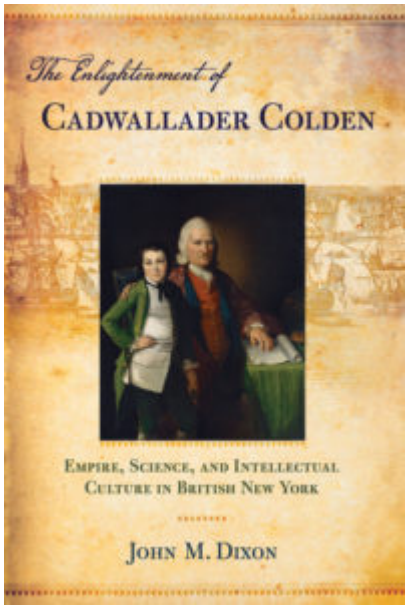
Imperial Enlightenment

The Enlightenment of Cadwallader Colden

Empire, Science, and Intellectual Culture in British New York

John M. Dixon



John Dixon, *The Enlightenment of Cadwallader Colden.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2016. 243 pp., $35.

John Dixon's welcome study of Cadwallader Colden is the most comprehensive of the few biographies we have of this important North Briton colonial. Dixon's brief book attempts a narrative of Colden's life, an analysis of his important intellectual efforts, and an evaluation of his varied political career. His broad thesis is that Colden's lifework and philosophy were part of a different and less understood moderate Enlightenment based on "Imperialism, elitism, and conservatism" (7). In this vein, Dixon is spot-on. As he notes, the Enlightenment in America has too long been imagined as a teleology of the American Revolution (167). Colden's brand of Imperial fealty, elite scientific debate, and conservative political values were at the center of the *British* Enlightenment, and Dixon's book is an important entry point into this world. Where Dixon's book falters is in its ambitious breadth and its lack of engagement with the historiographical debates his subject calls to attention. *The Enlightenment of Cadwallader Colden* is a breezy 167 pages (243 pages with notes and index) and tries to encompass Colden's personal life, his historical and scientific contributions, and his political career, philosophy, and writing. As such it necessarily treads lightly even where the subject requires more weight. Perhaps most disappointing is Dixon's failure to engage with the literature on the creation of a British identity by "North Britons" or Scots dedicated to an Imperial Atlantic (see, for example, the work of David Armitage). This leads Dixon to pass up an important opportunity to study the new patronage-driven Imperial and royal *British* identity at the center of Colden's Enlightenment—and which Colden so obviously represents.

Dixon's study is divided into three sections that encompass Colden's education ("Beginnings"), his scientific and other intellectual ideas or efforts ("Active Matters"), and his political career ("Politics"). This framework is held together via the narrative of Colden's life as he departs Scotland, settles in British North America, and becomes a gentleman scholar holding the political

offices and power he ambitiously pursued—culminating in his position as lieutenant governor (and acting governor) of New York on the eve of the American Revolution. As Dixon ably represents, Colden is a fascinating polymath. His maps, reports, and book on the Iroquois were seminal and important contributions to Imperial science and politics and made Colden the "leading British authority on the history and geography of New York" (77). Also of interest, and adroitly discussed in Dixon's book, are Colden's obvious failures in his purely scientific pursuits. Colden jumped feet-first into some of the most intensely theoretical debates of the eighteenth century. At question was the nature of matter—and thus of the universe and of God's relationship or lack thereof with His creations. Covered in greater depth in Alfred Hoermann's largely forgotten intellectual biography of Colden, this is no easy slog and requires a mastery of philosophical ideas not at the center of the American historical canon. Here also a central tenet of Dixon's elite conservative Enlightenment is made explicit: the matter of consequence at the center of these transatlantic discussions was not so much how the universe worked per se, but how it worked in its relationship to God. If, as proponents of Mechanism argued, the universe had been set in motion by a distant "unmoved mover," why need God exist? A clockwork universe set in motion by what Samuel Clarke called a "do-nothing King" was a gateway to atheism and chaos. On the other hand, if matter itself contained agency or motion as a quality imbedded in its creation, the religious consequences were equally perilous. Deeply religious thinkers like Isaac Newton in his 1730 *Opticks* imagined the universe as God's "boundless uniform *Sensorium,*" where God's literal and constant will was the motor logic of all planetary and material movement. Colden's unsuccessful challenge to Newton was also shaped by the same religious constraints. As such, then, some of the most important Enlightenment era scientific debates were shaped not by empirical analysis but by the religious beliefs and sensibilities critical to contemporaries' vision of themselves in the universe.

Colden's forays into these hypothetical discussions failed miserably to impress his contemporaries, but he enjoyed a number of other scientific contributions, in botany, for example, that contributed to his intellectual renown. He was, however, eminently more successful in the political realm, and Dixon's analysis of Colden is critical to understanding a world now lost. As Dixon notes, the American Revolution and the various documents and principles stated therein have shaped and defined our understanding of the Enlightenment in America (7). Imagined this way, the Revolution stands as a seminal moment in the American Enlightenment and the nation's founding documents its *arias.* Following this logic, the political principles and hierarchies at the center of the Empire are cast as *unenlightened* systems of exploitation and oppression foisted on colonials by arrogant Britons and overturned by the *enlightened* Revolutionaries. Dixon's biography of Colden provides an important counter to that narrative and resurrects Colden as an important *Enlightenment* political figure loyal to the Empire and what Dixon refers to as the "national interest" (67). In both his service as surveyor general, lieutenant governor, acting governor and other lesser offices—as well as his factional struggles, Colden

was driven by Enlightened and decidedly British political ideals, such as the balance of power seated in the unwritten British constitution (138). It is here, however, where Dixon's analysis misses an opportunity to explain the complexity of Imperial politics, the new transnational British identity, and pre-Revolutionary socio-political relationships.

The broader confusion surrounding these ideas shone forth for me the other day as I sat with my daughter watching—for the first and last time—the film version of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992). There is much to regret in this romantic romp, but when a British soldier—likely a Scot—screamed out to the startled Indians, "England is sovereign!" I was definitely confused. Colden was the prototypical North Briton whose Imperial allegiance was part of the construction of a transnational "royal," Imperial, and *British* identity based on patronage, and critical to understanding the Enlightenment nature of the British Empire. The British Empire and the consequent British identity (not *English*) were created by transient men and women—for well-known historical reasons, many of them Scots—who set out on watery domains, constructing along the way new social and transnational political identities that were, in their day, a contagion for new ways of looking at the world. They created a commercial, political, and intellectual world based on political love for a monarch, economic interest in an Imperial (not *national)* world order, and a desire for stability and what they understood as progress.

But why does this matter for Dixon's book? Missed opportunities abound in all books and it is a valuable axiom of reviewers to not criticize an author for a book he or she did not write. It matters because Dixon fails to adequately explore or explain the socio-political relationships that drove men like Colden in the Imperial world and are critical to the very Enlightenment he seeks to spotlight. Colden is presented by Dixon variously as a reformer against "corruption" for "the national interest" (67) and then, conversely, as a "corrupt" politician who as surveyor general manipulated land grants to his and then Governor Cosby's favor (94). The word "corruption" is bandied about rather loosely here, with men seeking to profit from their political relationships and positions imagined as morally suspect. Dixon, for example, presents Horace Walpole, British Auditor General of the Plantations, as "corrupt" for upholding the royal prerogative and collecting fees related to auditing the revenue of New York (68). Walpole was, of course, entitled to demand such fees (and send a deputy in his place). Indeed, New York's reluctance to pay such fees was an illegal and dangerous challenge to the Imperial order—and Colden's Enlightenment. This characterization of colonial politics as inherently corrupt even when lawful is consistent with the familiar narrative that usually culminates with the old world order swept away by a better democratic future. The corruption Dixon alludes to, however, is the machinery of a political, social, and economic structure based on patronage. Further, patronage, and the consequent *corruption*, as Alexander Hamilton noted, were the genius of the British political system, bringing men into political and economic relationships that wove together and transformed often competing ethno-religious-kinship networks—therein bringing stability and prosperity to the

British Empire and to British North America. In other words, patronage, and the seeming *corruption* at its heart, were critical to the transnational British Imperial identity and system at the center of Colden's Enlightenment.

Colden benefitted throughout his life from this elite and conservative Imperial Enlightenment. It brought him power, prosperity, and the leisure and license to pursue scientific ideas which, though they often failed him, were critical to his worldview and sense of purpose. He was not the author of these political and social structures, but he was their loyal servant, and as such his life, and Dixon's book, offer us an excellent entry point into this world long-lost.

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