

commitment to the public good assertively took center stage during these decades. Seger concludes with a discussion of advice for merchants, multidisciplinary thinkers, and mechanics whose “assertive empiricism” (163) qualify them as the culminating “Renaissance men” of Seger’s analysis.

Across the longer period addressed in the book’s chapters, Seger identifies several overall trends: most significantly, the growing force of national identity and empire alongside an increasing respect for first-hand knowledge over prior written authority. Seger’s accessible and readable introduction will surely inspire further work: book historians might look more closely at patterns of reprinting and circulation, including the role of particular printers (rather than named authors, for example) in shaping the contours of print popularity; literary or textual scholars might look further into the long life of the regimen form, which persisted even as other paradigms of health-care took hold. By bringing together this range of sources, and decisively defining “useful books” as a distinctive genre in print, Seger offers a helpful contribution to an expanded view of early modern literary and scientific cultures. Part of what makes how-to books so fascinating is their location at the perpetually contested boundary between theory and practice, where they bridge the ideal form of prescription with the messy unfolding of everyday life. A persuasive case for the importance of “useful books” and the knowledge they imparted to the culture and history of the English Renaissance, Seger provides evidence not only for early modern practices but for the fantasy and ambition that made the world (and oneself) seem eligible for improvement in the first place.

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WILLIAM R. SMITH. *Benjamin Colman’s Epistolary World, 1688–1755: Networking in the Dissenting Atlantic*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. Pp. 284. \$119.00 (cloth).
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Benjamin Colman’s Epistolary World, 1688–1755: Networking in the Dissenting Atlantic is an interesting book. Much of its interest lies in its distinctiveness, both in terms of its subject matter and its approach. The danger that accompanies this distinctiveness is the possibility for unmet readerly expectations. The reader seeking a biography of Benjamin Colman may be disappointed with the text. So too the reader anticipating a documentary history of Colman’s letters. For the book, in the end, is neither a story of Colman’s life nor his letters, but rather is, as the title claims, the story of Colman’s epistolary world. Another way of saying this is that the goal of the book is to construct this world on the basis of Colman’s letters.


In Smith’s book, Colman can be described as a docent, leading the reader by the hand. Like any good docent, he at times takes center stage, but his goal is always to draw attention away from himself to the artifacts he has been commissioned to describe. Each chapter presents overlapping narratives of particular aspects of dissenting experience, and Colman sometimes seems to play only bit parts as he enters and exits the stage. Without a more focused narrative engagement with his life and letters, uninitiated readers may struggle to appreciate just how influential Colman was within these narrative frameworks, though he rightly deserves to be recognized alongside more well-known figures such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. What is more, the book lacks the apparatus to guide the curious reader towards further study of Colman’s life and letters. Smith has consulted a number of archives, whose abbreviations are quietly noted shorthand at the outset, but these sources are not detailed in the chapter bibliographies.

Benjamin Colman’s Epistolary World might arguably be more accurately described as the story of his epistolary worlds, for while Colman himself of course inhabited but a single world, the book

divides this world into bite-sized pieces, treating them distinctly and in turn: chapter two looks at attempts to unify English dissent in during the reigns of William and Mary; chapter three studies key contributions in the construction of a dissenting narrative identity on both sides of the Atlantic; chapter four examines the competing educational projects of Anglican and dissenting clergymen in New England; chapter five studies the legal status of the Church of England and the dissenting churches in New England; chapter six examines the divergent responses to the Great Awakening among the dissenters of England and New England both. Each chapter stands on its own as an account of a particular world, each followed by a set of endnotes and a distinct bibliography. Given this format, the reader might be excused for regarding the book as a collection of related essays each providing a window into a different epistolary world. The advantage of this format is that it helpfully provides educators with the opportunity to use individual chapters as supplemental readings in their classrooms.

Holding the different chapters and worlds together is the notion of a dissenting interest, which Smith describes as an ecumenical endeavor aimed at getting Presbyterians and Congregationalists to present a unified front in their ongoing struggle with the Church of England. Smith's account of the dissenting interest, across the trans-Atlantic epistolary worlds he presents, confirms that New England dissenters shared a great deal, not only among themselves, but with their opponents. As each successive chapter makes clear, New England dissenters shared with members of the Church of England imperial and ecumenical ambitions, educational and proselytizing goals, establishmentarian ideals, and revivalist yearnings. In each chapter, therefore, the Church of England appears at the margins of the text as a shadowy figure which ominously lurks about and yet often curiously seems to be walking in step with Colman and his friends. Smith makes it abundantly clear that while the Church of England provided dissenters with their chief antagonists, it also provided allies such as Bray and Gibson.

Smith's nuanced account of the dissenting interest helpfully problematizes the facile narrative that draws a straight line from the Mayflower to Independence Hall. The point is not only that Colman and his allies sought to promote the dissenting interest by demonstrating just how loyal and useful New England dissenters were to the British Crown, but also that the trans-Atlantic epistolary networks in which Colman played a leading role were the bonds of affection that united British subjects on both sides of the Atlantic. In Smith's telling, Colman's death signaled the erosion of these networks, an erosion that paved the way for a nascent American interest. It would be tempting, along these lines, to read Smith's account as Whig historiography. Colman's failure, in this case, becomes a kind of inevitable stepping stone on the path to a modern, enlightened, American, or even secular narrative identity. But Colman's enacted devotion to his God and to his Church were more than historical facts that can be deployed to explain the contemporary world. His struggle and failure to unite his co-religionists is bound up with the parallel struggle of those within the Church of England who would soon find their beloved Church divided in the protracted battle between Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics. Colman is bound to them not merely because they were overrun by similarly centrifugal forces but because they are all part of a larger story, the story of Christians supposedly unified by faith going their separate ways. If the marks of religious and ideological allegiance that have historically held Americans together are now proving inadequate in this regard, it could be that Colman's epistolary world is useful not merely in providing a historical backdrop for this failure, but also a promissory hope. For while political, cultural, and economic worlds now seem to be overwhelmingly centrifugal in orientation, the epistolary world, as the world of labored, enacted friendship, may yet have the potential to be an even more powerful centripetal force.

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