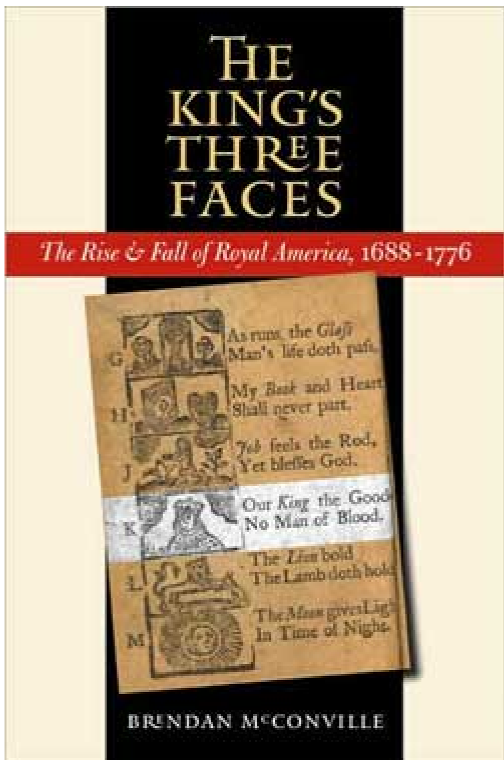
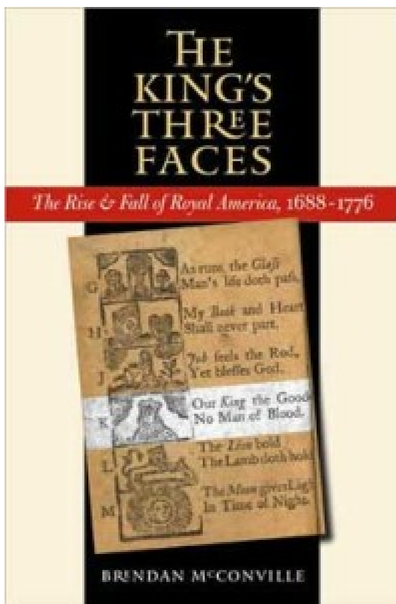
Smashing Idols





Brendan McConville, The King's Three Faces: The Rise & Fall of Royal America, 1688-1776. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2006. 322 pp., paper, $21.95.

In *The King's Three Faces*, a brilliant, bounding study of Anglo-American political culture, Brendan McConville smashes a false idol of American history: the "neoliberal perception" of the colonial period "as a long prologue to the revolutionary crisis" (3). McConville rejects the notion that Britain's North

American colonies were populated—as it might appear in the hindsight of a later, more democratic society—by “protorepublicans, readers of Country pamphlets, rising assemblies, plain-folk Protestants, budding contract theorists, protocapitalists, protoproletariat, protoliberals, (and) modernizers” (4). To the contrary, he argues, those colonies were inhabited by ardent, purple-eyed king worshippers, perhaps the most devoted royalists in all of the British Empire.

In the first part of this three-part monograph, McConville examines the royal political culture that developed in British North America after the Glorious Revolution. McConville discovers this political culture—committed to limited, Protestant monarchy—in an astoundingly vast array of phenomena and events. Folk rituals such as the Pope Day parades by which colonial crowds commemorated the foiling of the Gunpowder Plot; public holidays such as the anniversaries of accession on which the monarch’s greatness was proclaimed; and consumer goods such as the mass-produced prints of the king and queen, which American colonists hung alongside portraits of their own kin: these are but very few of the ceremonies and artifacts that integrated colonial America into the British empire.

In tracing the rise of this political culture, McConville offers an interesting spin on anglicization: the thesis that eighteenth-century North American society grew to resemble more closely that of the British Isles. As McConville explains, the richly royalized political culture that flourished in the American provinces never took root in the metropole, where a large administrative bureaucracy doled out ample patronage, where the liturgy of the state church gave meaning to people’s spiritual existence, and where an organized system of land tenure tended to preserve the social order. These assimilative forces all bound home islanders to their nation but allowed them to remain phlegmatic toward the Hanoverians’ monarchical rites (8). Thus in McConville’s ironic formulation, Americans were becoming *more* British than was in fact British.

In the second part of his study, McConville reveals just how firmly royalism had taken hold of the American imagination. To accomplish this, he explores the myriad rhetorical purposes for which British colonists invoked the king’s name. On both sides of the Zenger Crisis, for example, disputants waved the banner of Georgian liberty. Much more intriguingly, enslaved African Americans in several instances justified rebellion by proclaiming the righteous English king’s supposed intention to abolish slavery. As these moments demonstrate, colonial Americans envisioned their monarch as a benevolent defender of their rights. At the same time, however, they also imagined the king in neoabsolutist terms. McConville explains that by midcentury, as if to repair the dynastic breach of an earlier generation, Americans had restored to the Hanoverians the glory, if not the prerogative, of divine right. Resulting in part from a popular revival of Stuart remembrance, this process culminated in use of “solar imagery and other absolutist metaphors” to describe the Georges (203).

Why was it, then, that such reverential colonists came to desecrate the king? To a considerable extent because George III fell short of their vaunted expectations. Despite Americans' pleas for royal intervention, King George never protected his loving subjects from a corrupt Parliament or a scheming ministry (neither of which figured heroically in British Americans' imagined constitutional order). So profound was Americans' resulting disillusionment that, as McConville details in Part III, the Revolutionary crisis touched off a frenzy of anti-royal iconoclasm.

Regrettably, McConville does not question the limitations of political culture as a mobilizing force; rather, he presumes its efficacy to integrate the nation and reconcile its members to their sovereign. His evidence makes it easy for readers to do the same. But just how potent was this political culture? What other social and political ends did it serve? Was it conducive to more consensus than conflict? Did every colonist who disdained royal festival, like the Puritan Samuel Sewall, ultimately come to accept it (55)?

These questions are not simply academic but would rather seem to press upon McConville's central thesis. For even if we join McConville in his assumption that American colonists fêted the Crown out of heartfelt regard for their king, the question persists, why? Did British colonials tote about his majesty's miniature portrait because they thought that a hereditary sovereign monarch was an essential component of benevolent government? Or did colonial Americans, situated at the far reaches of the Atlantic, adulate the Crown because to do so confirmed their identities as trueborn Englishmen? For McConville the answer is clearly both, but he does not weigh these considerably different impulses against one another. In fairness, he likely cannot: such intentionality does not readily yield to rigid quantification. Still, somewhere in this dichotomy, false though it may be, rests the balance of royalism and republicanism. Under the former interpretation, the Declaration of Independence and the republican constitutions written in its wake would seemingly represent a monumental abrogation of past principles. But under the latter, the War for Independence would be more remarkable for patriots' violent repudiation of national allegiance than for the republican institutions they subsequently adopted.

Readers who wish to burn their own golden calves must lace up their boots, for McConville ranges far and wide. His analysis of rough music and skimmington as rituals for the enforcement of early American gender norms ranks among the very best treatments of the subject. And yet not until a belated and maddeningly brief discussion of patriarchy and family roles does McConville relate those folk customs to the rise and fall of royal America. (Would that the Elizabethtown Regulars who flogged a notorious wife beater on his "Posteriors" had instead branded the royal arms on that same spot [183].) Similarly, McConville's chapter on imperial reform offers a fruitful exploration of the many imaginative proposals floated by imperial consolidators for the reorganization of Britain's eighteenth-century dominions. Aligning this book with a late renaissance in imperial history, this chapter points the reader toward a breathtaking vista of Albion and Indian what-might-have-beens. It

further discloses certain colonists' willingness to resolve their political grievances within a constitutional framework, a testament to their thorough integration into the British Empire. And yet this chapter stands apart from the rest of the book in its detachment from the ceremonial and material culture by which British North Americans avouched devotion to the Crown.

All of these observations amount to little more than praise by faint damnation, for *The King's Three Faces* is a compelling book. If McConville argues for the power and pervasiveness of royal political culture with the fervor of a recent convert, that is because he is. "Like most scholars of my generation, I accepted the whiggish schools' central imperatives," McConville confesses. "Belief that some form of modernization drove change in colonial America still dominated the historiography of the period, and I endorsed its logic" (6). McConville's new faith may not entirely displace the old republican and liberal orthodoxies, but it will certainly force a rethinking of their creeds.

Further Reading:

On the anglicization thesis, see John M. Murrin, "Anglicizing an American Colony: The Transformation of Provincial Massachusetts" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1966); T. H. Breen, "An Empire of Goods: The Anglicization of Colonial America, 1690-1776," *Journal of British Studies* 25 (1986): 467-99; and Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988), especially chapter 8. Readers will find a take on anglicization similar to McConville's—that the American colonies were becoming more "English" even as England was becoming something rather different—in James A. Henretta's "Magistrates, Common Law Lawyers, Legislators: The Three Legal Systems of British America," in Christopher Tomlins and Michael Grossberg, eds., *The Cambridge History of Law in America: Early America, 1580-1815* (New York, 2008): 555-92. In its concern for political culture, McConville's study contributes to the so-called "newest political history," which includes works by Joanne Freeman, Simon Newman, Jeff Pasley, Len Travers, and David Waldstreicher, to name only a few of its practitioners.

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