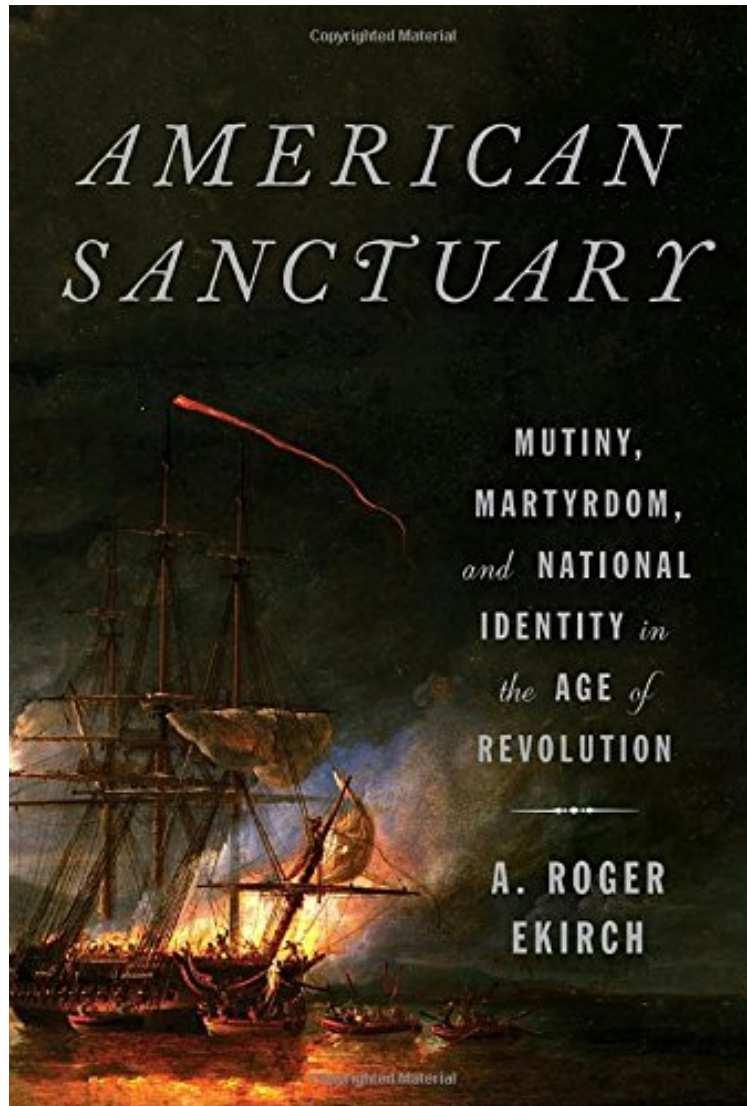


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# American Sanctuary: Mutiny, Martyrdom, and National Identity in the Age of Revolution

A. Roger Ekirch

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CustomerA portion of American History from the late 18th century I had never heard of. Found it fascinating and very informative. Kudos to Roger Ekirch.. The book is making the rounds of the American Legion in South Miami and will end up in the Veteran's Hospital. Thanks.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy Joaquim J. A. Olendzkiexcellent1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy Jack SchillerGood read

From one of the most wide-ranging and imaginative historians in America today; there is no one else quite like him in the profession (Gordon S. Wood)a dazzling and original work of history. A. Roger Ekirchs American Sanctuary begins in 1797 with the bloodiest mutiny ever suffered by the Royal Navyon the British frigate HMS Hermione, four thousand miles from Englands shores, off the western coast of Puerto Rico. In the midst of the most storied epoch in British seafaring history, the mutiny struck at the very heart of military authority and at Britains hierarchical social order. Revolution was in the air: America had won its War of Independence, the French Revolution was still unfolding, and a ferocious rebellion loomed in Ireland, with countless dissidents already arrested. Most of the Hermione mutineers had scattered throughout the North Atlantic; one of them, Jonathan Robbins, had made his way to American shores, and the British were asking for his extradition. Robbins let it be known that he was an American citizen from Danbury, Connecticut, and that he had been impressed into service by the British. John Adams, the Federalist successor to Washington as president, in one of the most catastrophic blunders of his administration, sanctioned Robbins extradition, according to the terms of the Jay Treaty of 1794. Convicted of murder and piracy by a court-martial in Jamaica, Robbins was sentenced by the British to death, hauled up on the fore yardarm of the frigate Acasta, blindfolded with his hands tied behind his back, and hanged. Adamss miscalculation ignited a political firestorm, only to be fanned by news of Robbins execution without his constitutional rights of due process and trial by jury. Thomas Jefferson, then vice president and leader of the emergent Republican Party, said, No one circumstance since the establishment of our government has affected the popular mind more. Congressional Republicans tried to censure Adams, and the Federalist majority, in a bitter blow to the president, were unable to muster a vote of confidence condoning Robbins surrender. American Sanctuary brilliantly lays out in full detail the story of how the Robbins affair and the presidential campaign of 1800 inflamed the new nation and set in motion a constitutional crisis, resulting in Adamss defeat and Jeffersons election as the third president of the United States. Ekirch writes that the aftershocks of Robbins martyrdom helped to shape the infant republics identity in the way Americans envisioned themselves. We see how the Hermione crisis led directly to the countrys historic decision to grant political asylum to refugees from foreign governmentsa major achievement in fulfilling the resonant promise of American independence, as voiced by Tom Paine, to provide an asylum for mankind

Celebration for A. Roger Ekirch AMERICAN SANCTUARY A dramatic tale . . . A good, readable story in the mode of Nathaniel Philbricks nautical histories . . . Impressive. Thomas E. Ricks, The New York Times Book It takes a special gift in writing about the past to offer readers the sense of events unfolding through the deeds, decisions, policies and prejudices of dead white guys, as Mr. Ekirch has done . . . Ekirch navigates deep water in enumerating events, detailing arguments and tracing sequelae . . . Fact-based and argumentative, a real history like this may disarm modern patriots who lard their pronouncements with pious references to our Founding Fathers . . . American Sanctuary is trenchant in its drawn parallels to our day. Philip Kopper, The Washington Times A gifted storyteller . . . absorbing . . . The thoroughness of Ekirchs research, his attention to detail, combined with his considerable narrative skills, make American Sanctuary an engrossing, informative and enjoyable read. Ben McC. Moise, The Post and Courier Great new book: American Sanctuary by Roger Ekirch, about the battle that resulted in the US granting asylum to refugees. Very timely! Arianna Huffington, Co-Founder of The Huffington Post It is always gratifying to learn history you dont know. In this case, the subject is a specific incident with which the vast majority of Americans are unfamiliar but revolves around one of the major controversies between the nascent American Republic and its former mother country, Great Britain, and questioned the fundamental American belief in the provision of asylum to the oppressed and persecuted. Stuart McClung, New York Journal of Books Deeply researched and elegantly written . . . Gripping and timely . . . Ekirch is such a masterful storyteller that American Sanctuary reads like a mystery . . . The most surprising of this books many insights is that, after the acrimony of the election of 1800, Americans returned toand even broadeneda common definition of American citizenship rooted in the concept of liberty. Kathleen DuVal, The Wall Street Journal Delves into the far-reaching ramifications of a violent 18th-century mutiny on the HMS Hermione, a British frigate . . . Ekirch builds a strong case that the politics informing the controversy were instrumental in the historical refusals of the U.S. to extradite aliens charged solely with political crimes. Ekirch, a meticulous historian who writes with flair, brings the political theatre of the 1800 election into full view . . . Persuasive . . . A complex and instructive tale. Publishers Weekly (Book of the Week) Ekirch does an admirable job bringing to light this unfamiliar history, using it as a vehicle to describe the early state of American politics in postrevolutionary times . . . Readers will be treated to a concise, unique moment in the nations past that would have aftershocks for years to come. Keith Klang, Library Journal Ekirch covers the murderous 1797 mutiny aboard HMS Hermione in all its drunken excess, tracks the worldwide hunt and capture of some of the perpetrators, and then offers a masterful dissection of the political

consequences of the Robbins affair . . . The Robbins controversy featured arguments about alien rights, asylum, national identity, and the meaning and scope of American citizenship, all of which persist and all of which Ekirch handles with remarkable dexterity. Kirkus s (starred review) A dramatic narrative linking the stories of a fierce, bloody mutiny on a British war vessel in 1797 to a legal battle over extradition that rocked John Adams administration, shaped the nations developing party system, and contributed to Adams defeat in the bitter Presidential struggle of 1800 and to the election of Thomas Jefferson. Bernard Bailyn, author of *The Barbarous Years* Roger Ekirch has done it again another enthralling narrative that grows more important as the reader reflects upon its meaning. David Hackett Fischer, author of *Washingtons Crossing* Although Roger Ekirch brings to this fascinating account of mutiny, martyrdom, and politics in the early American Republic the imagination and flair of a seasoned novelist, he is actually a superb historian; and the story he tells about America as the asylum for the oppressed of the world two centuries ago is not only true but timely. Gordon S. Wood, author of *Empire of Liberty* One of the most important and enjoyable books I have read in many years . . . An extraordinary journey. Ekirch's gripping narrative brings a largely forgotten episode to life, illuminating its immediate impact on party politics in a polarized, revolutionary age and on the new nation's enduring identity as an asylum of liberty. Ekirch's brilliant reconstruction is a triumph of historical research and analysis. Peter S. Onuf, Professor of History at the University of Virginia Fascinating. Ekirch is a marvelous storyteller. Beautifully written and engrossing, a book that should be of interest, to the historian, and to the general public. An important addition to our understanding of early American history. James Roger Sharp, author of *American Politics in the Early Republic* Packed with drama. Ekirch tells this story with rich and powerful prose, demonstrating how this saga of the mutiny on the *Hermione* helped Americans develop their national identity during the early republic. Paul A. Gilje, author of *Liberty on the Waterfront* About the Author A. ROGER EKIRCH was born in Washington, DC, and raised in Alexandria, Virginia. He is the author of *Poor Carolina*, *Bound for America*, *Birthright*, and *At Days Close*. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Huffington Post*. He holds degrees from Dartmouth College and John Hopkins University, and has received a Guggenheim fellowship. He lives in Roanoke, Virginia, and is a professor of history at Virginia Tech. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. CHAPTER 1 Men-of-War At high tide on a September morning in 1782, not quite a year since Britains humiliating capitulation at the Battle of Yorktown, His Majestys Ship *Hermione*, her coppered hull slathered with grease, slid stern-first down a wooden slipway into the swollen waters of the River Avon, fed by the swift currents of the Severn estuary. A launch was no easy feat, nor was it free of peril, but the port of Bristol, Englands metropolis of the west, had been building ships since the thirteenth century. Before a rapt crowd lining the stone quays sailors, shipwrights, and merchant princes heavy ropes, tethered fast to the bow, were cast off with ceremonial fanfare. Slowly the tide-borne frigate began to slip away from the dry dock of Sydenham Teast, directly across the Avon from the elegant townhouses of Queen Square. With a surplus of warships at royal wharves waiting to be built or repaired, private docks such as Teasts reaped the rewards of government contracts. It was a promising start. Fitted out in a naval yard, the *Hermione* was commissioned for duty the following spring too late, owing to a halt in hostilities that February, to enter the American War of Independence. Two-decked, three-masted, and square-rigged in the fashion of frigates, she was the first in a new class designed by Sir Edward Hunt, bearing a rounder midsection, much like the profile of a tulip, to lend stability. The clean-lined hull ran 129 feet in length with a beam of nearly 36 feet. Of 714 tons burden, she was notably larger than the slavers that Teasts shipyard furnished for Bristols lucrative African trade, designed instead for a naval company of 220 men. Costs of construction, fittings, sails, rigging, and armament exceeded 16,000. In addition to six carronades, devised with a large caliber for firing at close range, the *Hermione* received 32 cast-iron cannons, among them 26 twelve-pounders for the main deck. Unlike larger, more powerful men-of-war that boasted two or even three gun decks, with lower ports vulnerable to ocean swells, the main battery of the *Hermione*, lying well above the waterline, promised greater versatility in heavy weather. In the annals of classical mythology, Homer tells of the rose-lipped *Hermione*, the only daughter of Menelaus, king of Sparta, and Helen, whose abduction ignited the Trojan War. For many Britons, however, the frigates name conjured halcyon memories of wartime riches and national glory. Years back, in May 1762, toward the close of the Seven Years War, two British warships cruising off the southern coast of Portugal captured a Spanish treasure galleon named the *Hermione* just a days sail from the port of Cdiz, home to Spanish fleets for nearly two centuries. Striking her colors before firing a single shot, the enemy prize had been en route from Peru with a glittering cargo of gold dust, jewels, and silver estimated at 700,000 to 800,000, the richest capture in the history of the Royal Navy. Such was the outpouring of joy in Britain that the name *Hermione* graced newborns and racehorses alike. In August, throngs gathered from Portsmouth to London, anxious to glimpse twenty heavily laden wagons transporting the treasure under military escort to Tower Hill. George III viewed from an upper chamber in St. Jamess Palace the convoys arrival in the capital, which was followed by a marching band. The air was rent with the shouts of the populace, described a newspaper. Less happily, major Spanish banking houses from Barcelona to Mlaga collapsed; chaos reigned among Andalusian merchants; and the *Hermiones* captain, on returning home, forfeited his head.### In the decade that followed the Treaty of Paris of 1783 years that saw a resurgence of transatlantic traffic; the Royal Navys startling expansion to keep pace with rival fleets; and the spiraling descent of the French monarchy, corrupted by debt and

decay, into revolution an anxious peace descended on Europe like a bank of dark, low-hanging clouds lit by fitful flashes of sheet lightning. In the course of losing most of its American colonies, England had acquired a host of familiar enemies nursing grudges old and new. More than once, the country teetered on the brink of fresh hostilities, in 1787 with France over rival claimants in the Netherlands, and three years later with Spain in the Pacific Northwest. As much as ever, the realms safety depended upon naval superiority. During the Revolutionary War, control of the English Channel had been surrendered, sparking widespread fears of foreign invasion. Little wonder, with the looming prospect of peace, that the Admiralty, at the urging of England's fledgling prime minister, William Pitt the Younger, set about rebuilding the fleet with an aggressive program of extensive repairs and new construction. Already the country's largest industrial infrastructure, naval dockyards stretching from Deptford to Portsmouth resounded with newfound urgency. The great naval preparations now making militate against every idea of peace, observed the Reading Mercury in January 1783. All the while, British warships plied the North Atlantic. With the Channel fleet guarding the homeland, frigates, prized for their speed, firepower, and maneuverability, played a pivotal role in projecting British power overseas displaying the flag, keeping sea-lanes open, and escorting commercial convoys. First designed by the French in the late seventeenth century, frigates typically cruised the seas either alone, in pairs, or in small squadrons detached from battle fleets. Not uncommonly, they roamed out of signaling range from other vessels. Though smaller than line ships armed with heavier metal, they were the most glamorous vessels in the Royal Navy, famed for their aura of adventure as well as for their autonomy and sailing prowess. Star captains was how an English poet described the small number of officers fortunate enough to receive a command. Adding to their allure was the prospect of prize money. Upon the capture of an enemy warship, merchantman, or privateer, everyone from the admiral of the fleet to the cabin boy, according to rank, reaped a portion of the spoils, with captains due a quarter share. In 1790, when war with Spain appeared imminent, a young officer, on hearing rumors of his posting to a frigate, immediately wrote his sister. Acknowledging the larger sums paid to captains of line-of-battle ships, he assured her, If I can get her into the West Indies, I will make the Dons pay me the difference once or twice a month. Besides periodic patrols of home waters and routine repairs in royal shipyards, the *Hermione* spent long spells cruising the Caribbean. When spring yielded to summer, it was not unusual to find her farther north safe from hurricanes policing British fishing banks off Newfoundland. Even then, uncertain trade winds, fickle currents, and mercurial weather could render familiar seas hazardous. During a harrowing trip from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Ireland in 1789, fierce storms, exhausted provisions, and the deaths of ten seamen forced the *Hermione's* crew to take refuge in the Spanish port of Corunna. Sixteen bedraggled survivors were left to die in a hospital as the stricken vessel beat on for Ireland. Only after extensive repairs at a cost in excess of 20,000 did the *Hermione* return to the West Indies three years later in a squadron of seven warships, arriving barely a month after the revolutionary government in Paris declared war against Britain on February 1, 1793. Tensions had mounted after French troops invaded the Austrian Netherlands, followed in January by shocking reports of the execution of King Louis XVI at the age of thirty-eight. Insofar as prospects for peace had grown bleak, the only surprise was that France, not Britain, first loosed the dogs of war. Although the greatest part of the bloodletting during the First French Revolutionary War (1792-1797) occurred in Europe, the Caribbean, for the Pitt government, became a critical theater of operations. For all the hurricanes and earthquakes, the stifling summers, the perils of disease to say nothing of the Lilliputian size of most islands their plantation economies afforded European powers immense troves of wealth. For Britain, the loss of Barbados or, worse, the much larger island of Jamaica would have been devastating. If anything, France's colonies were dearer. Boasting eight thousand plantations, the French island of Saint Domingue (now Haiti) was the wealthiest colony in the Caribbean. Equally important, with France deprived of naval bases, British sea power in the North Atlantic would again rule the waves. And with French troops on the march in Europe and much of the navy sidelined, the islands were all the more vulnerable to coastal raids and amphibious assaults. Hence the departure of a mammoth flotilla, months in the planning, in November 1793 under the seasoned command of Vice Admiral Sir John Jervis. Fitted out in Portsmouth and Cork, the expedition to the Caribbean comprised nearly one hundred warships and transports ferrying eight thousand unblooded troops tasked with bringing the French empire to its knees. Even before the fleets arrival that January, life aboard the *Hermione* had quickened. Along with squadrons stationed from Newfoundland to East India, the Royal Navy maintained two bases in the West Indies: Port Royal, on the southeastern coast of Jamaica, once a pirate haven reviled as the most wicked town in the West, and Carlisle Bay, home to Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados, from which the *Hermione* under Captain John Hills routinely departed to escort merchant convoys to safer waters. Come fall, however, the *Hermione* had joined a squadron from Jamaica in landing troops in western Saint Domingue. Soon afterward, a small inlet at Cape Saint Nicholas Mole, on the northwestern tip of the island where the sandy coastline gave way to mountains and lush forests, was seized from the French. On the same spot on December 6, 1492, Columbus had landed during his first expedition to the Americas. Although notorious for yellow fever, the sheltered bay gave the British a strategic anchorage in the Western Caribbean second only to Port Royal and Kingston. In the months following Jervis's arrival in early 1794, Port-au-Prince, the capital of Saint Domingue, lying to the south, was taken after the fall of Martinique, Saint Lucia, and Guadeloupe, like so many dominoes, to British forces in the Eastern Caribbean. For several hours, the *Hermione*, lying directly opposite the capital, traded volleys of cannon fire with a French shore battery. Then one of

the ships main guns blew up, igniting a second explosion on the larboard (port) side of the forecastle. We suffered very severely, a young officer later wrote of the eleven casualties, including five seamen mortally wounded. Despite the British victory, the interior of Saint Domingue, in the early stages of a slave insurrection resulting in Haitian independence, remained an elusive prize. And by years end, in an abrupt reversal, heavy French reinforcements poured into the Caribbean, causing the British offensive to sputter. The military, hobbled by indecision, struggled to retain hard-won terrain. The bill was steep. As the fighting ground on, massive numbers of troops and seamen perished, owing less to hostile fire than to the deadly triumvirate of yellow fever (black vomit), malaria (ague), and dysentery (bloody flux). In the *Hermione* alone, a junior officer attested, we lost in three or four months, nearly half our crew; many from apparent good health, dying in a few hours. The *Hermione* persevered in the thick of the fighting, shelling and protecting ports from Saint Nicholas Mole to Cape Tiburon, at the southern tip of the islands western coast. She also tacked to and fro in search of merchantmen and other easy prey. Black with white molding, the frigate cut a forbidding figure. Not only were the commercial ships of belligerent nations subject to seizure but also neutral craft suspected of trading with the enemy, including the vessels of American merchants who enjoyed a lucrative commerce with the French islands. Profiting from the spoils, British commanders interpreted their instructions liberally. Frigates became notorious in the United States for their depredations. To the deep chagrin of George Washingtons administration in Philadelphia, by March 1, 1794, no fewer than 250 American vessels had been commandeered, with the lions share ruled legitimate prizes by British Admiralty courts. The *Hermione* garnered a princely portion of the plunder. By late 1793, she had already snagged four American ships laden with sugar, coffee, cotton, and provisions. More seizures followed, among them a Boston schooner taken at anchor off Saint Nicholas Mole while its captain, on shore, scrambled to sell its cargo of lumber. More lucrative, potentially, was the capture of the *Rising Sun*, a twenty-gun U.S. merchant ship thought to contain a great quantity of money belonging to the French commissary on Saint Domingue. To little effect, an American in Kingston howled, The property of real American citizens are waisting by endless vexations, and her most invaluable treasure, the lives of her virtuous citizens, are daily closed by illegal detentions. Nothing can equal the contempt and derision wherewith we are treated. Worst was the impressment of American sailors on suspicion of being either deserters, British citizens, or both, an estimated ten thousand men during all of the French Wars (1793-1815). Desperate to man their warships, the British had grown exasperated by the loss of seamen to an expanding American merchant marine. In the mid-1790s, no vessel earned a blacker reputation in American eyes than the *Hermione* under Philip Wilkinsons command. On July 4, 1795, she left Port-au-Prince for the remote outpost of Jrmie, 120 miles to the west. There, at anchor, lay twenty American ships, which members of the frigates crew methodically boarded. Before the day was out, they had laid hold of nearly seventy seamen, practically all claiming to be native-born Americans. Kept aboard the *Hermione* without food for the better part of two days, they refused to enlist in the Royal Navy. Although five sailors were returned for being unfit to serve king or country, the angry protests of American captains, unable to crew their vessels, went unheard. The next thing we shall hear of this frigate, *Hermione*, perhaps, warned a New Jersey newspaper, [is that she is] on our coasts, annoying not only our allies, but plundering our own vessels.