

LINDA COLLEY

... discusses a transatlantic career studying global history, British angst, and why constitutions matter



Linda Colley is Shelby M.C. Davis 1958 Professor of History at Princeton University. She was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1999.

You have been based in America for quite some time now. You were at Yale University between 1982 and 1998, and have been at Princeton University since 2003; in between, you were at the London School of Economics. Are there significant differences in how history is studied on the other side of the Atlantic? Is there an American way of doing history?

I don't think that there is a monolithic American way of doing history. I do think – and I'm not sure British-based historians of Britain always fully understand this (why should they?) – that if you do British Studies in the United States, it is a rather different discipline, because you are teaching it as a foreign subject. So, if you are a British historian

in the United States, you have got to work out how to make the subject comprehensible, attractive and pertinent to an audience that is becoming more and more diverse. I have many more Asian, Chicano and African American students now in 2016 than I did when I first started teaching at Yale in 1982, because of demographic shifts in the US and because the university system there has become, quite rightly, more variegated. So I tend to talk about the British past in wider contexts – not just European contexts, but imperial and global contexts – as a way of making the subject buzz a bit more.

Are American students at all interested in more insular British history?

Some of them are very interested and will do very detailed work for you. But I have many graduate students in the United States, and I have to get them academic jobs. I probably couldn't get someone a job if I had him/her writing a doctoral dissertation

1. Linda Colley, *In Defiance of Oligarchy: The Tory Party 1714–1760* (Cambridge University Press, 1982).
2. Jonathan Spence was elected a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy in 1997. Joseph Needham was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1971.
3. Edmund Morgan was elected a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy in 1978. David Brion Davis was elected a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy in 1992.
4. Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World 1600–1850* (Jonathan Cape, 2002; Pimlico paperback edition, 2003). The book is divided into three parts covering different geographical zones: Mediterranean, America, and India.

on, say, Robert Walpole's fiscal policies of the 1730s. That, actually, would be a very interesting topic, but it would likely be career suicide for an up-and-coming young scholar in the United States.

You yourself did start studying British history post-1700 – there was your book on the Tory party 1714–1760.¹ But your work acquired a much more international dimension as you moved on to the British imperial diaspora. Does being based outside the UK provide a perspective that helps with that more global outlook?

I think so. Going to the United States introduced me to different parts of the world and their histories to a greater degree. For example, going to Yale meant that I met the wonderful Chinese historian, Jonathan Spence; I had never previously met anybody who studied the Chinese past other than Joseph Needham at Cambridge.² Some of my best friends at Yale were great Americanists, like Edmund Morgan, John Blum and David Brion Davis.³ So I found myself learning a lot from different kinds of scholars, and that gave me new ideas for the topics I chose to write about.

For instance, *Captives* stemmed from, mundanely, a pizza lunch with another Americanist, John Demos.⁴ He was writing about captivity tales, and he commented that they were a purely American genre of the 17th and 18th centuries. I thought that really didn't make sense given the closeness of transatlantic connections, and that there must have been a captivity genre in Britain. So I hit the library catalogues and, of course, there was. That was the genesis of *Captives*, in which I spin together captivity narratives from three zones of British encounter in the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries. I don't suppose I would necessarily have thought of writing it had I not been in the United States.

Did the themes emerge from the literary sources that you found, or were you looking for themes in the sources when you turned to them?

A recurring method in the history I write is that I like doing close analysis of particular texts, but I also try to locate them in a broader context. Reading these extraordinary narratives by different kinds of captives gave me access to a lot of individuals who had been completely lost from the story. But finding out why and how they had become captives and what kind of captivities they endured also gave me

an entrance into the texture of British power – and British weakness – in different parts of the world at different times, and I found that intriguing. One can't read too much into these texts, and I embed them very densely in many layers of more conventional historical research. But I became interested in the vulnerabilities and compromises of empire, and not just in chronicling its growth and power in a Whiggish way.

Why were these narratives so compelling for contemporaries? What does it tell us about the Britons of that time that they loved reading this kind of tale?

Some of the most absolutely gut-wrenching texts were never published because the experiences were so dark and troubling – particularly some of the captivity narratives of military men who felt that they had been made to feel emasculated and/or placed in a position where customary notions of racial order were inverted. If therapy had existed at the time, they were doing the right thing: they wrote out their experiences!

With other narratives, if the captivity had a happy ending or could be contrived to have a happy ending – 'We were rescued by brave British soldiers or sailors etc.' – one can see why there would be an audience. But quite a lot of imperial episodes were extremely controversial at the time, so there were probably mixed readerships. I think people found these narratives gripping for some of the same reasons we find them gripping now. These are such far-reaching, violent and complex events, but they are contained within the experiences of an individual. That is something immediate and vivid that people can easily react to.

You make much use of these contemporary accounts of individual stories to explore the big historical narrative of Britain's global expansion. And you obviously do this to particular effect in *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: How a Remarkable Woman Crossed Seas and Empires to Become Part of World History*.

Oh, don't call it that! I fought against the use of that subtitle for the UK paperback edition. But, hey, I'm only the writer! The original hardback subtitle was *A Woman in World History*, and that is what it is about.⁵

Can you talk about the approach of using just one person to tell the story? Is there a particular way of writing a book like that?

I had always wanted to try biography. I like writing

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5. Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History* (Harper, 2007); *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: How a Remarkable Woman Crossed Seas and Empires to Become Part of World History* (Harper paperback edition, 2008).

different kinds of books, even though many of the curiosities running through them are the same. I knew I didn't want to write something conventional such as another biography of the younger Pitt or Benjamin Disraeli – fascinating though those topics are.

I also thought it would be interesting to write about a woman, because that side of the globalising world of the 18th century tends to be neglected. Even today, most self-describing global historians are male, and they often write about huge frameworks, tell very big stories, and their characters are mainly other men. I wanted to write something that was global history but in a different way.

Elizabeth Marsh represented an extraordinary challenge because she was not remotely an affluent woman. She was the daughter of a ship's carpenter. We have the narrative she wrote of her captivity in Morocco – the first published text in English by a woman on that country. Then there is the unpublished diary she wrote of her travels along the eastern coast of the Indian subcontinent in the mid-1770s – one of the very first narratives of this sort by a woman not accompanying her husband. But when I wrote the book, I had no letters by Marsh at all (since it came out, we have found a few). So I had to reconstruct her largely through the writings of others. It is not a book I could have attempted without the world wide web. It was this that led me to some of the sources out of which I could wrench details to fill out her remarkable and remarkably itinerant life.

Did you follow Elizabeth Marsh's footsteps physically? Is that an important part of a historian's work?

For me, it is, yes. I did a lot of travelling in Morocco, and I went to many of the sites in India that she explored. I also tried to get a sense of what it was like on the sea. For example, she is captured and taken to Morocco in 1756 when, most unwisely, she boards a small merchant ship that is setting out from Gibraltar. It is hit by Moroccan corsairs and taken back to Morocco. So I took a ship from Gibraltar to,

in my case, Tangiers. It was a much less exciting passage, but still a very rough crossing, even in a modern motor ship. It was interesting to realise how easy it would be in a small wooden ship, particularly in mist – and that sea crossing is full of mist – to go astray and fall into the hands of raiders. While I had read about this, experiencing that stretch of water made me understand it at a deeper level.

You have written importantly about Britain itself. In *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837*, you described how the mindset of being British first came about. Then, in 2014, ahead of the Scottish independence referendum later that year, you produced a Radio 4 series, and book, on *Acts of Union and Disunion: What has held the UK together – and what is dividing it?*⁶ Did you feel that, as an academic historian who had covered the topic, you had a duty to enter the arena of public debate at that time?

I don't think I would put it like that. I am personally averse to any kind of narrow or hegemonic view of what the academic's duty is. Historians have different interests, different skills and different curiosities. That said, I do feel that if you have certain swathes of knowledge and can possibly contribute to the public's wider understanding, then this is a good thing to do.

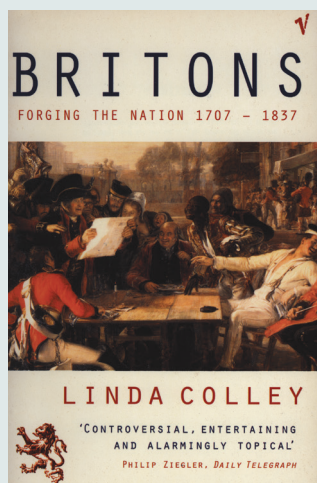
I had never done a series of radio talks before, and I found it an astonishing thing to do – and a tremendous privilege. No other country has the BBC. Where else would an academic historian be allowed to give 15 talks on the radio to a nationwide audience? It would be inconceivable.

I thought it was a wonderful opportunity to give people information that might help them sort out these complex events. And I didn't have an obvious drum to beat: I wasn't resident in the UK, I had been in the US for a long time. I had done lots of lectures and discussions in Scotland, so I had a sense of some of the strands of various Scottish arguments. Also, I felt that I could put this particular troubled political union within a wider context. It's not something that can be understood just from its internal make-up. You have to look at change over time, and at the different relations between different parts of these islands and different parts of the world. Trying to get that over in 15 short talks and a slim book was interesting!

What reaction did you have to the series?

In general, the response was extremely positive from people from different parts of the political spectrum. I was told that the series was listened to in the political offices of the SNP (Scottish National Party), but I was also told that the Prime Minister's Cabinet secretariat had listened to it. So that was good. And one of my friends who is a working Peer told me that she had gone into the Library in the House of Lords just after the book had come out and there were five Peers there all reading it!

However, the more moving thing was that I got letters from people from a wide variety of back-



6. *Acts of Union and Disunion*, fifteen 15-minute talks broadcast in January 2014 on BBC Radio 4 (available via the BBC iPlayer). Published as: Linda Colley, *Acts of Union and Disunion: What has held the UK together – and what is dividing it?* (Profile Books, 2014).

7. Linda Colley, 'This Small Island: Britain, Size and Empire' (Raleigh Lecture on History, 2002), *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 121, 171–190.

grounds. I got one from a young black woman who was a fairly new citizen in the UK. She said that she had found it very heartening, and that she had not realised before listening to my talks that there had been waves of migrants into these islands and that the nature of Britishness had changed over time. This made her feel more confident about the kind of role that she could conceivably play in this society.

In the 2002 Raleigh Lecture on History which you gave at the British Academy, ‘This Small Island: Britain, Size and Empire’, you discussed how different aspects of Britain’s size affected its imperial expansion.⁷ And you revealed how at different times there were varying levels of anxiety or confidence about how big a player Britain was in the world. Do you think we have similar worries about our place in the world now?

The UK has increasingly had to come to terms with global decline since the Second World War, even though the process started well before that. For a while, the fact that Britain had emerged on the victorious side in 1945 rather glossed over its loss of weight and power in large stretches of the world – the loss of this huge, increasingly ramshackle, empire. I suspect that many people here are still not remotely over this amputation yet. I think that a lot of the angst about the EU in this country isn’t actually about the EU at all. It derives from deeper doubts and anguish about the nature of the UK itself.

One of the most unfortunate verdicts on this

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country’s post-war experience, which is quoted over and over again, is Dean Acheson’s remark that ‘Great Britain has lost an Empire and has not yet found a role.’ It’s unfortunate because it suggests that somehow Britain *should* have a special role. Most countries on the face of the globe do not have roles in fact. They seek, if they are lucky, to be orderly places where the majority of people are prosperous, and where there is peace within, and external enemies are repelled. Many countries would give a great deal to achieve that. The idea that the UK should seek out a distinguishing role on top of all this is misplaced, and people should stop tormenting themselves about it.

In *Acts of Union and Disunion* you talk about possible ways in which the Union might be better held together. You talk about more autonomy for the different nations; you talk about setting up some proper federalism; and you also talk about the benefits of having a written constitution. Constitutions are what you have now moved on to as your current area of work. Does British exceptionalism in not having a written constitution remain an odd thing?

I can think of good historical reasons why we don’t have a written constitution. Part of it is that we haven’t been invaded since 1688 and forced to change political regime violently. Very often it is the experience of defeat, invasion, revolution, or some other major trauma that gives rise to a new constitution. If in the future Scotland becomes independent, almost



‘The (Modern) Deluge’. This marvellously complacent British print from 1848 celebrates the unwritten British Constitution as a sacred Ark floating invulnerably while other European regimes are swept away.

certainly it will have a written constitution to signal its new identity; and I should think it is within the bounds of possibility that what is left of the UK might also feel the need for some kind of new written document to reappraise and legitimise what it is.

I don't have idealistic notions about written constitutions. They are as good as they are, and they vary enormously in competence. As Jefferson said in the early 19th century, it is best to have constitutions that are revised regularly. Otherwise you get appalling anomalies like the gun laws in the United States. That is a country with a now very antique and creaking written constitution that is in dire need of radical amendment. So these are not magic bullets. However, I think that in some contexts they can be helpful, because they can set out a script in which people have to hammer out statements of belief, political principles and ideas about identity and aspirations. Of course this is difficult, but it can be very useful if you are trying to hold an increasingly complicated polity together.

In your new essay, 'Writing constitutions and writing world history',⁸ you talk about the dramatic expansion in the writing of constitutions in the late 18th century and the 19th century. You show how, by just studying the output, you can track the flow of ideas and, indeed, intellectuals across the globe.

This is another iteration of my delight in looking closely at particular texts and embedding them in much broader stories.

I became intrigued with written constitutions for a variety of reasons. I come from a country that, since the 1650s, has not had a conventional written constitution. So coming to the United States, where there is written constitutional idolatry, I felt I had to learn more about these texts and what they did.

But, as I read into them, it seemed to me that a lot of existing analyses were not particularly satisfying. The conventional story was often that, as written constitutions spread around the globe, it was all to do with the spread of democracy and nationalism, but this made only limited sense. Throughout the 'long' 19th century, full democracy was a minority pursuit. And while there were nation states, there were also empires, some of which were leading protagonists of written constitutions – one thinks of Napoleonic France, which was an imperial power but also a big proponent of written constitutions. So as a historian I had to find different explanations for the explosion of these instruments.

I also wanted to get away from the national celebration of particular constitutions. They are a literary, political and legal genre that crosses boundaries, seas and continents. I was intrigued by that.

And I had a deeper aim in approaching this topic. In recent decades, the history of political thought has been a very flourishing and creative field. However, it has also tended to be very elitist, focusing on great minds, so I was interested in constitutional texts in part because they involved much broader constituencies. How were constitutions drafted and printed? Who read them? How did ordinary people

interpret them? How did they move about different countries and continents? Who were the agents who spread them? I found for instance that before 1850 some of the most busy activists pushing new constitutions in different parts of the globe were soldiers and sailors. This is not

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surprising, given that soldiers and sailors were often remarkably mobile, whereas, before the coming of steam ships, ordinary civilians tended not to be. So studying the spread of written constitutions is a way of re-connecting the history of political thought and ideas with social history, which is all to the good.

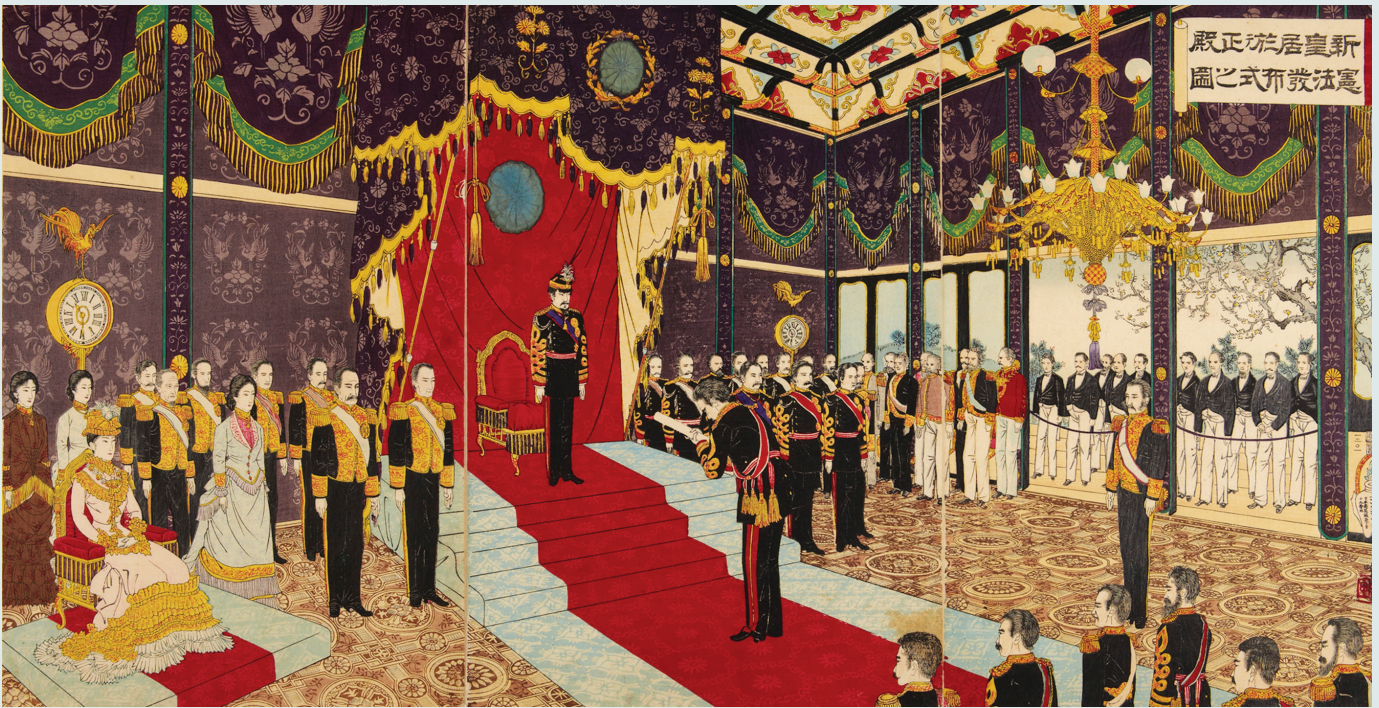
You talk about how, as tools of empire, these constitutions, far from being vehicles for spreading democracy are sometimes serving to hold in place indigenous people – and indeed women.

I found this striking in several ways. In the long 19th century, writing constitutions was a well-known amateur and scholarly pursuit. It was not just that politicians, legal officers and jurists were writing formal constitutions; it was also quite common for individuals who were simply interested in politics and stuck indoors on a rainy afternoon to say 'You know, Bolivia needs a new constitution', or 'I visited Baden last summer: that's a place that needs a constitution – I think I'll draft what a constitution for Baden might look like.'

However, I noticed that this was almost entirely a masculine pursuit. It's not just that non-royal women are shut out of official constitution writing until they are allowed in as full citizens. Even as an amateur pursuit, writing constitutions was clearly quite gendered.

I do think we sometimes forget the way that written constitutions, as they evolved, operated as dirigiste texts and as weapons of control, not just documents of liberation and rights. That is important.

8. Linda Colley, 'Writing constitutions and writing world history', in *The Prospect of Global History*, edited by James Belich, John Darwin, Margret Frenz and Chris Wickham (Oxford University Press, 2016).



Japanese print showing the Emperor of Japan being formally presented with the Meiji Constitution.
IMAGE: PRINCETON ART MUSEUM.

Are these constitutions recording change or creating change?

I think it's both. They are creating change in all sorts of ways. One of the ways is through statements on boundaries. This connects with their imperial significance. For example, as the United States gradually stretches over the American continent, part of the way it does that is through constitutions. The federal constitution comes into existence in 1787, but then increasingly there are state constitutions – and they are regularly issued and revised. A lot of the time they say things like 'The boundaries of Tennessee are that particular river, taking in that particular mountain range.' Why are they saying this? It's because many of these boundaries are in fact disputed. There are overlapping areas inhabited by indigenous peoples who certainly don't think they belong to Tennessee. So these constitutions are making claims and forcing changes – legitimising settler advance. They can say to indigenous people 'But the constitution says the boundary is *here*, and so you have no right to be *there*.'

I liked your story of the Cherokees who tried to create a constitution of their own and were slapped down.

In the 1820s, Cherokee activists worked out how to write down their own language. They also acquired printing skills – they set up a newspaper. They felt that, with these skills – with a written language, and with print, which is one of the great instruments that spreads constitutions – they could play

this game to their own advantage. Well, they tried and, as you say, they were slapped down, because it was not supposed to be a game that people such as they played.

In your essay, you introduce readers to the Meiji constitution of Japan of 1889, which not enough of us will be familiar with, although it sounds as though it is an important document.

It's a remarkably important document. In regard to the spread of constitutions, there is a real shift from the 1860s onwards. They appear in zones where on the whole you haven't seen written constitutions before, like Ottoman Turkey and Japan. Before the First World War, they have also appeared in Russia and China. And you get schemes in the 1860s from what one might call early African nationalists for written constitutions to be applied to that continent as well.

The Meiji constitution interests me deeply because it picked up on so many themes that I focus on. First of all, it illustrates how constitutional information crosses boundaries. The Meiji regime wanted to make Japan a modern empire – I stress 'empire' – and was determined to get a written constitution as a token of modernity. So it sent envoys around the western capitals to pick up constitutional and legal nostrums, and was particularly influenced by what was happening in Germany. Japanese leaders then threaded these different elements of acquired knowledge together with their

own indigenous priorities, and published this new Meiji constitution in various languages. It reflected their own domestic ambitions, but it was also intended to impress the western world with the fact that Japan was now a major power that had to be taken notice of.

The Meiji constitution was also important for other Asian peoples. Indian nationalists, for instance, were excited by it because they felt 'Here we have a powerful written constitution in the Asiatic world. If they can do it, then we can do it.'

So it is important in itself, and it is important too as an indication of how global power relations are shifting by the last third of the 19th century.

You describe your essay as defining a research agenda. Are you now following that through and producing a book?

I am almost half way through it. It has taken me a long time to work out the plot, as it were. For a start, once you leave national history, you have got to do an awful lot of reading and be parasitic on the expertise of so many other scholars. You have to have your chapters read over and over, so that hopefully you don't make too many silly mistakes. But also, when you deal with big stories in different parts of the globe, working out a plot line becomes more than ever challenging. It took

me some time to work out what I was doing. I knew I had curiosities that were valid, but I didn't know how I was going to handle them. I have at least the illusion by now that I do know how to handle them.

And you also have, on the horizon, a Penguin history of Britain in the 18th century. Will it be easy reverting to familiar territory, or does that present challenges of its own?

I think it will present challenges. I hope it does, because that is what books should do. I have always intended to leave the Penguin history of the 18th century to the end of my active professional career. This was partly because *Britons* involved such a major effort. That book took 10 years to write and, by the time I finished it, I really felt that I wanted to leave 18th century British history alone for a while. I felt that I had to establish sufficient distance from *Britons* so as to be able to approach that particular period afresh and in an interesting new way. Also it goes back to the fact that

I have been in the United States. I wanted, while I was there and while I was still a highly energetic scholar able to travel fast around different parts of the world, to focus on these more global history books. However, it will be intriguing to come back to Britain in the long 18th century and to see what I can do with it. ●●

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