When London Was the Capital of America (review)

Andrew Shankman

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nobles and soldiers. These purveyors of false value, like the *vellón*, or cheap copper coins to which the Spanish Crown increasingly resorted as its expenses grew after 1600 and its supply of precious metals from the Indies shrank, drove out good money and valorous men alike in favor of cheap substitutes. While the moralists and intellectuals Vilches discusses did not arrive at a consensus regarding what to do about the crisis, their analyses agreed that New World gold was undermining true value—moral, cultural, and economic—in Spain.

New World Gold is a rich book that scholars of early modern European culture and literature, as well as Atlantic World specialists, will find useful and intriguing. It could have used a stronger conclusion that did a better job of summing up and comparing the different strains of thought regarding value and gold among the numerous moralists, literary authors, and nascent political economists Vilches discusses in the book. Also welcome would have been a concluding discussion regarding the evolution of these debates in Spain about gold and *valor* in the later seventeenth century. As the Spanish Crown weakened and the economies of colonies in the New World began to shift from mining to production, especially on plantations, how did the tenor of the cultural anxiety in Spain change? These comments are merely a sign, however, that Vilches's research raises interesting questions and offers new paths for research in the future.

GAYLE K. BRUNELLE
California State University, Fullerton

When London Was the Capital of America. By JULIE FLAVELL. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010. 320 pp. $32.50 (cloth).

In the mid eighteenth century many British colonial North Americans loved London and managed to live there. Julie Flavell tells their story in this enjoyable though somewhat limited book. Along the way she introduces us to social climbers, cads, intriguers, radicals, and the greatest metropolis of the early modern Western world.

Flavell organizes her book around a series of characters, Americans from the thirteen colonies who lived in London for extended periods during the twenty-five years before 1775. The principal figures include the South Carolina planter Henry Laurens, his children, and their slave Scipio, who once in London changed his name to Robert. In addition, we come to know Stephen Sayre of Long Island, Arthur Lee of Virginia, Benjamin West, and Benjamin and William Franklin,

among others. Together all of these characters, a southern planter, a slave, a young man on the make seeking his commercial fortune, a sometime scholar matriculating at the Inns at Court, a highly successful artist, and two, at least for a time, reasonably successful "empire men," are broadly representative of perhaps as many as two thousand colonials who lived in London in the decades just before the American Revolution.

Flavell is a skillful storyteller. Through the experience of the Laurens family we learn that the most visible Americans in London were absentee planters, primarily from the West Indies and South Carolina. Indeed, many Londoners were surprised that there were nonslaveholding regions in the colonies. The Laurens family found a community of colonial slaveholders in London but Scipio-turned-Robert also found opportunities to broaden his horizons and join in the general dissatisfactions expressed by freeborn Englishmen who were also servants. Robert lived in a London where, as Flavell shows, self-representation was fluid and where the bold and creative could make a play to radically transform their circumstances. Some from well below the ranks of the gentry became so good at imitating them that they made decent livings selling their services as character references for servants seeking to move to better situations. In London Robert was enslaved in a great city with a population of fifteen thousand blacks, many of them free. His residence coincided with the Somerset case and with the public mocking of colonial concerns about liberty. Robert lived in proximity to conversations such as the one Laurens's eldest son had with his friend Thomas Day. Day informed John Laurens that "if there be an object truly ridiculous in nature, it is an American patriot signing resolutions of independence with one hand, and with the other brandishing a whip over his affrighted slaves" (p. 133). John Laurens turned against slavery, and the heady atmosphere of London allowed Robert to do what Scipio had not. When the Laurens family left London Robert had long since disappeared; city air had made him free.

Flavell's best story introduces the grasping social climber and rake Stephen Sayre, a cross between Mr. Lovelace and Barry Lyndon. Sayre, the son of a Long Island tanner, managed to get an education at a local Presbyterian school and then a gentleman's finishing at Princeton (a fairly common trajectory similar to that of the famous diarist Philip Vickers Fithian). His rise fed an insatiable ambition, and Sayre came to London in the 1760s determined to get all that he could. He attached himself to the merchant House of De Berdt headed by Dennis De Berdt, who was also the colonial agent for Massachusetts. Sayre insinuated

himself thoroughly into the family, assuming that "the old codger must soon pop off" (p. 134). De Berdt kept up his end but went bankrupt at the same time. Sayre, who had anticipated and made arrangements, quickly moved on to become the lover and quite likely the pimp of a beautiful but aging actress, Sophia Baddeley. He managed to seduce her by bribing her fortune-teller to predict that she would meet a tall, handsome stranger wearing a gold chain in St. James Park. When she rushed to find him, Sayre was waiting for her. Flavell tells Sayre's story at her leisure and she tells it very well. It alone is worth the cost of a book that, for example, takes a longish time to explore the rather well-known story of the London doings of Benjamin Franklin and his illegitimate son William.

When London Was the Capital of America is an eminently readable and enjoyable book, but if it has a larger scholarly contribution to make it is a limited one. Flavell's primary analytical point seems to be that there really were a fair number of aspiring colonial Americans who really, really liked being British. Does Flavell believe that specialists will be shocked to learn that "Just ten years before American independence, there is not a whisper of the development of an American character among this crowd even those who went on to become leading Whigs," or that "Even those who became leaders in the American Revolution were not egalitarian?" (pp. 69, 92). Specialists will not be shocked by these revelations; indeed, they will not even be shocked, shocked to learn them.

The real strength of Flavell's scholarly contribution is that she tells a series of very fun stories quite well that fit neatly into the overarching explanation historians have long been providing of the eighteenth-century Anglophone world and of the coming of the American Revolution. Central to that explanation is the concept of Anglicization, the process by which eighteenth-century colonial Americans embraced a British identity of polite, commercial gentility, an identity that developed within the elite and the growing middle class roughly simultaneously in England, lowland Scotland, Anglo-Ireland, and the far-flung colonies. A central cause of the American Revolution was that Anglicized British colonial subjects grew furious that the limited constitutional monarchy, which they viewed as the Glorious Revolution's finest legacy, would actually deny freeborn British subjects of the king their British liberties. Colonists had to think they were British before they could conceive let alone articulate that Britain was not treating them in the ways that all Britons deserved. Flavell contributes to arguments made for some time by scholars such as Jack Greene that many Britons in Britain did come to see British Americans as odd, exotic,

slave-owning curiosities, the sorts of un-British folk for whom the liberties of the subject did not strictly apply. Ironically, many in Britain could see a distinct and different America where colonists could not. These insights are not all that new, as the title of the 1980 volume of essays edited by J. G. A. Pocock, *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776*, attests.

Nonspecialists will absolutely enjoy this book. Specialists will enjoy finding great stories to add to lectures whose overall thrust they will not have to change, which leads me to a final observation, and one absolutely not the fault of Julie Flavell. In a far better world than the one we live in, this well-written and enjoyable book would never have been published using the always diminishing resources of even major university presses. Instead, an entirely reputable trade press would have provided it to a global citizenry of readers. But hardly any amateurs read books anymore and commercial presses never publish serious works of history such as this one. The top university presses, to survive, desperately seek to fill an abandoned commercial niche that probably no longer exists as they fearfully rush away from risky, new, and vital scholarship.

ANDREW SHANKMAN
Rutgers University–Camden

Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization and the French Monarchy. By PAUL CHENEY. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010. 320 pp. $49.95 (cloth).

The last decade has seen the emergence of a rich body of literature that reconciles the polarized scholarly traditions of social and political histories in the field of early modern and revolutionary France. The revisionist turn away from the Marxist paradigm in the 1970s replaced deterministic economic interpretations of historical change with analyses of political discourse. Post-revisionist historians have readdressed the "social" from a fresh angle, discovering how discussions about commerce and its effects inundated political thought. Michael Kwass's *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century France*, John Shovlin's *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism and the Origins of the French Revolution*, and Amalia Kessler's *A Revolution in Commerce: The Parisian Merchant Court and the Rise of Commercial Society in Eighteenth-Century France*, among others, demonstrate how the historiographical movement away from "the social" has opened the