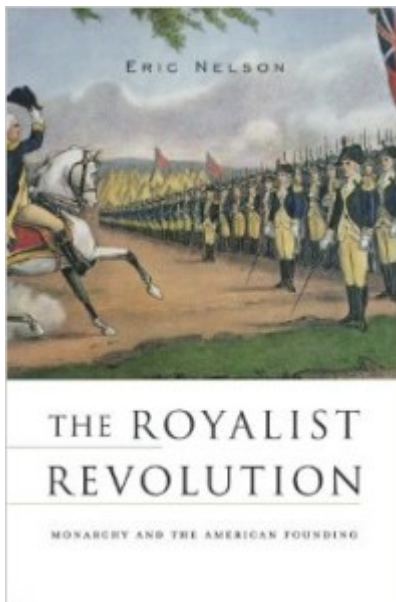


Revolution Revisited



Scholarship on the American Revolution and the U.S. Constitution is still, to a significant extent, shaped by and measured against Gordon Wood's and Bernard Bailyn's seminal monographs and the enduring interpretive shadows they cast over the field. So it is with Eric Nelson's reappraisal of the ideological underpinnings of the imperial crisis, independence, and American constitutionalism. Nelson locates the roots of 1760s-1780s political debate in the constitutional contest between Charles I and Parliament that led to the English Civil War more than a century earlier. At issue for eighteenth-century colonists, as it had been for seventeenth-century Englishmen, lay the question of who served as the proper guardian of liberty and whence the danger of encroaching power originated: Parliament or king? Nelson's driving argument is that the "fear of legislative tyranny" that animated royalists in the 1640s and 1650s also shaped the constitutional thought of an influential group he labels "patriot royalists," including James Wilson, John Adams, James Iredell, Alexander Hamilton, and Benjamin Rush (172).



Eric Nelson, *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2014. 400 pp., \$29.95.

Nelson thus attempts to resolve the problem of the presumed disjuncture between a radical revolution and a conservative constitution. He argues that the two were, in fact, connected ideologically and constitutionally by a predominant strain of royalism, "understood as the defense of prerogative powers lodged in a 'single person'" that is compatible with liberty (115). While admitting that the term "royalist" is problematic, Nelson defends his use of it by claiming that some colonists "equated their position with that of the Stuart monarchs of

the seventeenth century and traced the origins of the imperial crisis of the 1760s to the defeat of the seventeenth-century Royalist cause" (240, n32).

Clearly, seventeenth-century English history shaped the worldview of eighteenth-century British Americans, but from which aspects of that history did the spokesmen for independence and the architects of the Constitution take their lessons? Nelson rejects the idea that independence signified the high-water mark in a rising tide of republicanism. He argues instead that patriot royalists went to war, not against the king, but against Parliament, and subsequently created a constitution replete with royalist prerogative. Nelson concludes that "if American constitutionalism does not rest on the Royalist theory of representation, it rests on nothing" (107). In support of this bold claim, Nelson presents the ideological lineage of royalism during the imperial crisis and of constitutionalism in chronologically organized chapters, each of which covers a key component in his argument.

Nelson begins by explaining that between 1768 and 1775, British colonists embraced "dominion theory," a theoretical shift in constitutionalism predicated upon the assumption that the colonies lay without the realm and that colonial charters linked Britain's colonies to the Empire through the king alone. This shift required a revision of English history in which, Nelson posits, colonists made "an outright assault on the ideological apparatus of the two parliamentary revolutions of the seventeenth century" (108). In the revised narrative, Puritans fled to America to escape the tyranny of Parliament, not Charles I.

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Nelson believes that in taking this line of argument, colonists supported the "Royalist theory of representation" (108). Patriot royalists deemed the king a better representative of the people than Parliament since he served as a disinterested arbiter who sought to benefit the empire as a whole. Moreover, prerogative powers invested in the king shielded his subjects from a grasping, self-interested legislature. Thus, colonists "became the last Atlantic defenders of the Stuart monarchy" (31). In his effort to establish this ideological connection between the English Civil War and America's founding, Nelson could do more to distinguish the royalists who went to war in the name of Charles I from the patriot royalists. To argue, as Nelson does, that original authorization (via charter or ratification) held more importance than did election in the late-eighteenth century overlooks the fact that numerous imperial reform plans attempted primarily to resolve that very point.

Nelson addresses a central problem that arises from his argument for ideological consistency between 1775 and 1787: how to reconcile prerogative power with republicanism. He juxtaposes two strains of revolutionary

republicanism: "Hebraic," which identified the dangerous element in monarchy as the idolatry of kings, and "Neo-Roman," which stressed that danger stemmed from prerogative power (115). Patriot royalists clung to the hope that George III would claim his rightful prerogative powers, particularly his negative on Parliamentary legislation that adversely affected the colonies. Only when the king steadfastly refused did colonists turn against him. Yet, royalism survived the throes of rebellion because most colonists had "thoroughly absorbed [Thomas] Paine's Hebraizing exclusivist argument against kingship" that separated prerogative power from "the kingly office" (144, 183).

Finally, Nelson argues that the U.S. Constitution did not mark a departure from revolutionary ideals, but an adherence to them. It was, instead, the initial period of constitutional formation between 1777 and 1780 that diverged from the revolution's royalist trajectory, as exemplified by the Pennsylvania Constitution that evoked the "ghost of the Long Parliament" (179). In Nelson's view, the turning point came with the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution that corrected "'elective despotism'" (181; original emphasis). In keeping with revolutionary principles, Americans then created "a recognizably Royalist constitution, investing its chief magistrate with the very same prerogative powers that Charles I had defended against the great whig heroes of the seventeenth century" (232).

Throughout the book, Nelson takes pains to distinguish his argument from historians such as Wood, Bailyn, John Philip Reid, and Brendan McConville. Nelson certainly carves out a historiographical niche regarding royalism's reverberations in the early national period and the revival of understudied seventeenth-century sources. However, much of the structure in his challenge to the canon is not without precedent, particularly regarding the pre-revolutionary period. For example, in *The King's Three Faces*, McConville discusses many of the same points—albeit with different conclusions—including colonists' alignment with the king during the imperial crisis via charters, dominion theory, and prerogative power. Nelson attempts to sidestep these similarities by asserting: "McConville and I are in agreement that eighteenth-century British Americans generally felt great 'devotion to the monarchy,' but such devotion was not in itself a *constitutional* position" (239, n29; original emphasis). This seems off the mark, however, considering that McConville's explanation of monarchical political culture includes colonists' disparate interpretations of seventeenth-century constitutionalism as well as their adoption of dominion theory in the 1730s and 1740s, decades before Edward Bancroft's pamphlet, which Nelson identifies as the template for this shift.

While his study is necessarily limited, at times Nelson superimposes a mid-seventeenth-century theoretical framework on the late eighteenth century without sufficient contextual depth in the latter period to make his points compelling. For instance, while he presents convincing evidence that colonists discussed the Hebraic interpretation of *Common Sense*, in presenting this as the sole link between revolutionary and constitutional royalism, Nelson navigates a narrow interpretive path that simply does not account for the depth of

colonists' rejection of monarchy. He gives short shrift to key events and actors, such as the part the king's troops played in alienating colonists. Likewise, his strategy of taking political writers at their word seems to require that ideas supersede context, lest the latter muddle the former. This is a tough pill for historians to swallow, as context is often the only reliable determinant in sifting sincerity from drizzle in an age rife with sarcasm, pseudonyms, and vitriolic debate.

Another problem is that Nelson's dichotomy of parliamentarian Whigs and patriot royalists does not account for the complicated and shifting spectrum of political affiliation and imperial conceptualization during the late eighteenth century. He seems to view loyalists as mouthpieces of the administration, defined by their fealty to Parliament. Yet, many loyalists argued for colonial rights and equity within the empire. Nelson even classifies James Madison as "something of an inadvertent loyalist," which is, frankly, a bit bizarre (202). He aligns Madison politically with royal governor Thomas Hutchinson simply because neither subscribed to the charter theory of authorization—hardly the salient point. What, then, distinguished patriot royalists from loyalists? After all, loyalists refused to take oaths to a Continental Congress they believed had usurped the king's authority, which sounds remarkably like the royalist constitutional position. Loyalists withstood threats, exile, torture, humiliation, imprisonment, and confiscation of property, all in the name of the king.

While a rich resource for scholars and students, *The Royalist Revolution* is probably too dense for lower-level undergraduates. Nelson relies heavily on the papers of his core group of patriot royalists, but also draws extensively from other contemporary sources. While much of Nelson's book covers well-trodden ground, it nevertheless includes meticulous explication of issues like the royal negative and representation. It also brings attention to understudied issues such as the Fishery Bill debates and introduces a fresh perspective of the Constitutional Convention as something more than a platform for the historically ubiquitous James Madison. In broader terms, Nelson's book underscores the point that historians have underestimated the influence of monarchy and royalism on the watershed moment in American history. It is worthwhile to consider what implications potentially grounding our founding moment in royalism—however one defines it—has for our understanding of the origins of the Revolution and the Constitution as well as for our national identity.

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