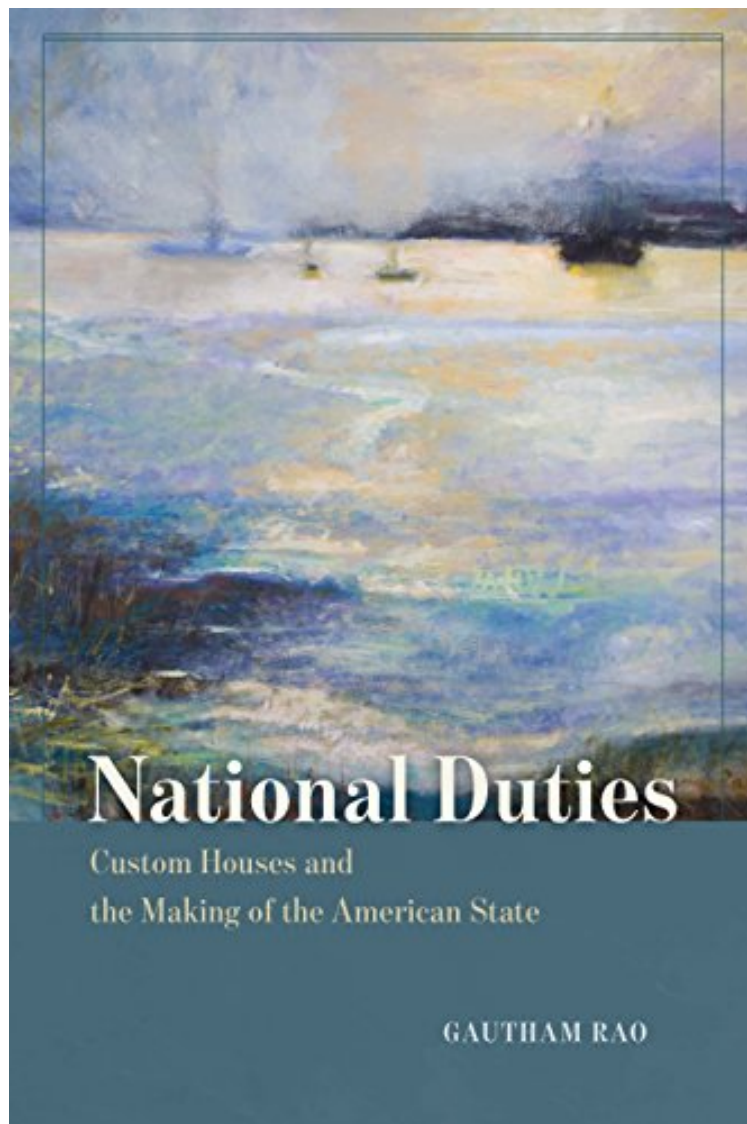


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National Duties: Custom Houses and the Making of the American State (American Beginnings, 1500-1900)

Gautham Rao

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Gautham Rao : National Duties: Custom Houses and the Making of the American State (American Beginnings, 1500-1900) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised National Duties: Custom Houses and the Making of the American State (American Beginnings, 1500-1900):

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Accessible and livelyBy L. SwamyFor a non historian, this book was a clear, accessible, and deep look into the forces that influenced our country's transition from a nascent Republic into a

legitimate sovereignty. Most importantly, this text is anything but dry! The history comes alive with a mix of schematics, graphics, and most importantly actual language from the late 1700s. Rao uses these original documents to show us the real emotions - especially the anxiety - as we began to accumulate the revenue without which we would not thrive as an independent nation.

In the wake of the American Revolution, if you had asked a citizen whether his fledgling state would survive more than two centuries, the answer would have been far from confident. The problem, as is so often the case, was money. Left millions of dollars of debt by the war, the nascent federal government created a system of taxes on imported goods and installed custom houses at the nation's ports, which were charged with collecting these fees. Gradually, the houses amassed enough revenue from import merchants to stabilize the new government. But, as the fragile United States was dependent on this same revenue, the merchants at the same time gained outsized influence over the daily affairs of the custom houses. As the United States tried to police this commerce in the early nineteenth century, the merchants' stranglehold on custom house governance proved to be formidable. In *National Duties*, Gautham Rao makes the case that the origins of the federal government and the modern American state lie in these conflicts at government custom houses between the American Revolution and the presidency of Andrew Jackson. He argues that the contours of the government emerged from the push-and-pull between these groups, with commercial interests gradually losing power to the administrative state, which only continued to grow and lives on today.

Brilliantly researched and smartly argued, *National Duties* deploys prodigious research to construct a social history of governance in the early Republic. Rao gives us a methodological monument that will not be replicated for some time, connecting high fiscal policy to its implementation on the ground, and placing that contingent relationship in the broader social context of mob action and the cultural context of the British fiscal-military state on the one hand, and republican ideology on the other. Besides providing a methodological template for historians interested in governance and the law, regardless of site or time period, Rao's approach yields a major substantive payoff. He argues persuasively that the great centralizer, Alexander Hamilton, was in fact instrumental in replicating a decentralized financial regime and it was Jefferson and Madison, so often portrayed as the protectors of states' rights who shored up the plenary power of the national government.