“preamble,” a “bill in equity,” and, finally, “part petition, part screed,” without defining the key characteristics of any of these legal and non-legal forms of writing or explaining how it could be all of these very different forms of writing (97–98).

The Hoffers’ interesting idea about the possible impact of legal training and experience on some important contributors to the pre-revolutionary debates about the relationship of Parliament to the Colonies earns from this reviewer the Scotch verdict of: “not proven.”


In May 1793, as the French Revolution turned bloody, Alexander Hamilton contrasted the violent upheaval in France with the peaceful resolution of revolution in America: “Would to heaven that we could discern in the Mirror of French affairs, the same humanity, the same decorum, the same gravity, the same order, the same dignity, the same solemnity, which distinguished the course of the American Revolution.” In The Will of the People, T.H. Breen observes the same distinctions. He centers the experiences of ordinary people to answer how and why Americans sustained their revolution for eight long years of war and avoided the violent excesses that marred so many other similar movements.

By examining how small communities experienced the Revolution, primarily through sermons and town meeting records, Breen argues that the war thrust ordinary people into new political roles. Charged with leading their town’s resistance efforts, these men “learned on the job, gaining a measure of self-confidence through the daily challenge of policing politically suspicious neighbors, recruiting Continental soldiers, overseeing the local militia, collecting taxes, and supplying soldiers with food and blankets” (12). In doing so, they created a political culture in which ordinary people were responsible for the success of the independence movement, thereby forming the practical and rhetorical foundations for government by the people.

Breen organizes The Will of the People into six chapters that chart the emotional progression of the colonists. He begins with feelings of
rejection after Parliament passed the Coercive Acts in 1774 to punish Bostonians for their Tea Party. In response, colonists formed local committees of correspondence, “each one a spontaneous expression of popular anger about how Britain’s rulers had treated the Americans as lesser subjects” (20). As the imperial crisis reached a boiling point, colonists turned to religion to reassure themselves of the legitimacy of their actions. Ministers insisted on the righteousness of resisting tyranny and so played a crucial role in assuaging colonial anxieties about cutting ties with Great Britain.

During the course of the war, rejection and anxiety gave way to fear, particularly of internal enemies. Breen argues that local vigilance against pretended patriots invigorated the revolutionary spirit of ordinary Americans, and so helped to preserve their commitment to the independence movement. Neighbors surveilled each other, reporting any suspicious behavior to local committees of safety. In addition to policing dissent, these committees empowered ordinary men with political authority and strengthened popular allegiance to the cause. “Even when the war was going badly and people grew weary of sacrificing the comforts of daily life,” Breen explains, “the committees reaffirmed in small communities a commitment to revolution” (124). As the war dragged on and the value of the Continental currency fell, ordinary people organized committees of economic fairness charged with ensuring justice in the marketplace. This effort also helped to maintain the spirit of ’76. “The experience of regulating local economies—of fighting for collective values rather than for individual liberty—gave them greater confidence in their right and ability to determine the character of political affairs” (162).

Breen concludes by exploring how the post-war desire for revenge against returning loyalist refugees fizzled out. While some refugees suffered violence at the hands of their neighbors, most successfully reintegrated themselves into local life, relying on a common language, culture, and, for the most part, religion to heal old wounds. By moving quickly from “rejection to reconciliation,” the patriots guaranteed the long-term success of their revolution, a lesson Breen hopes contemporary Americans will learn (221). “At a time when political hostilities again threaten to destroy the fabric of civil society,” he writes, “the revolutionaries remind us how to resolve even the most divisive issues” (197).

Breen’s “bottom-up” story of “a founding people rather than a few Founders” refreshes the well-worn history of the American Revolution with new stories and characters (223). For instance, he uncovers
that in 1774, Americans created a relief network to aid the people of Boston suffering under the economic strictures of the Port Act, which had closed the port of Boston. By sending money, food, and supplies to Boston, people from across the thirteen colonies forged bonds and contemplated the injustices of imperial policies. Perhaps Breen’s greatest revelation is his discovery of internment camps used to house suspected traitors in Winchester, Virginia and Exeter, New Hampshire.

However, Breen’s avoidance of the loyalist perspective creates a lop-sided narrative in which the question of how ordinary people chose to support the revolution is not balanced by a consideration of why so many others did not. African-American and Native American loyalists receive the least attention. By exclusively exploring the patriot side, Breen implies that those living in North America had only one right choice and one just cause. But for thousands of people, the British Empire offered the best hope for liberty and prosperity. Unfortunately, the omission of loyalism strengthens the myth of American exceptionalism, centers a white narrative, and, at minimum, renders Breen’s argument about the choices of ordinary people unsatisfyingly incomplete.

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Inventing Boston, Design Production, and Consumption, 1680–1720.

By Edward S. Cooke Jr. (New Haven: Published for the Paul Mellon Center for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2019. Pp. 232. $60.00 hardcover.)

Edward S. Cooke Jr.’s Inventing Boston, Design Production, and Consumption, 1680–1720 sets a new standard for employing objects alongside primary source material in a work on early American history. Meticulously researched and beautifully illustrated, Inventing Boston is both handsome and informative. All too often, objects are reduced to the role of illustration—to the extent that they are included at all—in books on American history, and, sadly, in exhibitions organized without sensitivity to their quality, method of manufacture,