Janet Polasky

Revolutions without Borders: The Call to Liberty in the Atlantic World. New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2015. xvi + 371 pp. (Cloth US\$35.00)

In 1776, the young British colonist and revolutionary William Carmichael crossed the Atlantic with a copy of *Common Sense* in his pocket. Eight years later, his fellow American Elkanah Watson traveled in the other direction with abolitionist books, hoping to persuade George Washington to end slavery in the new United States.

Janet Polasky's fascinating and powerful book traces voyages—literal and intellectual—of people like Carmichael and Watson who transmitted the transatlantic revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. From Abigail Adams to Thaddeus Kościuszko to Mary Wollstonecraft, they crossed paths as they discussed, represented, and occasionally fled from revolution, carrying their evolving ideas of liberty and equality with them. The commonality Polasky finds among these men and women is a deep belief in a “universal cry of liberty” (p. 4). To most of them, the *universal* part was as important as the *liberty*—a worldwide desire for, and right to, freedom from oppression. Their daring visions for participation in governance, even at times across race and gender, changed the world, even when they were not part of one of the large militarily successful revolutions that usually get historians' attention.

Of course there was much to argue over regarding the purpose, limits, possibility, and responsibility of revolution. Polasky manages to show their self-imagining as a global community while neither oversimplifying commonalities nor overdichotomizing against a false category of counterrevolutionaries. Questions united revolutionaries more than answers. Which people should rule and how much power should they have? How much compromise with monarchy and nobility was acceptable? Was Christianity a driving force of liberty or a holdover of a less enlightened era? What was the role of violence in deposing kings and in spreading revolution? Was the ideal world one of strong sister republics or one universal republic?

And what to do about slavery and race? European visitors were shocked by public human bondage when they visited the new United States, expecting to see liberty. Yet France's National Assembly hesitated to seat the delegation of Vincent Ogé, the son of a white man and a free woman of color who owned a Saint-Domingue coffee plantation. Polasky's chapter on narratives by people fleeing slavery—“the largest transatlantic migration of the revolutionary era” (p. 75)—explores their diverse and overlapping identifications as revolutionaries, loyal subjects, Africans, people of color, abolitionists, Christians, and

merchants. Revolutions could not avoid issues of slavery and race, even as those issues challenged the ideal of universal liberty.

The limits of universalism and Polasky's wide-ranging learnedness are vividly on display in her chapter on feminist novelists. Women appear throughout the book—in salons, courts, and every kind of document—but here they powerfully take center stage. Wollstonecraft and others created female protagonists who were independent thinkers trapped in a world that kept women from being independent individuals, “leaving the reader with little doubt that tyranny is entrenched within the family” (p. 188). Yet, with the exception of Betje Wolff and Aagje Deken, female novelists could find no solution to the dependency trap of marriage for themselves or their characters. In the novel written by Wolff and Deken, the heroine finds happiness in passionate female friendships and a companionate marriage. They themselves found it in their life together in a thatched cottage north of Amsterdam. Some revolutionaries rethought women's place in the family and society, but none of the revolutions “remade the family” (p. 231).

Throughout the book, Polasky draws on a vast range of historiography to pull in an astounding number of people, regions, and movements. While Britain and France and their colonies in North America and the West Indies get most of the attention, the European continent is fully part of the story. People of color are prominent, and we follow them from the Americas to Europe and Africa. Latin America is less present, in part because of the book's chronology. (We meet Francisco Miranda only when he shows up in a French salon.) The book's elegant structure makes it all intelligible, with each chapter focusing on one kind of document or correspondence, while proceeding roughly chronologically from 1776 to 1804.

Revolution was not a universal movement, as it turned out. The French helped the American Revolution while crushing revolution in Geneva. The revolutionary nations of the United States and France failed to help Poland's movement, even though it was moderate and led by American Revolutionary hero Kościuszko. France and Geneva had mutually supporting revolutions in 1789, but Napoleon Bonaparte violently annexed Geneva in 1798. Not long after a “revolutionary French Republic declared war on emperors, Haitian revolutionaries secured their independence by defeating the armies of the soon to be crowned emperor of the French” (pp. 262–63). There might be a universal cry of liberty, but answering it would not be quick or simple.

Kathleen DuVal

History Department, University of North Carolina,
Chapel Hill NC 27599, U.S.A.
duval@unc.edu