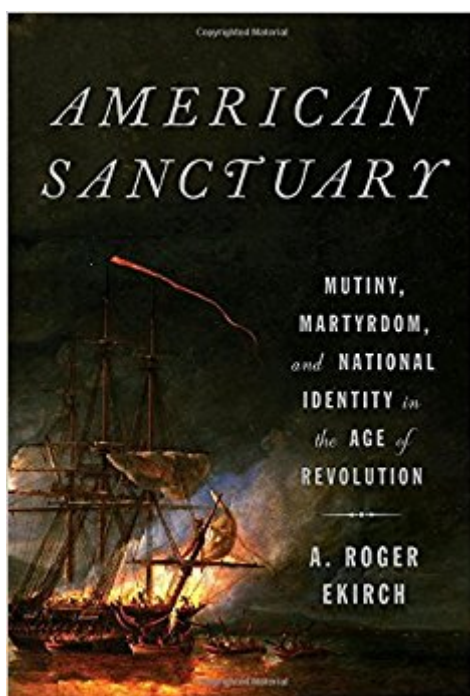


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American Sanctuary: Mutiny, Martyrdom, And National Identity In The Age Of Revolution



Synopsis

From “one of the most wide-ranging and imaginative historians in America today; there is no one else quite like him in the profession” (Gordon S. Wood) a dazzling and original work of history. *A. Roger Ekirch’s American Sanctuary* begins in 1797 with the bloodiest mutiny ever suffered by the Royal Navy on the British frigate HMS *Hermione*, four thousand miles from England’s shores, off the western coast of Puerto Rico. In the midst of the most storied epoch in British seafaring history, the mutiny struck at the very heart of military authority and at Britain’s hierarchical social order. Revolution was in the air: America had won its War of Independence, the French Revolution was still unfolding, and a ferocious rebellion loomed in Ireland, with countless dissidents already arrested. Most of the *Hermione* mutineers had scattered throughout the North Atlantic; one of them, Jonathan Robbins, had made his way to American shores, and the British were asking for his extradition. Robbins let it be known that he was an American citizen from Danbury, Connecticut, and that he had been impressed into service by the British. John Adams, the Federalist successor to Washington as president, in one of the most catastrophic blunders of his administration, sanctioned Robbins’s extradition, according to the terms of the Jay Treaty of 1794. Convicted of murder and piracy by a court-martial in Jamaica, Robbins was sentenced by the British to death, hauled up on the fore yardarm of the frigate *Acasta*, blindfolded with his hands tied behind his back, and hanged. Adams’s miscalculation ignited a political firestorm, only to be fanned by news of Robbins’s execution without his constitutional rights of due process and trial by jury. Thomas Jefferson, then vice president and leader of the emergent Republican Party, said, “No one circumstance since the establishment of our government has affected the popular mind more.” Congressional Republicans tried to censure Adams, and the Federalist majority, in a bitter blow to the president, were unable to muster a vote of confidence condoning Robbins’s surrender. *American Sanctuary* brilliantly lays out in full detail the story of how the Robbins affair and the presidential campaign of 1800 inflamed the new nation and set in motion a constitutional crisis, resulting in Adams’s defeat and Jefferson’s election as the third president of the United States. Ekirch writes that the aftershocks of Robbins’s martyrdom helped to shape the infant republic’s identity in the way Americans envisioned themselves. We see how the *Hermione* crisis led directly to the country’s historic decision to grant political asylum to refugees from foreign governments—a major achievement in fulfilling the resonant promise of American independence, as voiced by Tom Paine, to provide “an asylum for mankind

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Customer Reviews

Celebration for A. Roger Ekirch **AMERICAN SANCTUARY** *“A dramatic tale . . . A good, readable story in the mode of Nathaniel Philbrick’s nautical histories . . .*

Impressive.” • Thomas E. Ricks, *The New York Times Book Review* *“It takes a special gift in writing about the past to offer readers the sense of events unfolding through the deeds, decisions, policies and prejudices of dead white guys, as Mr. Ekirch has done . . . Ekirch navigates deep water in enumerating events, detailing arguments and tracing sequelae . . .*

Fact-based and argumentative, a real history like this may disarm modern

“patriots” who lard their pronouncements with pious references to our Founding Fathers . . . American Sanctuary is trenchant in its drawn parallels to our day.” • Philip Kopper, *The Washington Times* *“A gifted storyteller . . .*

absorbing . . . The thoroughness of Ekirch’s research, his attention to detail, combined with his considerable narrative skills, make American Sanctuary an engrossing, informative and enjoyable read.” • Ben McC. Moise, *The Post and Courier* *“Great new*

book: American Sanctuary by Roger Ekirch, about the battle that resulted in the US granting asylum to refugees. Very timely!” • Arianna Huffington, *Co-Founder of The Huffington Post*

“It is always gratifying to learn history you don’t know. In this case, the subject is a specific incident with which the vast majority of Americans are unfamiliar but revolves around one of the major controversies between the nascent American Republic and its former mother country, Great Britain, and questioned the fundamental American belief in the provision of asylum to the oppressed and persecuted.” • Stuart McClung, *New York Journal of*

Books *“Deeply researched and elegantly written . . . Gripping and timely . . . Ekirch is such a masterful storyteller that American Sanctuary reads like a mystery . . . The most surprising of this book’s many insights is that, after the acrimony of the election of 1800, Americans returned to—and even broadened—a common definition of American citizenship rooted in the concept of liberty.”* Kathleen DuVal, *The Wall Street Journal*

“Delves into the far-reaching ramifications of a violent 18th-century mutiny on the HMS Hermione, a British frigate . . . Ekirch builds a strong case that the politics informing the controversy were instrumental in the historical refusals of the U.S. to extradite aliens charged solely with political crimes. Ekirch, a meticulous historian who writes with flair, brings the political theatre of the 1800 election into full view . . . Persuasive . . . A complex and instructive tale.” Publishers Weekly (Book of the Week)

“Ekirch does an admirable job bringing to light this unfamiliar history, using it as a vehicle to describe the early state of American politics in postrevolutionary times . . . Readers will be treated to a concise, unique moment in the nation’s past that would have aftershocks for years to come.” Keith Klang, *Library Journal*

“Ekirch covers the murderous 1797 mutiny aboard HMS Hermione in all its drunken excess, tracks the worldwide hunt and capture of some of the perpetrators, and then offers a masterful dissection of the political consequences of the Robbins affair . . . The Robbins controversy featured arguments about alien rights, asylum, national identity, and the meaning and scope of American citizenship, all of which persist and all of which Ekirch handles with remarkable dexterity.” Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

“A dramatic narrative linking the stories of a fierce, bloody mutiny on a British war vessel in 1797 to a legal battle over extradition that rocked John Adams’s administration, shaped the nation’s developing party system, and contributed to Adams’s defeat in the bitter Presidential struggle of 1800 and to the election of Thomas Jefferson.” Bernard Bailyn, author of *The Barbarous Years*

“Roger Ekirch has done it again—another enthralling narrative that grows more important as the reader reflects upon its meaning.” David Hackett Fischer, author of *Washington’s Crossing*

“Although Roger Ekirch brings to this fascinating account of mutiny, martyrdom, and politics in the early American Republic the imagination and flair of a seasoned novelist, he is actually a superb historian; and the story he tells about America as the asylum for the oppressed of the world two centuries ago is not only true but timely.” Gordon S. Wood, author of *Empire of Liberty*

“One of the most important—and enjoyable—books I have read in many years . . . An extraordinary journey. Ekirch’s gripping narrative brings a largely forgotten episode to life,

illuminating its immediate impact on party politics in a polarized, revolutionary age and on the new nation's enduring identity as an asylum of liberty. Ekirch's brilliant reconstruction is a triumph of historical research and analysis.

• Peter S. Onuf, Professor of History at the University of Virginia

“Fascinating. Ekirch is a marvelous storyteller. Beautifully written and engrossing, a book that should be of interest, to the historian, and to the general public. An important addition to our understanding of early American history.”

• James Roger Sharp, author of *American Politics in the Early Republic*

“Packed with drama. Ekirch tells this story with rich and powerful prose, demonstrating how this saga of the mutiny on the *Hermione* helped Americans develop their national identity during the early republic.”

• Paul A. Gilje, author of *Liberty on the Waterfront*

A. ROGER EKIRCH was born in Washington, DC, and raised in Alexandria, Virginia. He is the author of *Poor Carolina*, *Bound for America*, *Birthright*, and *At Day's Close*. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Huffington Post*. He holds degrees from Dartmouth College and John Hopkins University, and has received a Guggenheim fellowship. He lives in Roanoke, Virginia, and is a professor of history at Virginia Tech.

A portion of American History from the late 18th century I had never heard of. Found it fascinating and very informative. Kudos to Roger Ekirch.. The book is making the rounds of the American Legion in South Miami and will end up in the Veteran's Hospital. Thanks.

excellent

Good read

A good book from one of my favorite periods of American history.

This is a thinking man's page turner. From the start, the reader is thrust into the brutal maritime practice of "impressment" via a tragic encounter between an American freighter and the British frigate HMS *Rose* near Cape Anne. (Note: Ekirch delightfully establishes a Patrick O'Brien-esque understanding of 19th century British naval culture and custom in quick fashion.) But this international incident is just an appetizer to the main course aboard the HMS *Hermione* years

later. And what a main course it is - a horrific mutiny that would leave even Thomas Hobbes agape by its human savagery. It is in the aftermath of this gory event that Ekirch truly shines at his craft. He dissects the complex moral, legal, and social ramifications of the up-rising with a surgeon's precision. The news of heavy-handed British retribution ran fast and deep into the delicate social folds of our young republic. In fact, it swayed the American political spirit right through the Presidential election of 1800 - providing a pivotal tailwind for the Democratic-Republicans (see: Thomas Jefferson), raising a national fervor against impressment, and lubricating the gears of war with the British that would only accelerate over the next dozen years. His arguments for the catalyst are clear and convincing. Upon finishing *American Sanctuary*, one is left with the profound impression that the crucible of history passed aboard the HMS *Hermione* on that September day in 1797 and Ekirch masterfully gives it the interpretation it deserves.

Professor Ekirch has uncanny mastery of detail and great skill as a researcher and scholar of early American history. This work undoubtedly will remain the definitive study of the mutiny on the *Hermione* and its consequences, for it is difficult to imagine anyone attempting to supplant this study with new findings or contrary interpretation. The bloody uprising on the British man-of-war HMS *Hermione* and the vicious slaughter of its officers, the military and political pursuit of the mutineers, and the international reaction to this event are presented in dramatic fashion. But few writers have the skill to examine and interpret the serious consequences this naval crime had upon the presidency of John Adams and his administration, and upon Jefferson and other political and ideological rivals of the Federalists. One of the leaders of the mutiny, Jonathan Robbins, an American citizen impressed into the Royal Navy, entered the United States and attempted to oppose British efforts to have him extradited. In a long-lamented decision from Washington, Robbins was released to the British, who promptly hanged him, without a hearing. Reaction to that decision did much to weaken Adams's chances of reelection and dramatized America's need to define itself as a sanctuary for the oppressed of the world. Few scholars can match Ekirch's skill in following the ensuing political and judicial consequences of the *Hermione* Affair for the American public and their leaders, down to our own day. The volume is handsomely bound and well printed, with many portraits, maps and plates capturing the spirit of this era. In the right hands, this narrative could well form the basis of an interesting movie script, a film for thinking audiences and an antidote for the noxious pap that Hollywood spoons out in recent years. We can only hope.

Roger Ekirch's book about a mutiny that has been largely forgotten, but that had major implications

for American politics, the Presidential election of 1800, and sanctuary of fugitives in the United States, is well written, and opens a window into a poorly understood era of American history. The book reads well and explains a part of the complex relationship between the United States and the British Empire in the first 50 years after the Declaration of Independence. During those years the Royal Navy manned its ships partially by impressing American sailors at sea. American courts were often sympathetic to the mutineers rather than to the British request for extradition. In the case of the Mutiny of the Hermione, the Captain and eight other officers were thrown overboard. Ekirch's tale of the mutiny and the aftermath is a compelling read.

This book is terrific. I have had an interest in the bloody mutiny aboard HMS Hermione since reading Dudley Pope's "The Black Ship" many years ago, but Pope focussed on the mutiny itself. Ekirch recounts in less detail what happened aboard Hermione, but concentrates on the effects of the mutiny and the British pursuit of the mutineers, especially Thomas Nash, aka Jonathan Robbins, on American politics, law, and Anglo-American diplomacy. From the presidential election of 1800, in which it was a major and perhaps decisive issue, to judicial cases and legislation as late as the 1980's, the mutiny and the fate of Nash/Robbins have had a continuing major impact on the United States and its self-image as a sanctuary for fugitives from oppression in other countries. Thoroughly researched and very well written, this book is must reading for students of the early national period of American history.

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