

Borderland Smuggling: Patriots, Loyalists, and Illicit Trade in the Northeast, 1783–1820. By *Joshua M. Smith*. Foreword by James C. Bradford and Gene A. Smith. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. xv +160 pp. Index, notes, bibliography. Cloth, \$55.00. ISBN: 0-8130-2986-4.

Reviewed by Andrew Wender Cohen

This slender volume discusses smuggling between Maine and the British Maritimes during the early national period and the failed attempts at regulating trade along the new borders created by the War of Independence. Though perhaps too understated in its claims, the book is a lively and well-written investigation of an important and interesting subject.

Borderland Smuggling is filled with wonderful characters and stories. Joshua M. Smith introduces us to Lemuel Trescott, the customs collector at Passamaquoddy, now in Maine, then a town in Massachusetts, from 1810 to 1820. A Revolutionary War hero, Trescott was an active merchant and clubman, prominent in local affairs. But his status as a booster of the Northeast only encouraged his willingness to assist the smugglers who paid his price. Indeed, Trescott played it both ways, facilitating the unlawful entry of millions of dollars in British goods while simultaneously begging the Treasury to allocate funds for a Revenue cutter (a single-masted, lightly-armed sailboat) to intercept Canadian ships and seize contraband.

Smith deftly uncovers the various schemes smugglers and corrupt customs agents employed to circumvent the tariff. For instance, in 1812 alone, Trescott confiscated 2,684 tons of Canadian plaster, but then ordered his assessors to appraise the gypsum at 25 percent of its real worth. The owners posted bond for the duties (worth twice the assessed value), received their goods, and sold them for a large profit. Under this system, the government rewarded Trescott for his malfeasance, paying him a moiety, or share, of the seizure.

Smith convincingly argues that any history of the Northeast must necessarily discuss both the United States and Canada, particularly during the republican period,

when the dense web of commercial and familial connections mocked efforts at enforcing national identity. Expanding on this theme, he assiduously defends his smugglers, painting them as ordinary folks who tried to maintain trade relationships despite the imposition of artificial national barriers. Smugglers and their confederates, in his view, were solid citizens rather than cutthroats, in part because the complicity of customs officials like Lemuel Trescott removed the need for violence. The fact that Passamaquoddy named its schoolhouse and lyceum after Trescott suggests the reputability of the smugglers and their confederates.

But Smith's depiction of smugglers as simple provincials seeking to survive difficult conditions actually diminishes the historiographical significance of his project. Given the scholarly tendency to attribute ideological motives to everyday behavior, many may appreciate Smith's humility. In my view, however, his argument seems modest to a fault. By Smith's own admission, many smugglers were local political elites and worldly adventurers, not starving farmers or fishermen. Moreover, one cannot reasonably deny the political implications of illicit trade with the British enemy during the Embargo of 1807 and the War of 1812. At the very least, it shows that American national identity was too weak to staunch the greed of the traders. At most, it suggests a region in open rebellion against the American state.

Smith further depoliticizes smuggling with his claim that most Americans were indifferent to the crime. For instance, he cites the illicit importations by silk merchants Arthur and Lewis Tappan to demonstrate that average Americans accepted trade in contraband. If pious abolitionists like the Tappan brothers smuggled, Smith reasons, then surely the practice carried little stigma. But he has this backwards. We remember the Tappans today because they rejected the values of the majority, advocating a nexus of unpopular reforms, from antislavery to temperance. Abolitionists in the United States and Britain were among the foremost advocates of free trade, one reason they were unpopular among antebellum northern workingmen. The smuggling of two radical merchants proves not the libertarianism of the majority, but instead reveals the political, and even oppositional, commitments of the perpetrators.

Americans condemned smuggling as a serious crime in part because of its effect on the health of the federal government. Even a cursory newspaper search reveals

intense editorials savaging those who defrauded the government. For instance, in 1791, Thomas R. Waite's *Cumberland Gazette*, published in Portland, Maine, called the smuggler "an enemy to his country" who undermined "the very basis of public security" and "reduced his fellow subjects to a state of wretchedness and slavery" (August 22, 1791, p. 1).

But Smith oddly declines to place the war on smuggling within the larger history of state development. While focusing on local officials in Maine and the Maritimes, he seldom considers the impact of the federal government's failure to collect customs duties on its broader struggle to survive. After all, the U.S. Army famously crushed tax revolts in Western Massachusetts and Pennsylvania in the 1780s. Likewise, the postrevolutionary Treasury cracked down on counterfeiters, briefly making the offense a capital crime. At the very least, Smith should have compared the regulation of northeastern trade to these more extreme expressions of federal power.

Similarly, Smith seems reluctant to analyze the intriguing evidence he finds. Late in the book, he notes that smugglers often disguised themselves as Indians. Such masquerades evoke a number of issues: the smugglers' notions of race, their metaphorical rejection of American and British nationality, and perhaps their identification with the Boston Tea Party patriots, who dressed similarly while protesting British mercantile laws in 1773. But Smith does not convey any sense of what he believes these stories mean.

Despite these flaws, *Borderland Smuggling* should be read by anyone interested in the regulation of trade, borders, and American national identity. Though it could have benefited from more analysis and a richer sense of context, it is a brief and entertaining product of painstaking research that offers a detailed picture of the northeastern coastal economy.

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