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Book Review: Against War and Empire: Geneva, Britain, and France in the Eighteenth Century

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Richard Whatmore. *Against War and Empire: Geneva, Britain, and France in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). ISBN:9780300175578. Hardcover. \$75.

Richard Whatmore returns to the familiar territory of eighteenth-century republican thought in his study of the Genevan *représentants*, republican reformers who sought to ensure their city's continued independence in a world of large empires. By the late seventeenth century, most Genevans recognized that the growth of French power had made untenable Geneva's traditional foreign policy of playing its neighbors (France, the Swiss cantons, and Savoy) off one another. They began to debate fiercely the proper role of France in the city's affairs. Throughout the eighteenth century, the ruling magistrates tended to consider friendly relations with France a necessity, while the opposition argued that this relationship sacrificed autonomy and eroded Geneva's Protestant identity. Bound up with this issue was the question of democratic reform, "the great split in Genevan politics in the eighteenth century," as the ruling faction feared expanded power for the citizenry would only antagonize France and lead the republic to ruin (p. 26).

The *représentants* argued that sovereignty rested with the *citoyens* and *bourgeois*, assembled in the General Council, and argued for expanded powers of this body. Only through democratic reform and a return to the values that had allowed the city to prosper could a small republic like Geneva safely navigate a political climate dominated by the empires of Britain and France and their recurring wars. Whatmore follows the lives of a handful of prominent *représentants* (Etienne Clavière, François d'Ivernois, and Jacques-Antoine Du Roveray, as well as Etienne Dumont, "the last *représentant*") from their exile from Geneva in 1782 through the French Revolution and into the nineteenth century. These men realized after a failed *représentant* uprising that any democratic reform in Geneva would need support from one of the large empires, and ideally both Britain and France would set aside their rivalry in favor of closer commercial links and relinquish their imperial ambitions to promote the cause of liberty worldwide. The *représentants*, therefore, challenged the imperial system itself.

Whatmore details the attempts by these men to enlist support from Britain and France for constitutional revisions in Geneva.

Britain's attitude toward Geneva was one of detached interest for much of the eighteenth century, as the British were unwilling to commit to major interventions on the city's behalf, in large part because Geneva had always been part of France's sphere of interest. London did accept Genevan exiles and even allowed for an abortive attempt to establish a colony in Ireland. French support, on the other hand, was particularly important for the *représentants* because, as one of the guaranteeing powers of Geneva's constitution, it intervened in the city's affairs several times in the eighteenth century to settle internal disputes. The radical opposition in Geneva, which took the name *représentants* in the 1750s, argued that Geneva's increasingly oligarchic and aristocratic government had allowed sovereignty to pass to France, which was especially abhorrent because of that country's Catholicism, extravagant luxury, and lack of political liberty. Although France's support for American liberty inspired some hopes that the country would be open to a more democratic neighbor, these were quickly dashed when French troops helped quell the *représentant* uprising in 1782. The French Revolution provided fresh opportunities for the exiled *représentants* to enlist French support for a democratic republic at Geneva, yet these too proved disappointing as war and empire quickly returned on a grander scale.

Whatmore provides excellent analysis of the arguments of the *représentants*, republicans who sought to find a way to preserve Geneva's traditional way of life in the face of a changing world. Identifying political liberty and Protestantism as the reasons for Geneva's past success, they rejected the argument that increased reliance on France could ensure the republic's survival. Chronicling the *représentants'* relationships with prominent writers such as Rousseau and Mirabeau (and Dumont's adoption of Jeremy Bentham's philosophy) as well as their own publications, Whatmore demonstrates how these men sought to persuade the empires of Britain and France to abandon the pursuit of traditional empires and support a peaceful world of commerce, one in which small states could maintain their independence. His excellent study functions as both a history of Geneva and an analysis of republican political theory in the final decades of the eighteenth century.

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