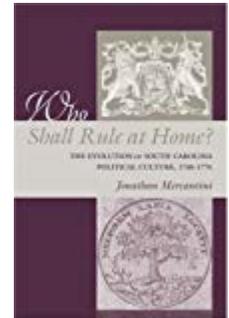


Jonathan Mercantini. *Who Shall Rule at Home? The Evolution of South Carolina Political Culture, 1748-1776.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007. xii + 314 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57003-654-5.



Reviewed by Lou Roper

Published on H-SC (November, 2007)

Jonathan Mercantini's book attempts to revise our understanding of the development of opposition to British imperial authority in South Carolina and the colony's place in the American Revolution. In Mercantini's view, an abiding insistence of leading Carolinians on the pre-eminence of local rights, as manifested by their practice of political "brinkmanship" whenever they deemed those rights to be under threat, constituted the key element in this history. His analysis, which tracks a series of disputes between what he styles as "colonial" and "imperial" elites (e.g., pp. 66, 162), thus targets the longstanding view of Robert M. Weir that "harmony" constituted the hallmark of South Carolina politics in the run-up to 1776.[1]

According to Mercantini, rather than harmony, the arrival of James Glen as governor in Charles Town in 1748 generated a running series of constitutional disputes between imperial appointees and the Commons House of Assembly. These culminated in South Carolina's surprising presence in "the vanguard of radical colonies" (p. 256) as relations with the metropolis became increasingly heated after the enactment of the

Stamp Act. The successes leading colonists recorded in their dealings with Crown officials, through their refusal to yield on questions of provincial privileges, provided the platform for the most vociferous defenders of those liberties, such as Christopher Gadsden.

Mercantini provides a concentrated narrative of South Carolina's political history over nearly three decades, with an especially useful tracking of the colony's responses to the Stamp Act, along with a salutary reminder that often-stormy difficulties between Whitehall and the colonies existed prior to 1765. Most importantly, he reminds us of the enduring importance--paradoxically--of localism for early modern Englishmen, especially those living in South Carolina, even at a time when a sense of national identity became more apparent and the "center" made inroads on local sensibilities.[2]

This account, though, proves rather old-fashioned in its approach, which leaves open the question of the novelty of its findings. In the first instance, Mercantini's portrayal of Governor Glen and his successors as lodged between two stools,

trying to please both their masters at the Board of Trade and the colonists purportedly under their authority, fits nicely into the well-known characterization of the "origins of American politics" offered by Bernard Bailyn almost forty years ago.[3] Mercantini then stresses the constitutional disputes between the Commons House protecting their liberties, on the one hand, and South Carolina's governors and an increasingly active Board of Trade keen to advance the royal prerogative, on the other (e.g., pp. 4, 28-30, 34, 139), which are inevitably drawn in large part from the journals of the Assembly. This understanding appears to unwittingly follow the classic Whig view of "revolutionary" behavior, despite Mercantini's occasional efforts to apply cautionary brakes (p. 234). [4]

This sort of analysis provides a not-entirely-satisfactory treatment. First, it presumes that those historical actors who cloaked themselves in the shroud of liberty did so primarily, if not exclusively, for altruistic principled reasons, and that we, correspondingly, should accept their version of events without question. Moreover, it does not shed much light on behavior outside of the halls of governmental institutions. Thus, *Who Shall Rule at Home?* neither pauses to provide much analysis of the motives of the "Patriots," nor does it provide much context for the activities of Gadsden, Glen, Charles Pinckney, Henry Laurens, and the other figures under discussion. In a related sense, many royal appointees, including Glen a Scottish lawyer, did not constitute an "imperial elite." Rather, these officials often regarded their American offices as stepping-stones for socio-political advancement, a tendency that colonists throughout the Anglo-American empire invariably recognized and loathed. Unsurprisingly, this sentiment prevailed in South Carolina as well: "harmony" on issues related to imperial relations, if not "unanimity," within the colony's leaders remained "the norm," as Mercantini admits (p. 168). [5]

It remains correspondingly unclear to what degree the nature of South Carolina's political culture changed after 1748 from what had transpired previously. As Mercantini notes, the province's leaders had readily resorted to "brinkmanship" prior to that date, most notably in the successful rebellion it staged against proprietary rule in 1719 (p. 3). When and why did "brinkmanship" translate into outright rebellion? Ironically, given his historiographical approach, Mercantini provides no explanation of how and why the South Carolina political nation fractured over the independence issue. This point has special significance given that South Carolina saw some of the fiercest fighting between Loyalists and Patriots, although he includes a brief discussion of the Carolinians' behavior at the federal Constitutional Convention (pp. 245-249).[6]

Other issues, some of them editorial, arise. First, Mercantini's tendency to equate political "harmony" with "unanimity" (e.g., pp. 16, 104) leads to a sense of overstatement in his argument. The 1762 controversy that erupted between new Governor Thomas Boone and the Commons House, over the seating of Christopher Gadsden in the legislature, "provides the sharpest lens for viewing the ongoing changes in the colony's political culture" (p. 168). When the governor sought to use questions over the propriety of Gadsden's certification to pursue revision of the colony's election law, the Assembly quickly claimed absolute privilege to certify the selection of its membership and resorted to "brinkmanship"--refusing to cooperate in governing the colony--until Boone retreated (pp. 167-186). According to Mercantini, we should attach significance to the "presence of any disagreement" among the Commons in pursuing this strategy (p. 175), but a favorable vote of 24 to 6--even with over half of the members not voting--indicates pretty solid support for this extreme position. Moreover, again, it remains unclear to what degree this episode manifests "change" in the colony's political culture: the Commons House

employed a very similar strategy as early as 1689. [7]

In the end, the degree of political disharmony that existed within the "colonial" elite--Weir's subject nearly forty years ago--also remains unclear. Differences of opinion may have existed over strategies and particulars, but, Mercantini's Carolinians, like Weir's, seem to have agreed reasonably consistently on first principles: that they remained best qualified to govern their province, and that others, especially outsiders and those who thought otherwise, required a firm disabusing. Thus, this book, despite a series of errors and repetitions, adds welcome detail on its subject; but it does not really advance our comprehension of the place of South Carolina politics in the world of early modern "Atlantic Revolutions."

Notes

[1]. Robert M. Weir, "'The Harmony We Were Famous For': An Interpretation of Pre-Revolutionary South Carolina Politics," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 26 (October, 1969), 473-501.

[2]. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688-1783* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); and J. S. Morrill *The Revolt of the Provinces: Conservatives and Radicals in the English Civil Wars, 1630-1650* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976).

[3]. Bernard Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968).

[4]. Wallace Notestein, *The Winning of the Initiative by the House of Commons* (London: The British Academy, 1924).

[5]. Patricia U. Bonomi, *The Lord Cornbury Scandal: The Politics of Reputation in British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[6]. Ronald Hoffman, Thad W. Tate, Peter J. Albert, eds., *An Uncivil War: The Southern Back-*

country during the American Revolution (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985).

[7]. "Petition to the Right Honorable Seth Sothell" in William J. Rivers, *A Sketch of the History of South Carolina to the close of the Proprietary Government by the Revolution of 1719*, Appendix (Charleston, 1856), 418-430.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-sc>

Citation: Lou Roper. Review of Mercantini, Jonathan. *Who Shall Rule at Home? The Evolution of South Carolina Political Culture, 1748-1776*. H-SC, H-Net Reviews. November, 2007.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13831>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.