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'We the People', *The Literary Review*, May 2010
[Review of *When London was Capital of America*
by Julie Flavell (Yale University Press 289pp £20)]

Before 1776 there was no such thing as American. The adjective merely described the contents of a swathe of British colonies in an arc running from Nova Scotia through to the West Indies. Animals and plants could be called American. So too could the indigenous populations. Mohawk and Cherokee chiefs visiting London in the 1760s were plainly not British. But most people living in the colonies regarded themselves as British citizens who happened to live on the other side of a great ocean. As a consequence, England in particular was 'home', and they claimed the liberties of their compatriots with the same enthusiasm that they aped their fashions.

For people who thought this way, London was naturally seen as their capital city. It was perhaps twenty times larger than Boston or New York. For colonials, as for Yorkshiremen or East Anglians, London was the ultimate destination for the ambitious and those with pretensions to gentility. Acutely aware of just how provincial Philadelphia could be, Benjamin Rush told his son that London was 'the epitome of the world. Nine months spent in it will teach you more ... than a life spent in your native country.' There, colonials would acquire 'the polish, the something not to be expressed', which is 'only to be acquired by mixing with the world'.

Of course London had always had a strong community of men with commercial interests on both sides of the Atlantic. The trades in sugar and slaves made many a fortune. Now, particularly in the two decades before the outbreak of rebellion, traders were joined by colonials coming to London as long-term tourists. According to Julie Flavell, there were never fewer than a thousand of them. Such a number was not insignificant when it included many of those who would go on to demand independence. South Carolinians clustered around Berners Street and West Indians were to be found in Marylebone. By 1760, every colony had its own coffee house. These people were so proudly English that they imported potatoes into their colonies in order to be on a gastronomic par with their fellow citizens. Getting to London entailed six weeks of unpleasantness on the Atlantic crossing. The whole venture was not for the faint-hearted. But, once safely arrived, opportunity was everywhere. Some took advantage of the fact that England was 'the land of universities and schools'. In public schools and at Oxbridge, colonials mixed with the sons of a governing elite. Some married English wives or husbands. Some merely enjoyed themselves. In all contexts assimilation could not have been easier. True, some Londoners apparently expressed astonishment that not all colonials were black, but generally there was little friction. In terms of accent, dress and manner, colonials were accepted as Englishmen, which is what they wanted and what they were.

Flavell makes the point by concentrating on the experiences of particular colonials in London. Henry Laurens, English to the core, would nevertheless go on to lead rebellion in South Carolina. He was pleased that his sons would acquire good manners, appalled that mixed marriages were paraded on the streets of London, and irritated by the loss of a slave when the English courts decided that no one could be taken out of the country against their will. Even so, he counted his two years in London well worth the trouble and expense.

Stephen Sayre was of a different stripe. Born into a poor family on Long Island, he decided early in life that he could not 'bear the thoughts of living in America or starving in England'. For him, the capital presented endless opportunities for a good-looking man to live by his wits. He survived on the largesse of susceptible women and by following business practices that came close to fraud. He rose remorselessly through the ranks of the City's community, ending up as London's Sheriff. His career mirrored that of many an Englishman on the make.

But the doyen of the London-living colonials was Benjamin Franklin. Seventeen years of residence made his house in Craven Street a magnet for American visitors then and now. He was awestruck that in 'this little island', every neighbourhood contained 'more sensible, virtuous and elegant minds, than we can collect in ranging one hundred leagues of our vast forests'. He knew

parliamentarians, and was indeed offered a seat in the Commons. The Royal Society welcomed him into their fraternity and Oxford gave him an honorary degree. For most of his life, Franklin could be regarded as one of the most successful Englishmen of his generation.

So why did America rebel? The answer was simple. Laurens, Sayre and Franklin protested about George III's behaviour precisely because they felt that their English rights were being trampled on. In the 1760s, they supported the cause of John Wilkes and other Londoners who felt the same way. Crucially, therefore, it is a great mistake to see the War of Independence as a war between American and British. Rather it was a civil war, with Englishmen and colonials divided on both sides of the Pond. Flavell's emphasis on this point is invaluable.

Civil wars have terrible costs. Laurens became a rebel, even though one of his 'Pall Mall friends' was Thomas Hutchinson, the last royal governor of Massachusetts. His eldest son died fighting with Washington, while his brother and youngest son stayed in London throughout the conflict. Benjamin Franklin, after trying his hardest to find a peaceful solution, joined the rebellion, while his son, William, became a leading loyalist. This well-researched and enjoyable book makes the case for seeing the War of Independence as a squabble among the English. Since only the French and Spanish were likely to benefit from such a squabble, it was a silly war. Just how silly the war was is demonstrated by the thousands of American tourists who still come to London looking for a kind of home.