

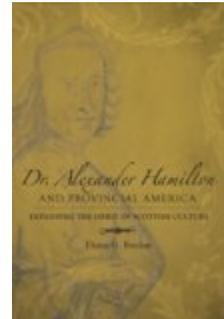
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Elaine G. Breslaw. *Dr. Alexander Hamilton and Provincial America: Expanding the Orbit of Scottish Culture*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008. xv + 348 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3278-4.

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The intellectual and cultural influence of Dr. Alexander Hamilton (1712-56) is widely cited, but few historians have a detailed understanding of this complex Scottish-American (who should not be confused with the Founding Father of the same name). An Edinburgh physician who immigrated to Maryland in 1738, Hamilton is primarily known for his 1744 travel diary, which provides a rich source of information about America's mid-eighteenth-century society, politics, and economy.[1] In the late 1980s and early 1990s, and inspired by the work of Carl Bridenbaugh and J. A. Leo Lemay, a number of academics drew attention to other aspects of Hamilton's life and work. In particular, they touted Hamilton's massive satirical account of Maryland politics and society, *The History of the Ancient and Honorable Tuesday Club*, as a canonical work of early American literature. This complicated manuscript was edited by Robert Micklus and published in three volumes in 1990. An abridged version then appeared in 1995. These editions were meant to inspire a wave of new scholarship. However, both issues sold poorly. As a result, Hamilton's stock has stumbled over the past decade.[2]

Bucking this trend, Elaine G. Breslaw's wonderful and accessible biography, *Dr. Alexander Hamilton and Provincial America*, makes a powerful new argument for Hamilton's historical importance. It describes him as the foremost of several highly-educated Scots emigrants who modeled and promoted an enlightened urbanity within the British colonies. Hamilton's "legacy to America," Breslaw concludes, was that he transmitted a cultural self-confidence across the Atlantic by transplanting a Scottish belief "that it was possible to create proud traditions out of local experiences" (p. 332).

Breslaw's study deftly moves between Scotland and America, capturing the essence of Hamilton's various homes, belongings, travels, beliefs, behaviors, and writings. Framed by a prologue and an epilogue, it is broken into four parts that together contain twenty-three readable chapters. Part 1 describes Hamilton's happy upbringing during the formative years of the Scottish Enlightenment. The twelfth child of the professor of divinity at the University of Edinburgh, Hamilton was born into Scotland's lesser gentry. His father was a tolerant religious moderate who enjoyed the patronage of the landed class. Hamilton spent his youth among the educated elite, and learned to square manners with moral virtue. Aged thirteen, he entered the University of Edinburgh, then a center of modern, cosmopolitan learning. Along with other students, he enjoyed the freedom and leisure to form clubs and experiment in polite conversation. After he received a Master of Arts degree in 1729, Hamilton spent several years as a medical apprentice before training as a physician at the medical school of Edinburgh. On completing his formal studies in 1737, and with his father deceased, he sought new patrons by joining the Whin Bush Club, a society that celebrated both traditional Scottish culture and English advancement. He drew heavily upon these experiences once in America.

Hamilton's arrival in and adaptation to the New World is the subject of the second part. Faced with few opportunities in Scotland, Hamilton followed his eldest brother, also a physician, to Maryland. Arriving in the winter of 1738-39, he initially found Annapolis to be little more than an uncivilized village. As he settled in an unhealthy, desolate, and disorderly frontier society, Hamilton grew homesick, depressed, and ill from malaria. He remained burdened by financial debts de-

spite the fact that his medical practice was successful. Hamilton was about to return to Scotland when he won in 1743 a seat on the Annapolis Common Council, a position that promised social respectability and economic rewards. The following year, he made his famous tour of the northern colonies. Accompanied by his slave, Dromo, Hamilton journeyed 1,624 miles in just over four months. After enjoying the company of other educated Scots in the cities of New York, Newport, Boston, and elsewhere, he arrived back in Annapolis with a new confidence in the social and intellectual potential of the British colonies.

In part 3 we see how Hamilton established himself in Maryland through his societies, medical practice, publications, musical interests, and 1747 marriage to the wealthy but exceedingly young Peggy Dulany. Committed to a life as an American gentleman, Hamilton attempted to remake unsophisticated Annapolis into a colonial version of Edinburgh. Central to this effort was the Tuesday Club, which grew rapidly from an initial gathering of eight men at Hamilton's home in May 1745. Meeting in private households, this all-male club cultivated a refined masculinity by replacing crudity and violence with polish and humor. It promoted a style of quick-witted irreverence. To banish disharmony, members were instructed to laugh at sensitive political matters. Apparently, incidents of cross-dressing were common. According to Breslaw, these techniques of ridicule and inversion were intended to reinforce rather than subvert the established social order. The Tuesday Club, like the local Masonic society that Hamilton founded in Annapolis in 1748, also became a means for spreading ideas of manners and conviviality that were essential to the Scottish Enlightenment. As Breslaw notes, Hamilton's Scottish influence paradoxically allowed diverse Americans to fashion themselves as cultivated Englishmen at the margins of the British world.

The concluding chapters describe Hamilton's final years. In 1751 he published an important pamphlet in defense of a method of smallpox inoculation used by Dr. Adam Thompson, another emigrant Scot and someone Hamilton had known at the Edinburgh medical school. In 1753 Hamilton won a controversial election for a seat in the Lower House of the Maryland General Assembly, where he supported the Court Party and opposed the intolerance of a rising anti-Catholic faction. Although Hamilton left this post the following year, he continued to serve on the Annapolis town council. He also found time to write his history of the Tuesday Club, com-

pleting a 1,900-page manuscript. (Breslaw accepts that much of the humor of this work is lost on twenty-first-century readers, but she also acclaims this history as "Hamilton's most important cultural legacy," p. 286.) As war with France approached, Hamilton closely followed British preparations. He met with several army leaders who passed through Maryland, but was snubbed by General Edward Braddock, the British commander-in-chief. Following Braddock's disastrous 1755 expedition against the French, which ended in the deaths or wounding of nine hundred British and American soldiers, Hamilton traveled to the remote Fort Cumberland to interview the surviving troops. Reporting back to family and friends, he blamed the defeat on Braddock's poor command. After his return to Annapolis, Hamilton's health declined once again. Laughing at himself until the end, he died in May 1756 at age forty-four.

Dr. Alexander Hamilton and Provincial America is an engaging and informed cultural biography that will appeal to many readers. Some may find its general treatment of Enlightenment Scotland as a climate of improvement, sociability, and refinement too broad. However, this approach suits the playful nature of Hamilton's writings, which are otherwise hard to pin down. Where Breslaw does connect Hamilton's work to the ideas of other Scots thinkers, such as David Hume and the historian Charles Mackie, she necessarily points to overlapping themes in the absence of more direct evidence. Nevertheless, the overall result is a convincing argument that Scottish intellectual culture first reached America through the efforts of relatively obscure persons in removed places. *Dr. Alexander Hamilton and Provincial America* helps us to understand why Scottish professionals who crossed the Atlantic in search of new economic opportunities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had a disproportionately large influence on American cultural development.

Notes

[1]. First published in 1907, this journal was later edited by Carl Bridenbaugh and issued as *Gentleman's Progress: The Itinerarium of Dr. Alexander Hamilton, 1744* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948).

[2]. See Robert Micklus, "The Reception of Dr. Alexander Hamilton's *History of the Tuesday Club*, Ten Years After," in *Finding Colonial Americas: Essays Honoring J. A. Leo Lemay*, ed. Carla Mulford and David S. Shields (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001), 170-182.

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