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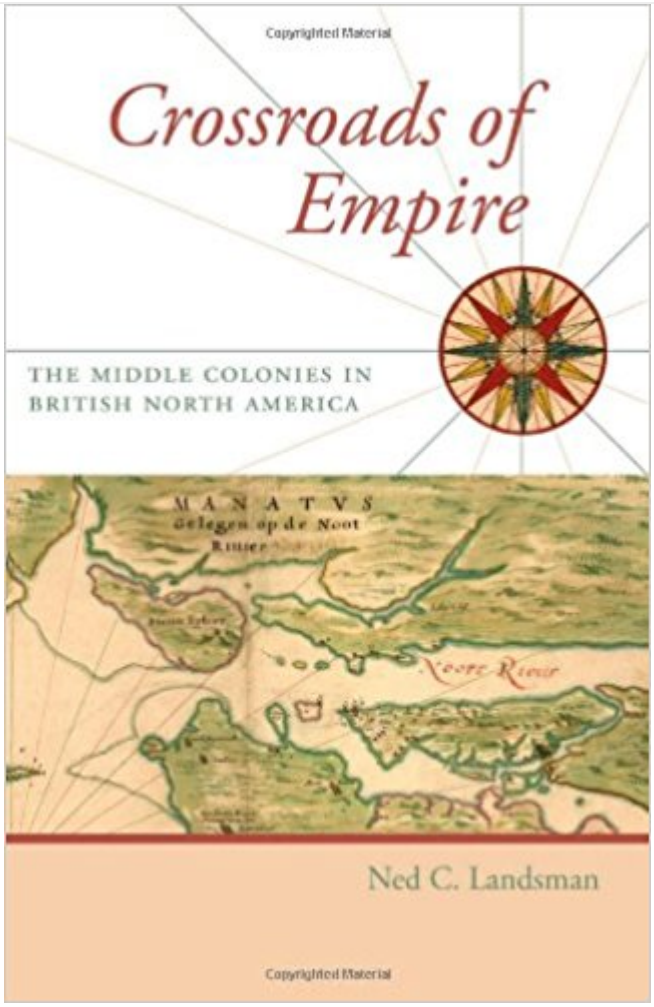
Crossroads of Empire: The Middle Colonies in British North America



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Reviewed Work(s)

Crossroads of Empire: The Middle Colonies in British North America. By Ned C. Landsman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010). Pp. 243. Cloth, $45.00. Paper, $25.00.

In 1972, Milton M. Klein wrote that the middle colonies "represented, in germinal form, the very nation that [would] come into existence by the late nineteenth century." A year later, Patricia U. Bonomi described them as having formed the "embryo of the new political order." These broad generalizations were the result of a decade-long explosion in middle colonies scholarship, particularly New York. Klein and Bonomi pointed out that the ethnic diversity, religious pluralism, toleration, and factional politics of the middle colonies anticipated the developments the rest of the country would experience over the next century. Indeed, "New York and the middle colonies may have been the real forge for American democracy," wrote one reviewer in 1975. It seemed as if the middle colonies were finally poised to assume their proper place in the grand synthetic narrative of colonial and revolutionary America. So, what happened?[1]

Unfortunately, time was not on the side of the middle colonies. The fragmentation of the New Social History and the subsequent cultural turn made the possibilities of synthesis increasingly remote and rendered a grand narrative less desirable. By the middle of the 1980s, some historians even began challenging the validity and usefulness of the middle colonies as an analytical category.[2] In the end, the moment passed without either a synthesis of the region or a deeper exploration of Klein and Bonomi's suppositions. In *Crossroads of Empire*, Ned Landsman has finally produced a synthesis of the middle colonies that more fully explores the ideas put forth by Klein and Bonomi nearly forty years ago. He also incorporates into his analysis recent trends in early American historiography, however, including the Atlantic world, continental history, and, especially, empire studies, thereby bringing a more contemporary relevance to Klein and Bonomi's thesis.

The book begins with three chapters devoted largely to the settlement and early politics of New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. The narrative is familiar and well told. Landsman devotes each of the next four chapters to a different aspect of the overall "crossroads" theme, e.g., "The Commercial Crossroads of the British Atlantic," "The Crossroads of Cultures," "The Crossroads of Philosophy and Faith," and "Politics at the Crossroads." These thematic chapters form the core of the book. Much as in his excellent and highly recommended synthesis of colonial American intellectual and cultural history, *From Colonials to Provincials: American Thought and Culture, 1680-1760* (1997), Landsman deftly distills complex political, intellectual, and cultural developments into surprisingly easy prose.[3]

The author situates the middle colonies as the nexus of the trade and information networks of the Atlantic world and the imperial theatre in the interior and describes how they "incorporated competing commercial cultures originating in varied imperial ambitions" (77). In so doing, he gives the regionalization of the middle colonies a much more solid geographical basis, which previous critics had deemed largely arbitrary. Thus situated, Landsman can start to deal with their competing internal cultures. While all three colonies experienced significant degrees of ethnic and religious diversity, they nevertheless managed and utilized that diversity in various ways, producing different levels of toleration and different forms of pluralism. For example, New York, with its high-church Anglican ruling party, produced legal "toleration without a great deal of tolerance" (124). This led, in part, to what Landsman calls "group life," or the "retreat into consolidated religious and ethnic enclaves," which remained a visible feature of urban life in New York for over two centuries (140). In Pennsylvania, by contrast, the relative political weakness of the Penn family allowed for more interaction between groups.

In "The Crossroads of Philosophy and Faith," Landsman describes the middle colonies as an intellectual crossroads at which two seemingly antagonistic systems of thought, the Enlightenment and the Great Awakening, intersected. Yet, recent trends in Enlightenment studies have shown the relationship between religion and enlightened thought in the early eighteenth century to have been more concomitant than dialectical.[4] The middle colonies provide an excellent example of this

dynamic at work. While the religious and intellectual diversity of the middle colonies did lead to extremes on both sides, Landsman argues that it also led to a "broad middle position about matters of spirituality and enlightenment that was organized around some often-unrecognized commonalities between the two." Indeed, this unique relationship created a "powerful synthesis that stood at the very center of mid-Atlantic culture and that placed the region at the cultural center of British North America" (144). Examples of this "synthesis" abound including the mutual respect between Benjamin Franklin and George Whitefield, the Quakers' marriage of spiritualism and naturalism, and the enlightened evangelicalism embodied by Jonathan Edwards and institutionalized in the College of New Jersey. Landsman's interpretation also hints at an intellectual backdrop to recent work by Jack Rakove on the moderate nature of revolutionary politics in the middle colonies. [5] By stressing the "middle position," however, Landsman fails to develop a sufficiently complex picture of the dramatic internal cultural struggles of the period; for example, he mischaracterizes the cultural struggle between enlightened dissenters and the high-church Anglican establishment in 1750s New York City as a "political controversy" (161-2). In his account, as well as other recent scholarship, the significance of the Enlightenment in New York, especially in relation to Philadelphia, remains largely misunderstood and underappreciated.

For Landsman, the political crossroads came with the intersection and reconciliation of "liberty and faction" (182). By the 1740s, this struggle had created a political culture based upon the legitimacy of opposition. The factionalism of New York in this period can best be characterized as fluid. The De Lancey and Livingston families were at different times both the royal and opposition parties, and, even at one point in the late 1740s, found themselves on the same side. However, in Pennsylvania, the Penn family provided a constant focus for the opposition which led to less factional fluidity. Like Bonomi, Landsman finds that the middle colonies' factionalism was also the source of their political stability. However, he fails to give the reader a sense of the colonies' broader political culture as experienced by non-elites. Especially in New York, political life was not defined or utilized solely by the elite. Rather, freemen and freeholders both participated in and shaped the colony's self-interested political culture. The Seven Years' War significantly changed the political dynamic of the three colonies, causing instability

and—with the removal of the French from the west—a geographical transformation from a nexus to a frontier of the British Atlantic world. These developments set the stage for the upheavals of the 1760s and 1770s, when the legitimacy of opposition, dissent, and faction became part of the basis of the young nation's new science of politics. On the social level, Landsman echoes Gordon Wood when he writes, "What took place in the mid-Atlantic was a revolution in the most literal sense of the word: a revolution, or turning, in the affairs of men (and women)" (213).

The overall thesis of *Crossroads of Empire* is fundamentally that of Klein and Bonomi: the middle colonies were the crucible of modern America. But Landsman has not just fleshed out their thesis; he has also added new contexts to it that make the middle colonies even more relevant in light of recent early American historiography. More importantly, perhaps, he has produced the first general, full-length work dedicated to the middle colonies in almost half a century. This fact makes the following criticisms of the book seem quite minor indeed. First, the book is based largely upon secondary sources. This is standard practice for such a synthesis, yet at a few points in the book this reader found himself yearning to be shown rather than told. Second, the book's length—just 214 pages—may tend to leave readers wanting more, particularly in the thematic chapters. That criticism, however, is a testament to Landsman's laconic incisiveness and analytical concision. More positively, the book's brevity also adds to its versatility. Just like his previous book, *Crossroads of Empire* is well suited to both the general reader and undergraduates. For sure, it may be used successfully in a variety of undergraduate courses with students of various levels and will prove exceptionally useful in upper-level colonial America and Atlantic World courses. Landsman has now produced two highly useful synthetic works; yet, one cannot but hope that he plans to undertake a monograph some time soon on any of the major themes in this interesting and informative book.

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[1] Milton M. Klein, "New York in the American Colonies: A New Look," *New York History* 53, no. 2 (1972): 138; Patricia U. Bonomi, "The Middle Colonies: Embryo of the New Political Order," in Alden T.

Vaughan and George Athan Billias, eds., *Perspectives on Early American History: Essays in Honor of Richard B. Morris* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 63-92; Thomas J. Archdeacon, "Review: New York Might Be America," *Reviews in American History* 3, no. 2 (1975): 191.

[2] Robert J. Gough, "The Myth of the 'Middle Colonies': An Analysis of Regionalization in Early America," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 107, no. 3 (1983): 393-419.

[3] Ned C. Landsman, *From Colonials to Provincials: American Thought and Culture, 1680-1760* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997).

[4] For an overview of this scholarship, see Jonathan Sheehan, "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization: A Review Essay," *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 4 (2003): 1061–1080.

[5] Jack Rakove, *Revolutionaries: A New History of the Invention of America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2010).

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