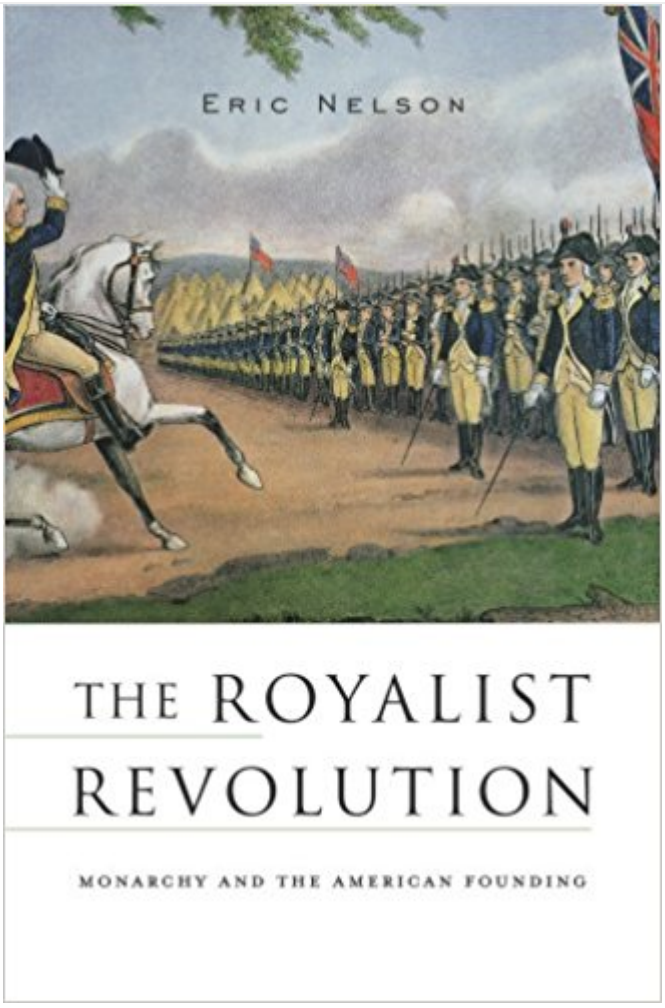
{essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia

The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding



Volume 48 (2015)

Reviewed Work(s)

The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding. By Eric Nelson (Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014). Pp. 400. Hardcover, $29.95.

In historical literature and popular imagination, the tyranny of King George III figures prominently in the narrative of the American Revolution. One of the most influential interpretations of the Revolution and Founding eras, arising in the 1960s, emphasized Americans' embrace of the radical Whig political philosophy of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain, which celebrated the supremacy of Parliament over the monarchy. In contrast, Eric Nelson's powerful revisionist account, *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding*, reinterprets the Revolution as a rebellion in support of "royal power" (2). Nelson contends that the American Revolutionaries fought a war against Parliament and sought to "rebalance the imperial constitution in favor of the Crown," their efforts culminating in 1787 with the Constitution's establishment of a "chief magistrate" more powerful than any English monarch since the Glorious Revolution of 1688 (7).

According to Nelson, American royalism had its roots in the "Royalism of the Jacobin and Caroline courts" (31). The colonists' "neo-Stuart" theory radically recast seventeenth-century English history by asserting that Parliament had usurped the King's authority over the colonies following the execution of Charles I. While Whigs accused the Crown of continuously expanding "patronage power" and thereby degrading the English constitution, Royalists contended that the Crown's inability to regain its rightful prerogative powers had corrupted the constitution. The American colonists desired the king to reassert his royal prerogative over the colonies, but George III had no intention of ruling like the early Stuarts. George III's decision not to exercise his prerogatives left Americans disenchanted, causing some American writers to turn against the king and monarchy. Yet, as Nelson observes, Americans who rejected George III still maintained the neo-Stuart position that the monarch possessed a "constitutional prerogative power," which allowed him to deny consent to parliamentary bills relating to the colonies (65).

Monarchy continued to shape American constitutional development after the War of Independence. Nelson draws attention to John Adams's assertion, in his *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States*, that the monarch served as the representative for the whole nation. In this perspective, the Royalist theory of representation supported "the liberty of American subjects" far more than did the inconsistent parliamentary theory of virtual representation (71). The concept of monarchial authority as a part of the American political system persisted after the war's conclusion. The establishment of an American constitutional government, Mercy Otis Warren stated, created a "Republican *form* of government, founded on the principles of monarchy" (183). The Royalist Revolution's major political theorists, such as Alexander Hamilton and the Pennsylvania delegate James Wilson, sought to establish a new government with a "strong, prerogative-wielding chief magistrate" in the Constitution of 1787 (185). Wilson proposed a chief magistrate appointed by popular election. This would ensure that the executive official was not only a representative of the people but as "independent as possible" from the legislature (187).

Through meticulous primary and secondary source research, Nelson grounds his argument in British and American political philosophy and situates his unique analysis within the immense historical literature on the Revolution and Constitution. Nelson draws upon an extensive collection of British and American political tracts, the *Journals of the Continental Congress*, the *Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, the *Federalist Papers,* and the personal letters of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, James Iredell, and Alexander Hamilton.Nelson's interpretation hinges on taking American appeals to royal authority and use of royalist language seriously. Instead of seeing American appeals to monarchy only as a means to gain support against Parliament, Nelson interprets them as genuine. While historians of the Revolutionview the American constitutional position as essentially Whig,Nelson asserts that Americans' "final constitutional position was not Whig at all…but anti-Whig" (6). Nelson builds upon the scholarship of Charles Howard McIlwain, who argued that the Revolution was primarily a conflict between the American colonists and Parliament. Yet, as Nelson observes, McIlwain considered the concept of "prerogativism" an "ideological dead end," rather than the genesis point of American constitutionalism (7). Nelson also positions his work against the republican turn in American

historiography championed by Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, and J. G. A. Pocock that depicts the American patriots as "republicans-in-waiting" who feared the monarchy's executive power and corruption (6).

Although Nelson presents a compelling and well-researched history, a number of issues will generate future scholarly debate. Nelson associates Americans' desire for stronger executive power with royalism, minimizing the role of republican and democratic ideology during the Revolutionary era. His contention that monarchy served as the model for the Constitution's establishment of a president is a point Alexander Hamilton refutes in *Federalist No. 69*, which contrasts a republican executive with the British king. In addition, Nelson's frequent use of lengthy block quotations, while effective in bringing forward documentary evidence and context for the reader, disrupts each chapter's narrative flow. The book's political and philosophical discussion is also quite dense, at times difficult to follow, and requires a degree of prior knowledge of the American Revolution's political debates and ideological origins. Yet, these issues do not detract significantly from the overall quality of the book.

Eric Nelson's *The Royalist Revolution* offers an important reinterpretation of the ideological origins of the American Revolution and the Constitution. Challenging the established scholarship, the book will appeal to historians interested in political and intellectual history, the American Revolution, the creation of the Constitution, and the British Empire during the long eighteenth century. Nelson's work lays the foundation for reexamining how Americans drew upon and conceptualized Britain's constitutional traditions as they created an independent nation.

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