

“Owing to the Books I Have Lately Read”: Scottish Travelers Observe America in the 1770’s

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William Mylne complained from America in 1773 that his passage from Britain had been much dearer than he had calculated on, “owing to the books I have lately read.” He was not the only Scot during this critical juncture in Anglo-American relations to lament the accuracy or usefulness of available knowledge about America. Indeed, the modern historian must take into account the fact that the information circulating between Scotland and America in the eighteenth century included ideas about the two countries themselves. It was not just the flow of knowledge, but the nature of this aspect of it, that helped determine the somewhat paradoxical relationship between these two British provinces.

This paper studies the accounts of eight Scottish travelers to America during the 1770’s. If, as Ned Landsman has said, provincials such as Americans and Scots defined themselves more consistently as Britons than did those at the center of empire, then the 1770’s—when Americans began the process of questioning, then throwing off, their British identity—are crucial to the study of Scottish perceptions of their place in the empire. Despite the commonalities of provincial culture, many Scots in America remained loyal to the British government. How did travelers to America view not only the unfolding political (and then military) situation, but also America itself and its inhabitants?

The arguments this paper makes are twofold: first, that many of the observations made by Scots fit neatly into the mainstream of comments made by English travelers to America. As a whole, this commentary tends to define America as a place outside of normal definitions of the British nation. Secondly, America in this case could become a backdrop against which Scots defined their own Britishness—the “Other” that provoked self-definition. This was often accomplished in subtle ways, as through use of the signifiers “English” and “British,” and reveals the absorption of some English mores into a British identity.