**Sean D. Moore, *Slavery and the Making of Early American Libraries: British Literature, Political Thought, and the Transatlantic Book Trade, 1731-1814,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 288 pp., £55 (Hardback) ISBN 9780198836377.**

The history of the book can at times be Whiggish and triumphalist. Sean Moore avoids this in dramatic fashion by putting the practice of chattel slavery at the heart of the history of the Atlantic book trade and American library culture in the eighteenth century. In short, this book is about ‘slavery-enabled reading’ (28), as the wealth generated by slavery and the slave trade was used to pay for the founding of libraries and their book collections. The picture is not entirely bleak, however, as Moore also argues that the (primarily British) books read by Americans, many of which were preoccupied with promoting liberty and rights, ‘ripen[ed] the climate for both revolutionary and abolitionist sentiment.’ (xiii). But, as he points out, this literature could equally be used by white Americans to claim their own rights against slaves.

Moore’s study focuses on five major libraries founded in America before the Revolution: the Library Company of Philadelphia (1731); the Redwood Library of Newport (1747); the Charleston Library Society (1748); the New York Society Library (1754); and the Salem Social Library (1760). Presenting himself as foremost a literary scholar rather than a historian (xi-xii), the book is organised in the chronological order of the books Moore surveys in relation to these libraries: Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* (1688; adopted for the stage in 1759); Alexander Pope’s *Windsor Forest* and *Essay on Man* (1713 and 1733); Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719); Charles Johnstone’s *Chrystal, or the Adventures of a Guinea* (1760 and 1765); and the autobiographical *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789). He links his reading of these works to broader historical questions, notably ‘how Americans understood themselves as part of an anglophone Atlantic print media market, or imagined community, that was linked to their consumer culture and politics and that helps explain how they behaved financially, intellectually, and politically.’ (xiii). More specifically, Moore thinks that each work he analyses tells us something about American attitudes towards slavery.

The political thought component of the book engages with the question of whether republican ideology, on the one hand, or liberalism and capitalism, on the other, is to blame for American slavery. In challenging the republican or civic humanist paradigm, perhaps chiefly associated with J. G. A. Pocock, Moore uses C. B. Macpherson’s ‘possessive individualism’ thesis (see esp. 10-17), John Locke’s agenda aim was to justify the unlimited acquisition of property by capitalists.[[1]](#footnote-1) Scholars of Hobbes and Locke criticised Macpherson by pointing to the anachronism of regarding seventeenth-century England as a capitalist bourgeois society. Locke specialists have further responded by recovering the fundamentally religious grounding of his political philosophy.[[2]](#footnote-2) Most relevant in the present context, Macpherson’s thesis came under early attack from historians putting forward a distinctly republican reading of the American eighteenth century. These included Pocock as well as Gordon Wood, who were both inspired by Caroline Robbins and Bernard Bailyn, and who displaced John Locke along with the anachronistic category of liberalism. In recent decades, however, Locke has returned to American historiography in grand fashion. As Moore here points out, ‘no figure was as central as Locke’ in American eighteenth-century libraries (31), confirming earlier accounts about the ubiquity of Locke presented by historians from Isaac Kramnick to Eric Slauter. With Locke, the ‘possessive individualism’ thesis has also returned in some historical studies, and, as Moore highlights, it never went away from literary studies (17). The Macpherson thesis, he further claims, ‘is centrally relevant to slavery in that it posits that modern individuality is derived from proprietorship of one’s person and labor, ownership that slaves did not have.’ (10).

The most substantial and explicit challenge to Pocock’s republicanism thesis comes in the book’s fourth chapter (141, 147-8), in which Moore looks at Charleston Library Society in South Carolina – the state with the largest slave population and even slave-backed paper money. It is true that Pocock could have said more about the potential relationship between American republicanism and slavery. However, this seems to be an area in which the republican thesis might still be relevant, as slavery was an institution not only integral to the early American republic but also to ancient republics. Moore makes a great deal of the British turn in American historiography, in other words, the idea that the Americans became more culturally British after 1750. This is evident in the catalogues of American subscription libraries, which were not much different from their British counterparts (24). According to this interpretation, the American Revolution was essentially an outcome of them insisting on their rights as Englishmen. This is both accurate and familiar, but we should remember that Britons *in Britain* were not slaveholders, although many of them traded in slaves. Moreover, very few British mainstream political thinkers in the eighteenth century wanted to introduce chattel slavery in the British isles; Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun’s proposal to do so in Scotland at the turn of the eighteenth century was widely seen as extremely idiosyncratic. Moreover, ‘West-Indians’ such as William Beckford who tried to cut a figure in British society were often heavily criticised for their slave-generated wealth. A basic yet important point seems to be that eighteenth-century Americans were insisting on more liberties than the legal rights of the British. As Quentin Skinner stressed, slavery was central as the antonym to liberty in Roman law, enshrined in the *Digest.*[[3]](#footnote-3)Though ‘neo-Roman’ liberty is not going to explain everything that was going on in eighteenth-century American political thought, it might be more useful in clarifying colonial thinking about slavery than Moore allows.

Whatever one thinks of the Macpherson thesis and its detractors,[[4]](#footnote-4) Moore makes an important point when arguing that one of the unfortunate offshoots of the onslaught upon it has been that the history of political thought, especially in the ‘Cambridge’ tradition, has been divorced from social and political history (10, 16). Since the programme of the so-called Cambridge School was formulated partly in opposition to Marxist reductionism, the fear of social history has remained endemic among many historians of political thought, and it might have outlived its usefulness. As a result, ideas are sometimes not only given a reasonable degree of autonomy, but also treated in a rather abstract way, and often with little reference to either the economic base or political action other than writing. By contrast, Moore’s book is presented as an attempt to ‘understand how people put ideas into practice’ (xiv). This ambition should be applauded, and he is right that the history of reading can be an impressive tool for achieving or at least approximating this goal. The irony, or rather tragedy, here, however, is that there was little action. As he puts it: ‘British and American anti-slavery writing…may have been producing more of an imagination of a day when slaves would be emancipated rather than always instigating action.’ (35).

There is of course nothing controversial about Moore’s loathing of slavery and the failures to end the slave trade and emancipate slaves at an earlier date. What is more uncommon, however, is his unwillingness to exonerate other practices with which slavery was economically and culturally connected. *Slavery and the Making of Early American Libraries* is an unusual book in that it is written by someone who clearly and rather viscerally dislikes the period under review. Moore seems to have little understanding for why Americans are fascinated by their Revolution, and he has certainly no time for the romanticisation of the eighteenth century embodied in Patrick O’Brien novels, ‘the current cult of Jane Austen’ and the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise (205). Indeed, Moore seeks to explicitly indict the period from the perspective of the present. The eighteenth century was a ‘failure’, he contends, and studying it will ‘help us appreciate how the nineteenth- and twentieth-century revolutions in political thought, human rights, and activism have improved the world enough for us to see how far this earlier past fell short of what many of its writers idealized.’ (37). This is of course true, but hardly a conclusion that requires a book-length study to prove, and one could argue that this statement underplays the contribution of earlier arguments to later emancipations and improvements.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In the conclusion, the book turns directly to contemporary politics, as Moore connects his indictment of the eighteenth century with the present day, and in particular the trend of privatisation begun in the 1980s. For Moore, the eighteenth century does not demonstrate the vibrancy of civil society but rather the danger of relying on private charity for public goods. In being sceptical, if not outrightly negative, about associational culture, Moore is closer to the milder conclusions in Peter Clark’s classic study of clubs and societies in early-modern Britain than Gertrude Himmelfarb’s neo-Tocquevillian celebration of voluntarism.[[6]](#footnote-6) Moore’s praise of state action as opposed to corporate and individual initiatives – which sits somewhat uneasily with his admiration of activism cited above – will please some readers and infuriate others.[[7]](#footnote-7) He makes important points about what may be the origins of the limitations of the American welfare state and in warning against conservative and libertarian tendencies to venerate an earlier era of ‘limited government’ (202). It is a shame that, when doing so, he falls into the predictable pattern of idealising the decades before the 1980s as a golden age of big government and social democracy. This represents a lack of appreciation for the obvious fact that the world has changed irreversibly since the 1970s – economically, culturally and ideologically – and it would be hard to claim that it has only been for the worse. Thus, whilst Moore manages to avoid being triumphalist about the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment, he is happy to rather uncritically eulogise the democratic socialism of the mid-twentieth century – once seen as a failure by the Left and the Right alike, it should be noted[[8]](#footnote-8) – showing once again that the politics of nostalgia is not the exclusive property of conservatives.

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1. C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford, 1962). Elsewhere, Max Weber, though unacknowledged, appears to provide much of the theoretical underpinning of the argument, as when Moore writes that the Protestant theology of Defoe’s era ‘aligned ethics with capitalism’ (109). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the 'Two Treatises of Government'* (Cambridge, 1969). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 36-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For an important but critical review, see James Tully, *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Contexts* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 71-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, for instance, Dan Edelstein’s recent *On the Spirit of Rights* (Chicago, IL, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800* (Oxford, 2000); Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French and American Enlightenment* (London, 2008 [2004]), pp. 131-46. Interestingly, the Labour prime minister Gordon Brown is a major admirer of the Himmelfarb, and has written the foreword to the British edition of her book (London, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Elsewhere, Moore aligns himself with Slavoj Žižek’s critique of charity (79). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, e.g., Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge, 1983), ch. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)