

Rough Crossings – Britain, The Slaves and the American Revolution by
Simon Schama. BBC Books 2005.

With *Rough Crossings* Simon Schama more than confirms his place as the UK's leading popular historian; as a respected and serious academic this is a considerable achievement.

Rough Crossings is in many ways a most unexpected book: not because of its quality, which is uniformly high, but because of the author's approach to the subject. *Rough Crossings* is not about the trade in African slaves in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, or about the struggle to abolish slavery in Britain, though it deals with both subjects. Principally it is concerned with the role played by black Americans in the American Revolution in response to the pragmatic proposal made by the British to the effect that any who left their American owners to join the British forces would be given their freedom.

The positive response to this call, and the actions of some who answered it, is both surprising and impressive. But what makes *Rough Crossings* such a memorable story is not the War of Independence material, or that about the British settlement for African Americans in Nova Scotia and the subsequent settlement in Sierra Leone: rather it is the characters who bestride the book.

Granville Sharp, the tireless godfather of slave freedom, the former slaves Jonathan Strong, James Somerset and Gustavus Vassa; Lieutenant John Clarkson who transported former slaves across the Atlantic to a harsh African freedom and the famous William Wilberforce.

This is a wonderful piece of history, moving, disturbing and inspiring, told with subtlety and skill by a master of his craft.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh