

*When London Was Capital of America.* By Julie Flavell. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. xii, 305 pp. \$32.50, ISBN 978-0-300-13739-2.)

In many respects this study achieves its aim: a vivid re-creation of London as the capital city of the British in North America, as told through their lives. In reclaiming these histories, Julie Flavell reasserts what British colonists treated as a given: that London was their

center of government, authority, and the arbiter of social life and fashion. Flavell opens with the world of Henry Laurens, busy in Charleston in 1771 with preparations to send his son Harry, age seven, to London. The history of the Laurens family in London occupies the next four chapters. Her subsequent chapters never entirely leave the Laurens's circle (in part a consequence of the closeness of the London American community), even though Flavell also introduces New Yorkers such as Stephen Sayre and numerous other remarkable colonial-born Londoners. This is both the strength and weakness of the book. Adroitly using a disparate range of sources (some of which could have been interrogated further and compared with others), the narrative is a splendid read, a compelling social history that illuminates the houses, streets, and taverns of eighteenth-century London. Topographical detail is exemplary. The book's title, however, is misleading: *When London Was Capital of America* is actually "Americans in London" or more accurately "Some Americans in London." We learn almost nothing about the economic history of London as the capital of America, all too little about the politics of the transatlantic relations of England and the United States, and, given the centrality of the social and familial histories, surprisingly little about communications. An important aspect of colonial history in this period, for example, is that the Eastern Seaboard towns communicated far more often with London than with each other, and that even some of the news and correspondence sent between cities such as Charleston and Boston actually arrived via London (where the time lag implications were significant).

Flavell's discussion of nonwhites is solid. Her attention to Scipio, a slave to the Laurens family and a fellow traveller to England, pays dividends with an intriguing and well-sourced study. The author's valedictory at the end of her telling of Scipio's history might be written more in eighteenth-century language than intended: "We wish him [Scipio, now restyled as Robert Laurens] well as he disappears from view" (p. 61). Her description of the Cherokees' visit to London is also well done. Determination not to lose sight of Scipio also means that he is remembered—even speculatively—at every

possible occasion (including on pages 125 and 243, not that it features in the index).

The portrait of the Laurens family intelligently uses earlier accounts, integrating them with some valuable new London sources. Mercantile connections are, however, underplayed. Henry, the paterfamilias, famously championed the Carolinas as "a commercial country," dismissing the efforts of those such as James Gadsden (who seems not to have been a London visitor) to bolster classical learning as a prop to civilization and civility in the New World.

Confident though the narrative is, its occasional slips distract the reader. There were several courts in Westminster Hall, not one (p. 85). Middlesex is not simply "a county on the outskirts of London" (p. 143); rather, it encompassed much of the fashionable West End that was beloved by South Carolinians and other Americans. "Troops" were not "the city's ham-fisted police force," or at least there were also ham-fisted constables (p. 145). The work of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens is quarried to add color at various points, but it does little for historical insight, and the exuberance of the writing sometimes grates, even if the society beauty Sophia ("the Divine") Baddeley was indeed "not the sharpest tack in the box" (p. 155).

James Raven  
*University of Essex*  
*Colchester, England*

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