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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joan R. Gundersen. *To Be Useful to the World: Women in Revolutionary America, 1740-1790.* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996. xv + 273 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8057-9916-3.

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Published on H-Women (February, 1998)

In *To Be Useful to the World,* Joan Gundersen achieves an ambitious goal: to synthesize the extensive body of recent literature pertaining to the history of American women from 1740 to 1790 into a readable narrative history suitable for undergraduates and general readers as well as scholars.

The American Revolution, the pivotal event of this period, plays a central role in Gundersen's synthesis. Indeed, the author organizes her detailed analysis around a broad examination of the revolutionary era and the multiple effects it had on different groups of American women. In particular, Gundersen argues that the long-debated question of whether the American Revolution advanced or hindered women's status is too simple. Rather, her extensive and often nuanced reading of recent studies in women's history and early American social history, as well as her own research and publications on women in colonial and revolutionary Virginia, suggests instead that the Revolution was a complex event which affected different women differently. As she explains in the work's preface, the Revolution "appears as a series of trade-offs. Women both gained and lost, but not equally, and one woman's gain might be intimately tied to another's loss" (p. xii).

To illustrate her thesis, Gundersen takes a social historical approach and personalizes her analysis by following three women and their households through the period, comparing and contrasting the myriad of ways that the Revolution, as well as the broader transformations of the eighteenth century, impacted their lives and the lives of their daughters and granddaughters. The women she focuses on include: the Mohawk Indian Margaret Brant and her daughter, Mary; Deborah Franklin, the common-law wife of printer and patriot Benjamin Franklin, and her daughter Sarah; and Elizabeth Dutoy Porter, a French-English woman of a middling planter family in Virginia, and her slave, Peg. The Porter story in particular, which Gundersen draws from her own research on the Virginia piedmont, really enlivens this synthesis with some original insights. By examining these women's lives as daughters, wives, and mothers, and their experiences as travelers, students, workers, and participants in the legal system, Gundersen ultimately reminds readers that the eighteenth century was a time of profound transformation. And the American Revolution, she suggests, was only one component (albeit an important one) of the broader social, economic, and cultural changes underway in early America.

Of course, how women experienced these changes, and the degree to which they participated in them, depended on the individual. Women, Gundersen argues, were not a monolithic sex who experienced change in universal ways. Rather, their experiences, like the experiences of the men who were their fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons, varied according to their class, race, and age.

While many readers will find Gundersen's assertions familiar, because this is, after all, a work of synthesis, her analysis still raises several important issues of interest to historians. For those familiar with Gordon S. Wood's most recent work, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1992), Gundersen's synthesis qualifies, if not overtly challenges, Wood's assertion of the Revolution's fundamentally radical character. While white American men may have experienced unprecedented access to independence and democracy in the wake of the Revolution, women, by contrast, found themselves increasingly excluded from the most basic prerogatives of citizenship in the young nation as new norms cast them as dependent nurturers and moral guardians. Some wealthy white women could add public meaning to their lives by serving as good republican mothers. Poor white, Indian, and African-American women, however, found themselves wholly excluded from the Revolution's supposedly "radical" benefits. As Gundersen illustrates, these women, operating under the "double bonds" of race and sex (and social class too), found themselves further marginalized as non-virtuous "others."

Second, Gundersen's characterization of the Revolution as a culminating event in the long history of an already-changing women's America, raises intriguing questions (which, in all fairness to the author, ultimately go beyond the temporal scope of her work) about when such changes began. If the transformations apparent in women's lives by 1790 did not originate exclusively during the revolutionary era (as Gundersen suggests), when did they begin? Certainly Kathleen Brown's, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs* (Chapel Hill, 1997), and Mary Beth Norton's, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York, 1996), suggest that women's historians need to look back to the seventeenth century, and particularly the last quarter of that century, for many of these answers. According to Brown and Norton, many of the social, economic, and legal trends Gundersen addresses in their eighteenth-century context had their origins in the social transformations of the late seventeenth century. Reading these works in conjunction with Gundersen's very admirable synthesis offers inquisitive readers an even more complex and nuanced portrait of early American women.

Gundersen should be commended for writing a fine synthesis. Her analysis, as well as the close attention she pays to setting the lives of the Brant, Franklin, and Porter women into the broader contexts of revolutionary America, provides students, general readers, and scholars with a clearer understanding of eighteenth-century women's lives and the often double-sided nature of their experiences. In the end, Gundersen's synthesis can be read too as a testament to the continuing intellectual power of Linda Kerber's *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, 1980) and Mary Beth Norton's *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston, 1980). While women's historians of the last seventeen years have qualified and in some cases discounted Republican Motherhood by analyzing the lives of Indian, African-American, and white working women as exceptions to this paradigm, Kerber's and Norton's interpretive models, as Gundersen's synthesis suggests, nonetheless remain central to any analysis of women during the revolutionary era. As Gundersen herself observes, this book could not have been written "without the pioneer efforts" of Kerber and Norton (p. xi).

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Citation: Judith Ridner. Review of Gundersen, Joan R., *To Be Useful to the World: Women in Revolutionary America, 1740-1790.* H-Women, H-Net Reviews. February, 1998.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1661

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