Nicole Eustace
1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism
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In 1775 Samuel Johnson pronounced, “Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.” Boswell, clarifying the remark years later, qualified it: Johnson “did not mean a real and generous love of our country, but that pretended patriotism which so many, in all ages and countries, have made a cloak of self-interest.”1 In 1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism (2012), Nicole Eustace, an associate professor of history at New York University, sets out to reveal the origins of the emotion-fueled patriotism that greeted America’s second war with Great Britain, and in the process finds both authentic love of country and a few scoundrels. She analyzes the patriotic rhetoric of the Democratic-Republicans of James Madison’s administration to outline a cultural history of patriotism: “Love of country is not a timeless and unchanging concept. Americans of the early republic drew on love in support of the war in culturally specific and politically revealing ways” (56). Echoing Benedict Anderson’s influential thesis by seeing the nation as an “imagined community,”2 she declares that her aim “is to begin to understand just why such a mixture of patriotism and romance proved so peculiarly potent” (258–59). She concludes that this hybrid patriotism was indeed a cloak for national self-interest, arguing that the war was “fought for something that looked a lot like imperialism” (225). But pro-war patriotism struck a popular chord, claims

Eustace, because most Americans had a vested interest in expanding U.S. territory and increasing its population. To them reproduction and land acquisition were the essence of freedom.

One of a host of books published to coincide with the war’s bicentennial, 1812 marks a resurgence of interest in what many have called a “forgotten war.” A spate of recent books seeks to bring it to remembrance, including works on various facets of the conflict and biographies of key figures. Further, historians who once looked to the Revolution for America’s origins have been increasingly drawn to the early republic to seek the genesis of national political, social, economic, and cultural trends.

Author of the well-received *Passion is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (2007), Eustace is a historian of emotion, a subfield of cultural history that sees feelings as the internalization of cultural values and norms. Historians of emotion study continuity and change in human emotion over time and analyze the language past cultures have used to describe it. In 1812 in particular, Eustace is concerned with the patriotic discourse about the war and the emotional response to that discourse, and the role both played in creating American nationalism. Patriotism, she argues, is a form of love, something one feels. The five chapters of 1812 comprise what is essentially a collection of microhistories. She unpacks layers of meaning embedded in these case studies to highlight the intersections between emotion, politics, and media on the one hand, and ideas about citizenship, gender, race, and family on the other.

For Eustace, what began as a conflict over naval rights became a kind of cultural event that tested the “strength and meaning of American patriotism in a nation...”
torn by sectional and political factionalism” (xiii). In her telling, Republicans of the era hit on a winning maxim—that strong emotions influence judgments more effectively than rational arguments or successful policies. War supporters used “the public prints” (xvi) as well as other popular media formats to sell the conflict to readers, attempting to rouse fear and making emotional appeals to patriotism, repeating the “party line” until it became the dominant interpretation of the war.6 The message the press and Republican supporters pitched, Eustace shows us, was that the war was about procreation and family formation—love, lust, marriage, and children. War supporters exploited a wide range of media and genres, including novels, plays, captivity narratives, speeches, sermons, broadsides, and songs, to manipulate how people felt about and experienced the war.

In the first and perhaps strongest chapter, “Celebrating Love, Liberty, and Progeny,” Eustace argues that Americans perceived population as the basis of the nation’s strength. The framing vignette centers on divergent British and American interpretations of Thomas Malthus’s *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798). According to Malthus, unrestrained population growth not only exhausted food supplies, causing famine and suffering, but unchecked growth was also a moral evil that fueled territorial aggression, and, in America’s case, led to the dispossession and destruction of Indians. Americans rejected the latter part of Malthus’s thesis, Eustace shows, substituting the pervasive “folk wisdom” that unchecked reproduction was a sign of personal and national success and that population and power were linked. Eustace marshals the writings of various Americans, such as Benjamin Franklin, Parson Weems, and Thomas Jefferson, all extolling the virtues of large families and population growth. Most notably, publisher Hezekiah Niles not only expunged Malthus’s critique of U.S. expansionism from his 1811 American edition of *Essay on the Principle of Population* but also silently inserted a ringing endorsement of Manifest Destiny. The pursuit of happiness articulated in the Declaration of Independence included, to most Americans, the inalienable right to marry and the freedom to reproduce. Eustace then characterizes free trade, sailors’ rights, and sovereignty—typically cited as causes for the war—as mere smokescreens for larger American ambitions: British territory in Canada and Natives in the Ohio Country and in the southeast blocked the national imperative of westward expansion. Polemicists supported this imperative by creating a patriotism modeled on romantic love and sexual attraction, which would both motivate national action and stand in for a lack of ethnic nationalism. Women were expected to participate in this culture of “ardent patriotism,” but only as alluring yet virtuous vessels of desire. They were to give men something to fight for and to reward them with sexual pleasure once they were married. Only within the confines of a matrimonial bedchamber was this patriotic, romantic ardor legitimate, because it supported large families that increased the nation’s strength.

In chapter 2 Eustace builds her argument of emotion around the court-martial of General William Hull, the American commander who surrendered Detroit in 1812. As she recounts, pro-administration critics accused Hull of cowardice for his failure to maintain the “emotional ardor” of his troops. Hull was clearly a scapegoat and the court-martial a partisan show-trial designed to deflect criticism from failed Republican policies, she shows. Pitted against Hull in the proceedings was Colonel Lewis Cass. For Eustace this confrontation represents an important cultural shift as well as generational differences in attitudes toward emotion. A member of the Revolutionary generation steeped in classical republicanism, Hull was confident that elites like himself governed their passions, while Cass, part of the younger generation that came of age after the Revolution, was influenced by the democratic ideals of Jeffersonian Republicans. Human nature was supposed to be subject to powerful emotions. Eustace concludes that Hull was popularly blamed for the loss of Detroit because of “the Nation’s embrace of the emotional” (71). This account is the best articulation of her argument on the nature of emotion, and it dovetails with what historian William M. Reddy elsewhere calls “emotional regimes” or dominant norms of emotional life.  

Chapter 3 examines propaganda about impressment. War rhetoric emphasized that the conflict was fought to free lovelorn sailors torn from their wives and families, rather than in support of more blatantly imperialistic U.S policy. Equating love with liberty, Eustace argues, Americans saw selecting a spouse as an exercise in democratic self-determination. Crafted by “politicians determined to maintain power” (79) and to actively shape public perceptions, this rhetoric required willful blindness to the expansion of slavery and the conquest of Indian lands, which had become official U.S. policy. Propaganda depicted impressment as clear evidence of British tyranny and injustice, causing disruption and heartache—because it separated families.

Eustace asserts in her well-argued fourth chapter that “U.S. residents believed that gaining control of North America would give them a celebrated place ‘in the history of the western world,’” and that “Indian rights were ‘forfeited’ to, not violated by, the United States, implying that Indians deserved to have their lands confiscated in retaliation for crimes against humanity” (146). Demographics were a form of warfare against Indians and American wombs were weapons; population expansion enabled national might and enacted divine intentions. To Americans, the clearest proof of British opposition to liberty was the willingness to employ “savage” Indians against American civilians during wartime. Killing Tecumseh and other Indians who resisted American expansion thus became a way of preserving American women, families, and communities. This rhetoric is clearest, Eustace argues, in captivity narratives, the quintessential early American literary form. Anti-Indian rhetoric in this genre demonized and dehumanized Indians in order to “evoke maximum loathing” (124), promote war, and justify expansion. Indians were depicted as disrupting American civilization by hoarding land that whites could use, thus preventing them from populating the continent.

7. While Eustace never uses the term, her constructions are analogous to Reddy’s in Navigation of Feeling, 129.
Focusing on slavery, race, and families, the last chapter shows how early opponents of slavery echoed pro-war arguments over impressment, contending that slavery undermined marriage and families. The issue could have cost Republicans the moral high ground, given the reasoning behind their pro-war arguments. For, if Britain had no right to impress American citizens, what right did U.S. slaveholders have to enslave blacks? Republican apologists made the specious argument that impressment was worse than slavery. Yet, because of America's commitment to slavery, Eustace shows that blacks had little reason to remain loyal to the United States. Further, the potential for rebellions made slavery a liability during wartime. But precious few white Americans advocated freedom or equality for blacks as a solution. Again, sex and reproduction ultimately framed American discussions: frightened white men feared that slaves would use British successes as an opportunity to rebel and rape white women. Throughout the war, Eustace shows, American writers delighted in tales of British, black, and Indian sexual savagery and juxtaposed them repeatedly with American gallantry.

In her conclusion, Eustace contends that the War of 1812 was a series of defeats and embarrassments for the United States. But in Republican rhetoric this trend was reversed by the miraculous last-minute victory at New Orleans in January 1815. Americans finally had cause to rejoice, for the nation's men had protected their homes, wives, and sweethearts from the British, depicted in the press as villainous rapists, she shows. Republicans, now redeemed, expanded their power and influence and enacted their vision for America, creating an expansionist, democratic, slave-owning republic. Marshaling America's patriotic spirit was the central achievement of the war, Eustace concludes.

While Eustace's narrative of American perceptions of the war deserves serious consideration by scholars of the early republic, especially cultural historians, it fails to take up several important cultural-historical themes. Surprising, for instance, is the lack of any discussion of Romanticism in 1812, even though at points her terms “ardent patriotism,” “emotional ardor,” and the “culture of ardor” seem to parallel the European cultural and intellectual movement that rejected Enlightenment rationalism, instead privileging the heroic achievements of individuals and artists who celebrated the primacy of feeling, bravery, and the epic nature of “national” destinies. Apparently seeing no similarities between America and Europe, Eustace instead argues for American emotional exceptionalism.

More significant is her lack of a sustained investigation of the influence of ideas about masculinity and honor on war rhetoric. While she certainly acknowledges the importance of gender and sex to her thesis, she universalizes manhood where she needs to historicize it. She argues that women, non-whites, and non-voting white men were all part of an enlarged public sphere. Yet her sources are not just gendered, they are also prescriptive, authored by elites subscribing to an idealized vision of hegemonic

8. See David Aram Kaiser, Romanticism, Aesthetics, and Nationalism (Cambridge, 2004); and Serhiy Bilenky, Romantic Nationalism in Eastern Europe: Russian, Polish and Ukrainian Political Imaginations (Stanford, Calif., 2012).
manhood, to the exclusion of all other masculinities. War discourse was not only a commentary on a new emotional regime, as Eustace contends. It was also an affirmation of white, propertied manhood and a reclaiming of national honor, as historians argued more than a decade ago—including Dana Nelson in *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (1998) and Mark E. Kann in *The Gendering of American Politics: Founding Mothers, Founding Fathers, and Political Patriarchy* (1999), and more recently, to a lesser extent, Rosemarie Zagarri in *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early Republic* (2007). Defending the country was presented as a collective defense of the nation’s manhood. That Eustace never fully discusses the part that honor played in the construction of elite male life is a serious omission. Critics, especially Bertram Wyatt-Brown in *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (1982) and Joanne Freeman in *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (2001), chronicle the influence of the era’s honor culture on politics and argue that it served as a guiding cultural precept for men, northern and southern. Even Eustace’s discussion of a postwar satire entitled *The Adventures of Uncle Sam in Search after His Lost Honor* (1816) sidesteps any consideration of honor. And it was not just for elites, as Elliot Gorn showed almost thirty years ago in his seminal article on fighting in the southern backcountry. In the fifth chapter of *1812*, Eustace fails to bring up working-class constructions of masculinity or honor in relation to the 1813 murder of two Native Americans, Nicholas Crevay and his wife, by two white factory workers Crevay had publicly humiliated by besting them in a wrestling match. She reads the incident only in relation to marriage.

Eustace’s innovative interpretation invites comparison with the most significant recent reappraisal of the war, Alan Taylor’s *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, and Indian Allies* (2010). Both emphasize issues of loyalty, citizenship, and national allegiance, and refreshingly focus on the less-studied western theater of the war. Both also agree that, despite New Orleans, the war was a string of military disasters for America, and that the war’s chief objective was territorial expansion. Eustace, however, argues that Americans united behind pro-war Republican discourse, while Taylor, perhaps more convincingly, posits that America’s lack of mili-

9. Scholars describe competing models of masculinity, each affected by such variables as class, ethnicity, religion, and race, and defined in relation to a culture’s dominant model of maleness or “hegemonic” manhood. See R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, Calif., 2005).
tary success showed not how united Americans were but how divided—leading him to characterize the conflict as a virtual civil war that revealed deep fault lines in American society. So while discourse and perception are the heart of the matter for Eustace, telling the untold story behind the rhetoric is paramount for Taylor—especially from the understudied Canadian and Atlantic perspectives. In his telling, local, regional, and ethnic allegiances trumped nationalism, while Eustace argues the reverse, relying on rhetorical evidence. Taylor does not deny that the new “emotional regime” described by Eustace played a part in the war, but he sees it as among the problems hampering American military readiness. He depicts the overly emotional behavior of the American officer corps, highly sensitive to perceived slights of honor and prone to bickering and dueling, as sowing division and limiting the army’s effectiveness.12 But was the War of 1812 a civil war as Taylor contends, or was America in fact united by a patriotic commitment to love, reproduction, and expansion, as Eustace claims? Eustace argues that political and social division was precisely why Republicans equated national allegiance with marital love, which they claimed was the root of all other loyalties: family, community, region, and ultimately nation. All Americans identified with wartime patriotism partly because, other than devotion to family, precious little else united them. Eustace’s 1812 is an important contribution to both our understanding of the War of 1812 and the cultural history of the early republic. Her emphasis on expansionism and the rise of nationalism in the United States, cloaked in a discourse of reproduction and family formation, is compelling, even if the war was—as Taylor contends—divisive.

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