

The English Atlantic in an Age of Revolution. *By Carla Gardina Pestana.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. xi + 342 pp. Maps, figures, notes, index. Cloth, \$49.95. ISBN: 0-674-01502-9.

Reviewed by Evan Haefeli

Carla Pestana's new book marks a significant step in the re-imagining of colonial America. Instead of focusing on a particular colony, her work spans the English Atlantic—the series of colonies, some rather small and soon forgotten, that ranged from Newfoundland to the Caribbean. Her theme is an important one that has lain dormant for too long: the transformation of England's Atlantic colonies by the revolutionary events of the 1640s and 1650s. The result is a powerful account of how an event generally overlooked in American histories played a crucial role in the development of colonial American society. Pestana suggests it was during these years that the first seeds of the American Revolution were planted in the attitudes and institutional practices that the English revolution produced on both sides of the Atlantic.

Beginning with an overview of the fledgling settlements, Pestana demonstrates how closely engaged they were with events and people back in England. In fact, most colonists in 1640 owed obedience not to the English state but to a particular person or group of persons, because their local government rested on the authority of a proprietor, a company, or the king himself, albeit through delegated representatives. As the civil wars progressively isolated the colonists from their protectors and then forced them to choose a new allegiance, colonists developed the habit of expressing loyalty to England, rather than to a particular source of authority within England. This helped them survive the confusing succession of governments that demanded their obedience up through the restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660. It also gave them a sense of their rights as Englishmen, independent of the government back home.

The English revolutionary Atlantic was caught between the need to continue to govern itself and the desire to turn a handsome profit. If money was to be made in

the colonies, then someone had to do a lot of work very cheaply. Servants had been doing this until 1640. The outbreak of hostilities encouraged colonists to look elsewhere for labor, namely Africa. And so the fateful switch to slavery was begun, in the Caribbean at least. To be English in the colonies, then, was to be free and not African. This evolving sense of self-importance was complicated by England's habit of sending as captive labor to the colonies those English, Scots, and Irish who lost out in the continuing military and political struggles back home.

Here again, an important difference in perception between colonists and the English government was established that would only expand over time. As slave labor spread throughout the colonies, it confronted colonists with daily exhibits of the power of being free and the misery of losing that freedom. For them, the point of being English was to be free, a feeling enhanced by their increasing contact with each other and constituting, in Pestana's view, the essence of the English Atlantic. This was not exactly the view of the English governments, which tended to favor loyalty and obedience, stressing the lateral ties across the Atlantic over the horizontal ones up and down the American coast.

Also important to Pestana's story are the habits of colonial governance developed by England's revolutionary regimes. Whereas before the 1640s it was the king who ruled the colonies, thereafter it was Parliament. And Parliament governed with a far heavier hand than Charles I had ever done. It demanded obedience. It regulated colonial trade. On occasion it even sent over fleets to keep the colonists in line. There were clear limits to what Parliament could do, but an important legacy of this period was its inclination to exercise a strong, centralized, and interventionist role in the life and commerce of the colonies.

Pestana is careful enough not to draw a straight line between the English and the American revolutions, but her thesis is deliberately suggestive. Well-researched in a wide range of sources from both sides of the Atlantic, *The English Atlantic in an Age of Revolution* is a work that all scholars of colonial America will have to reckon with. Was this period as transformative as she claims? At the very least, she has made the case that we need to pay more attention to it than we have until now.

Faced with the scarcity of available sources and the chaotic condition of many of the documents that do survive, she has accomplished a remarkable feat.

If there is a flaw, it might be in Pestana's failure to step fully outside the traditional concerns of colonial American history, in particular its preoccupation with the American Revolution. Her canvas is bigger than usual, but the message is an old one: differences grew up between colonists and their homeland. At times Pestana makes the useful gesture of likening the predicament of the colonies to the situation in the provinces of England, whose inhabitants too felt ambivalent about the civil war and its outcome. But no one suggests that they would eventually go their separate way. Why should one have expected the colonies to do so? It seems that more could be gotten out of a study that focused on only one revolution at a time.

Pestana has discovered a wonderful dynamism in the relationship between revolutionary England and its colonies. What are we to make of the close connection between them? Back in England, New England often symbolized Puritan radicalism, although colonial Puritanism was much more conservative than the home-grown variety. The mention of Virginia, on the other hand, could evoke fears of kidnapping on the streets of London. Unfortunately, Pestana's cautious prose undermines what could have been a path-breaking account of the expansion of the English world beyond the British Isles, rather than perpetuating the anachronistic division between Europe and America. Like the English governments that wanted their cooperation, she is not quite sure where the colonists' real sympathies lay, as their ability to switch from cooperation with the Puritan revolutionaries to rebellion against them after the execution of the king suggests that the colonists, like many in England, were not entirely sure either.

*Evan Haefeli is assistant professor of history at Columbia University. He has recently published, along with Kevin Sweeney, Captors and Captives: The 1704 French and Indian Raid on Deerfield (2003). He is currently working on a study of religious toleration in the seventeenth century Atlantic World.*