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FORUM

FORUM: 1776. Views from the British World. Ambivalent Independence: The US Declaration in Hemispheric Perspective

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Abstract

Timed to coincide with the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence that launched a revolution that created the United States of America, this series of articles complicates traditional narratives of this transformative event by situating it in a larger British world context.

This article considers the significance of the US Declaration of Independence in the western hemisphere. It argues first that the influence of the Declaration was limited in an era we call "the age of imperial fracture." Second, it contends that the former colonies that achieved independence, including the United States, did not experience a sharp break with the past. Instead, they grappled with the legacies of colonialism and imperial ambitions. Throughout the western hemisphere, independence triggered new waves of contestation and conflict and gave rise to new forms of imperialism.

Scholars working in the Atlantic tradition have long treated the US Declaration of Independence as a sharp break with the past. They argue that US independence triggered the "age of Atlantic revolutions," when monarchy and hereditary privilege came under attack, the United States was remade as a republic, and liberal reforms swept across much of Europe. From this perspective, the US Declaration ushered in the modern world.[1] Yet despite its influence, this historiography takes a strikingly partial view of post-1776 developments, especially as they unfolded in the Americas. Viewed in a hemispheric context, the US Declaration is less a turning point than it is a single moment in a long continuum of developments that followed from the European colonization of the Americas. Deep and rich historiographies trace the progress of events in Latin America and the Caribbean, which followed their own course and were only tangentially connected to the US example.[2]

[1] Robert R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1959–64); David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Harvard, 2007); Janet Polasky, *Revolutions Without Borders: The Call to Liberty in the Atlantic World* (Yale, 2015); Wim Klooster, *Revolutions in the Atlantic World*, new ed. (NYU, 2018); Patrick Griffin, *The Age of Atlantic Revolution: The Fall and Rise of a Connected World* (Yale, 2023); Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, *The Age of Revolutions and the Generations Who Made It* (Basic, 2024).

[2] Roberto Breña, "The Cádiz Liberal Revolution and Spanish American Independence," in *New Countries: Capitalism, Revolutions, and Nations in the Americas, 1750–1870*, ed. John Tutino (Duke, 2016), 71–104; Anthony McFarlane, *War and Independence in Spanish America* (Routledge, 2014); Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (North Carolina, 2004); Kirsten Schultz, *Tropical Versailles: Empire, Monarchy, and the Portuguese Royal Court in Rio de Janeiro, 1808–1821* (Routledge, 2001).

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Scholars of Britain also resist the claim that US independence marked a sharp break. They argue that the principles articulated in the US Declaration derived from those of the Glorious Revolution; that the British Empire long outlived US independence; and that the patterns that shaped the early United States were global phenomena.[3] From these perspectives, independence helped to sustain continuities rather than initiate ruptures with the colonial past.

With these contrasting interpretive traditions in mind, we want to ask two questions. First, how influential was the US Declaration of Independence in the western hemisphere? Independence, after all, came for many new nations. Did they embrace the principles of the US Declaration, or was independence driven by other considerations? The second question follows from the first. Every independent nation in the Americas became a republic. To what extent did these new republics break with the past, and how deeply were they shaped by the legacies of imperial enterprise?

This article is drawn from our forthcoming book, which presents a history of the western hemisphere from 1492 until the mid-nineteenth century. Rather than concluding with the age of Atlantic revolutions, it ends with a section on what we have chosen to call "the age of imperial fracture," which we think is a concept that more fully describes the events of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. We prefer "the age of imperial fracture" to "the age of revolution" because many colonies in the Americas were seeking neither independence nor revolutionary change, but all of them were affected by the breakdown and reconfiguration of Europe's early modern empires. The age of imperial fracture was a prolonged period of international warfare during which some of the peoples of the Americas aspired to independence while others preferred loyalty to kings and empires. It was an era of interdependencies and vulnerabilities as much as it was an age of independence, and its legacies were much more mixed than the phrase "age of Atlantic revolutions" would suggest.

Independence movements offered different kinds of challenges and opportunities to different segments of colonial populations. Leading men faced the prospect of losing important crown offices and preferments, but also saw opportunities to shape independent regimes according to their own favored principles and interests. Ordinary people also made calculations about the potential effects of independence. For some, republics offered an appealing alternative to the world of hereditary privilege associated with European monarchies. Others, including many Indigenous and African-descended people, thought kings would protect their interests and ensure stability and prosperity more effectively than upstart republics would. And everywhere, prospects for independence were refracted through imperial rivalries and the danger that colonies riven by faction might descend into chaos.

How did these varied calculations play out in practice? The first thing to say is that, on balance, more American colonies preferred their empires to independence. Great Britain had twenty-nine American colonies in 1776. Sixteen of them remained in the empire. These included the mainland colonies of Newfoundland, St. John's, Nova Scotia, Quebec, Rupert's Land, and East and West Florida, as well as the island colonies of Jamaica, Barbados, the Leeward Islands (Antigua, Barbuda, Montserrat, St. Kitts, Nevis, and Tortola), Grenada, St. Vincent, Tobago, Dominica, Bermuda, and the Bahamas. Generally, they were of two types: they were either too undeveloped or isolated for independence, or—in the case of Jamaica, Barbados, and other plantation colonies—they were too wealthy, too racially imbalanced,

[3] Steven Sarson, *The Course of Human Events: The Declaration of Independence and the Historical Origins of the United States* (Virginia, 2025); Andrew O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, The American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire* (Yale, 2013); Linda Colley, *The Gun, the Ship and the Pen: Warfare, Constitutions, and the Making of the Modern World* (Liveright, 2021).

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and too dependent on the support of British arms to risk it. In either case, Crown support was preferable to the pursuit of independence.[4]

The colonies of France provide another example. That kingdom lost all its mainland territory at the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763 and only retained a few island colonies, including Saint Domingue, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and St. Lucia. Saint Domingue gained independence and underwent a political revolution that is often compared to that of the United States. But the Haitian Revolution was very different from the US war of independence. It was triggered by a metropolitan crisis of political legitimacy that spilled over into the Atlantic, rather than the other way around. Haiti issued its own declaration of independence, but it came at the end of the war rather than the beginning, and in tone and content it owed little to the US example. Not only the declaration, but also the progress and outcome of the war, were shaped more by its people's African roots and the experience of chattel slavery than by either US or French notions of liberty and equality. More to the point for our present purposes, Saint Domingue's path was unique. The other French plantation colonies, including Martinique, Guadeloupe, and St. Lucia, also experienced immense upheavals during the 1790s, but all three ultimately remained within the empire.[5]

Haiti was not only an exception in French America; its experience was unique in the hemisphere. Other island plantation colonies that were similar to Saint Domingue, whether they were Spanish, British, or French, chose to remain under imperial protection rather than venture independence and risk a similar fate. Cuba and Puerto Rico were Spanish until 1898, when they fell under the protection of the United States, where Puerto Rico continues to reside. Jamaica, Barbados, and St. Kitts and Nevis gained their independence from Great Britain in 1962, 1966, and 1983, respectively. Martinique, Guadeloupe, Dominica, and St. Vincent remain overseas departments of France to this day. Although dramatic changes came to all these places, with the exception of Haiti, the age of Atlantic revolutions bypassed the island colonies of the Americas.[6]

For mainland Spanish America, independence was not triggered by a colonial revolt against crown rule. Instead, the process began when Napoleon deposed Ferdinand VII, and the first independent political bodies in Spanish America were local juntas that declared their loyalty to the deposed king.[7] Loyalty to the crown remained a viable alternative for many people throughout the military campaigns that ultimately brought independence, whether they were Spanish-, Indigenous-, or African-descended. As independence approached, the US example of making a public declaration was very influential. But in

[4] Quebec's case is more complicated than this brief account suggests: see Nancy Christie, *The Formal and Informal Politics of British Rule in Post-Conquest Quebec, 1760–1837: A Northern Bastille* (Oxford, 2020); Kathleen DuVal, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution* (Random House, 2015); Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Pennsylvania, 2000); Trevor Burnard, *Jamaica in the Age of Revolution* (Pennsylvania, 2020).

[5] Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Harvard, 2004); Dubois, *Colony of Citizens*; Caroline E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Tennessee, 1990); John Thornton, "African Soldiers in the Haitian Revolution," *Journal of Caribbean History* 25 (1991): 58–80; David Geggus, "The Slaves and Free Coloreds of Martinique during the Age of the French and Haitian Revolutions: Three Moments of Resistance," and Anne Perotin-Dumon, "Free Coloreds and Slaves in Revolutionary Guadeloupe: Politics and Political Consciousness," in *The Lesser Antilles in the Age of European Expansion*, ed. Robert L. Paquette and Stanley L. Engerman (Florida, 1996), 280–301, 259–79, respectively; David Barry Gaspar, "La Guerre des Bois: Revolution, War, and Slavery in Saint Lucia, 1793–1838," in *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean*, ed. David Barry Gaspar and David Patrick Geggus (Indiana, 1997), 102–30.

[6] Ada Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (Cambridge, 2014); David Sartorius, "Cuban Counterpoint: Colonialism and Continuity in the Atlantic World," in *New Countries*, ed. Tutino, 175–200.

[7] François-Xavier Guerra, *Modernidad e independencies: Ensayos sobre las revoluciones hispánicas* (Mapfre, 1992); Jaime E. Rodríguez O., *The Independence of Spanish America* (Cambridge, 1998).

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Spanish America that did not result in a single, unitary declaration. Instead, there were nearly two dozen of them, including two each by Colombia, Mexico, and Nicaragua. For the most part, although they borrowed the idea of declaring independence, they did not follow the form or substance of the US model.[8]

This profusion of declarations highlights the fact that mainland Spanish America had no equivalent to the Continental Congress. In fact, one of the thorniest problems raised by independence was the need to identify functional jurisdictional units across a vast and varied landscape. Spanish viceroyalties were immense. New Spain, for example, included not only present-day Mexico, but also all of western North America, Central America, the Caribbean, and the Philippines. The viceroyalty of Peru was also enormous. Even after it was subdivided in the eighteenth century to create the new viceroyalties of New Granada and the Río de la Plata, all three of these jurisdictions were unworkably large. Only two captaincies-general—Venezuela and Chile—were able to cohere. Everywhere in Spanish America, as royal authority collapsed and independence approached, new national boundaries and identities had to be hammered out in the context of chaotic and destructive warfare.[9]

That warfare was made more chaotic by the fact that, just as there was no Continental Congress, there was also no Continental Army. The wars of independence were instead fought by a shifting array of military forces, raised in various places and times for various purposes. In the final phase of warfare in Spanish South America, two consolidated armies coalesced to push the independence campaigns to their conclusion. The wars of independence in Mexico and Central America proceeded along entirely separate paths, following their own timelines and military logic.[10]

Every independent nation in the Americas became a republic, and every republic faced the challenge of implementing democratic practices and principles. Republicanism and democracy took many forms in mainland Spanish America, but they did not derive from US precedents. They were instead shaped by a broad range of influences that can serve to remind us how widespread and varied these principles were.[11] For example, the great military leader of the southern South America campaigns, José de San Martín, was an Anglophile and committed constitutional monarchist. His counterpart in the north, Simón Bolívar, spent a year in exile in Haiti, an experience more relevant to him than the newly independent United States. He was especially impressed when, under the terms of Haiti's 1816 constitution, the senate made Alexandre Pétion president for life. The stability of such an arrangement was appealing, as political fragmentation posed a grave threat to postindependence nation-building in Spanish America.[12] More generally, Spanish precedents and political ideas, especially as they were hammered out in Cádiz during the Napoleonic occupation, were much more influential than the Anglo-American example in shaping republican principles throughout Spanish America.[13] It is also clear that creole, Indigenous, mestizo, and African-descended communities drew heavily on both pre-Columbian traditions, such as the neo-Inka and neo-Aztec revivals in the Andes and Mexico,

[8] Armitage, *Declaration of Independence*, 117–22, 147–50.

[9] Natalia Sobrevilla Perea, "Emerging States," in *Re-Imagining Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1780–1870*, ed. Eduardo Posada-Carbó, Joanna Innes, and Mark Philp (Oxford, 2023), 109–34.

[10] McFarlane, *War and Independence in Spanish America.*

[11] Hilda Sabato, *Republics of the New World: The Revolutionary Political Experiment in 19th-Century Latin America* (Princeton, 2018); Posada-Carbó et al., ed., *Re-imagining Democracy*.

[12] Sibylle Fischer, "Bolívar in Haiti: Republicanism in the Revolutionary Atlantic," in *Haiti and the Americas*, ed. Carla Calargé et al. (Mississippi, 2013), 46–47; John Lynch, *Simón Bolívar: A Life* (Yale, 2006); John Lynch, *San Martín, Argentine Soldier, American Hero* (Yale, 2009).

[13] Breña, "The Cádiz Liberal Revolution and Spanish American Independence," 71–104.

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and also on the precedent of the Haitian Revolution, which abolished gradations of racial difference.[14]

Portuguese America followed a path almost directly counter to the currents of Atlantic revolution when the monarch himself left Europe to evade Napoleon's army, and Rio de Janeiro became the capital of a co-equal Portuguese kingdom. Eventually João VI was called back to Iberia, but his son Dom Pedro remained behind and declared Brazil an independent kingdom. It survived until 1889, when it too, like all the other former colonies in the hemisphere, finally became a republic.[15]

Looking across this spectrum of outcomes, determined by decades-long patterns of conflict and rivalry in a diverse array of settings with widely varying patterns of demography, economy, society, and culture, it is hard to see the US Declaration of Independence as the herald of a new day in the hemisphere. Certainly, the crack-up of Britain's American empire had a triggering effect on other developments. In particular, it hastened the bankruptcy of the French monarchy, which turned out to be the prime mover in each of the hemisphere's other imperial catastrophes. With this chain of events in mind, it seems reasonable to conclude that the progress of independence in the western hemisphere was more directly a product of events in Europe, and the Atlantic entanglements they generated, than it was an attempt to replicate the US experience.

What did independence mean for the new nations that arose in the Americas? Although there is a strong tendency in US and North Atlantic historiography to argue that the American Revolution marked a sharp break with the colonial past, we would contend something like the opposite. Independence did not mean beginning the world anew, so much as it created new contexts for addressing old challenges. For the United States, as for the rest of the new nations of the western hemisphere, independence meant grappling with the legacies of colonialism and imperial ambitions. Throughout the hemisphere, independence triggered new waves of contestation and conflict and gave rise to new forms of imperialism.

Every former colony in the western hemisphere adopted some form of republican government after gaining independence, though they varied considerably in their details. But these republican institutions did not mark new beginnings, so much as they attached new frameworks to old sociopolitical systems. Many things still had to be worked out in practice. Every independent nation experienced instability, rebellion, and civil war as it hammered out its new political institutions. More than the wars of independence, it was left to the civil wars that followed to attempt to establish durable institutions and political settlements.

Every nation in the Americas wrestled with the legacy of African slavery as it debated the parameters of citizenship, and the end of slavery was a prolonged process. In the places where the institution was most deeply embedded, it came through mass military mobilization. In Spanish America, both Bolívar and San Martín were able to keep their armies in the field only by granting freedom to African-descended soldiers and supporting free womb laws. Full emancipation came later, in the context of mass mobilization in the civil wars of the mid-nineteenth century. In the United States, a civil war that was originally undertaken

[14] D. A. Brading, *The First America: The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots, and the Liberal State, 1492–1867* (Cambridge, 1991); Charles F. Walker, *Smoldering Ashes: Cuzco and the Creation of Republican Peru, 1780–1840* (Duke, 1999); Rebecca Earle, *The Return of the Native: Indians and Myth-Making in Spanish America, 1810–1930* (Duke, 2007); David P. Geggus, ed., *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (South Carolina, 2001); João José Reis and Flávio dos Santos Gomes, "Repercussions of the Haitian Revolution in Brazil, 1791–1850," in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, ed. David Patrick Geggus and Norman Fiering (Indiana, 2009), 284–313.

[15] Kirsten Schultz, "Atlantic Transformations and Brazil's Imperial Independence," in *New Countries*, ed. Tutino, 201–30; Schultz, *Tropical Versailles*; Neill Macaulay, *Dom Pedro: The Struggle for Liberty in Brazil and Portugal, 1798–1834* (Duke, 1986).

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only to contest the legality of secession also became a war for emancipation, in large part because some 200,000 Black soldiers served.[16]

Patterns of economic development in the nineteenth century were directly linked to the colonial enterprises that preceded them. The oldest, wealthiest parts of the colonial Americas—Mexico, Peru, and Bolivia, along with most island plantation colonies—were largely bypassed by both capital and immigrants after independence. These places had been among the most intensively capitalized and industrialized societies on earth in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Silver production in Mexico and the Andes drove their development and spun off a variety of other capital-intensive business enterprises. With independence, Indigenous communities continued to pursue subsistence-plus agriculture to support local and regional markets while silver capitalism collapsed around them. Many former sugar-planting islands experienced something similar.[17] The most striking example is Haiti, where sugar production ceased and, in its place, the rural population created a system that Jean Casimir has called the "counter-plantation," in which workers grew food for subsistence, sold surpluses and home-produced goods in local markets, and produced commodities for long-distance trade, but in much smaller quantities than Saint Domingue had done. Sugar exports fell to almost nothing, but coffee—a crop that grew abundantly on former plantation lands and was relatively easy for autonomous rural households to harvest and process—remained an important cash crop. These changes reflected Haiti's reorientation from a colony where the wishes of plantation owners shaped the lives of all its residents to an independent nation in which its rural population made its own choices about economic production and social organization.[18]

Capital investment and immigration moved from these older centers of colonial enterprise to newly developing regions. With most of the Americas still in Indigenous hands, many new nations became settler-colonial projects that aimed to conquer new territory, expel or absorb Native American inhabitants, and claim borderlands regions as their own. Eastern Venezuela, northern Mexico, the Río de la Plata, the western United States, the Great Lakes and western Canada, and the Brazilian sertão all became sites of conflict and conquest. Governments often followed, rather than led, in these processes as settlers demanded access to new lands and resources. Throughout the Americas, in the aftermath of imperial fracture, new nation-states fought for decades, with one another and with independent Indigenous nations, to secure territorial possessions and draw borders through borderlands.[19]

Four nations extended their borders in especially dramatic fashion. The United States and Canada expanded westward in North America, in the process creating one of the world's longest international boundaries, while Argentina and Chile expanded southward in South America and created another. Wars of conquest against Indigenous peoples were essential to the expansion process, as was enabling legislation that made the occupation of

[16] George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America, 1800–2000* (Oxford, 2004); Peter Blanchard, *Under the Flags of Freedom: Slave Soldiers and the Wars of Independence in Spanish South America* (Pittsburgh, 2008); David Williams, *I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era* (Cambridge, 2014).

[17] John Tutino, "The Americas in the Rise of Industrial Capitalism," in *New Countries*, ed. Tutino, 25–70.

[18] David Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti*, rev. ed. (Rutgers, 1996); Johnhenry Gonzalez, *Maroon Nation: A History of Revolutionary Haiti* (Yale, 2019), Laurent Dubois, "Thinking Haiti's Nineteenth Century," *Small Axe* 18 (2014); Jean Casimir, *La culture opprimée* (Lakay, 2001).

[19] Caitlin Fitz, "The Monroe Doctrine and the Indigenous Americas," *Diplomatic History* 47, no. 5 (2023): 802–22; Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History," *AHR* 104, no. 3 (1999): 814–41; David Maybury-Lewis, Theodore Macdonald and Biorn Maybury-Lewis, eds., *Manifest Destinies and Indigenous Peoples* (Harvard, 2009).

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Native American lands a matter of national interest. Each of these nations claimed vast new territories and attracted millions of immigrants who helped to occupy and exploit them.[20]

Ecological transformations that were set in motion after 1492 accelerated dramatically in the nineteenth century. Animals and plants were commodified on an unprecedented scale. Indigenous animals like beavers, bison, fur seals, sea otters, and guanacos were hunted, sometimes to near extinction, in response to international demand for their furs and hides. As indigenous animal populations dwindled, cattle and sheep moved onto the steppes of the western hemisphere to feed international markets for beef and wool, while other Eurasian species, including pigs, chickens, horses, mules, and oxen, supplied household needs and regional markets. Commercial ranching and animal processing became one of the hemisphere's most important centers of economic growth. Plant life in the Americas underwent a similar transformation. Wherever it was ecologically viable, temperate-zone landscapes were converted to large-scale grain production as both domestic and international markets for wheat, maize, and barley grew rapidly in the nineteenth century.[21]

From the sixteenth century to the twentieth, the Americas served as both an incubator and an intensifier for a wide range of experiments in social formation and economic development. Landscapes were transformed by an extraordinary mixing of flora and fauna, and all kinds of enterprises were capitalized on an unprecedented scale. Novel forms of social organization and cultural expression grew out of contacts among disparate peoples. The age of imperial fracture gave way to dozens of experiments in republican government. New American nations fought cataclysmic wars to determine the fate of slavery and the parameters of citizenship. All of this was grounded in changes that were set in motion by transatlantic contacts after 1492, and all of it was only glancingly related to events in Philadelphia in 1776.

Eric Hinderaker and **Rebecca Horn** have been colleagues at the University of Utah for 35 years, she in early Latin American history and he in early North American history. Their forthcoming book, *The Americas: A New History of the Western Hemisphere*, will be published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 2027. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2026 Harmsworth conference at the Rothermere American Institute at the University of Oxford, entitled "The Meanings of Independence: The American Declaration in Global Context, 1776–1826," convened by Eliga Gould and Patrick Griffin. The authors are grateful to that audience and to the editors of this journal for their comments. Please address any correspondence to: eric.hinderaker@utah.edu; rebecca.horn@utah.edu

[20] Claudio Saunt, *Unworthy Republic: The Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory* (W. W. Norton, 2020); John P. Bowes, *Land Too Good for Indians: Northern Indian Removal* (Oklahoma, 2016); Alberto Harambour, Soberanías fronterizas. Estados y capital en la colonización de Patagonia (Argentina y Chile, 1830–1922) (Universidad Austral de Chile, 2019); Carolyne R. Larson, ed., *The Conquest of the Desert: Argentina's Indigenous Peoples and the Battle for History* (New Mexico, 2020); Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the US-Mexican War* (Yale, 2008); Benjamin Hoy, *A Line of Blood and Dirt: Creating the Canada-United States Border Across Indigenous Lands* (Oxford, 2021).

[21] James P. Ronda, *Astoria and Empire* (Nebraska, 1993); Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750–1920* (Cambridge, 2000); John Soluri, *Creatures of Fashion: Animals, Global Markets, and the Transformation of Patagonia* (North Carolina, 2024); Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, *Creating Abundance: Biological Innovation and American Agricultural Development, 1700–1960* (Cambridge, 2008).

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