

BOOK REVIEWS

British North America, 1754–1766 by Fred Anderson, *Drums in the Forest* still provides detail about the early history of Pittsburgh unobtainable elsewhere. Its republication is welcome.

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Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan*. [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005. Pp. xx, 323. Appendices, notes, maps, illustrations, index.] \$26.95 (Cloth).

Jill Lepore possesses the enviable skill of writing popular histories that meet the highest standards of scholarship. Her previous books, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (1998) and *A Is for American: Letters and Other Characters in the Newly United States* (2002), combined the interpretive sophistication demanded by professionals with the period details and narrative zip that appealed to interested general readers. This book, exploring the 1741 slave conspiracy that cost thirty black men and four whites their lives, continues along these lines. Via archival research, some learned inferences, and a few leaps into imaginative gloom, Lepore addresses the question of whether New York's conspiracy was a real plot or a tragic projection of Anglo-American fear. In addition, Lepore uses the conspiracy as a platform to explore the nature of slavery, race relations, and political culture in Britain's North American colonies. Although some of her judgments strain the evidence up to (and maybe beyond) its breaking point, her treatment is at the same time enlightening and entertaining. If academic historians minded the way that Lepore blends meticulous research, interpretive rigor, and accessible writing, bookstores might be able to sell history books that dealt with subjects beyond the second day of Gettysburg.

Eighteenth century New York City housed the second largest slave population in British North America. Only Charles Town, South Carolina, was home to more. Lepore brings to life its community of slaves and free colored persons. She also illuminates the white population's perceptions of, and interactions with, this community. Like the city's Africans and African-Americans, Manhattan's

whites were an extraordinarily diverse lot. She argues that the white community's response to the plot—including the way they imagined and, in some ways, invented it—must be understood in light of New York's raucous political culture. Most important here is the struggle between its "court" and "country" factions in the wake of the 1735 libel trial of John Peter Zenger.

Like urban slaves everywhere in the Atlantic World, bondspeople in New York City enjoyed comparative freedom. Also like slaves elsewhere, the women and men they served despised blacks. Both conditions inspired and facilitated what Lepore argues was a very real conspiracy to rise up and murder the city's whites (the exact plans are not known). Jack, a slave owned by a cooper who possessed a well frequented by slaves, seems the ringleader. Lepore speculates that Gerardus Comfort's Jack may have been an Akan-speaking Cormantee who had lived for some time in Jamaica—a general background he shared with many enslaved New Yorkers. Partly because of his residence near the well, many of the male slaves in the city knew Jack though, as Lepore demonstrates, nearly all the black men were acquainted. The conspiracy, however, was not so broad: imprisoned blacks in the dungeon beneath city hall learned from their cellmates that they might escape the torch if they implicated others. It would also help if they described their initiation into the plot at a posh ceremony held at the tavern of John Hughson, a local white man.

Lepore believes a plot really existed, but it was not the conspiracy that the colony's authorities believed they had unearthed. Early in the investigation, inquisitors learned about a ritual-laden ceremony held at Hughson's tavern, which happened to be adjacent to the well at Jack's cooper shop. Eventually, the investigation implicated a number of Irish soldiers in the garrison, a Catholic priest, and several Spanish sailors enslaved after being captured by English privateers. Confirming as this did a variety of fears and prejudices, Anglo-American elites in New York (but not, Lepore shows, in New England), found this story compelling. Like many poor whites, Hughson had intimate dealings with the city's black population—relations that earned the fear and scorn of the well-to-do. The Irish and Catholic arms of the conspiracy, revealed late in the proceedings, testified not merely to longstanding English prejudices but to the fragility of political authority on the empire's margins in an era of endemic imperial rivalry. Lepore concludes that Hughson was uninvolved in the plot. The rituals practiced at his tavern were not conspiratorial ceremonies, but a prank mocking Masonic puffery. To the authorities, they looked like white complicity in a slave revolt. Lepore may be right about this: she documents a contemporary controversy, linked to the colony's court-country split,

over Masonry, but the evidence that Hughson was engaged in mockery is circumstantial, not direct. Nevertheless the tavernkeeper, his wife Sarah, and Peggy Kerry, a lodger, swung.

Lepore's argument strains in its attempt to link the plot and its overzealous prosecution to political divisions in the colony. Certainly she provides illuminating background to our main source for the conspiracy, the *Journal of the Proceedings* collected by Daniel Horsmanden, the ambitious, grasping English-born official who led the prosecution of the plotters. Horsmanden's life, and particularly his efforts to insinuate himself into the city's court faction, provides the framework for much of the book. Lepore likens white New Yorkers' terror at the prospect of a slave revolt with the repulsion Horsmanden's court party felt toward their political opposition. The analogy fits, but is no substitute for direct evidence, and there is little to suggest that political controversies significantly informed New Yorkers' understanding of the conspiracy. Somewhat confusingly, Lepore argues that the conspiracy both legitimated and discouraged white partisanship. It did the first by making party strife seem comparatively harmless; the second, by uniting whites to face a real crisis. Maybe, but really, who knows?

All of this provides rich fodder for thought and argument, but *New York Burning* also contains three appendices that seem particularly promising for explication in the classroom. The first, using a combination of contemporary records and modern technology, including GIS software, details Lepore's efforts to reconstruct New York City at the time of the conspiracy. Appendix B is a spreadsheet that presents information about the accused conspirators, and the final appendix provides data about their owners. Thus, *New York Burning* is much more than a stimulating, if sometimes frustrating, effort to cast some light on a shadowy eighteenth-century conspiracy. As an effort to place it in terms of the mechanics of slavery in a bustling, contentious northern port city, it expands our notion of the social history of the eighteenth century Atlantic World.

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