Brava to Bonomi. Her engrossing investigation of a popular early American scandal gives us, first, a demonstration of deft historical detective work; second, a rich reconstruction and analysis of the crass and complex political culture of post–Stuart England; and, finally, a clear picture of the relationship between imperial policies and local, intra-colonial conflicts.

Bonomi immediately confronts the validity of the charges against Edward Hyde, Viscount Cornbury—royal governor of New York and New Jersey from 1702 to 1708—reviewing with even-handed poise the mix of rumor and questionable evidence that has been widely accepted and perpetuated by respectable historians. Bonomi disputes the image of Cornbury as a cross-dressing petty tyrant, which is based largely upon a portrait in the New York Historical Society collection, dubiously alleged to be Cornbury dressed as his cousin Queen Anne. The documentary evidence holds up no better; most of it is simply hearsay, preserved in letters and diaries. After reading the first eighteen pages of Bonomi's book, most of us will delete the mildly titillating discussion of Cornbury from our textbooks and lecture notes.

Bonomi appreciates the appeal of a spicy tale, but she also knows that more important issues are involved than one man’s shaky gender identity or aristocratic forays into transvestitism. Beginning with basic questions—Were accusations of sexual misconduct common in the era? Why were they effective? How was gossip spread?—Bonomi provides a thorough social and political grounding of the Cornbury scandal that not only clarifies this particular case but also provides a revisionist portrait of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century political culture.

Beginning with Chapter 5, “One Tale is Good ’Til Another is Told,” Bonomi’s book is a model for how to separate the various institutional and ideological components of a cultural context, analyze them, and then bring them together in synthesis. She looks first at the political dynamics that made rumor and innuendo respectable and then at the rise of the gossip mechanism known as “grub street” and its role in the deployment of gossip as a political weapon. Next, she details the fluid gender boundaries of the age, the anxiety that they generated, and the way in which they intersected with political anxieties.

In Chapter 7, she turns to the conditions under which information—and, as the post-Watergate generation would call it, disinformation—was conveyed in the transatlantic world of the British empire. Bonomi links the atmosphere of anxiety about political and social stability, the rise of grub street, and the limitations of formal and informal communication networks with regard to the New York and New Jersey
political and economic realities at the turn of the eighteenth century. Thus, Bonomi creates a double context for Lord Cornbury: the cultural and political anxieties of the age and the long-standing, unresolved tensions within colonies, and between colonies and Crown. The result is one of the best written accounts of provincial politics in New York and New Jersey and one of the best examples of the positive impact of the new, transatlantic perspective on colonial history.

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Biographical studies of George Washington often depict him in isolation from the social and cultural context that shaped him and within which he operated, thereby perpetuating a mythic figure immune to historical analysis. The essays in this volume seek to explain him not only within a particular region, the Virginia backcountry, but also within a particular process, expansionism into that region. Moreover, whereas Washington scholars have tended to employ a traditional biographical approach, five of the eight contributors in this book use the methods of economic history, historical geography, social history, ethnohistory, and psychology to illuminate the circumstances surrounding and affecting him. All of the essays informatively examine how the young soldier/land speculator’s backcountry experiences influenced his development and outlook. Some will especially interest historians attentive to the utility of various disciplinary methods.

Three writers offer straightforward biographical essays. Dorothy Twohig’s insightful overview, “The Making of George Washington,” shows how his backcountry years prepared him for his later endeavors. Philander Chase’s thorough study of his land-surveying career demonstrates not only that profession’s significance in an expansionist society, but the relationship of his surveying to his personal wealth, social standing, and emerging nationalist vision. John Ferling reviews the provincial officer’s formative frontier-military experiences.

The remaining essays each apply a different set of tools to examine an important aspect of Washington’s young-adult career. Bruce Ragsdale succinctly applies a generation of colonial-Chesapeake, economic-history scholarship to explain Washington’s business enterprises within the slave-labor-based, tobacco and grain plantation system of the mid-eighteenth-century Northern Neck. Complementary studies by Robert Mitchell, a historical geographer, and Warren Hofstra, a social historian, reconstruct frontier Virginia’s developing social system.

Biographies typically view frontier conditions from Washington’s viewpoint, but these analyses shift the perspective to that of the white