

Kenneth Owen, *Political Community in Revolutionary Pennsylvania, 1774–1800*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018, 224p. ISBN 9780198827979. Price \$85.00.

Writing about Pennsylvania politics around the time of the Revolution is a formidable and daunting task. The historian is faced with multiple personalities, factions, and election tickets all brought into play by the western push in the 1750s for greater representation in the colonial legislature. It is no surprise, then, that historians often have relied on simple dichotomies to make sense of it all: west versus east, Presbyterian versus Quaker, poor versus rich, radical versus conservative. According to these histories, radical western Presbyterians of few means triumphed during the Revolution and took power under the state's first constitution, but wealthy eastern conservatives eventually brought Pennsylvania back in line by 1790 under new federal and state constitutions.¹ In his first book, Kenneth Owen offers a way to rethink the Revolution and its legacy in Pennsylvania by focusing primarily on the participatory political culture that included disparate groups who together 'participated in the formation of the state' (p. 18).

Owen is ambitious, launching his analysis off of a very firm historiographical foundation (thank you to Oxford for using footnotes). Over the course of the introduction, he establishes that – in under 200 pages – his book will shed 'new light on the American Revolution' (1); help us 'properly understand the American Revolution' (1); tell the 'the story of...the creation of a new nation' (1); use Pennsylvania as a case study to analyze 'political development from the Continental Association through to the Revolution of 1800' (2); show how 'Pennsylvanian political activism...fundamentally shaped national politics' (3); and challenge historiographical misrepresentations of Pennsylvania that do not account for the 'complexity and diversity' of a state that 'does not fit easily into traditional narratives of the Revolution' (5), particularly the counter-revolution narrative of the 1790 constitution (8).

To accomplish this agenda, he deploys the concept of 'political community' as a short hand for the energetic and participatory political culture that developed around the time of the Revolution. On one hand, the term denotes a kind

1 Owen cites the two classic studies of the 1776 and 1790 state constitutions, John Paul Selsam, *The Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776: A Study in Revolutionary Democracy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936) and Robert L. Brunhouse, *Counter-Revolution in Pennsylvania, 1776–1790* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1942), as well as Douglas M. Arnold, *A Republican Revolution: Ideology and Politics in Pennsylvania, 1776–1790* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989) and Owen S. Ireland, *Religion, Ethnicity, and Politics: Ratifying the Constitution in Pennsylvania* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

of popular sovereignty—i.e. the conviction that any legitimate political argument ‘had to be seen as having some representative underpinning’ (9). This is why, for example, the Anti-Federalists were successful in shaping the ratification debate after the Constitutional Convention by deploying a rhetoric of ‘promot[ing] the common cause’ that Federalists could not ignore (97). On the other, it points to political mobilization, what Owen calls ‘boots on the ground and ballots in the box,’ that trumped any rhetoric or ideology no matter how eloquent (10). ‘Political success in Pennsylvania,’ he argues when discussing the 1799 battle for the Pennsylvania governorship, ‘depended on a much fuller engagement with popular mobilization’ (155). Thus, the book is not only about how governments gained and wielded power but also about how ‘an opposing populace sought to limit the government’s ability to exercise this power’ (12). Owen rejects any suggestion that community is analogous to class, preferring instead to see economic issues as constitutional. ‘When economic dispute arose,’ he argues, ‘it was the question of popular accountability, not class, that provided the main framing of the debate’ (13).

Owen divides his goals into three themes split over five chapters: ‘political concerns, economic disputes, and the acceptable role of violence in a republican society’ (12). Chapter One examines the “radical manifesto” that was the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776, while Chapter Two considers the price fixing committees of 1779 as a reinvigoration of that constitution’s principles. Chapter Three pushes back against Robert Brunhouse’s counter-revolution thesis by arguing that historians who follow his lead ‘have paid insufficient attention to the continuities of political practice outside the formal realms of government’ where the ‘underlying principles of the political community were still critical in shaping the future of Pennsylvanian politics’ (83). Thus, even though unicameralism was replaced by bicameralism (to cite one example), local actions ranging from petitions to riots remained critical to holding on to political power that ‘rested on demonstrably representative elective mechanisms’ (91).

Chapter Four follows the defeated Constitutionalists, largely Democratic-Republicans after 1790, as they became what the Republicans used to be: those out of power who scrutinized the government ‘with the same level of popular participation that had characterized the lifespan of the 1776 Constitution’ (115). This scrutiny included episodes of violent opposition, most notably the Whiskey Rebellion. Chapter Five continues this examination of the limits and uses of violence in the early republic through the Fries Rebellion, while also exploring the popular movement against the Jay Treaty and the Federalists’ manipulation of strategies of popular mobilization during the gubernatorial race of 1799. All of this, Owen argues, shows continuity in Pennsylvania’s

political culture from 1776 to 1800. While Pennsylvania's political history was indeed fraught with chaos and conflict, its government remained 'established on norms of popular sovereignty that could truly be supported by the entire community' (186).

Owen has given us much to think about, perhaps more so for Pennsylvania historians than those interested in the Revolution more generally. Focusing on the 'underlying principles of the political community' (83) more than the content of various political disputes offers a way to consider both the winners and the losers in Pennsylvania's political arena as contributing to the formation of the state. The challenge to the counter-revolution thesis is especially intriguing given our tendency to define past governments as those who held power while largely ignoring those who challenged that power. Such a reconceptualization certainly has utility outside of the period discussed in this book. Owen's chronology, however, is unnecessarily truncated (though this may have been a constraint placed on him by the series editor), and an initial chapter covering at least 1763 to 1773 would have provided more context to understand the 1776 constitution. In particular, it would have led to a more serious consideration of how race in the wake of the Paxton Riots shaped the parameters of political community and the militarization of the state under the first constitution, thereby further underscoring Owen's contention that Pennsylvania is key to understanding the creation of the United States.

Nathan R. Kozuskanich

Associate Professor, Nipissing University

nathank@nipissingu.ca