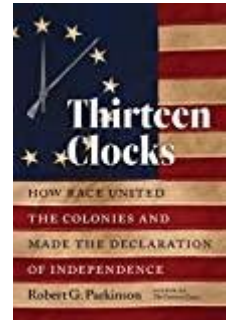




**Robert G. Parkinson.** *Thirteen Clocks: How Race United the Colonies and Made the Declaration of Independence.* Williamsburg and Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture and the University of North Carolina Press, 2021. 256 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-6257-2.



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Robert Parkinson's *Thirteen Clocks* is a wonderful achievement. Billing this new work as an abridgement of his prize-winning *The Common Cause: Creating Race and Nation in the American Revolution* (2016), Parkinson has actually written quite a different—and far more accessible—book, one that is built on the method and the central material of his earlier tome. Closely focused on the fifteen months leading up to July 1776, *Thirteen Clocks* addresses head-on the question first posed by John Adams: how did thirteen separate British colonies decide to join into a single nation? The unvarnished answer, both distressing and unsurprising, is white supremacy.

*Thirteen Clocks* is perfectly designed for an undergraduate classroom. The writing is superbly clear, approachable, and vivid. If *Common Cause*, at over seven hundred pages, drowned the reader with detail, this book distills the argument, the evidence, and the tale into an engaging and manageable account. Parkinson has found a fine bal-

ance between a big overarching argument and the explication of the method that underpins it.

Parkinson begins with an excellent chapter on newspapers that would alone make the book worth assigning. As he guides his reader through the process of making, reading, and distributing a newspaper, he reprises his earlier argument that “the inside of a colonial newspaper was where to find the news” (p. 27). Don't be distracted by the essays and advertisements on the front and last pages, Parkinson warns his readers; those front pages were composed to simplify the work of newspaper printers, not to grab the attention of readers. This focus on the production of newspapers, and particularly the “exchange system” that moved news through newspapers up and down the Eastern Seaboard, makes concrete the “imagined community” of print so commonly evoked by a brief reference to Benedict Anderson's influential work. Most impressive is a capsule account of the travels of an issue of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1774. Converting the data contained within two subscription books into a map of one particu-

lar newspaper's travels, Parkinson asks his readers to imagine a dense network of newspapers with nodes anchored in individual homes from Massachusetts to South Carolina. On this chapter rests Parkinson's premise that "printer's ink was indeed the Revolution's lifeblood" (p. 28). The circulation of newspapers would be one of the preconditions for the creation of a new body politic.

Yet British colonial America was far too divided to simply cohere around a common reading. In his second chapter, Parkinson lays out the material and political conflicts that divided white male colonists in the 1770s. Internal arguments over land, politics, and taxes were rife in every colony, and when they were not arguing internally, colonial politicians bickered over the drawing of their borders with neighboring colonies. Like the farmer and the cowman of *Oklahoma*, it seemed impossible that a Virginian and a Pennsylvanian could be friends, much less allies against the British Empire. Up and down the Eastern Seaboard, colonies were more likely to see each other as rivals than allies.

Arguments of principle were even more divisive than those of politics. The few politicians and Sons of Liberty who might have seen the power in Franklin's old adage "Join or Die" realized that compromise over these principles would be a far greater barrier to union than self-interest. Most interesting, perhaps, is Parkinson's interpretation of the arguments over slavery that began to emerge in the 1770s, when the antislavery movement gained ground but never quite swept the British colonies. Given the existence of sentiments on both sides of the issue, Parkinson argues, "Antislavery was antiunion" (p. 58). If even all those who were opposed to the British Crown could not agree on abolition, it seemed it would be better to say nothing at all.

Having set out the challenges to colonial unity, Parkinson turns to the story of how the racist impulses of white colonists drove them together under the guise of responding to the British attacks

at Lexington and Concord. Newspapers spread far and wide the fears of slave conspiracies, Native attacks, and unnamed foreigners, and these fears seemed to be the "real ripples" of the bloodshed of 1775 (p. 81). While such stories might have started as individual rumors, Franklin and his allies soon decided that their best argument against the British would really have to be an argument against African and Native Americans as "proxies" for British power. It was no accident that the newspapers harped on the violence of these proxies and on British attempts to channel this violence against colonists. These stories were carefully crafted by the movement's leaders and then "surgically" edited for the best effect as they slipped into the stream of news exchanges. Virginia governor Lord Dunmore's proclamation, offering freedom to enslaved men who joined his force, was only one of the many stories that colonial newspapers highlighted to show the lengths to which the British government would go to stir up racial violence. In the face of a high desertion rate from the Continental Army and waning *rage militaire*, fake news about racial violence seemed the only way to keep up support for the revolutionary cause. Undergraduates would need little help to see the contemporary parallels.

The ubiquitous theme of violence in colonial newspapers laid the groundwork for the Declaration of Independence itself, the climax of Parkinson's story. His final chapter is a lightly revised version of a central chapter of *The Common Cause*: "Merciless Savages, Domestic Insurrectionists, and Foreign Mercenaries." It was the Native, Black, and Hessian allies of the British, Parkinson claims/shows, that animated the Declaration of Independence and its list of grievances, culminating in "the ultimate deal breaker with the British," the charge of exciting domestic insurrections (p. 157). By putting such weight on the racial fears that colonial propagandists themselves had stoked, the revolutionaries laid the cornerstone for the white supremacist nation in which we now live.

In his brief conclusion, Parkinson suggests ways in which this weaponizing of racial prejudice shaped the United States. The racism written into the Declaration of Independence, he argues, was fundamental to the exclusionary forms of citizenship created by the new nation. I do not mean here to weigh in on this argument, which follows that of *The Common Cause*. However, the question of whether citizenship (rather than subjecthood) was a new form of exclusion in the eighteenth-century nation was an idea first explored by women's historians such as Linda Kerber, Jan Lewis, and Rosemarie Zagari, following similar questions posed by historians of the French Revolution. Sharon Bloch and Lauren Duval have written important articles on the political impact of stories of violence against women during the Revolution, and Erica Dunbar's classic *Never Caught* (2017) examines how arguments over slavery shaped the

life of Ona Judge as she tried to escape the bondage of George Washington. So I find it somewhat shocking (to speak politely) that a "Further Reading" bibliography compiled in 2021 is silent on women's history, political or otherwise.

*Thirteen Clocks* puts forth an important argument about the ways that the American Revolution firmly attached virulent racism to the founding of the United States. Although Parkinson insists in his introduction that this book emerged simply from his reading of old microfilm, I'm sorry to say that I do not quite believe him. It is clearly a book of its moment, and as such it has an important place in our classrooms. I plan to make it required reading (with a revised bibliography) in my American Revolution class for years to come, at least in part because it provides such a readable and absorbing abridgment of an argument with which we all need to grapple.

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