Yale

Source: BBC History Magazine {Main}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Thursday 1, April 2021
Page: 82,83
Area: 922 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 89865 Monthly
Ad data: page rate £3,575.00, scc rate £0.00
Phone: 0117 927 9009
Keyword: Yale University Press

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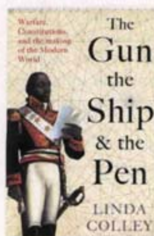
A sign of the times
A frieze in Washington DC's Capitol building depicts the signing of the US Constitution. Linda Colley's new book offers fresh perspectives on the role of constitutions in global history

GLOBAL

Documenting history

DAVID ARMITAGE hails an "enthralling, illuminating and inspiring" work of scholarship, which explains how the advent and spread of written constitutions shaped the modern world



The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen
by Linda Colley
Profile, 512 pages, £25

If you're building a navy from scratch, much can hang symbolically on what you call your ships. When George Washington received a list of names for new frigates in 1795, the *United States* came top, followed by the *Constitution*. (The *President* was third.) The first was predictable; the second, perhaps less so. The eponymous American document had been ratified only seven years before and was among only a tiny handful of similar instruments anywhere in force. As Linda Colley reminds us in her dazzling new book, constitutions were still rare and fragile in the late 18th century and would take another hundred years to blanket the world. She argues that what propelled the spread was war, not least naval war. In light of her findings, the USS *Constitution*'s moniker seems easier to explain, and even a bit overdetermined.

That striking link between warfare and lawfare in the history of constitutions is only the grandest of many fresh arguments in *The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen*. Colley conducts a vivid worldwide tour of "a contagious political genre" from roughly the Seven Years' War to the First World War, with glances both backwards (to Interregnum England) and forwards (to present-day South Africa and Russia). Her aim is to liberate constitutions from the national – indeed, often nationalist – silos to which they have usually been consigned. She asks not just what the documents said but what their composition and circulation, their imitation and veneration, can tell us about such matters as forming states, popular politics and the meanings of modernity. The result is one of the most enthralling, illuminating and inspiring works of global history in decades.

Again and again, Colley's connective, transnational approach reveals striking patterns and raises novel problems. Why were so many early constitutional entrepreneurs Protestants, and often Freemasons?

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Article Page 1 of 2

512449463 - ASTAGR - D217-1

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How did islands, from Corsica to Pitcairn, become the forcing houses of constitutions? Why were most constitution-mongers men, with the conspicuous exception of the Russian empress Catherine the Great? And how do we explain Britain's trade surplus in constitutions, energetically peddling them to others but never writing one for itself?

Traditional constitutional history avoided similar questions because it was more textual than contextual, focused on the meaning of provisions rather than constitutions' larger significance. In much of the world, study of constitutions long ago migrated from history departments to law schools but, with its rich circumstantial detail and panoramic scope, *The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen* proves that the history of constitutions is too important to be left to constitutional lawyers. And it's important, not least, because from modest beginnings constitutions came to matter to millions across the globe: "Every country has a constitution", the Chinese reformer Kang Youwei recalled rebellious Turkish soldiers telling their sultan in the 1870s.

Colley's first major example is the Corsican general Pasquale Paoli's constitution for his home island in 1755. Although this was short-lived, it pointed forward in salient ways: to constitutions as specifically written, more often printed, documents; to constitutional freelancing by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his ilk; and to grand experiments in remaking the world through law like those of another charismatic Corsican, born Napoleone di Buonaparte. It was no accident that Paoli and Napoleon were both men at arms. As Colley shows, when "hybrid warfare" on land and sea increasingly extended over oceans and continents, constitutions became a handy political technology for managing taxation, representation and mobilisation. Indeed, in the century after 1776, military matters appeared in almost 3,400 constitutional provisions. To paraphrase the historical sociologist Charles Tilly, states made war – and war made constitutions.

Wars generated reams of paperwork. That flood also carried constitutions into print and to ever greater prominence. Often dismissed by critics as merely "paper constitutions", they had to be printed to be durable and, once published, were eminently portable. Radicals in Calcutta read the liberal Spanish Cádiz Constitution of 1812 as keenly as Kang Youwei later followed Turkey's constitutional experiments. Collections and copies of constitutions travelled transcontinentally by sail and later steam in the decades between the Haitian Revolution and Japan's Meiji Restoration. "Of making constitutions there is no end," historian Hosea Ballou Morse intoned biblically in 1919, echoing observers like Edmund Burke, John Adams and the Macau merchant who marvelled in 1831 at the prodigious output of "constitution manufactories" from Spain to contemporary Saxony.

This is a big book in every sense: vast in scope, broad in ambition and rich in stories, convergences and insights. And yet, as Dr Johnson might have said, one wishes it even longer than it is. Colley covers Europe, the Americas, the Pacific (in a particularly original chapter), Africa and east Asia but she could have told us more about the many continental or global constitutions proposed over the centuries, about the various failed or abortive constitutions, especially within the United States, and even about the world's longest constitution, for its largest democracy, the Indian Constitution of 1950. These may be counsels of perfection, but they indicate how fertile her account of "the relentless progress across geographical space of single-document written constitutions" will be for future scholars and perhaps also for constitution-makers.

"This is a big book in every sense: vast in scope, broad in ambition, and rich in stories, convergences and insights"

Thomas Jefferson observed that every constitution should expire after 19 years. This turned out to be nearly spot-on: quantitative study of constitutions since 1789 finds they last an average of about 17 years. (Recall the joke about the reader asking a librarian for a copy of the French constitution: "Try the periodicals section.") Against all expectations, some constitutions, notably Norway's of 1814, have lasted a good deal longer. The hoariest, of course, is the US constitution itself. After the battering it's taken in the past four years, we could be forgiven for seeing a parallel with the sailing-ship that bears its name. The USS *Constitution* remains moored to this day in Boston harbour, a majestic relic of political and military pressures in the 18th century, though one ill-equipped to face the challenges of the 21st.

David Armitage is the Lloyd C Blankfein professor of history at Harvard University and author of *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas* (Yale)

JENNIFER BURNS

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