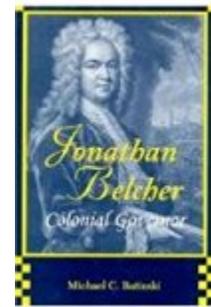


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Michael C. Batinski. *Jonathan Belcher: Colonial Governor*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996. xviii + 212 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-1946-5.

Reviewed by Michael P. Gabriel (Kutztown University)
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American Nehemiah

Most students and scholars of colonial history are familiar with such Massachusetts governors as John Winthrop and Thomas Hutchinson. Far fewer, however, know of Jonathan Belcher, who held that post from 1730-1741. In this well-researched biography, the first ever on Belcher, Michael C. Batinski argues that the governor represents an important transition figure between the colony's early Puritan leaders and later, more secular ones. According to the author, the American-born Belcher can best be understood as he envisioned himself, as an American Nehemiah. The Old Testament Nehemiah, a Jewish leader in the service of the Persian king during the post-exilic period, gained permission to restore the walls of Jerusalem. He simultaneously instituted religious reforms to renew the Israelites' covenant with God. Belcher similarly protected his people by attempting to preserve the traditional Puritan legacy while maintaining the colony's charter from the British king. Belcher did not operate in the world of the Puritan founders, however. Rather, he served in the increasingly commercial and political one of the later colonial era.

Batinski begins his narrative by examining Belcher's family background, focusing on his father, Andrew, who rose from a modest peddler to become one of New England's leading merchants through a wise marriage and aggressive business dealings. Batinski provides a fascinating view of Andrew's systematic program to establish his family's prominence and groom Jonathan for political leadership. This regimen included a Harvard education, which Andrew lacked, and several trips to Europe to refine young Jonathan, give him greater prestige in Amer-

ica, and establish his connections overseas. During his journeys, Belcher twice visited Hanover, providing him with contacts to its royal family before it ascended to the British throne. While in Europe, Belcher learned to dress in the latest styles and to maneuver his way through the intricate networks of Britain's commercial and political elite. Rather than broadening his basic views, however, these trips merely confirmed to him the superiority of New England's institutions. Belcher was struck by European decadence and the great disparities in wealth. Upon returning home he assumed his place in the family business and entered a marriage arranged by his father. For the rest of Belcher's life, he remained under his father's influence.

Batinski analyzes the effects Andrew's dominance had on Belcher psychologically and comes up with a plausible, though not entirely convincing, conclusion. Although talented, wealthy, and influential in his own right, Batinski argues that Belcher saw the world as a fearful, combative place but could not confront his opponents openly. Instead, he raged in his personal thoughts and correspondence at perceived enemies and often saw himself as a martyr to the machinations of others. He rarely acted upon these impulses, though, and when he did it was often "volcanically." Interestingly, Belcher pressed his own sons the same way that his father treated him, with similar results.

In 1729 Belcher was in England on behalf of the Massachusetts assembly, then in a dispute with the sitting royal governor, William Burnet, over granting him a per-

manent salary. When word arrived of Burnet's unexpected death, Belcher was named to the position. According to Batinski, this provided Belcher with the perfect opportunity to play the Nehemiah role. Although a gifted businessman and political manipulator who craved recognition, Belcher was, at heart, a Puritan who in many ways identified with the spiritual beliefs of ministers such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield.

During his tenure, Belcher employed his considerable skills as a courtier to protect his colony's traditional beliefs and interests and, at the same time, to maintain his role as a loyal servant to the Crown. For example, Belcher upheld the establishment of the Congregationalist Church against Anglican attempts to gain that status for their institution considering that Massachusetts was a royal colony. Despite the wishes of the British government, he refused to enforce imperial trade regulations that hurt his political allies and supported the assembly's refusal to grant the royal governor a permanent salary. In this latter case Belcher believed that such an action would undercut the assembly's power and independence. He repeatedly played one faction against another to obtain his goals, all the while informing his masters in London of his valiant efforts to implement their instructions. Overall, Belcher proved extremely successful in Massachusetts and enjoyed a stable and successful term. Later, as royal governor of New Jersey, Belcher would play an active role in establishing a college to train ministers which would eventually become Princeton University.

Belcher's experiences in Massachusetts were not duplicated in New Hampshire, which he also headed as governor of the Bay Colony. There he pursued bitter partisan struggles against his political foes which ultimately led to his administration's downfall. Batinski explains this difference by noting the small size of New Hampshire's government, making it more susceptible to manipulation, Belcher's fewer personal ties to the colony, and his own inconsistent behavior.

This book neatly complements many existing colo-

nial works with its blend of political, economic, and social history. *Jonathan Belcher* easily could be a case study for Bernard Bailyn's *Origins of American Politics*. Batinski puts a human face on the factionalism that Bailyn describes in both American and British politics. Readers also acquire more understanding of the importance of patronage in both systems, and how it worked differently in America because of the availability of fewer positions and a larger electorate. In such Anglo-American disputes over the royal governor's salary and the use of paper money, one also catches an early glimpse of issues which would eventually contribute to the growing imperial crisis in the 1760s and 1770s.

Batinski's detailed descriptions of the Belchers' commercial ventures, land speculation, and interest in sound currency help readers understand the growing complexity of the colonial economy. The book also clearly illustrates the human cost of such developments. These included lengthening poverty rolls and disturbances caused by grain shortages and rising prices, which harkens to Gary Nash's *Urban Crucible*. The Puritan ideals of community and the just price fell before the quest for profits.

Batinski concludes his book with a bibliographic essay which demonstrates the depth of his research into primary sources and his command of the secondary ones. He has organized his book in a logical manner and possesses a clear, interesting writing style. Overall Batinski successfully presents Jonathan Belcher as a man who linked two worlds: that of his Puritan forbearers and that of an increasingly cosmopolitan society. In doing so he adds to our knowledge of the social, political, and economic maturation of the American colonies in the mid-eighteenth century.

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