Imperial Enlightenment

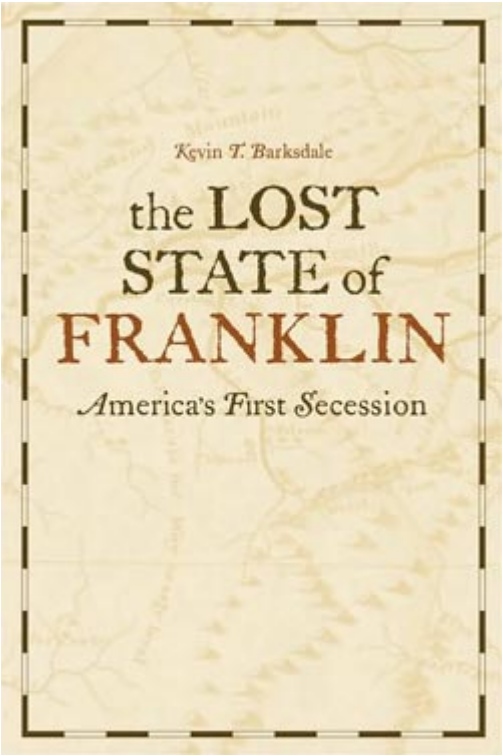
The Enlightenment of Cadwallader Colden

Empire, Science, and Intellectual Culture in British New York

John M. Dixon

John Dixon’s welcome study of Cadwallader Colden is the most comprehensive of the few biographies we have of this important North Briton colonial.

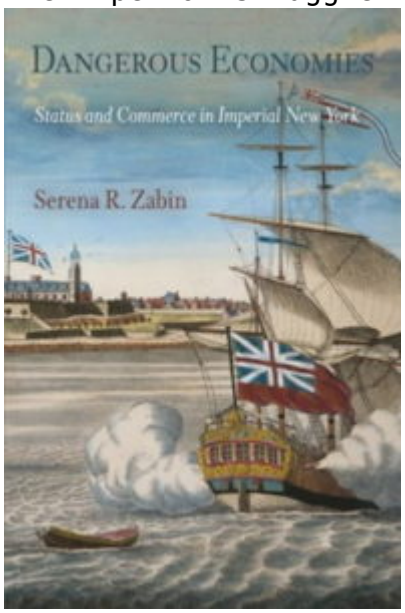
A Lost Cause



The sovereign vacuum created by the inability of any power to serve the needs of backcountry settlers politicized the early national West.

On the margins of the margin

In this wonderful snapshot of the relationship between economic systems and social hierarchies in eighteenth-century New York, Serena Zabin offers an exciting view of life on the margins in the imperial city. For starters, Zabin views New York not as a colonial frontier but rather as an imperial outpost, and she suggests that this vantage is key to understanding how New Yorkers understood themselves and their world at the time—on the margins of empire. Life on the margins of empire was filled with characters generally thought to be marginal to the real elites, politicians, and power brokers in England. But Zabin persuasively demonstrates that work done by poor and middling white women, slaves, servants, sailors, and dance masters was much more central to the imperial struggle for status and authority than previously thought.



Imperial New Yorkers were obsessed with appearance and representation, as traditional markers of class status were no longer reliable.

Central to women's economic authority were their relationships with others—mostly men who had the legal standing necessary to conduct business or access to wealth and markets, but also women in the form of family networks. Expanding efforts to understand the significance of marriage and family in women's lives, Zabin finds agency where most historians see only oppression: the law of coverture. Zabin writes, "Coverture reveals not the ways in which women's participation in the market was limited but the ways in which it was channeled" (35). Women navigated the market through their relationships. Though legally erased through the laws of coverture, married women used their marital status for social and economic leverage in order to acquire credit, information, respect, and access to markets, goods, and services. Such astute observations substantiate the book's arguments. Still, the bigger story is how women's work gets hidden in the archives. Historians well know that commonly referenced "court records and city directories" only list occupations of men, but Zabin points out that even when women had the chance to testify about their work in court trials, they neglected to identify their occupations and rather "defined themselves by their husbands' occupation" (39).

The author is a master storyteller whose clear prose and arresting plot lines never betray her thesis. The story of shopkeeper Elizabeth Anderson stands as a perfect example. This compelling, horrific account demonstrates in small part the antagonism that business women were subject to and the centrality of economics to every level of social interaction and authority. When Anderson pursued a group of men who had attempted to rape her daughter Mary, the accused took revenge by trying to destroy her business and reputation. While the case went to trial, it had the unseemly outcome of the public whipping of Elizabeth (you'll have to read the book to find out why). Yet the trial itself is secondary to what the incident reveals about the importance of economics and status.

Zabin's treatment of the alleged 1741 slave conspiracy further emphasizes the tight fit between social and economic forces. While many historians have embraced the evidence suggesting a planned slave insurrection, Zabin relegates most of the conspiracy story to a footnote and shows instead how economic roles shaped the hearings, ruling, and outcome of the trials. Most people involved, aside from Justice Daniel Horsmanden, distanced themselves from the event and moved on. Zabin concludes that "this failed attempt to violently re-inscribe social order through courtroom drama exemplifies the enduring power of New York's economic culture over the simple ideology of white over black often associated with colonial America" (132).

The remainder of the book examines the use of credit, the role of consumer goods, and the treatment of prisoners of war. Here, Zabin offers us stories of social, cultural, and economic fluidity. Social hierarchies were weakened and appearance mattered. Zabin details the different forms of currency available in

the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the way that access to credit was linked to "cultural assumptions of trustworthiness"—assumptions increasingly threatened by con artists who "used commercial markers of gentlemanly status, such as fashionable clothes and letters of introduction, in order to exploit the modes of commercial exchange that depended on both personal interactions and long-distance exchange" (31).

Imperial New Yorkers were obsessed with appearance and representation, as traditional markers of class status were no longer reliable. How else could people determine their social betters and inferiors? To whom should credit be extended? Dancing masters were a crucial site of enactment of this drama concerning status, highlighting both the importance of appearance and the fluidity of social standing. It was no longer enough to simply be rich or successful. One had to be able to project this persona, as well. Ironically, those charged with training elites in the ways of refinement were far from elite themselves (103).

The unreliability of appearance also shaped race relations. White New Yorkers relied on race to determine slave status, but they found the visible markers of race increasingly unreliable. Spanish prisoners of war challenged the longstanding notion that dark skin constituted eligibility for enslavement. Spanish sailors captured by the British refused to accept being sold into slavery when their captors would not see beyond their dark skin and recognize their status as freemen and prisoners of war. For black sailors living on the margins of competing empires, war and commerce became vehicles for enslavement (113). These accounts provide important windows into the dynamic struggle to codify racial categories as well as the centrality of labor to such debates (117, 122).

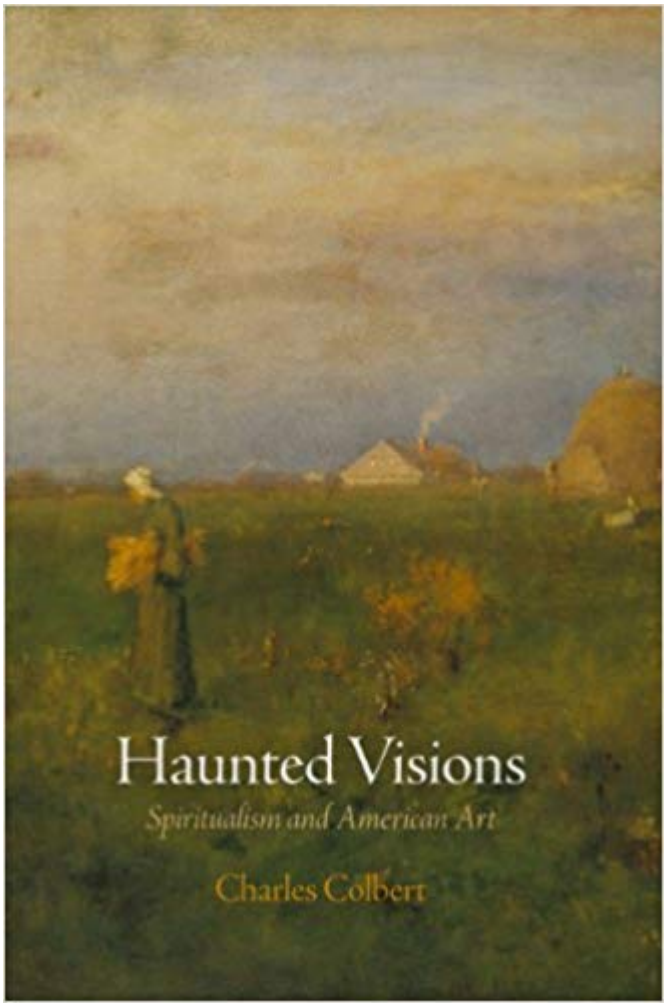
Zabin mentions the importance of ballroom heterosociability as well as the significance of "mixed sex" sociability in defining proper social interactions for elites (97). This reader was left wanting to know more about how the concept of heterosociability shaped other economic interactions between men and women. Did a failure to successfully demonstrate heterosociability affect one's ability to navigate the gendered world of the market? While several scholars of early America have documented the relationship between economic and gendered identities (failures at the market have led to crises of masculinity in more than one study) few have extended this analysis to monetary relationships *between men and women.*

As a scholar of women's crime, I was most taken by the detailed descriptions in Zabin's chapter on the underground, extralegal, and (in her terms) "informal" economies run predominantly by poor white women and black men. The market in used and often stolen goods threatened elites for two distinct reasons: the informal economy undermined the value and "status implications" of luxury goods, and it encouraged interracial economic partnerships between black men and white women (8). While married middle- and upper-class white women were encouraged in their financial transactions, poor women were ridiculed and

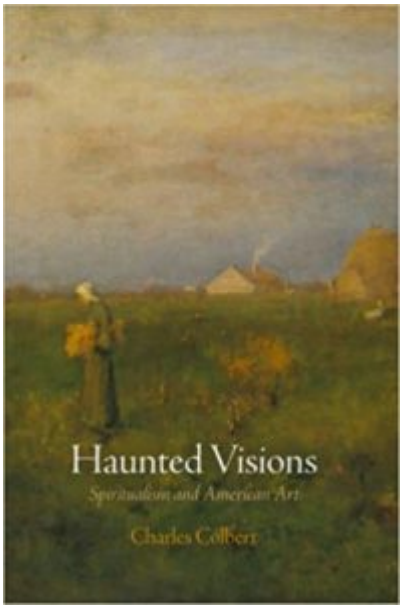
frequently charged, convicted, and imprisoned. Stealing, receiving, or selling stolen goods were the most common crimes women were charged with during the period, and yet participation in this economy was liberating for slaves and poor white women (80). Historians have long argued that petty theft, particularly of cloth and clothing, was motivated by necessity. Zabin notes that there was an overall increase in the value and significance of consumer goods throughout the period, and argues that we should see slaves, servants, and other poor people involved in the informal economy as consumers who were also aware of the increasing value of luxury goods on the market (66).

Social order is dynamic, unstable, and largely defined by economic rather than political forces. This take on imperial New York is refreshing—not only for its disassociation from the (not yet) pending revolution, but also for its skillful weaving of racial and gendered analysis within a larger, compelling narrative. Zabin sums up her argument, “The primacy of commerce in the British Empire, particularly within the context of a diverse and competitive Atlantic world, worked against any stiff adherence to an abstract social order” (158). The author’s writing style and deft turns of phrase make this an excellent choice for the general public and undergraduates. Its substantial archive and careful analysis make it essential for Early Americanists and feminist historians alike.

White light (goin’ messin’ up my mind)



Imagine yourself seated around the table at a séance. Imagine having already committed to an ethereal mechanics of sympathy and spirit communication. Imagine the promise of darkness and the desire to sense something beyond the shadow play of candlelight. Imagine an artist like James McNeil Whistler breathing in the scene in which silence, concentration, and spirit-seeing were requisite for success, a scene he sought to recreate in the experience of his own portraits, most strikingly in his *Arrangement in Black* series. In the shimmering spaces between light and dark there is, for a lack of a better

phrase, a profound depth. 

Artistic creation as a form of mediumship.

Now imagine standing in front of Jackson Pollack's *White Light* (1954). Standing *in*rather than *at* attention. Longing to see beyond the buoyed splats and hardened rivulets of paint, into the dense measures of Pollack's being and the very rhythm of his mid-century milieu.

The work of art as mystic portal.

Colbert seeks to illuminate an invisible depth for his readers.

There is a relationship between these experiences, argues Charles Colbert in *Haunted Visions*—between a century of American art, between artistic creation, spectatorship, and a tradition of appreciation in which the critic becomes a kind of psychic interpreter, expert in discerning the hidden lines of influence.

In asking how spiritualism influences a visual romanticism in nineteenth-century America, Colbert explores the precursors to a distinctly American modernism. Colbert's understanding of spiritualism is sufficiently broad to include a host of other metaphysical schemes that inflected how a wide range of Americans assumed their position at a trance lecture or séance table—mesmerism, psychometry, phrenology, psychical research, and the radical empiricism of William James that would seek to explain such schemes or situations. There is, of course, a transcendentalist hue to all of this, but Colbert succeeds in distinguishing a tradition of nineteenth-century aesthetics from an Emersonian orbit and its afterglow.

Colbert offers a compelling catalogue of odd American artists who "advocate[d] the virtues of enchantment" (61). With an emphasis on the ideological impact of Andrew Jackson Davis and Emanuel Swedenborg, *Haunted Visions* offers a breezy yet fine-grained portrait of the myriad artists and critics swept up in the

metaphysical flowerings of the nineteenth century. Colbert is at his best when he writes of the way in which orientations to psychic energies and magnetic powers make their way into stone, marble, and canvas.

The narrative is roughly chronological. It begins with a consideration of the "spiritualist theme" in the work of four sculptors (Hiram Powers, William Wetmore Story, Henry Dexter, and Harriet Hosmer, the latter drawing upon the principles of perpetual spirit motion for the design of a Ferris wheel that would expose riders to the possibilities of interplanetary travel). After looking into how painters William Sidney Mount and Fitz Henry Lane strove to paint the metaphysics of light in the antebellum era, Colbert moves onto postbellum tonalism and the tendency among its practitioners (James McNeil Whistler and George Inness among others) to aggressively paint the auratic energies that pervaded the natural world. The book concludes with discussions of the critic and collector James Jackson Jarves and the early twentieth-century artist Robert Henri, whose interest in clairvoyance, Colbert argues, was part of a long nineteenth-century run-up to the revolution that was American Modernism.

The gist of Colbert's argument is that this limned tradition was integral in setting the stage for the emergence of modernist art and spectatorship. Modernist works were self-consciously dependent upon and invested in promoting higher levels of consciousness. The surfaces of these works were intended as portals to somewhere else precisely because they had captured the depth that clings to all surfaces—a macrocosmic economy of forces that was ever present but visible only to the properly initiated. "The psychic content of late nineteenth-century art," writes Colbert, "resides beneath the surface and implies an existence that usually operates beyond the threshold of the senses. An observer attuned to the possibility enters a meditative state at the behest of these intimations and resonates sympathetically with them" (19).

Interestingly, Colbert adopts such a critical gaze when explicating the spiritualist content that underlies the works he surveys. In other words, Colbert seeks to illuminate an invisible depth for his readers, which is tantamount to his argument that spiritualism mattered, intensely mattered, for artists and audience alike.

In Colbert's telling, spiritualism comes across as primarily about beliefs, principles, what might be called doctrine-effects. Questions of artistic practice are engaged pointedly at times and there is much to be admired in such a line of inquiry, for it reveals the presence of spiritualist proclivities in arenas not often seen as wrapped up in occult sympathies. Yet in Colbert's rendering of spiritualism as largely a reaction against the anti-intellectualism and sensational excess of evangelical revivalism, the non-ideological life-world of spiritualism (i.e., the bat-shit crazy wonder of it all) does not often come to the fore.

Given the discursive reach of spiritualism, it would have been helpful if

Colbert attended to questions of desire, affect, and how individual historical figures theorized their interiority. This would have allowed him to broach how people live *out* and *through* a metaphysics of correspondence in addition to living *by* it. For example, what else is going on with George Inness's "desire to impress himself unequivocally into his compositions" other than his "belief" in the occult? What to make of how his paintings actively deny the inevitability of urbanization? How does the occult revival relate to other kinds of revival and other political registers beyond questions of religious freedom, belief, and cognition (166)?

Colbert argues that the significance of spiritualism, in general, and of spiritualist art in particular, is that both call into question theses of secularization. The persistence of spiritualism in the nineteenth century and beyond, then, demonstrates that religion, and by extension, enchantment, did not recede within the frame of modernity but existed alongside all manner of profanations. Colbert maintains that the presence of religion he unearths should surprise theorists of secularization, challenge the "secularizing bias of historians" (15), and upend Max Weber's lament over iron-clad disenchantment.

On its face, this argument is convincing enough. Indeed, within histories of American religion, spiritualism has often been figured as a formation of rebellion—against religio-political orthodoxies, against gender hierarchies, against death itself. And while traffic in ghost-stories may always signal epistemic eccentricity, I am still left wondering what, exactly, is surprising about the cultivation of a reasoned attention that trades in concepts of creativity and genius and eternal value? What is necessarily surprising about Jarves's notion of the "special gift" of art-seeing (rather than spirit-seeing) in which the "mysterious test of feeling . . . takes cognizance of the sentiment of the artist, his absolute individuality, by which he is himself, and none other; that which cannot be exchanged or imitated" (217)?

Colbert emphasizes the creative individualism of spiritualist practice rather than viewing it in light of cultural consolidations and incorporation. He does not ignore themes of industrialization and urbanization. Nor does he overlook artistic responses to demographic forces. But the reader yearns for a fuller discussion of how and why the artists Colbert surveys were generative of and complicit in the culture at-large. Might the kind of authentic self that Jarves celebrates become less authentic, or better yet, something else entirely, when considered in light of market directives, technological incentives, conceptual conflations of religion and freedom, and other forces that exceed the frames of cognition and intentionality? How might the language of magnetism, for example, be bound up in an encounter with an increasingly capitalized and networked society—one that allows for a robust recognition of self precisely by occluding its powers of ontological diffusion? How does one come to picture (literally and figuratively) a vibrant aura or diagnose the process of re-enchantment? What categories feed into such activities? What are the mechanics? Is enchantment merely a cognitive matter?

In my reading of *Haunted Visions* there is a lament coursing between the lines of Colbert's narrative—the decline of what he calls the "tempular museum." This lament is precipitated by the golden-age-quality of the era Colbert considers and culminates in the "awed reverence" demanded by the auratics of Mark Rothko's *No. 14* (1960) or Pollack's *White Light*. There is an implicit figuration of decline in Colbert's narrative—the spiritualist flowering of the long nineteenth century followed by an increasing numbness to spiritual depth. After Pollack and Rothko the deluge of pop art. Andy Warhol as the cynical embrace of the secular surface of things.

But I am not entirely convinced that enchantments lie only behind the screens of history and/or canvas. Indeed, surface and depth may be entirely inadequate for understanding enchantment or anything at all for that matter (the depth ever there to domesticate the unruliness above, to give some semblance of order). For in facing *White Light* one may hear the sounds of Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz* (1961), its gatefold album cover so perfectly capturing the synaesthetic promise of *White Light* and Pollock's method of spontaneous composition. Harmonies converge ever so intensely as Pollack's world bleeds into the Warhol world of irony and so-called detachment and, of course, into the sonic space of the Velvet Underground's *White Light/White Heat* (1968), inspired, in part, by Coleman's extended riffs and asymmetrical phrasing in *Free Jazz*. There is a density and compulsion to all this signal static. The surface becoming the depth and vice versa in a continuous shimmering implosion—the audience at home, longing to clarify, to collect, to own a copy (paintings being long out of reach, original vinyl pressings now do the trick).

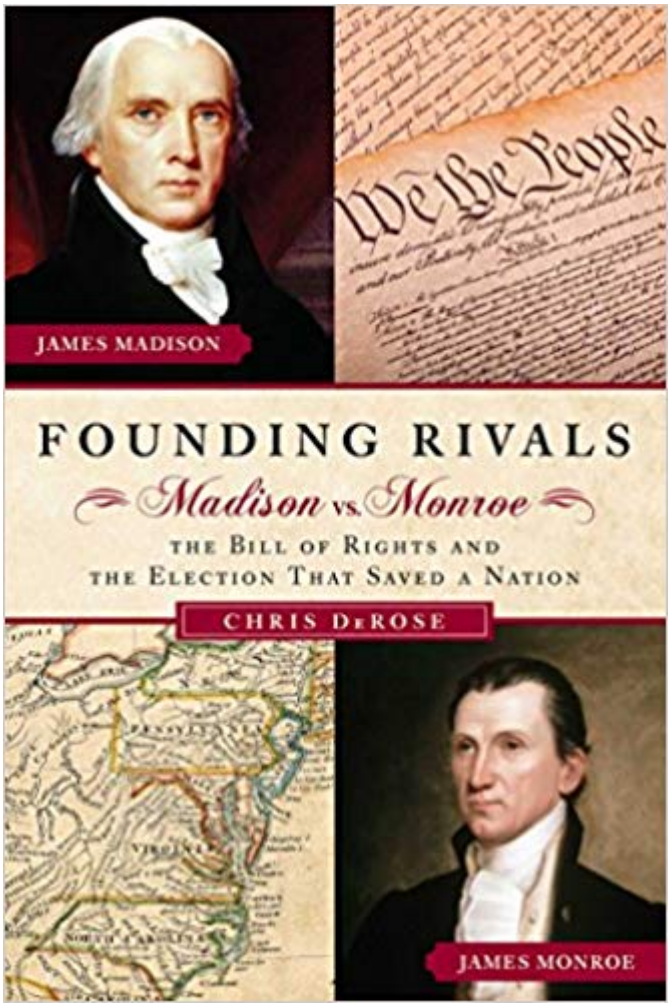
It is this contemporary experience of vibrant matter that Colbert addresses through his pre-history of an American art. As Colbert writes of the spiritualist will to domesticate—"By taking possession of paintings, one raised the prospect of being possessed by those same paintings" (227). Indeed, this central claim is spot-on. The shadow play of spiritualism persists in our contemporary moment, suffusing our desire for objects that are really real, things anchored, forever, in a world that goes beyond, so far beyond, those flat schemes of representation. Such schemes must, to their detriment, still the circulation and distinguish art from experience, life from death. The end result, one surmises, is the contemporary art market with its blend of bourgeois frivolity, Victorian fetishism, and bewilderment in the face of such a dense cultural ecology. So that when you walk into a room in which *White Light* hangs, you may be peppered with a palpable spirit of the age—burnt metal circulations of money and sex, feedback, and all manner of spectral splatter.

This article originally appeared in issue 12.4.5 (September, 2012).

John Lardas Modern teaches in the Religious Studies Department at Franklin &

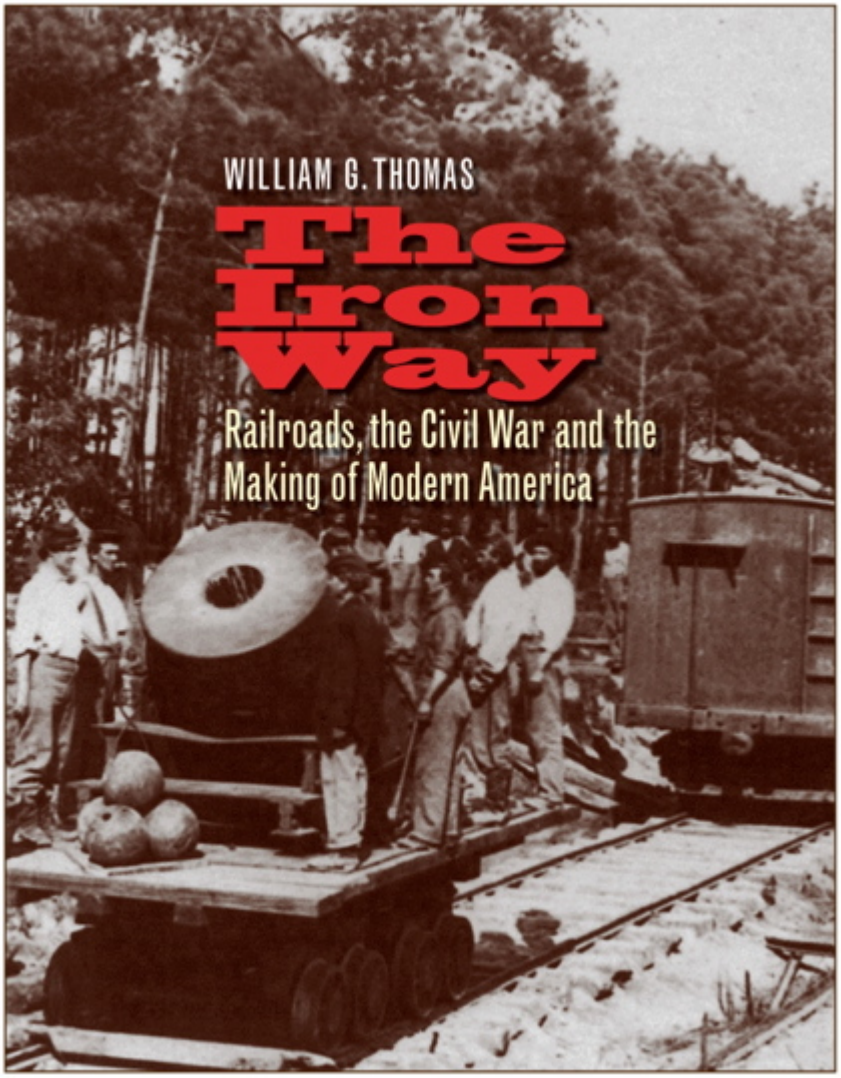
Marshall College. He is the author of *Secularism in Antebellum America* (2011), *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs* (2001), and co-curator of *Frequencies: A Collaborative Genealogy of Spirituality.*

Outsourced History



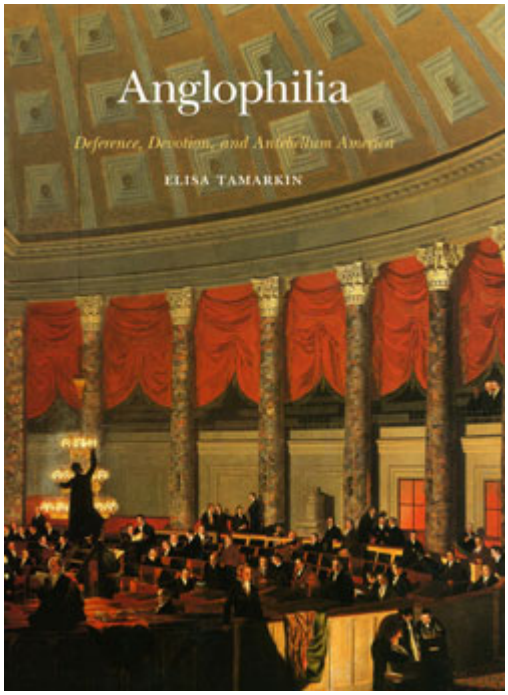
It is fair to say that had the election in Virginia's Fifth District gone the other way, the nation's early political history would have been considerably altered.

Like an Arrow from Jupiter's Bow: Railroads and the Civil War



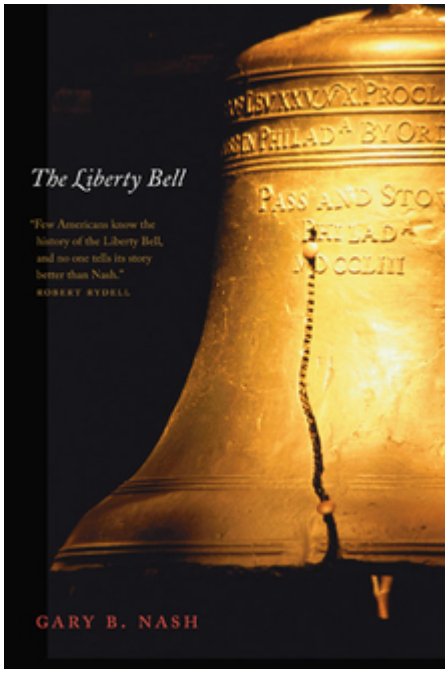
The presence of railroads in the North and South did not determine social relationships in either region. Instead, both sections of the country used the same technology for their own ends.

Victoria Complex



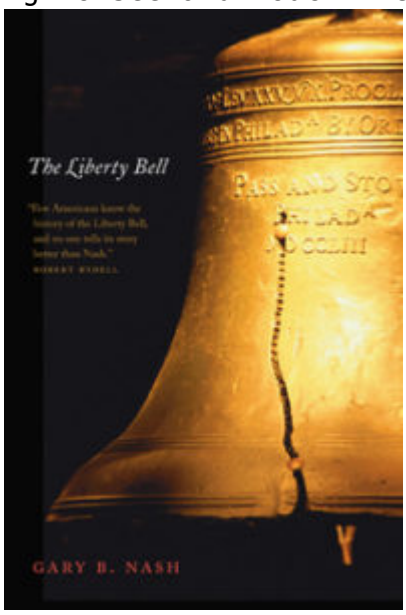
Americans expressed remorse for their lost place in the British empire and their dissatisfaction with the new political order of an independent democracy wrought by economic and moral conflict.

A Bell Crack’d



Americans love stories of the Revolutionary era, even if, as recent comments by

leading politicians about Paul Revere, the geographic location of Lexington and Concord, and the precise wording of the Constitution suggest, a lack of understanding of the founders often supports that reverence. The Liberty Bell is a case in point. On any given day, a long line of visitors snakes through Philadelphia's Liberty Bell Center, waiting to see and touch the bell that rang out news of independence on July 4, 1776.



Except that it did not. Yet long before school children sang "The Star Spangled Banner" or recited one of the several versions of the pledge of allegiance, Americans flocked to see the bell. On occasion, the London-manufactured bell traveled about America, but it first hung in Pennsylvania's colonial State House, and so it was natural that the editors of Yale University Press's *Icons of America* series asked historian Gary B. Nash, the author of a number of volumes about Philadelphia, to explain the bell's cultural significance. In a brisk, fascinating volume sure to irritate those politicians who prefer their history neat and clean, Nash explores the complicated story of symbol that became as cracked and imperfect as the nation it represented.

As the break with Britain approached, the bell pealed even more frequently.

The bell's story began in the 1750s, several decades before the Revolution. For most of the city's history, a small bell strung from a branch behind the State House was enough to call the assembly to meeting or warn Philadelphia's inhabitants of war or fire. But in 1751, legislative speaker Isaac Norris II decided the growing port deserved a bell grand enough to rival "Great Tom" in London's St. Paul's Cathedral. Curiously, Norris opted for a phrase from Leviticus—"Proclaim Liberty Thro' all the Land to all the Inhabitants Thereof"—to encircle the bell. Trouble with Parliament was not yet on the horizon, and Nash speculates that Norris was aware that just the year before, John Woolman and Anthony Benezet had called upon Quakers to cleanse themselves of the sin of slaveholding. Benezet was openly teaching black children, most of them slaves, to read in his home each evening, and so it was appropriate that in later years, northern abolitionists embraced the bell's words as symbolic of

their crusade to liberate their nation’s inhabitants.

The bell arrived in 1752, but either the stormy passage at sea or inferior packing damaged the bell, which had been tested in London. In its first trial in Philadelphia, the bell cracked. Norris complained to London, but the Whitechapel Foundry—still in business today—insisted the product was sound when it left their office. Philadelphia craftsmen made a mold of the bell before smashing the original into pieces small enough to melt down into a second bell. Although beautiful in appearance, the new bell gave out a dull thud when rung. The third casting was ready by June of 1753, and at long last the largest bell in North America tolled the hours, welcomed the accession of King George III, and marked the end of the Seven Years’ War.

As the break with Britain approached, the bell pealed even more frequently. In rang across the harbor in October 1773 in protest of the Tea Act, and again in 1775 to welcome rider Paul Revere into the city. (Perhaps *that* is what Governor Sarah Palin meant when mentioning “those warning shots and bells.”) It was silent on July 4, 1776, but four days later it rang to summon residents to hear Colonel John Nixon read the Declaration of Independence. Soon, however, British troops occupied the city. Worried that Redcoats would melt it into musket balls, patriots hid the enormous bell beneath the floor of the Zion German Reformed Church. It saw the sun again when victorious soldiers tried to ring it following news of the Yorktown victory, but by then the State House steeple had rotted to the point that it could not support the one-ton bell.

Despite the fact that the endless recastings left the bell susceptible to cracking, it remained intact until the 1843 celebration of Washington’s birthday (not, contrary to popular belief, the 1835 funeral procession of Justice John Marshall). By then, the bell had already become a national icon, thanks to journalist George Lippard’s assertion that it had announced independence on that first Fourth of July. Moved to the first floor of what was now known as Independence Hall, the bell became a rallying cry for those who hoped the republic would practice what the words on the bell promised. When thirty-five blacks and five whites were put to trial for the so-called Christiana riot, abolitionists gathered outside the hall to protest that “those colored men were only following the example of Washington and the American heroes of ’76” (49). And while on his way to Washington from Springfield, President-elect Abraham Lincoln stopped at Independence Hall to raise the flag and promise a devotion to the principles enshrined there. Just more than four years later, Lincoln’s body lay in state in the hall, the liberty bell pushed to the corner.

In 1885, the bell took to the road. It traveled first to the New Orleans World and Industrial Cotton Exposition in 1885. Along the way, crowds turned out to touch the bell and even sing it serenades. When it passed through Biloxi, the aged Jefferson Davis was called upon to give a speech. Wisely, the former Confederate president chose only to speak of his father’s Revolutionary service, rather than his breakaway country’s attempts to eradicate the bell’s

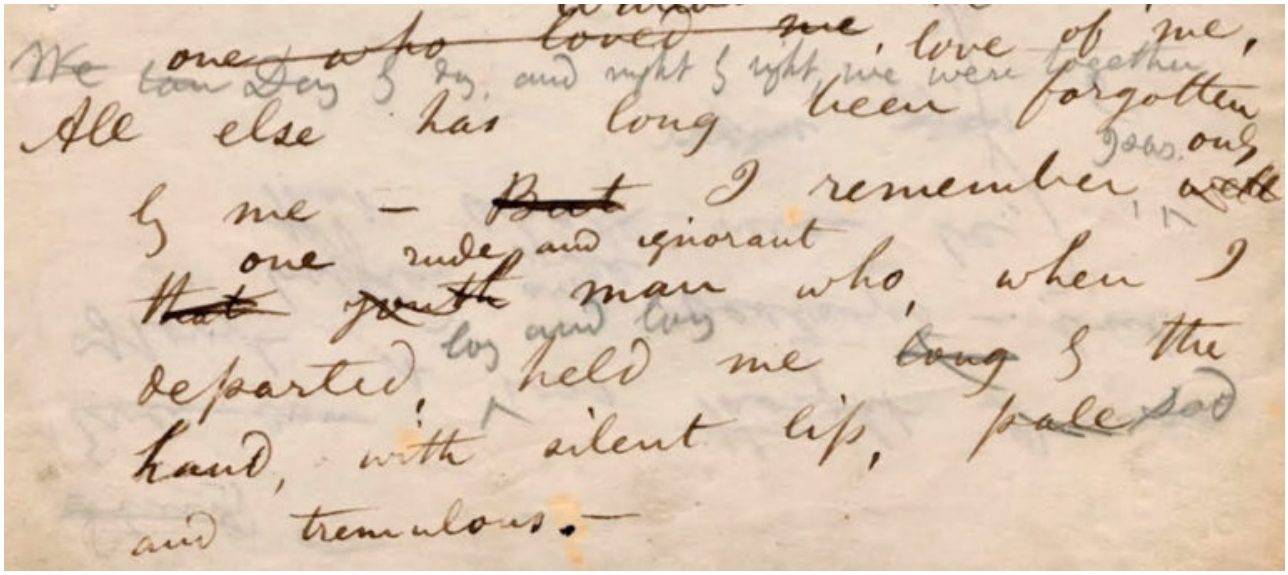
pledge of liberty. Visits to Chicago, Charleston, and Boston followed, and as one of the many photographs in the book suggests, countless children touched and kissed the bell. (In the spirit of full disclosure, I confess I took a photograph of my youngest daughter, Hannah, touching the bell.)

Like any important symbol, the bell continued to be appropriated by various groups. In 1915, the Pennsylvania Woman Suffrage Association printed posters featuring the bell and its words, while evangelist Billy Sunday visited the icon during its travels and promised to use its power "to aid in driving Satan from the Western shore" (125). During the Great War, President Woodrow Wilson used its image to sell war bonds, and to emphasize its connection to earlier conflicts, grizzled Civil War veterans donned tattered uniforms and marched past the bell.

Mostly, however, the bell remained an icon of liberty and resistance. In 1965, civil rights activists staged a protest around the bell, and two years later war protesters staged a "be-in" near the bell while they smoked what Nash drolly describes as "distinctively pungent cigarettes" (169). Appropriately, therefore, when planning for a new home for the bell began in the early 1990s, the National Park Service considered a spot near what had been the rented home of President George Washington, whose household staff included nine slaves brought from Mount Vernon. Having made this courageous decision to reveal the complicated interplay between slavery and freedom in the early years of the republic, local authorities promptly cooled on the idea until Nash and historian Randall Miller launched a public relations campaign designed to force planners to tell the richer story. When Philadelphia's black community staged a rally on the site in 2002, the Park Service gave way, and the subsequent Liberty Bell Center included not only material on slavery at that cite but featured statues of Hercules and Oney Judge, two of Washington's slaves who fled his Philadelphia home before he could return them to Virginia at the end of his second term.

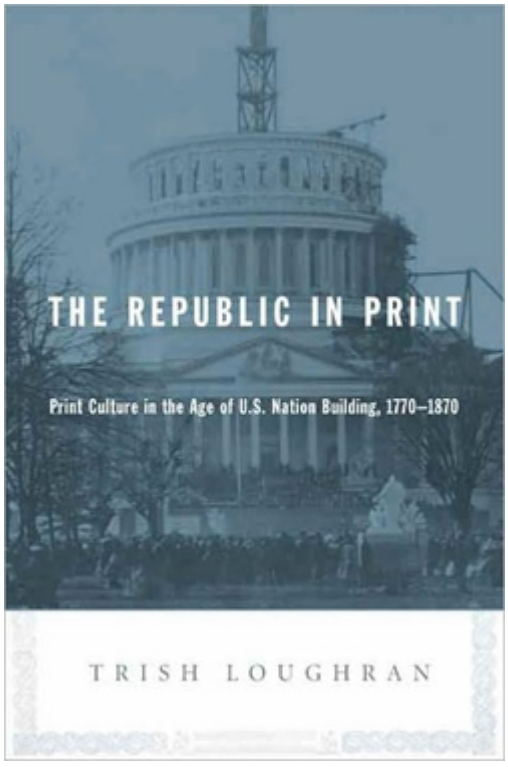
On occasion, Nash's discussion of the bell instead becomes a history of Independence Hall and events that took place outside its doors, but since the saga of the two icons were so intertwined, that is probably unavoidable. Nash's prose has always been clear and vigorous, but rarely as lively and bright as it is here, perhaps because this story is ultimately happier than those previously told by this prolific scholar.

Whitman's Wandering Mind



Wandering too is a technique of not looking, a practice of studied indirection. In that way it's like revising—whether a poem or an entire collection—which is also a way of denying one's loss of a past through an attempt to re-experience the sensations that accompany originary composition.

On Print and Polemics



This is quite a big, startling argument.