

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Brendan McConville, Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture.** *The King's Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688-1776.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. xii + 322 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3065-9; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5866-0.



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**Published on** H-Atlantic (June, 2007)

At a rally at Faneuil Hall, Boston, on April 28, 2007, it was my pleasure to observe Americans invoking their anti-monarchical traditions by calling for the impeachment of “King George.” One week later, President Bush welcomed Queen Elizabeth II with a recitation of a familiar libertarian mantra: that the special relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom was sustained by a common history that fostered in both countries a “deep and abiding love of liberty.” American libertarians are legion, American monarchists rather less so, but there is a third tradition in tune with notions of an imperial presidency: *Imperium et Libertas*, as Benjamin Disraeli once put it, or a deep and abiding reverence for what a benevolent emperor might achieve. This was the kind of monarch that Thomas Hutchinson believed in, when, on arriving in England in 1774, he rushed to London to brief George III and found himself fielding the king’s detailed and knowledgeable questions. Alas for Hutchinson, the king failed to provide the decisive leadership necessary for salvaging the liberty of colonists terrorized by rebels and the rebels symbolically impeached the monarch in the Declaration of Independence.

Americans’ fascination with the British monarchy has a history longer than the history of their own repudiation of monarchical rule. Brendan McConville’s *The King’s Three Faces* is a magisterial study of colonial Amer-

ican attitudes toward monarchy, and of how ingrained these attitudes were in colonial political cultures before the Revolution. Like most scholars caught up in the rush to promote his work, McConville overstates his claim that he provides a “counterthesis” to historiographical orthodoxy. Even so, I venture to suggest, he does indeed posit a new historiographical paradigm: that the colonists were not so much proto-republicans as innate royalists deeply attached to the monarchy and British imperialism.

McConville examines the prevalence of royalism in colonial political cultures between the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89 and the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1775. In that time, the colonists fully embraced the Hanoverian Succession and the expansion of the British Empire. “Devotion to the monarchy, the imperialization of political life, patriarchy as political and social expectation, a British historical understanding and perception of time, intense fear of Catholics, and a growing, mobile yeoman population that perceived its relationship to the king as a personal one: these factors explain much of what occurred in public life in America between 1688 and 1774” (p. 7). What occurred, according to McConville, was fragmentation. The first fault line was between the colonists and homeland Britons; the second concerns the origins of the American Revolution.

McConville provides an engaging account of royalism in colonial America. He demonstrates clearly how ritual celebrations iconized the Hanoverian Succession, from rites marking the monarch's birthday to the Pope's Day parades. McConville argues that the prevalence of royal iconography by 1740 is enough to contradict to the prevailing historiographical view that colonial societies were inherently "antithetical to monarchy" (p. 79). Many colonial historians might disagree, but I suspect that McConville has gone a long way to providing some answers to the criticism that met Gordon S. Wood's discussion of monarchical society in part 1 of *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1991). The answers to sustain Wood's sub-thesis are not to be found in social and political structures nor even in political behavior, but in examinations of political culture such as undertaken here by McConville: reverence appears far more important than patronage, consent more so than management, and participation more than manipulation. In sum, the colonists espoused a Hutchinsonian belief in "benevolent royalism": they were proudly monarchical and imperialist, and did not need to be marshalled by royal governors or other officials. (That they were also overtly localist in their views is an issue worth further consideration. How did localism conflate with royalism and imperialism? Does localism equate with proto-republicanism?) The analogy which McConville draws with modern-day Northern Ireland—that the colonists espoused a "marching" culture (p. 79)—is not as far-fetched as it might seem: it could be said that in their articulation of royalism the colonists were professedly more British than the British.

The king, however, wore many faces. McConville manages to ascertain how colonists of different stripes evinced highly subjective and often contradictory views of monarchy's place, both in their lives and the functioning of the British Empire. Colonists who, on November 5, fervidly marked the failure of Papist plots and, on January 30, lamented the downfall of kings were profoundly unsettled by the rehabilitation of Oliver Cromwell after 1750. Unlike the Loyalists of Northern Ireland, the colonial celebrations of royalism were bereft of an event like the siege of Derry (1688-89) or the battle of the Boyne (July 12, 1690) that brought divergent groups together in commemorating unity in the face of adversity and Protestantism's triumph over Catholicism. (The nearest approximation, for New Englanders at least, was the cap-

ture of the French fortress of Louisburg on July 26, 1745.) That role ought to have been filled by victory over France in the Seven Years' War. Why that was not the case can be explained in part by the colonists' "subjective understanding" (p. 251) as to monarchy's role within the empire.

Colonists and Britons tended to view the legacy of the Glorious Revolution very differently. The British political elite lauded the establishment of a limited monarchy and the concomitant emergence of Parliament; by the mid-1760s, sovereignty lay with the "king-in-Parliament," and the doctrine of parliamentary supremacy was a *sine qua non* of imperial relationships, as the American colonies found out to their cost. For the colonists (irrespective of whether we see them as British-Americans or provincial Britons), the monarchy was a more dominant feature of the constitution, less constrained by parliament than British writers supposed: wherefrom the colonists appealed to the "king and Parliament," and in whose minds the two institutions were separated by design and by emotion. This important distinction is often missed by scholars of the Revolution. Constraints of space do not allow for a comparison of McConville's book with Richard L. Bushman's *King and People in Provincial Massachusetts* (1985); suffice to note that both are indispensable to appreciating how traumatic the break with monarchy was in the mid-1770s.

It is unfortunate that McConville describes the genteel Englishwoman Anne Hulton as a "New Englander" (p. 281), for her evocative and detailed account of the infamous tarring and feathering of customs officer John Malcolm enlightens us to the isolation of Britons from the colonial mainstream. Did colonial-born royalists feel the same? By the time that royalists and Crown servants were terrorized as "Loyalists," a profound change had occurred in the colonists' self-perceptions as well as in their evaluations of their connections with the British monarchy. The fault line that constituted the Revolution is succinctly covered and, to this reader at least, it is not entirely clear where the anti-monarchical outburst really came from. I need to re-read these elegantly written chapters, but for now I am certain that this stimulating book will raise a number of essential questions about the advent of the Revolution as much as it does about Colonial America.

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**Citation:** Colin Nicolson. Review of McConville, Brendan; Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture., *The King's Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688-1776*. H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. June, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13291>

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