BOOKS

[The Eagle and the Crown: Americans and the British Monarchy, Frank Prochaska, Yale University Press, 240 pages]

From George III to George W.

By Andro Linklater

FRANK PROCHASKA offers a provocative thesis in *The Eagle and the Crown.* To the customary list of legacies left by the British after independence—language, the common law, representative government—he argues that we should add a predilection for monarchical rule. Much of his book is devoted to the not very interesting effusions of royalty fervor that periodically swell the bosoms of nominal republicans. But this froth, he suggests, is thrown up by a more subversive undercurrent. For all their pride in being "citizens" rather than "subjects," Americans hanker for the firm smack of command from a monocratic sovereign. It is a desire planted in them by the extraordinary powers granted to the president by the Constitution, and since 1789, it has been fostered by the explosive increase in the reach of federal authority.

The argument begins with the monarchical mood that infected the Founding Fathers in their deliberations on the president's role. As Benjamin Franklin Bache observed in 1797, the designers of the Constitution "dismissed the name of king, but they retained a prejudice for his authority. Instead of keeping as little, they kept as much of it as possible for their president."

They did so despite being aware of good republican alternatives. A classical education had made most delegates to the Constitutional Convention familiar with the examples of an assembly-led democracy in Athens and the Roman republic's reliance on consuls to head the government, while James Madison, at least, had also studied the contemporary model of republican Switzerland's cantonal confederation. And from far away in Paris came Thomas Jefferson's advocacy of senatorial oversight to guide the Republic's destiny.

Nevertheless, according to Madison's notes, what concerned delegates was the extent of the elective monarch's powers, not whether the post should exist. To quote Bache again, they created a constitution before they had "sufficiently *unmonarchized* their ideas and habits." The anomalous outcome was a republic that invested its chief executive with the sweeping authority of Article Two of the Constitution, to be commander in chief of the armed forces, to make treaties, to issue pardons, to appoint supreme court judges and "all other officers of the United States," and to take whatever other action the president deems necessary to "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution."

With the detached wisdom of his 82 years, Benjamin Franklin justified the decision on psychological grounds. "It will be said that we do not propose to establish kings," he commented. "But there is a natural inclination in mankind to Kingly Government. They had rather have one tyrant than five hundred. It gives more of the appearance of equality among Citizens, and that they like." There was good reason both for Adams's proposal that the president should be addressed as "His Mightiness" and for Jefferson's acerbic remark that "We were educated in royalism; no wonder if some of us retain that idolatry still."

According to Prochaska's argument, the planting of that seed explains the apparently illogical attachment to the folderols of British royalty felt by otherwise republican citizens. The Constitution encourages it as insidiously as it breeds respect for Magna Carta.

Prochaska illustrates the strength of this attachment with examples that range from Washington's rationale in 1789 for the coronation-like ritual of his inauguration—"it was taken from the Practice of that Government under which we had lived so long and so happily formerly"—through to *Time* magazine's all-time record sale in 1997 of 1.2 million copies for an issue devoted to Diana, Princess of Wales.

The Victorian era provides the richest material. The author cites an editorial from the *Richmond Whig* on the eve of the Civil War: "To be under the dominion of a lady like Queen Victoria, distinguished by every virtue, would constitute a favorable exchange for the vulgar rule of a brutish blackguard like Lincoln." With satisfying symmetry, he finds that remark balanced 30 years later by New York mayor Abram Hewitt paying grateful tribute to "our Queen" for personally preventing "the motherland" from giving formal recognition to the Confederacy.

By the end of the book, when Prochaska quotes Walter Bagehot, editor of *The Economist* and author in 1867 of the incomparable study *The English Constitution*, it is difficult to be sure whether the remarks apply to the east or the west coast of the Atlantic: "So long as the human heart is strong and the human reason weak, Royalty will be strong because it appeals to diffused feeling, and Republics weak because they appeal to understanding."

Despite the author's evident intelligence and assiduous research, his case is weakened by serious flaws. Perhaps because the book is also aimed at a British audience, it focuses on the celebrity sizzle of royalty's appeal rather than the meaty constitutional questions posed by the investment of sovereignty in one individual. Its evidence is largely anecdotal, culled from letters and newspapers, and of necessity highly selective. At first glance, the thousands that mobbed the future Edward VII in Chicago in 1862 seem impressive testimony to royalty's pulling power, except that in the same city just as many people crowded in some years later to see Buffalo Bill Cody. The affection felt for Victoria was undoubtedly genuine, but with Britain supplying almost half the United States' imports and consuming about one quarter of its exports, how much of

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that feeling was built on commercial goodwill? It was surely more than coincidence that the popularity of Victoria's heirs declined as the scale of British trade diminished.

Most seriously, there is a problem with the very basis of Prochaska's argument. However monarchically minded, the majority of delegates to the Constitutional Convention were more anxious to shore up an inadequate central government than to create a quasi-king. The power of the 13 original states dwarfed that of the United States government under the Articles of Confederation and even under the new federal constitution continued to overshadow it for many years. To cite only the most obvious examples, despite the regal powers accorded him by Article Two, Washington found his directives on native American policy blithely defied by the governors of New York, Pennsylvania, and Georgia. In similar fashion, Adams was challenged by Virginia over the Alien and Sedition Acts. Jefferson had to call out federal troops in New York to make the 1807 Embargo Act stick, while Madison could not even compel the governor of Massachusetts to go to war in 1812. Not until the trans-Appalachian states emerged as a counterweight to the original 13 and Andrew Jackson threatened to march troops into South Carolina in 1832 did the president amount to much more than *primus inter pares*.

Although Jackson was termed "king" by his opponents, the true extent of the presidency's reach only emerged during the Civil War. When Lincoln's secretary of state, William Seward, told a journalist of the London *Times*, "We elect a king for four years, and give him absolute power within certain limits, which after all he can interpret for himself," the ghost of George III may be said to have walked out of the constitutional closet. At that point, the thesis of *The Eagle and the Crown* begins to make sense.

Not only did the West Wing court with which we are now familiar start to appear in the White House, but the new wealth of the Gilded Age engendered a snobbish appetite for the social rank and hereditary titles available across the Atlantic. (This sort of exchange cuts both ways: I vividly recall a visit to the House of Lords some years back and the envious expressions of a dozen dumpy duchesses as a tiara'd Jamie Lee Curtis sashayed past with genuinely aristocratic hauteur in her guise as Baroness Haden-Guest.) Since then, by way of the New Deal and the imperial presidency of Richard Nixon, the president has become more powerful and more insulated from the people than any monarch.

It may well be objected that the checks and balances—the legislative power of Congress and the reviewing power of the judiciary—have also acquired more strength, reducing any accusation of kingship to a mere jibe. But what is often overlooked is that the sovereign power of the presidency has grown with the supremacy of the United States. And in one particular fashion, it has been used within the country's borders to erode the difference between a subject and a citizen.

There is one influential section of the population that very properly has given up some of the privileges of citizenship and are, strictly speaking, the president's subjects. The Armed Forces take an oath of allegiance, not to the United States or to the Constitution as some believe, but to the president in person. They are as much his men as the redcoats were George III's. In times of war or grave emergency, their status grows to be the norm because citizens identify themselves with the military. But in doing so they perforce adopt the outlook of subjects themselves. It is not a state of mind to enter into lightly, but it is one that recent history has made familiar to us all.

Meanwhile, the original monarchical model has undergone an equally dramatic metamorphosis in the opposite direction. Exactly 200 years ago, George III still had enough power to appoint and maintain in office the most unpopular prime minister in British history, Spencer Perceval, shortly to achieve distinction as the only premier ever to be assassinated. Now compared to the immense executive and legislative power concentrated in a prime minister's hands, the sovereign authority vested in Queen Elizabeth II amounts to little more than ceremony—with one vital exception. It is to her that the armed forces swear loyalty. When your country is engaged in unnecessary conflict, there is much to be said for being able to distinguish the political fool who led you into war from the sovereign whose troops are fighting it.

A strong understanding is what Bagehot expected of the citizens of a republic. *The Eagle and The Crown* illustrates how easy it is to let that focus be swamped by "a natural inclination to Kingly government." ■

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[A Brief Inquiry Into the Meaning of Sin and Faith, John Rawls, Harvard University Press, 252 pages]

Rawls at the Crossroads

By Luke Coppen

MAY 1945. The U.S. Army is engaged in a fierce struggle with Japanese forces for control of Luzon, the largest island of the Philippines. A first sergeant asks for two volunteers: one to scout enemy positions, the other to give badly needed blood to an injured soldier. Two young men—John Bordley Rawls and his friend, Deacon—step forward. Deacon's blood type matches the wounded soldier's, so he heads off toward the field hospital. On the way Japanese mortars rain down. Deacon dives into a foxhole, but a shell lands nearby, blowing him to smithereens.

John Rawls recalled this incident in his eminent old age in a file called "On My Religion" found on his computer after his death in 2002. Writing more than 50 years after the fatal shell fell, Rawls was still shocked by the loss of his friend. He offered Deacon's death as one of three milestones in his transformation from "a believing orthodox Episcopalian" to an agonized agnostic. (The other two were a jarring, jingoistic sermon by an Army pastor and his discovery of the horrors of the Holocaust.)

Rawls grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, in a mildly religious atmosphere. His mother was an Episcopalian, his father a Southern Methodist. Rawls described his youth as "only conventionally religious" until his final two years at Princeton. "Then things changed," he wrote. "I became deeply concerned about theology and its doctrines." He even considered seminary, but decided his first duty was to fight alongside his friends. After the war, Rawls carved out an international reputation as a political philosopher, but until now few have known about his earlier incarnation as a passionate young Christian theologian.

In *A Brief Inquiry*, we come face to face with this bright, earnest, devout figure. The book reproduces Rawls's senior thesis, discovered by chance in the Princeton library shortly after his death, together with excellent interpretive essays by Robert Merrihew Adams and Joshua Cohen, and Thomas Nagel. Rawls submitted the thesis in December 1942 and earned a grade of 98 out of 100. I'm not surprised: it's a blazingly original and ambitious work, all the more remarkable considering Rawls was just 21 when he wrote it.

The thesis has two basic aims: to show what Christianity is and what it's not. For the young Rawls, Christianity is assuredly not the faith proclaimed by the Catholic Church. He argues that the two greatest Catholic thinkers—Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas—made a fateful philosophical error. Their mistake was to express Christian doctrine in terms of Greek philosophy. "The difference between Catholicism and Platonism is a matter of degree," Rawls asserts. Augustine, Aquinas, Plato, and Aristotle all fell into the trap of "naturalism," which he defines idiosyncratically as "any view which constructs the cosmos in naturalistic terms." The naturalistic thinker sees things, not people. Even God is conceived as a "thing" in the universe, the obscure object of our desire. Rawls writes,

> I believe that naturalism leads inevitably to individualism, that it cannot explain community and personality, and that it loses the inner core of the universe. Since this manner of thought has been prevalent in the West since Augustine we are proposing more or less of a 'revolution' by repudiating this traditional line of thought. I do not believe that the Greek tradition mixes very well with Christianity, and the sooner we stop kow-towing to Plato and Aristotle the better.

He then adds, rather primly: "An ounce of the Bible is worth a pound (possibly a ton) of Aristotle."

The young Rawls is not the first to dream of prising Christianity from the hands of pagan philosophers; it's a recurring theme of Protestant theology. Rawls is indebted to Anders Nygren, the Swedish Lutheran author of *Agape and Eros*. Nygren contrasted the ancient Greek notion of love (*eros*) with the New Testament ideal (*agape*) and accused Augustine of creating a monstrous hybrid of the two. He claimed that Luther restored *agape* providentially to its true place in Christian theology.

Not surprisingly, Catholics find this objectionable. In the less famous part of his 2006 Regensburg address—the speech in which, according to most reports, he insulted the Muslim world—Pope Benedict XVI energetically defended the Church's Greek philosophical inheritance. The Pope said the "encounter between the biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance," but was part of the divine plan because it anchored Christian faith in reason.

The young Rawls sees further proof of Catholicism's innate individualism in the lives of its mystics. "We reject mysticism," he declares, "because it seeks a union which excludes all particularity, and wants to overcome all distinctions." We might object that Rawls is confusing the mysticism of the West with that of the East. When St. John of the Cross achieved mystical union with God he didn't become a vaporous divinity; he remained John of the Cross. But Rawls insists on his point. The trouble with mystics, he says, is that they regard God as an object in the universe—the highest object, to be sure, but nonetheless an object. They teach that God alone satisfies man's thirst for beauty, goodness, and truth. That is not an innocent mistake, says Rawls: it is a sin. "If one cannot have faith in God just because He is what He is, but has to add that He is most satisfying in his beauty and such an *object* that we shall never crave anything else—then perhaps it is better not to be a Christian at all." The implication is radical: John of the Cross and his ilk are no saints; they are dangerous heretics.

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