Journal of British Studies (2024), 1–2
doi:10.1017/jbr.2024.83

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

BOOK REVIEW

E. Wesley Reynolds. Coffeehouse Culture in the Atlantic World, 1650–1789

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. Pp. 264. $115.00 (cloth).

Brian Cowan

McGill University
Email: brian.cowan2@mcgill.ca

Coffeehouse histories have proliferated in the twenty-first century. Owing much to the centrality of debates about the rise of a bourgeois public sphere in the long eighteenth century along with a growing interest in the development of a consumer society in the same period, the coffeehouse now plays a central role in social, economic, political, and cultural histories of the age of enlightenment. *Coffeehouse Culture in the Atlantic World* adds another contribution to this burgeoning historiography. E. Wesley Reynolds ambitiously offers a narrative of the rise and fall of the coffeehouse on both sides of the Atlantic, thus providing a much-needed Atlantic history perspective. While most work on British coffeehouses has focused on their early history in the Stuart era, here we have a work that boldly promises to carry the story through the remainder of the eighteenth century and even gestures toward the largely *terra incognita* of nineteenth-century coffeehouse history.

Sociability is central to the story that Reynolds wishes to tell here. Relying on previous scholarship, he argues that the coffeehouse emerged in the later seventeenth century as an exemplar of what would come to be understood as "polite" sociability in the eighteenth century. The Addisonian ideal of coffeehouse sociability as it was articulated in the *Tatler* (1709–11) and *Spectator* (1711–14) papers dominated the way in which polite sociability was imagined, and here we find evidence that it prevailed in the British colonies as well as the metropole. Politeness helped provide a cultural glue that held the social worlds of British merchants and colonial settlers as well as metropolitan wits and politicians. This, along with the crucial role of coffeehouses as nodes for information diffusion across the Atlantic world, gave the coffeehouse a crucial place in the development of a coherent imperial society in Britain's transatlantic empire. There are chapters on coffeehouses as news centers, naval recruitment and management, merchant networking, as well as government lobbying efforts and slave trading.

The imperial tax crisis (1764–65) provoked by the Stamp Act (1765) put pressure on the coherence of the Britain's transatlantic coffeehouse culture, and the final chapter is titled "Bringing Down the Empire"—it sees the emergence of an independent United States as the beginning of the end of the transatlantic coffeehouse world detailed in this book. The French Revolution sealed its fate, as "coffeehouse politicians no longer discussed only elections or parties but new ideas like liberty and independence," which constituted "the rise of a new form of popular political opinion which matured into a real social force in European coffeehouses during the 1790s and continued through the nineteenth century until the fateful year of 1848" (182–83). Although not explicitly framed in Habermasian terms, this general narrative of the rise and fall of the transatlantic coffeehouse public sphere accords well with Habermas's understanding of the coffeehouse as a paradigmatic example of rational public discourse in the Age of Enlightenment.

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The North American Conference on British Studies

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2024.83 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While framed as a monograph about the rise and decline of the transatlantic coffeehouse public sphere, the scope of *Coffeehouse Culture in the Atlantic World* is somewhat too ambitious to allow for a deep investigation of the imperial coffeehouse. Reynolds makes good use of archival material from the East India Company, the Admiralty Courts, the State Papers, and Home Office records, but the bulk of the source material for this study are newspapers, pamphlets, and published editions of personal correspondence. It is also heavily reliant on the now vast historiography on coffeehouses and eighteenth-century sociability. Unfortunately, the work suffers from poor copyediting, as evidenced by the many misspellings of the proper names of the numerous scholars cited.

The Atlantic world focus is the most promising aspect of this study, but much more work on the social history of coffeehouses remains to be done. A chapter of the book is devoted to the paradox found in the fact that coffeehouse sociability lauded notions of free expression and egalitarianism amongst patrons while at the same time relying upon the labor of enslaved people and often promoting the slave trade on their premises. But much more could be done with this topic. There is little information on how the nature of the coffee trade changed after the 1720s when the source of coffee imports shifted from the Ottoman world to the Dutch East Indies and especially the slave societies of the West Indies. There is little attempt here to follow up on the insights provided by Jonathan Morris in his *Coffee: A Global History* (2018) and his broader project on decolonizing the history of coffee in which the links between enslaved labor and coffee consumption are central. Similarly, the book provides little by way of details about what made American coffeehouses distinctive in the eighteenth century. Its account of the extent of coffeehouses in colonial cities is only impressionistic and no attempt is made to offer a survey of their total numbers, let alone a sense of whether these numbers were rising, falling, or staying static throughout the century. There are a few mentions of regional differences between northern and southern coffeehouses, but little by way of comparison between colonial coffeehouses, inns, or taverns, recently the subject of Vaughn Scribner's *Inn Civility: Urban Taverns and Early American Civil Society* (2019). Without this comparative context, it is difficult to discern the distinctiveness of the coffeehouse in the colonial Atlantic world.

We still need more coffeehouse histories. Works such as this book demonstrate that coffeehouses retained a vital place in the social world of the first British Empire, but a definitive history of the coffeehouse in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries remains to be written.

https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2024.83 Published online by Cambridge University Press