

Four questions to Caroline E. Shaw

Caroline E. Shaw is associate professor of European history at Bates College (Maine). She is the author of *Britannia's Embrace. Modern Humanitarianism and the Imperial Origins of Refugee Relief* (Oxford University Press, 2015), a book which was derived from the PhD she wrote at the University of California at Berkeley.

Interview by Fabrice Bensimon

1. How was the British model of refuge defined – or redefined – in the nineteenth century?

Until the end of the eighteenth century, the very word “refugee” in English referred to the Huguenots, French Protestants who fled Catholic persecution in favor of shelter in the stridently Protestant state. The British model of refuge was, in this respect, a confessional model, bound up with the *raison d'être* of the early modern Anglican state. That changed, I have found, by the early nineteenth century. Refuge would still be part of the national sense of self, but that sense of self was increasingly about liberal ideology rather than religion or state security. As I argue in the book, that the shift began during the 1790s as a response to Catholic refugees from France and continued in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars. With the French Revolution came new allies, specifically Catholic allies in need of refuge from the National Assembly and then from Robespierre’s Committee of Public Safety. Conceived as a national duty, support for French Catholic Priests and laypersons extended from the upper echelons of society to every parish throughout the British Isles. If the French Revolution demolished a confessional model for refuge by creating a new, even more threatening social cleavage of ideology, the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars cemented the new notion that Britons would find in refugees ideological comrades in a far wider struggle against illiberal rule overseas. Aid to refugees had thus always been bound up in British national identity, but this increasingly centered upon Britain the champion of liberalism rather than on Britain as Protestant bulwark. Aid to refugees had long been premised on the understanding that refuge itself was a second best to ending the cause of persecution wholesale. Yet it was this very aspirational nature that drew activists from across the political and social spectrum to refugees’ causes. In an era of ongoing revolutions on the European Continent and slavery in the Americas, Britons forged a template for refugee relief, much of which remains intact to this day.

2. How was this model challenged in the late 19th century?

British refuge depended upon two interrelated factors as it expanded during the French Revolution and in the decades thereafter. Ideologically, refuge was inspired by an expansive liberal ethos, as mentioned previously. Materially and practically, refuge depended on the resources of an imperial power. The British could be as expansive as they were in their welcome to foreign refugees because they had the means to resettle tens of thousands of these refugees overseas in the outposts of their empire and under the British aegis elsewhere.

By the late-nineteenth century, however, British refuge would come under strain in both of these critical areas. Asylum-seekers seemed less and less like the liberal ideal than those of the previous generation. Continental Anarchists were more ideologically alien to

British norms than the model liberal revolutionaries of old. Their violence seemed to take aim at the fabric of liberal society and government. Non-revolutionary asylum-seekers began to seem less heroic as well. The iconic refugee had been a self-starter, an ideal liberal individual capable and willing to work hard in exile. This assumption had been important in differentiating refugees from the ordinary poor, other migrants included. Increasingly, however, whole populations seemed poised to be on the move. At a time of heightened economic anxiety, the fear of would-be refugee hosts was either that these newer populations could not work, would not work, or – paradoxically – would work too hard, undermining the native population’s economic prospects in the process. While the British had long relied on transmigration for more permanent refugee resettlement, local fears of the impact of new migration made standard venues for this project seem less viable. Either British officials and activists would have to carve out new harbors of refuge in their territories, or they would have to absorb more refugees at home. These changes were, of course, at once ideological, psychological, and geopolitical. Once heroic, the likes of a Kossuth or Garibaldi, the iconic image of the refugee gave way by the 1870s to images of the refugee as either a violent desperado or a helpless victim.

The numbers of in-coming refugees were, in fact, manageable according to government studies of migration in Britain and demands for refuge directed to British naval officers sailors and civil servants overseas. Yet, anxieties about refugees at home and under the British aegis overseas held sway and would result in significant policy changes. On the one hand, these changes were a matter of humanitarian triumph. For nearly hundred years the refugee had been an iconic figure in British cultural politics, but nowhere mentioned in law. Between 1870 and 1905, however, refuge for the persecuted would be codified in British law, with protections far exceeding those offered to refugees by EU or international convention today. On the other hand, officials and activists alike began to rework what constituted a *bona fide* refugee, narrowing the category considerably. An 1876 set of policy recommendations for the Admiralty, for example, limited asylum for fugitive slaves to those who faced immediate danger to their lives. The same language would be used in the 1905 Aliens Act, which restricted the immigration of destitute foreigners (read: Eastern European Jews) while at the same time preserving asylum for those who faced threats to life or limb due to political or religious persecution. While these changes reflected the largely imagined threat of unsustainable mass migration, court decisions limited the access of political offenders to asylum as well. *Real* political refugees would only be those who fought ‘in the light of day,’ by way of open and organized armed rebellion; in other words, they were not dynamite-throwing Anarchists, the prototype of the modern terrorist.

3. Your main focus is Britain and its Empire. Can you say a few words about the specific meanings that being an imperial power could give to the notion of “refuge” in the British case?

In a sense I have had to answer this question in my responses to questions one and two. It is, though, worth making a related point, this one about an absence in the archives. For my research, I spent the better part of three years locating and reading about the groups that the British termed “refugees” in the period between 1685 and 1914, the point being to understand the evolution of the category for a nation that prided itself on its refuge. What one rarely finds in these archives, however, is reference to any of the many

refugees from within the British Empire. To be a “refugee,” of course, implies flight from unjust rule and few would admit this to be the case in the British context, especially among activists or foreign refugees, who had to sell their cause to a wider audience. In reading documents about famine in India during the 1870s, for example, the only “refugees” are individuals from the Princely States. For the better part of the nineteenth century too, Irish nationalists – while friendly with Continental revolutionary refugees – are not called “refugees” themselves either.

The moment this changes, however, is a key moment in British imperial power that bespeaks both the expansiveness of the liberal imperial ethos and its decided vulnerabilities. It was the 1870 Extradition Act that provided a safeguard for the political offender. The Act was a matter of liberal triumph for two reasons. First, it codified refugee status in law for the first time. Second, it passed despite the fact that the British knew they were endangering their own hopes of recapturing violent Irish nationalists who had fled to France and to the United States. In this case, then, liberal sensibilities trumped imperial needs.

4. How does your work help to shed light on modern-day attitudes to refugees in Britain?

The number of asylum-seekers has increased dramatically since the Great War, and the number of displaced peoples has never been higher than it is today. Still, we see in nineteenth-century British refuge critical features of modern-day attitudes. In the first place, the legal limbo of persecuted foreigners – the quest to identify *bona fide* refugees – remains central to, really at the core of, present day deliberations, most of which happen now at detention-centers and at refugee camps around the world. Refuge is, as ever, tied up in the narratives we tell about refugees, the value judgments we make about them, and the degree to which we see in their stories a universal human plight. As at the end of the nineteenth century, it is a story that too often becomes lost when popular anxieties take hold. That said, I do not want to end on such a negative turn. There remains real power in the nineteenth-century British narrative of refuge – refuge was, after all, a successful social movement and one that gained cultural sway far beyond its individual activists advocating on behalf of one group of persecuted foreigners or another. British activists of the nineteenth century pitched their social movement against the greater despotism of foreign governments; Britons could undertake the moral responsibility for persecuted foreigners when others would not. In the age of Donald Trump, the time seems ripe for Britain and for Europe, to take up that charge once more.