



# **Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution**

*Simon Schama*

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## **Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution** Simon Schama

*Rough Crossings* turns on a single huge question: if you were black in America at the start of the Revolutionary War, whom would you want to win? In response to a declaration by the last governor of Virginia that any rebel-owned slave who escaped and served the King would be emancipated, tens of thousands of slaves -- Americans who clung to the sentimental notion of British freedom -- escaped from farms, plantations and cities to try to reach the British camp. This mass movement lasted as long as the war did, and a military strategy originally designed to break the plantations of the American South had unleashed one of the great exoduses in American history.

With powerfully vivid storytelling, Schama details the odyssey of the escaped blacks through the fires of war and the terror of potential recapture at the war's end, into inhospitable Nova Scotia, where thousands who had served the Crown were betrayed and, in a little-known hejira of the slave epic, sent across the broad, stormy ocean to Sierra Leone.

## **Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution Details**

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**Simon Schama**

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# **From Reader Review Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution for online ebook**

## **Bill says**

This 2006 National Book Critics Award history covers the period from shortly before the Revolutionary War to 1847. Schama notes the hypocrisy between the Declaration of Independence and reality. Liberty did not apply to slaves and free blacks.

During the Revolutionary War the British promised that any slave crossing over its lines and agreeing to help their cause would be freed. Thousands of slaves crossed and were freed. The question after the war was what to do with these newly freed people? Schama follows that fate of many. At first, the British arranged to have them shipped to Nova Scotia. Later many from Nova Scotia were shipped to Sierra Leone, rough crossings.

At the time of the Revolution slaves and freed blacks were horribly treated in England and especially in America. Many blacks believed if they could somehow set foot in England they would be freed. Sadly, that was not the case. British law provided no black could be transported from England to slavery.

Slave holders, of course, argued for continuation of the practice. Most Englishmen agreed or were indifferent. In America, there were few abolitionists except Quakers. There were, however, a few Englishmen who worked to improve conditions and finally to make slavery illegal. One of these men was Granville Sachs. He was responsible for the "no transport" ruling and later the founding of the colony in Sierra Leone.

Another was John Clarkson. His brother and a few others including Wilberforce, recognized the impoverished condition of the blacks in Nova Scotia. A combination of poor and rocky soil, cold weather and discrimination threatened their existence. John was sent there to convince the blacks to move from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone. The Nova Scotia blacks at first distrusted him for good reason; their impoverishment was caused by whites. After six months Clarkson was able to obtain their trust. Over 1,000 agreed to follow him to Sierra Leone. This required 15 ships. Clarkson developed strict guidelines describing how the blacks should be treated, as passengers, not slaves. The fleet sailed from Halifax shortly after New Year's Day, 1787. Once the coast was cleared, the ships ran into severe winter North Atlantic storms but finally arrived in what would become Freetown, Sierra Leone. After landing many died due to lack of shelter and the onslaught of tropical weather, especially rains.

A Sierra Leone company was founded and John Clarkson became its head in Sierra Leone. There were whites on the sailing from Nova Scotia and more arrived from London. Clarkson found that they were a problem because they treated the black settlers as servants, refused to perform hard work and many were drunk.

After years of hard work the settlers created a thriving village. Clarkson, who was younger than 30, returned to England to be married. His successors were strict and unlike Clarkson and the settlers, did not believe they were capable of self-government. This caused many ill feelings, petitions, Clarkson's firing from the Company, and a rebellion put down by the Royal Navy.

Many more years passed and Freetown became a self-governing free city.

Today, Sierra Leone has an English speaking population of 6.5 million, a GDP of \$4.6 billion and its per capital income is \$760 annually. According to Wikipedia it is recovering from a civil war, is the eight lowest

country on the Human Poverty Index and suffers from endemic corruption. Not what Granville and Clarkson envisioned.

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## **Philip says**

No short review of *Rough Crossings* by Simon Schama could begin to do it justice. It is far too big a project, far too significant an achievement for any simple summary. It presents a momentous story, highly relevant to our own times, of partial emancipation for the enslaved. The book is not for the faint hearted. For a start there's almost five hundred pages of detailed historical narrative, several distinctly prickly characters to meet and many direct quotes from contemporary documents, complete with the writers' inconsistencies of spelling and grammar. And then there is the raw suffering that it describes. There is real human suffering here, real people who were wronged by others who perpetrated a crime for which they will remain forever unpunished. Balancing this, however, is optimism engendered by the idealism of those who campaigned and worked for freedom and justice, against the convenient populist bigotry of their time. But rising above all others are those whose personal histories are described. These are people who devoted their lives to the undoing of the wrongs that were done to them, who never lost faith in life's eventual ability to deliver justice, despite the repeated contradiction of experience. In the end, it's the enduring human spirit that seems to triumph, despite the lack of any obvious lasting victories. For all concerned, it's a struggle, has always been so and will probably remain so in the future.

*Rough Crossings* chronicles the politics, warfare, commerce and human experience surrounding the practical application of the campaign to abolish the slave trade. It was Gore Vidal who described several of the founding fathers of the United States as dedicated slave owners, eager to protect their investments. He thus questions their commitment to their own declarations on freedom and equality. Simon Schama provides much detail to support this theme.

He describes black soldiers fighting for the British, ex-slaves, escapees, collaborators and supporters who sided with the colonial forces. We follow some of these people to the not very hospitable but at least relatively vacant lands of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. And then, via the campaigns and vision of Granville Sharp and the active management of John Clarkson, we follow the development and enactment of a truly magnificent project. The abolitionists, not for any convenience associated with the idea of merely "shipping them back home", but born of a sincere pursuit of freedom and autonomy for human kind, suggest that freed slaves might settle in Sierra Leone and there establish an autonomous, modern and self-supporting state. Not all goes to plan, of course, but then whatever does when idealism is realised? But the plan comes to fruition and communities sail the ocean to establish themselves in warmer climes on West Africa's shore.

An observation offered late in the book will be permanently etched in this reader's memory. The first women ever to participate in electing the government of a modern state were black women in Sierra Leone in the 1790s. *Rough Crossings* is worth reading for that revelation alone, for it is not the fact itself but the assumptions of the protagonists that led to it that is truly fascinating. How things came about, the motives of those involved and the energy with which they pursued their ideals is the real story, the enduring fascination.

There is far too much in Simon Schama's *Rough Crossings* to review. There are finely drawn biographies, moving stories of human interest, political posturing and analysis, and a complete history of a commercial enterprise based on idealism. The only advice is to read the book, but also to take time along the way to

reflect on what is described, to imagine what issue of our own time would be as politically risky as the applied idealism of these eighteenth century anti-slavery campaigners. And then follow that with any attempt to empathise with the experience of the cargo, whatever the direction of or motive for its transport.

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### **D.J. Cockburn says**

Schama follows the fortunes of slaves who fought for the British against the Revolutionary United States through the conflict itself, their subsequent resettlement in Nova Scotia and their recruitment to a model colony in Sierra Leone. It follows the lives of vastly different people, from the loyalist militias of the War of Independence to the abolitionists who opposed slavery in Britain to the shipmasters who betrayed the loyalists by selling them back into slavery. In spite of its broad scope, it remains extremely readable and places the many larger than life individuals who played a part in the story are always at the centre of the narrative.

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### **Martin says**

This book subverted my expectations. The author eschews explanation of the slave trade, so I am still looking for a good book about Britain getting rich off of rum, sugar and slaves. I really don't recall much time spent on the American Revolution either. The book ultimately becomes the story of two British men and the former slaves they encounter. First we meet Granville Sharp, a late 18th Century civil servant who takes up the cause of Jonathan Strong, a slave who suffered horrific treatment from his master. Sharp becomes a great defender of Negroes and is one of the early British abolitionists. Then we switch gears and focus on the black loyalists who fled to Nova Scotia after the American Revolution. With the help of Lt. John Clarkson, many were able to return to Africa and found Sierra Leone. The author portrays Clarkson as a compassionate and clear-headed at the beginning of the journey, but on the verge of a physical and emotional breakdown by the end. Because he saw the blacks as humans equal to himself, his witness to their condition was almost more than he could bear.

The author has a difficult task of telling compelling a story using whatever historical documentation survives. This is not difficult when researching British civil servants who kept thorough diaries and records of their lives. With the freed blacks he has a much more difficult job of trying to tell their stories that need to be heard, while there is so little documentation outside of an occasional census. These people appear and disappear from record like ghosts. The fact that the author does successfully manage to bring many of these people to life, indeed, rescue them from the ashes of history, is the greatest accomplishment of this collection of a few compelling tales from a difficult period of history.

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### **Jay says**

Rough Crossings is a fascinating topic that poses the challenging question to an American audience, "Would America's free blacks and slaves have been better off if America had lost the War for Independence?" America's exceptionalism may have been more limited than it has preferred to consider.

The book was informative in describing the evolution of British domestic policy as well as the British offers to free slaves if they found their way to British positions (offerend not entirely out of enlightenment but also

out of military advantage.) The book also interestingly discussed the willing departure of American blacks at the end of the war from the colonies to Nova Scotia and later the the British founding of Sierra Leone with both white and black settlers.

Unfortunately to me, I did not feel that the Simon Schama's narrative lived up to the promise of the topic. Though well-researched, including perspectives on individuals rarely discussed, I found his narrative to be tedious in places as well as difficult to follow the relationship of individuals to times and other people as the book moved from individual to individual too frequently in my opinion.

Overall, I was disappointed with book despite its informative sections and the topic. If 1/2 stars were available I would have split the difference between 2 and 3 stars.

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### **Ross says**

This is an interesting history of the transport of blacks from Nova Scotia to a supposedly new home in Sierra Leone, following the end of the American Revolution.

These were blacks, mostly slaves, who fought for the British in the revolution, in return for promises of their freedom and protection by the British government.

When the British lost the war these blacks and thousands of white loyalists were taken to Nova Scotia. In Nova Scotia all the promises to the blacks were ignored and they were treated as indentured servants, or even as slaves.

The transport to Sierra Leone was dreamed up by a couple of truly good-hearted men, but was seized upon by the normal type of men to profit from the blacks in Sierra Leone.

Just one more documentation of man's inhumanity to man.

I always have to laugh when I come across assertions by various do-gooders that humans are basically good. They should read "Man, the Killer Ape" by Desmond Morris.

Read again (June 2017) just to be sure the story is as sad as I took on first read. It is really more sad due to the nature of man. The author, who is a noted historian/professor, makes the point that in fact almost all human history is very sad.

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### **Coxy says**

Schama's argument - that the American War of Independence is turned on its head when seen through the lens of African Americans - is an interesting one. That is, whilst the white ex-European Founding Fathers argued passionately for liberty and freedom for all, what they actually meant was freedom and liberty for all white ex-Europeans. Indeed, much of the fight was to perpetuate the enslavement of African American slaves on the plantations in the South, because the British had already started to legislate against slavery (a cause championed by, amongst others, Graville Sharpe, who emerges in this book to be a great and interesting man). Tens of thousands of slaves fled their owners during the War, to not just the British lines but to Britain itself.

The second half of the book is about the ill-fated British colony of Freetown in Sierra Leone, set up as a Utopian community of ex-slaves, who were promised not just their freedom but the chance to set up their own laws, and elect their own (black) representatives. They are (inevitably) double-crossed by greedy, profiteering white officials, raided by French pirates, have their livestock eaten by ants(!), and harassed by

slavers.

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### **David R. says**

On the plus side, this book brings into focus a little studied topic (changes in English thinking about slavery from the 1770s to the 1830s and especially the foundation of the Free Sierra Leone colony) and puts into context such episodes as Lord Dunmore's War and the assault on the slave trade. Unfortunately, the author paints this one in such a way that American attitudes, behavior, and antislavery efforts are largely dismissed and English equivalents over-lauded (Schama spends little time on the horrifying slave experience on the English sugar islands). I'd recommend the read but the reader should be careful to understand Schama's prejudices and how they impact his narrative.

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### **Theo Logos says**

The myths we create about our past to edify our young and swell our national pride are nearly always noble and simple. History is much messier, often complicating our myths with inconvenient facts that ruin their simplicity and muddy their nobility. Simon Schama's book `Rough Crossings' is a case in point. It is the story of the slaves of the American patriots who were not included in the liberty that their masters fought for, or in the stirring phrases of the Declaration of Independence - slaves whose only path to liberty was to take up arms and fight alongside the British against their masters, and against the cause of a liberty that would keep them in bondage. It is a most interesting and disturbing story that neither begins nor ends with the American Revolution.

`Rough Crossings' actually contains three interlocking stories. It tells the story of Granville Sharp and Britain's abolitionist movement, both before and after the Revolution. It relates the history of the slaves seeking their freedom by fighting for Britain in the Revolution, and finally, follows the fate of those freed slaves after the Revolution, first to Nova Scotia and London, and later to a colony in Sierra Leone. While the details of the three tales often widely diverge, each is necessary to explain the others, and work together as a greater whole. And while the action of the slaves in the Revolution serves as a catalyst for the story, it receives less attention than does the story of the work toward abolition in Britain or the post war fate of the slaves freed by their service for Britain.

I found `Rough Crossings' to be fascinating but uneven. At times it was a gripping, page-turning read, but it could abruptly shift into a numbing morass of plodding detail. Schama would often drop the thread of one story, move on to another matter, and not return to pick up the dropped thread for many, many pages, creating a disjointed reading experience. He was at his best when writing about such intriguing characters as Granville Sharp, the gentleman musician who made the abolition of slavery in Britain his life's work; Lieutenant John Clarkson, the young navel officer who became the determined protector of the rights of the freed slaves and the governor of their colony in Sierra Leone; or Thomas Peters, freed slave and sergeant in the British Black Pioneers who became a impassioned advocate for his people. It is these and other fascinating characters into whom Schama breaths such life that are the heart of his book, and the best argument for reading it. `Rough Crossing' is history as important as it is neglected. I recommend it both to illuminate the dark, neglected aspects of the history of the American Revolution, and as an intriguing history

of British abolition.

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## Julie says

In this work, Schama ascribes blame to all sides when presenting his case on the efficacy of the abolition of slavery: the British promised much, in a high-handed, and unpardonable arrogance, which they passed off as scrupulousness and caution; the Americans were drowning in their own irony: freedom and equality at any cost, except if your skin was dark, and somebody owned you.

Abolitionism, it turns out, was a veritable push-pull of conscience and convenience: occasionally, if it was economically convenient to change a law or two, then the British could see their way clear to bestirring themselves; mostly, they were comfortable enough with the appalling injustice of it all to let their consciences prick them, now and then. They could live with the minor moral discomforts it would seem.

Schama introduces us to a number of pioneers of Abolitionism, both British and American, as well as African American (knowing I use the word anachronistically) slaves who tried to effect freedom and equality, in its truest sense. A handful of minor heroes emerge from the obscurity of history; but the names that stand out most prominently in this work are Granville Sharp, Thomas Peters and Lieutenant John Clarkson.

On a certain level, this is a very compelling book presented in such a way that history ebbs and flows between British and American, and the interconnectedness of all things is a marvel to see. On another level, it is also one of the most frustrating books I've ever read. Not only does Schama enjoy painting a picture, but he draws it in technicolour. It is so dazzling at times, that you are blinded.

It is obvious that Schama has a great facility with the language, and that he loves drama. He also over-writes everything. It seems to me, he would make a great novelist, an astounding purveyor of historical fiction. As a work of literary art, this book is lovely; as a book of history, it falls short because one is too often distracted by the prose.

For instance:

*On Monday, the 22nd of June 1772 at 11 o'clock in the morning, all of London and beyond seemed to have come to Westminster Hall, spilling from the coffee-houses and taverns, the law courts and mercantile establishments, the shops and exhibition rooms, coming by carriage and sedan chair and horse and foot, from the trim new squares to the west and the clattering City streets to the east. Since 1740, the interior of the ancient Gothic chamber had been divided by an elaborate wooden screen. On one side were the two courtrooms of the King's Bench and Chancery; on the other, a vast public space, a field of stone where people stood, sat, perused the shops at the walls and, when judgement was to be given, halted and listened. Among that crowd this day were black faces who greeted Mansfield and Justices Ashton, Willes and Ashurst as the four long wigs passed through the screen and into King's Bench, carefully ascending the low steps where once the judges of Charles I had hectored the deposed king, and took their high-backed seats. Silver-Tongue appeared, for the moment, tongue-tied, uncharacteristically leaden, his habitual affability oppressed by the burdensome expectations of history. More than ever the hall seemed not merely a court of law, his court of law, but as it had been centuries before, the true curia regis, the court of the king and the kingdom. England glowered in a summer chill, and for once the Lord Chief Justice wore his learning moodily.*



Translation: Court in session with Lord Chief Justice Lord Mansfield presiding.

Long passages like this often interrupt the flow of history, quite literally in this case! The reader is lost in beautiful Dickensian passages that bear neither kith nor kin to the problem being discussed. In the end, it becomes a feat of endurance to stay on point, and to keep reading.

I think I might prefer it if Schama turned his hand to fiction, for he assuredly has the talent for it.

In the end, while I enjoyed digging for the kernels of truth, to some degree, I would have much preferred a shorter, more direct approach. In historical works, I also look for detailed footnotes and reading lists in which this work fell somewhat short as well. Most of the bibliography showed dates in the '80s and 90s, and while interesting, surely there is much that has been done more recently, perhaps by younger scholars, on this topic. It seems that Schama is stuck in a bit of a time capsule. ... (But, perhaps I'm wrong on that and would certainly welcome being corrected if that is the case.)

3 stars for a frustrating read. Recommended to those who have nerves of steel.

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### **Jkimballcook Cook says**

Fascinating story. As a lawyer I wanted more detail on the legal cases, but the story was well-told. Perhaps it was because I read this on an iPad instead of in print, but toward the second half/last quarter of the book, it began to be a bit of a slog. It felt a bit disorganized, like we were jumping around in the chronology, but without a clear topical thread to follow either. Maybe that's Schama's fault--as an art historian, I think he has a tendency to get so caught up in the drama of the story that he's telling that he forgets to provide clear road maps and organize the story in a way that makes sense. But maybe that's my fault for reading on an iPad.

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### **Miguel says**

Schama unabashedly, and provocatively, studies the past from a moral viewpoint. In *Citizens*, he lengthily propounds the thesis that the French Revolution's violence was inherent from the very start and was not a perversion brought about by Jacobin terror. In this book, he seeks to introduce a discordant note in the traditional narratives of the American Revolution: Yes, it was a step forward in the story of freedom, but, no, it was a step back for American slaves who rushed to British lines after the redcoats offered freedom in exchange for serving George III. A remarkable story that led some men and women from Africa, to the American colonies, to Nova Scotia, and finally to Sierra Leone told in an unapologetically literary style.

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### **Nathan says**

For such a fundamental topic in the founding of America, the execution leaves much to be desired. Schama shows that the British slave and anti-slave movements were essentially carried over to the colonies and to the United States, with relatively little change in manner or degree. While that notion might have interesting implications for a separate study, Schama is content merely to report the fact without comment.

That's a shame; his reporting is horrendously boring. His prose is stuffy, his characterization nonexistent, and

his narrative arcane and unsatisfying. Most of his information that I hadn't read elsewhere pertains to the legalities of slavery, but this is also the hardest part to read. Never an enthralling topic at the best of times, the sterile and convoluted droning of Schama's style makes it unbearable.

There are plenty of other books on the subject, and I imagine one mustn't look very hard to find one more accessible and with a shred of engaging narrative. I wish I had read one of those books, rather than this.

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## **Jerome says**

Another useful reminder that Americans like me shouldn't be too smug about being shining beacons of freedom throughout the world. Schama's book is ambitious, fascinating, and surprisingly easy to read.

Unmentioned in most American textbooks and popular histories, thousands of slaves and some free blacks took refuge with the British army and navy during the war. American slavery did much to unify British public opinion against the colonists, and it did much to unify colonial sentiment against the British. British plots, both real and imagined, to free colonial slaves played a huge role in galvanizing American opinion against the British. After the war, many slaves were transported to other British lands, especially to Nova Scotia. Schama details their hopes and their misery quite eloquently. Eventually, the tale focuses on the efforts of English abolitionists to establish a "homeland" for liberated American and British slaves in Sierra Leone. The English abolitionists are the central personages of the book, but the former slaves themselves are the most compelling figures.

An understanding of the American Revolution can't always be limited to Boston and taxes. The story of Virginian expansionism, the problems of colonial indebtedness, and colonial racism towards both slaves and Native Americans must also be told, and Schama does a good job at that. Particularly revealing are Schama's pages devoted to George Washington, whose slaves were as willing to run away to the British as most others. Inevitably, certain British generals who have been execrated in American history books emerge as more sympathetic and honorable than we expect. But at the same time, British troops did not want to alienate Southern colonists, and one slave rebellion was crushed by British troops.

The British Lord Dunmore's promise to free any slaves that escaped from the American colonists led George Washington to call him "that arch traitor to the rights of humanity." Has anyone read that in a school textbook? Didn't think so.

What Schama doesn't really touch on is that at no time – none whatsoever – did Great Britain ever have an official policy on what to do with the runaway slaves who flocked to the British lines. Schama needed to, at a minimum, acknowledge that the promise of "British freedom" was never official government policy. To the British, the promise of freedom made the slaves a political football in a bitterly contested war. This realization throws cold water on Schama's thesis - the British connection was, at best, shaky and never even officially acknowledged! But this doesn't really detract from the story, which is still quite compelling.

Still, one argument Schama made annoyed me. Eventually, the British Army left Charleston and Savannah after signing the Treaty of Paris in 1783. Many slave refugees remained behind, and instead of just going back to their old owners, many formed paramilitary organizations known as maroons. These settlements had always been present throughout the colonial South. Schama described one group in particular: "In 1786, three years after the Treaty of Paris had been signed, a band of some three hundred former slaves, trained in arms by the British during the war, were still operating as freebooting partisans on both sides of the

Savannah River.” Schama describes their village and their fortifications. This was classic maroonage, even if these blacks had been trained by the British (after looking at the footnotes, I think this is a claim of questionable veracity). These black Americans held a grudge against their former masters and were certainly willing to raid white settlements with impunity. It is historically inaccurate and misleading to assume they were anything other than slave maroons. Schama leads very briefly down another path, I suspect only to end a chapter with spectacular punctuation. He writes, “But to the blacks of the South they were something more. They were exactly what they had decided to call themselves: ‘The King of England’s Soldiers.’” Chapter over, moving on to a description of the evacuation of black refugees from New York City. I was enraged with this statement because it implied that these blacks were chiefly loyal to George III or even only existed to return British rule to what was now the United States. These former slaves were merely eking out an existence through banditry. They were black, refused to be slaves, and as such their options in southern society were quite limited. It is impossible to know why they named themselves “the King of England’s Soldiers,” but they probably used the name simply to be provocative or even to be ironic. I think the implication that these fugitives slaves were somehow loyal to the king (especially after they had been left behind by the British army) is simply Schama twisting information in an effort to raise hackles for dramatic effect. Academic history demands much more than this kind of soaring rhetoric.

I also wish I could have gotten a better sense of how many slaves actually fought with the British as a proportion of slaves in the colonies, and a comparison of how the Nova Scotia/Sierra Leone former slaves fared versus former slaves who lived elsewhere. I also wish Schama would have spent more time on the fact that almost side-by-side with Freetown a major port for the slave trade remained very active. The hypocrisy and split personality of the British Empire on slavery during this time is astounding.

While I found myself annoyed at times with Schama's frequent shifts from scene to scene, and some of his stylistic quirks bugged me (his capitalization of Certain Phrases was particularly obnoxious), in general I enjoyed the narrative. And other than what I mentioned already this book was superb. I would highly recommend it to any American with romanticized notions of our war for independence.

See also *The Forgotten Fifth African Americans in the Age of Revolution*

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### **Kate says**

This is book is a five for those who are fascinated by black history, or social political history of the late 1700s in Europe. Can't say I'd recommend it to the average reader, but for the historical reader it's great.

Covers the rise of concerns about slavery in Britain, the British use of black people as workers and soldiers in the American Revolution, and their subsequent emigration to first Nova Scotia, and then Sierra Leone.

Schama is, as usual, brilliant and the stories are varied: good men trying to do the right thing, callous people doing the simple thing, and people getting caught in between competing needs. This has many black voices represented, which is rare in writing of the period. Makes it vivid and real.

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### **Jim B says**

If you are interested in the Revolutionary War and think you know the story of what happened, *Rough*

*Crossings* offers you a chance to see the war from an important but usually unknown angle, and to see the issue of slavery in the world history narrative instead of just the Founding Fathers' struggle with forming a union and coming to terms with slavery.

I was amazed that I knew nothing about the British and their appeal to American slaves during the Revolution. Our histories always focus on the political debate of its legality -- nothing is said about the slaves hearing the talk of liberty, and the fears of the Founders about them being incited to want their own liberty. Nothing is said about Henry Washington, a former slave of George's, and his role in the war. Such information is laid out in a compelling and scholarly way (I highlighted some of the sources cited in at the end of the book -- usually I skip bibliographies).

The "after" story was at first just discouraging -- Nova Scotia was the usual story of promises unkept and black people despised and shoved aside. But the story picked up again with the idea of promising loyal (to the British) former American slaves land in Africa. I had never heard about the Sierra Leone Company and the amazing 28 year old John Clarkson. People who think it's all about politics and not about morality have never met a man like John Clarkson. His faithful Christian character created an environment where former slaves began to assert their rights to self-governance and political freedom!

I was familiar with the story of Wilberforce and the British abolitionists, but not enough to appreciate the chilling impact of the French Revolution. Fredrick Douglass in Britain was also a new area of information for me, and shone a spotlight on the very different way in which the British and American societies have dealt with racial problems. (That's not to say that there weren't plenty of evil people on all sides.)

I hope these cryptic references to topics that interested me will lead you to check out this book. If not, maybe the fact that it won the National Book Critics Circle Award will tell you that the book is not sensational or shallow. Here is a well written, needed-to-be-told history!

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## **Dylan says**

This book is a handful, expect to be at it for awhile.

History is turned on its head by this book, however when I say history I dont mean actual facts disproven, rather this IS factual history, just modern (American mostly) historys dont want to point out that huge numbers of there Black Slaves fled to freedom in the British lines, that long before the Civil War the British Empire (and others) were giving Blacks tracks of land, wages and freedoms there brothers and sisters in the America's could only dream about.

but the great thing about Simon's work is that its not all black and white.

It gives you a new look at things normal history leaves out, but it also shows that the men and women from every angle are NOT saints.

American, British, French, Free Black, African, they All have a shade of Black/White in there stories.

When you are done, movies like Mel Gisbon's "The Patriot" will be filled with egostical rants and prideful lies in your eyes because you know better now.

That is what you learn from this (huge) book, to never take anything at face value, to dig or to question, to ask "What really happened?"

Works like this, are made for such things...

5/5

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## **Carol Dobson says**

Well written and very insightful. It was very interesting that black people in the United States saw the British King as their enemy's enemy, and therefore their friend. Schama exposes the contorted logic of the 18th century, describing George Washington as calling Dunmore "that arch traitor to the rights of humanity" because he promised to free slaves, whilst those who kept them enslaved were heroes of liberty. Schama not only writes in a detailed, factual manner, but he also is very descriptive. I particularly liked the passage about a turkey vulture riding the thermals in the damp Virginian heat.

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## **Gumble's Yard says**

Interesting take on the campaign for the abolition of slavery.

The central contention of the book is that in the American War of Independence, the British were seen by the black community as representing freedom and liberty.

At one point Schama provocatively claims that it was only when it became clear that the British were prepared to arm slaves to fight against the colonial uprising in the North East that the political uprising over representation and taxes became a full fledged war of independence as the Southern plantation owners realised their whole economic system was under threat.

However, aside from this contention, the section focusing on the War is (a little like Schama's "A History of Britain" series, hard to follow at times, with lots of minutiae but little of the bigger picture and an assumption that the reader knows the subject under discussion already).

The second half of the book concentrates on the journey of the now freed slaves who did fight for the British to Sierra Leone (via Nova Scotia) including the role of key British abolitionists such as Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson (and the role played by his brother John as a father figure for the fledgling black community) as well as Thomas Peters – the first black politician in the white world. This section although too detailed is very interesting and well written.

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## **Elizabeth says**

Somehow I've not read Simon Schama yet. Now I have...and now I will have to live to be 125 to read his other books. He is a detailed, engaging author.

The subtitle of this book begins to give the reader an idea of what it is about...something vaguely alluded to in all the books I've read about the American Revolution. Slaves who came over to the British side and fought their American masters were guaranteed freedom. This gives a completely different complexion (ha) to the American Revolution. The white Americans (and some blacks) were fighting for their freedom from the British. And the black people (and some loyalists) were fighting the Americans on behalf of the British, who guaranteed their freedom. More complicated than one could believe.

This book follows many of the loyal ex-slaves through their travels to Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, with

many trials.

As usual, several men are outstanding in their fight against slavery...and many are not.

Who knew that Samuel Fraunces who owned Fraunces Tavern, important NY historical location, was black.  
Not me.

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