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In 1770, a ship sailed into New York harbor bearing weighty symbols of the British Empire: the furniture of New York’s royal governor John Murray, the 4th Earl of Dunmore, and a four-thousand-pound gilt statue of George III on a horse. Six years later, Lord Dunmore, now royal governor of Virginia, had fled his post, and New Yorkers had pulled down and beheaded the statue. In his gripping biography of Dunmore, Dunmore’s New World, James Corbett David argues against seeing the events of 1776 as a sharp break with the past. Throughout his time in North America, Dunmore witnessed colonists’ lack of respect for royal authority. He learned that any outward signs of deference served mostly to impress on the governor the importance of fulfilling his patronage obligations.

David puts patronage and family at the heart of Dunmore’s story. In September 1745, at the age of fifteen, the young John Murray cheered Bonnie Prince Charlie on his triumphal southward march. The thrill of seeing thousands of armed soldiers in kilts was soon dulled by Charles’s defeat at the Battle of Culloden and John Murray’s father’s conviction for treason. The boy was rescued from ignominy by his childless uncle, the 2d Earl of Dunmore, who first worked to mitigate the damage and then conveniently died, making John Murray the new earl once his dishonored father died soon thereafter. Like many Scots in the aftermath of the Jacobite Rebellion, young Dunmore cultivated patronage and position within the empire that defeated them. Dunmore’s marriage to Charlotte Stewart (the daughter of the 6th Earl of Galloway, Alexander Stewart, and sister-in-law of the 2d Earl of Gower, Granville Leveson-Gower, the head of the Privy Council) gave him a well-connected wife. Lady Dunmore and her sister Lady Gower pushed for Dunmore’s appointment as royal governor of New York and subsequently Virginia. For a man without an income sufficient to support his estates and family, the salary, perquisites, and land opportunities could change his life.

Dunmore’s career exemplifies the problems and opportunities of empire. Loyal to his king, he found it impossible to implement the royal will. As soon as he disembarked on Manhattan Island, Dunmore saw that neither he nor his king was in charge. Despite holding documents showing it was the
king’s intention that the outgoing governor give him half of the fees collected since Dunmore’s appointment, he could not get the money. Matters as seemingly straightforward as appointing a potash inspector were fraught with local conflict, and, as David explains, “royal power was only effective in so far as it appealed to local interests” (5). Counterfeiters undermined the authority of the crown as they blithely copied the words “To Counterfeit is Death” (49) onto their fraudulent bills. A letter asking for instructions could take weeks or even months to reach London before it wound its way through the bureaucracy of Whitehall and an answer began its own transatlantic journey. Once the answer arrived, local circumstances had often changed enough to make it irrelevant. Like colonial administrators across the Americas and around the world, Dunmore learned to act first and ask permission later.

Dunmore’s own economic and familial interests grew intertwined with the colonies and at times diverged from the interests of the crown. As David points out, Dunmore often had to buy the consent of subjects with the only means at his disposal: land and the legitimacy of a legal title. Lord Dunmore’s War was an attempt to head off backcountry unrest, show ambitious speculators and settlers that the crown was on their side against Indians, and potentially forward Dunmore’s own future land interests. He prepared a future of prosperity and prestige for himself and his family by giving himself a large and not exactly legal land grant near Lake Champlain in what is now Vermont and a plantation with eventually over fifty slaves in Virginia.

Dunmore’s belief in a hierarchy of subjecthood allowed him both to profit from enslaved labor and to arm and free slaves for the empire. In North America, he identified the danger the enslaved population posed because he lived with it, both domestically and, in Virginia, as a threat in case of Spanish invasion. He supported Virginia slaveholders’ proposed tax on slave imports in order to keep the enslaved population from growing. But when those slaveholders rebelled, Dunmore looked to their slaves to help the empire. As David explains, Dunmore believed “that all sorts of political outsiders—servants, convicts, and Indians, as well as slaves—could be mobilized to protect the state” (106). After slaves and servants began coming to him in Williamsburg for refuge, Dunmore wrote his proclamation inviting male slaves of rebel masters to join the British army in exchange for their freedom.

John Shy’s observation that most histories of the American Revolution are about the coming of the Revolution, not the Revolutionary War, is particularly true for Dunmore. The pathbreaking work of Woody Holton

and Sylvia R. Frey has made Dunmore’s War and Dunmore’s Proclamation essential to understanding why the Revolution spread south. Yet by following Dunmore through the war, David shows the continuing possibilities of a pluralistic and expanding British empire in the Americas. Leaving the Chesapeake in the summer of 1776, Dunmore sailed to New York and began lobbying General William Howe to invade Virginia. After joining the victory at the Battle of Long Island, Dunmore took his case to London, where he offered to raise and lead four thousand Highlanders. By early 1781, King George was certain enough of General Charles Cornwallis’s impending victory to send Dunmore back to Virginia, but the news of Yorktown put him instead in the limbo of British-occupied Charleston, South Carolina. There, he devised plans to arm slaves and loyalist refugees to retake West Florida from the Spanish and from there invade Spanish Louisiana or the Carolinas and Virginia. But with no forces to spare, the crown cut its losses at the Treaty of Paris.

In retrospect, Dunmore’s invasion plans might seem foolhardy, but David points out that in the 1780s, most people expected Britain to attempt to regain some of its southern colonies. Dunmore was in the best position to make it happen, both in Charleston and in his postwar position as governor of the Bahamas. However, if Dunmore expected the Bahamas to provide colonists united by their opposition to rebellion, he was disappointed. Longtime residents of the Bahamas, including a large free black population, were recovering from a Spanish invasion late in the war as well as the influx of some 1,600 white and 5,700 black refugees. Dunmore attempted to juggle these populations’ conflicting interests while using the islands’ proximity to Florida to reestablish a British presence in the Southeast, surely something on which Indians, enslaved and free blacks, and land-seeking white loyalists could all agree. As with much of his career, he combined his own ambition, his desire for the empire to succeed and expand, and his concern for those who had remained loyal to their king. The failure of his plans, the decline of his career amid charges of corrupt land grants and improper use of public funds, and the end of his life in debt trying to support his grown children constitute an imperial story as well.

David shows Dunmore as a man of his time and place—the “New World” of increasingly independent British North America—while also revealing an “Extraordinary Life” at the story’s center. From Dunmore’s daughter’s clandestine wedding on the opening page, David draws in his readers exactly as a biographer should do, making us want to know more about this convivial, ambitious, adventurous person, who also helps us

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understand the era’s larger events and themes. In this telling, Dunmore is no drunken fool who lost an empire nor a great emancipator. He is a man of empire, creating and caught by webs of patronage, ambition, and family. David’s deep familiarity with the historiographies of the British Empire, the American Revolution, Native America, slavery, and the family makes the book cutting-edge scholarship. His vivid writing and well-crafted plotting make it a page-turner.