Royal Touch: What Charles I Can Teach Historians of the American Revolution

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Eric Nelson. *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014. xi + 390 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. $29.95.

As I read Eric Nelson's engaging and contentious monograph, the old adage about not judging a book by its cover kept intruding on my thoughts. Although the allure of monarchy in early America, before 1776 as well as after, is a familiar theme, Nelson explains why with grace and erudition.[1] Proceeding through the introduction, five meticulously researched chapters, and the conclusion, I found much to admire. Yet try as I might, I could not stop thinking about the title, especially the words "Royalist Revolution." In their adherence to monarchical principles, Nelson contends, a number of leading Founders were latter-day Royalists, the predominantly Anglican and Catholic party that supported Charles I during the English Civil War. Then as now, Royalism carried intimations of government by divine right, of a king who was head of church as well as state, and whose touch could cure a host of nasty ailments, notably scrofula. To say the Stuarts were a model that even a few Americans wanted to emulate is provocative. It is also, I think, revealing. That Nelson would package an otherwise fine study this way says quite a lot both about the book that he has written and, indirectly, about the state of the field that it is meant to address.

To understand what is controversial about Nelson's book, let me begin with what is not. In an insight often attributed to Charles M. Andrews, historians have long recognized the central role of the monarchy in Britain's imperial constitution before the Revolution.[2] Two points from the imperial school are particularly important to Nelson's argument. First, although the Crown and Parliament jointly governed England and (after 1707) Scotland, Americans believed that the colonies were dominions of the Crown alone—what Nelson aptly terms the "dominion theory" of the British Empire (p. 30). Second, until early 1776, when Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* convinced them otherwise, Americans held that their quarrel was only with Parliament, which had over-

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stepped its authority by attempting to tax the king's subjects in the colonies in the same way as it did subjects in Britain. Insofar as the colonists thought about George III, they hoped he would ride to the rescue as the defender of their liberty. In his oft-quoted *Summary View of the Rights of British America* (1774), Thomas Jefferson famously called on the king to "resume the exercise of his negative powers" and veto Parliament's destructive laws.[3] Similarly, during the first year of the Revolutionary War, George Washington referred to himself as the king's most loyal subject and to the redcoats opposing him as the parliamentary army. "I love my King," he wrote Martha on June 24, 1776, ten days before Congress declared independence.[4] The American Revolution, in other words, started as what John Pocock memorably called a "revolution against parliament."[5] When he says Americans were never more "wrapped up in their king" than on the eve of independence, Nelson is in good company (p. 108).

Although others have made this argument before, Nelson executes it very well. From this, he moves (in what is probably the most original part of the book) to a perceptive analysis of republicanism, which Americans embraced as they realized George III was not going to break with Parliament. He then makes an intriguing connection between the appeals to the king by Congress in 1774 and 1775 and the support of Federalists, in particular, for a "strong, prerogative-wielding chief magistrate" during the Constitutional Convention in 1787 (p. 185). Again, it is not exactly news that the Founders envisioned the President as a kind of elective monarch. By the time Washington took the oath of office in 1789, he had become the "father of his people," which is how King George's subjects thought of him in England. John Adams, for one, proposed using "your majesty" when addressing the new head of state. The explanation often given for such flourishes is that Americans had yet to break habits formed by more than a century and a half as subjects of a European monarchy. Against this, Nelson insists that there was nothing reflexive about the Federalists' position. In crafting the office of the President, Alexander Hamilton and James Wilson, who play leading roles in his story, were seeking to create the kind of chief executive that Americans had hoped in vain George III would become — and that the king in his fealty to Parliament had refused to be. "The Constitution, we might say," writes Nelson, "upheld the spirit of '75" (p. 185). It is a good point.

Where Nelson's argument becomes hard to accept is in his insistence that Patriots in 1775 and Federalists in 1787 were "Royalist." As Nelson himself notes, monarchy was not a uniform or monolithic form of government. European monarchs could be elective or hereditary, absolute or limited, divinely ordained or elevated through usurpation and conquest. They also went by a variety of names: kings and queens, princesses and princes, emperors and empresses, doges, dukes, stadtholders, and so forth. When eighteenth-century

Britons and Americans talked about monarchy, they usually had one of two versions in mind. One was the Whig Hanoverian monarchy that emerged from the great crises of the seventeenth century: constitutionally limited, religiously tolerant, and contractarian—or, more commonly, utilitarian—in its claims to legitimacy. This was the monarchy (and parliament) that confronted Americans before 1776. The other was the personal monarchy of Charles I. Although government by royal prerogative—Nelson's chief concern—was certainly part of Charles' reign, so was his anointed role as head of the Church of England, the divine basis of the throne that he occupied and, according to many Royalists, the sacred character of his person. After Charles' death, Royalists mourned him as an Anglican "martyr." This is what being a Royalist meant during the 1640s, and it is what it still meant at the time of the American Revolution.[6]

If Royalism lived on as a political concept, most of what Royalists fought for during the 1640s did not. Among the parts of Charles I's reign that persisted into the Hanoverian era were the king's role as the head of the Anglican Church and the doctrine that British monarchs were above the law. But crucial parts of the Stuart monarchy either followed Charles to the grave or died with his children and grandchildren. Rule by prerogative was one casualty. Another was the "royal touch," the quasi-magical ritual whereby monarchs in late medieval and early modern Britain and France claimed the power to cure scrofula and several other diseases by laying their hands on the sufferer's body. The last English sovereign to perform the rite was Queen Anne, Charles I's granddaughter and the final Stuart to occupy his throne. Among those she touched was a frail and sickly two-year-old named Samuel Johnson, whose mother brought him to London in 1712 in hopes that the queen would make him better. Over the course of a long and productive career, Dr. Johnson, as the compiler of the famous *Dictionary* (1755) came to be known, kept the gold "touchpiece" that he received on the occasion as an amulet on a chain around his neck.[7] During the American controversy, Johnson was a vocal supporter of the North ministry (and Parliament), penning the influential pamphlet *Taxation No Tyranny* (1774). A onetime Jacobite, Johnson was a lifelong Tory and High Church Anglican. When American Patriots called someone a Royalist, it was people like him whom they invariably had in mind.

Here is where the problem with Nelson's argument becomes acute. With the exception of James Iredell, a devout Episcopalian, the men (and they are all men) that Nelson identities as leading proponents of "patriot Royalism"—John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, James Wilson, and Benjamin Rush—were either Congregationalist or Presbyterian (p. 5). Despite their call for George III to revive imperial government by royal prerogative in 1775 and their support for a strong President in 1787, it would be hard to imagine a group less like the Royalists who rallied to Charles I's standard. On the differences, it is worth quoting what Hamilton had to say in *Federalist* no. 69. Although most of

the essay is a point-by-point comparison of the President's prerogatives with those of the British king, Hamilton opened with what, to Americans, was the most important difference of all. Under the Constitution, the President was still subject to the ordinary rule of law. By contrast, wrote Hamilton:

> The person of the King of Great Britain is sacred and inviolable; there is no constitutional tribunal to which he is amenable; no punishment to which he can be subjected without involving the crisis of a national revolution. In this delicate and important circumstance of personal responsibility, the President . . . would stand upon no better ground than a governor of New York, and upon worse ground than the governors of Virginia and Delaware. Hamilton also noted that in Britain, the king was "emphatically and truly . . . the fountain of honor," and he controlled "an immense number of church preferments."[8]

In each of these areas, Federalists envisioned a very different head of state.

If Royalism is such a poor fit with what the Founders thought and said, why use it? Had Nelson qualified the term, even slightly—say, by dropping the "ist" from the title and using a prefix like "neo" or "quasi" in the text—he would have come much closer to the book's main point, which is that the Founders were less hostile to prerogative government than their republicanism might suggest. In so doing, he could have dispensed with the parts of Stuart Royalism that most Americans did not want: its smells and bells, its thaumaturgical powers, its martyred king. Those were the parts that Hamilton did not hesitate to jettison in the *Federalist* essays, and they were things that would have appalled even the most monarchy-friendly Patriots had George III attempted to impose them in 1775. But that would have been a much less provocative book, and that is not the book that Nelson chose to write. Why?

The answer, I think, has a lot to do with the current state of scholarship on the American Revolution. Since the mid-1990s, a small but vocal group of historians has taken to bemoaning what John Murrin, in an unpublished paper, called the "self-immolation" of the field. Murrin's main concern, according to summaries that found their way into print, was what he (mistakenly) took to be a loss of scholarly interest in the Revolution's origins, but his lament tapped into a general sense that the questions that once dominated writings on the nation's founding had either been exhausted or grown stale.[9] In terms of the debates of the 1960s and 1970s—whether the Revolution was a social transformation (neo-Progressive) or an intellectual one (neo-Whig), whether its ideals were liberal or republican, whether its history is best written from the top down or the bottom up—there does seem to be an "originality crisis," as Woody Holton suggested in a 2015 keynote address.[10] Scholars who share these concerns have responded in a variety of ways. Some have organized conferences on the state of the field. Others have turned their pens to popular history and biography. Still others, no doubt, have abandoned the field alto-

gether. As *Royalist Revolution* reminds us, yet another way out is to take an especially well-worn shibboleth, in this case the centrality of republicanism to the founding generation, and turn it on its head. The danger, of course, is that shibboleths don't generally become well worn unless they happen to be, well, true. Even the best-executed revisions can end up straining credibility. It is possible, after all, to be too original.

My own sense, which Nelson's book has only strengthened, is that it is time to change the subject. In growing numbers, that is exactly what scholars of the American Revolution have started to do. By moving away from a narrow focus on the thirteen original states, which is where historians in the 1960s and 1970s largely directed their attention, a new generation has discovered that reports of the field's demise are greatly exaggerated. Along with Britain, the one place outside the United States that previous generations did study, major works have recently appeared on the Revolution as it affected—and was affected by—events in Canada, Sierra Leone, France, the Caribbean, Indian country, Spanish America and the Spanish borderlands, China, India, and the Pacific. Although not a development that this journal has paid much attention to, there has also been an upsurge in writings on the Revolution as a transformative moment in world history, helping feed a renewed interest in legal, diplomatic, and economic history. Historians today are far more likely than we were even a decade ago to take Americans at their word when they said their first goal in declaring independence was to join the powers of the earth. Obviously, none of this is a guarantee against revisions that attempt more than they deliver; neither will it entirely dispel the familiar urge to put old wine in alluring but unreliable new containers. However, there is no originality crisis. For historians of the Revolution who want something new to write about, numerous topics that really are new await. In that spirit, let me say that, while the claim on the cover of Eric Nelson's latest book continues to bother me, I enjoyed much of what he has to say in the pages in between. I look forward to seeing what he writes next.

Eliga Gould is professor of history at the University of New Hampshire. His most recent book, *Among the Powers of the Earth: The American Revolution and the Making of a New World Empire* (2012; paperback, 2014), was a finalist for the George Washington Book Prize and received the SHEAR Book Prize from the Society of Historians of the Early American Republic. A Japanese language edition will be published in 2016.

1. The best recent study of monarchy in early America is Brendan McConville, *The King's Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688–1776* (2006).

2. Charles M. Andrews, "The American Revolution: An Interpretation," *American Historical Review* 31 (1926): 219–32. The fullest modern elucidation is Jack P. Greene, *Peripheries and*

Center: Constitutional Development in the Extended Polities of the British Empire and the United States, 1607–1788 (1987).

3. [Thomas Jefferson], *A summary View of the Rights of British America* (1774), 28.

4. *Letters from General Washington to several of his friends in the year 1776* (1777), 35.

5. J. G. A. Pocock, "1776: The Revolution against Parliament," in Pocock, ed., *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, and 1776* (1980), 265–88.

6. Mark Kishlansky, *A Monarchy Transformed: Britain, 1603–1714* (1996), esp. chaps. 6 and 7.

7. Pat Rogers, "Johnson, Samuel (1709–1784)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, May 2009, http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14918 (accessed January 18, 2016).

8. Clinton Rossiter, ed., *The Federalist Papers* (1961), 416, 421.

9. The summary of Murrin's talk is from Patrick Spero, "A Negotiated Revolution," *Reviews in American History* 41 (2013): 31. Rather than losing interest in the Revolution's origins, historians' focus shifted to Britain and the Caribbean: see, for example, Andrew J. O'Shaughnessy, "The Stamp Act Crisis in the British Caribbean," *William and Mary Quarterly* 51 (1994): 203–26; Eliga H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Era of the American Revolution* (2000), chap. 4.

10. "Woody Holton On the Originality Crisis in American Revolution Studies," from keynote address that Holton delivered for conference "'So Sudden an Alteration': Causes, Courses, and Consequences of the American Revolution," Massachusetts Historical Society, April 9, 2015, YouTube video posted by "MassHistorical's channel," April 16, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3oeZfN31J4.