carole Watterson Troxler explore the tragic relationship between loyalism and slavery in the British Caribbean during and after the war. Snyder focuses on the Georgia/East Florida borderlands, which she describes as a sort of bandit country, where white Loyalists (and Patriots, for that matter) desperately fought over control of their slaves in ‘the whirlwind of wartime uncertainty, flight, and evacuation’ (p. 179). Troxler turns our attention to the post-war British Bahamas, where Loyalist exiles fought, unsuccessfully, to transform the Bahamas into a slave-based economy and society. When they failed, many decided to return to
the United States, where they were welcomed with open arms by southern state legislatures so long as they brought their slaves with them. If the 1790s ushered in a new British imperial identity partially rooted in a rejection of slavery, as Christopher Leslie Brown (in Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism [2006]) and others have argued, Troxler and Snyder show that the same cannot be said for the American South.

In the final part, Allison O’Mahan Malcom and Allan Blackstock explore a particular strand of British loyalism—anti-Catholicism—and its impact on Canadian, American and Irish politics during the first half of the nineteenth century. Unlike Mason, who argues for the absence of a post-war collective Loyalist identity, Malcom asserts that the popular Orange movement in Upper Canada and the Nativist movement in the United States ‘were manifestations of a usable loyalty … for purposes of political, social, and cultural power’ (p. 235). Blackstock goes one step further, arguing that some Irish Loyalist newspaper editors manipulated news of the Upper and Lower Canadian rebellions of 1837 (both of which were tied to the popular memory of revolutionary-era loyalism) to promote Irish loyalism back home. In doing so, he argues that there existed a ‘veritable loyal Atlantic’ (p. 261) that was artificially constructed through a flourishing Atlantic print culture.

This book wonderfully captures the complex and contested nature of British Atlantic loyalism in the Age of Revolution. The volume’s eight essays begin to reconsider the transatlantic impact of American independence on the shifting imperial allegiances and identities of British subjects in ways that mirror the far more substantial work that has been done on the Atlantic and global reach of revolutionary republicanism and democracy. While the volume may lean more toward the western Atlantic (the influence of mainland British political thought on popular Atlantic loyalism goes largely unnoticed) that should not deter potential readers from what is an invaluable collection of essays.

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