

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Angel Kwolek-Folland. *Incorporating Women: A History of Women and Business in the United States*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998. xv + 275 pp. \$34.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8057-4519-1.

Reviewed by Mary A. Yeager (Department of History, University of California, Los Angeles)

Published on H-Business (April, 1999)

Making a Difference: Women and Business History

Angel Kwolek-Folland's *Incorporating Women* is the first survey to synthesize the history of women and business anywhere in the world. Its pioneering status raises a series of significant questions for the scholarly and business communities and the public at large. Why have businesswomen in America been the first women to have their history surveyed and synthesized? And why now? In view of the fact that there is still a great deal that we do not know about women in business, is the synthesis premature? What does the synthesis offer historians of women and business and what is its significance for future research? And finally, where do we go from here?[1]

Accounting for Leaders

The practice of business and women's history in the United States has reached a historiographical crossroads just when demographic and economic changes are interacting to compel a dramatic restructuring of American business. As we approach the millennium, old certainties about the superior competitiveness of American business have given way to the uncertainties of global capitalism run amok. Women, including those with children, have become 51 percent of the labor force. They have started more new businesses at a faster rate than men. They have earned more baccalaureate and graduate degrees than have men across an increasing number of professions. More women have climbed into the ranks of middle management, while the small number of women at the very top has held its own.

For the first time in the history of American business, women who work have begun to be perceived as a partial solution to the problems of competitiveness rather than as a major social problem. No longer is the question whether single or married women should work but rather, how long women will work at a particular occupation and pay scale? Will married women and men be able to juggle the kids and career demands to suit personal and familial lifestyles?

The appearance of a historical synthesis of American women and business at this time is significant because it has been pieced together from two radically different historiographical traditions before a great deal of substantive or systematic research on women in business has been completed. Until relatively recently, historians have used gender more often to exclude rather than to include the opposite sex. American business history was generally written by and about men in growth-oriented manufacturing firms. American women's history was written by and about women who lived compartmentalized lives in private or public spheres.

More is known about women as workers than as businesspeople. Evidence on women's labor force participation is abundant, quantifiable, and relatively accessible, embedded in government labor and occupational censuses and company records. As an activity, business confounds with multiple meanings and definitions. It sweeps in production and trade, manufacturing, agriculture and service, as well as producers, entrepreneurs, professionals, workers and managers. As an occupation, it is notoriously ambiguous, often swept into other occupational groupings, such as proprietors or administrators. As a career or profession, it offers numerous choices, from clerks to middle-level managers and corporate executives.

Businesswomen have been hard to see and difficult to track. They have been misfits in the male world of business and a privileged minority among women. Their names have been erased in law and custom by those of husbands, fathers and brothers. Their economic activities have spilled across boundaries demarcating households, families, firms, and markets. Their multifaceted roles as wives and mothers, daughters and widows have blurred their business identities. Most female business activities have occurred in smaller corners and invisible niches of the service sector rather than in growth-oriented manufacturing industries, in family-oriented

businesses and retail shops, and in educational, philanthropic, and health-care and reform-oriented institutions. The motives of businesswomen have involved a complex and changing mixture of economic and non-economic factors. Their stories have tended to be communal and familial, muffling individual decision-making strategies and the competitive noises of firms and industries.

Kwolek-Folland has learned from her subjects how to transform problems into opportunities. She uses debates about working women as scaffolding for the synthesis. Chapter titles evoke a succession of images about working women: "Female Economies," "Mills and More," "Difference at Work," "Personal Work," "Crisis Management" and "Difference at Work." Work offers women a way to gain greater economic visibility. It expands opportunities to undertake business. Indeed, women's movement into white collar work in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries marks, for her, one of the most important changes for women in business in the past three hundred years. Data on occupations and women's labor force participation are correlated generally with women's increasing involvement in business activities. Business activities are based on a gendered division of labor. Women participate in business like workers participating in the economy, as part of a proletariat, more often in feminized, sex-segregated dead-end jobs and slower-growing niches of service-oriented industries. Women's status at work serves as a lightning rod for the debate over women's roles more generally. Debates about working women grow out of debates about women's place.

Businesswomen across the centuries have often adopted a work-oriented view of business. Business has been a way to make a living and survive. So integral has business been to women's lives, that some women have steadfastly refused to distinguish business from life. "You can never think of me as a business woman," one woman cautioned her daughter in 1910. "That is because I make a business of life and living my business." "Business is just life," American real estate entrepreneur Edith Mae Cummings wrote in 1929, "and we had life long before we had business." [2]

Kwolek-Folland, Bridge-Builder

Kwolek-Folland knows how to listen to women's voices. She has designed the synthesis to disrupt disciplinary boundaries that have kept women in separate spheres and men the only players in a male-dominated business game. Given that "Women have always been in business in America" (p.1), Kwolek-Folland has defined her central challenge as one of "incorporation": how to

bring "others," particularly women of different classes, races and ethnicities, into American business history and how to bring business into American women's history.

Incorporation has the ring of a conservative project of integration. Cynical feminists well-versed in the history of British legal traditions might well hesitate. After all, English civil law recognized the man and wife as one, but came to define the "one" as "male." Who is incorporated into what? Who are the "gatekeepers" of the incorporation process? What are the terms of incorporation? And what are the results of the incorporation process, both for those incorporated and for the incorporating body as a whole?

Kwolek-Folland does not ally with feminist theorists determined to tear down business institutions in order to clear the playing field of businessmen. Nor is she a neo-progressive reformer nipping at the heels of Charles and Mary Beard. She is an artist in tone, style, and temperament, using conservative colors to cover radical aims.

Double entendres bedevil the incorporation process. Incorporation is testily political, both a form and process, interacting to constrain and liberate women unevenly and unequally over time. Power is interpreted as direct authority and indirect influence. Both the terms and outcome of the incorporation process are contingent, dependent in part upon how societies regard and value "others," as reflected by women's changing legal status and business activities. Incorporation involves struggles over the meaning and significance of business and its associated concepts of profit, risk, entrepreneurship, and success. Kwolek-Folland defines business expansively as "engaging in economic activity in a market to seek profit and assuming the financial responsibility for that activity" (p. 5). Profit is often embedded in non-economic goals; risk is defined as much in personal and familial as in monetary terms; entrepreneurship is defined broadly as "new" areas of economic activity; success is linked to women's emancipation and autonomy.

To incorporate women into the history of business, Kwolek-Folland uses analytical tools derived from political and women's history. Social categories of race, gender, ethnicity, and class order human experiences along a continuum of differences that reveal the dynamics of power embedded in business activities and institutions. Kwolek-Folland regards these social categories as a "force," and more than occasionally, as an "irrational force" which shapes "how businesses approach markets, make hiring choices, and create organizational forms" (p. 8). Women's political struggles both spearhead and re-

flect changes in business activities and structures, shifting the meaning and influence of business in women's lives.

Business is incorporated into women's history through inequities and asymmetries of power associated with different business structures and economic activities and roles. Business organizations reinforce differences between men and women and other women. Business imparts new meaning and significance to these categories by serving as fickle emancipator of women's roles and conscious conservator of woman's place. It bridges the divide that has separated women's private and public lives.

Underlying Kwolek-Folland's assumptions about the importance of social categories to the understanding and meaning of business is a reformer's vision of a more equitable and just business system, one where gender differences are not unequally valued, where social condition does not constrain business opportunity, where a male standard is not synonymous with a universal standard, and where men and women have equal chances to exploit business opportunities. To liberate business from the shackles of a male-dominated business history and to emancipate women from a private world of love and ritual, she crafts a single, all-encompassing narrative to bestow public and historical legitimacy on businesswomen.

Surveying the Survey

The survey situates women within a chronological framework that evolves primarily out of economic and business history. Except for the middle of the twentieth century, when government policies take center stage, the periodization scheme is based upon major changes in the nature and dynamics of liberal, market-oriented capitalism, beginning with a pre-industrial period and advancing jerkily with successive industrial revolutions across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Women enter economic and business history indirectly by way of their business activities and relationships with other women and men in business and the larger society, as members of families, of social-reform, educational, and political networks. Business enters women's history indirectly by way of opportunities and legal status, through economic roles and activities that women assume as producers, entrepreneurs, managers, and professionals.

Women jump start the business of colonization in the 1550s as dependent sexual objects of colonizers' imaginations. They end their business journeys in 1997, still unevenly and unequally incorporated into the business system as legal independents, on unequal terms relative

to men and to each other, with laws that promise justice without protection. After four-and-a-half centuries of ever-diversifying business activities and at least three decades of debate and litigation about equal pay, businesswomen stand stalled in their tracks. Women's revolutionary breakthrough into the top tiers of management has fizzled.

For Kwolek-Folland, the setbacks are more telling than the advances. As if to underscore how much and how little had changed with regard to women and their relationship to business, she places powerful corporate tycoon Estee Lauder—named “Outstanding Mother of the Year” in 1984—atop the shoulders of Ojibwa fur traders, market women, butter makers bankers, and factory girls. Gender stereotypes have continued to dog women's advance in the business world, constructing their public personas even as women reconstruct the businessworld.

Evaluating the Results

Kwolek-Folland's survey and synthesis have alerted us to power differentials embedded in difference. Society's unequal valuation of “others” nurtured a system of laws regarding property rights, citizenship, suffrage, marriage and divorce that disadvantaged women more than men and some women more than others. Women's status, as reflected both in formal laws and informal customs, interacted with economic conditions to shape women's business opportunities and the manner of engaging in business.

The framework enables us to see more clearly different women's varying experiences in the business world over time. Some businesswomen mimic the monotonous and routine male shopkeepers and businessmen the world over, like Rose Stolowy of Kansas City, Missouri, or Catherine Ferguson, a confectioner shop-owner. Famous women, such as Rebecca Lukens, Amelia Earhart, and Oprah Winfrey, share brief appearances with their not-so-famous contemporary counterparts, like Phebe Cills, an African-American toy store owner, and the infamous sisters Aida and Minna Everleigh. Good businesswomen, like caterer Edith McConnell, coexist with the less successful, such as Christina Barnes, who “negotiated the business world with difficulty.” And then there are some who are larger than life, such as the six-foot, two-hundred-pound Sarah Bowman, who made money from prostitution AND the United States Army, only to die ungloriously of a tarantula bite in 1866.

Race opened opportunities for black businesswomen and professionals in segregated niches of the economy and closed them in areas dominated by whites. It im-

posed special social and economic burdens upon black businesspeople as community builders and as economic role-models. Black women undertook a variety of business roles even as slaves and engaged in a range of business activities even though they gained both property, voting and civil rights later than white women. Their work histories were longer and more continuous than either white women or black men. Black women boasted one of the nation's first and most successful brothel-keepers, the first female bank president, the first female self-made millionaire in America, and one of the wealthiest celebrity queens in the entertainment business.

Ethnicity affected whether women went into business at all. It proved important to women's control of property, as in the case of the early female Dutch settlers, and formative of entrepreneurial cultures, as in the case of Jewish women, whom Kwolek-Folland celebrates as the most entrepreneurial of American businesswomen. Lena Himmelstein Bryant (Lane Bryant Company), Fanny Goldberg Stahl, Esther Mentzer (Estee Lauder) stand tall in the female hall of business fame.

Class functioned as a marker of legal and economic status as well as a gate-keeper of the incorporation process, promoting gender rules that distinguished women from men and income bars that distanced lower from upper income groups. It gave wealthier women an easier entree into politics and educational institutions, which positioned them more strategically as leaders in social reform and philanthropic institutions.

Business played a mixed role in the lives of women. On the one hand, business structures operated to reinforce rather than undermine differences. In the early 1800s, textile owners hired young, single white women because the skills associated with textile production were already categorized as women's work. Later, with the coming of managerial capitalism, the gender coding of managerial and job rules kept women out of the highest-paying highest status jobs and paved the way for the feminization of clerical and personnel work. On the other hand, business expanded women's opportunities and control, empowering women as owners and managers even as it reinforced differences between men and women. Indeed, for some women in social-reform and political networks in the late nineteenth century, business activities became a proto-feminist political act.

Successive market-expanding industrial revolutions improved more than they undermined business women's economic well-being, generating more income and greater autonomy and independence for businesswomen than was the case for women who worked as employees

of others. Only when the scope of government's involvement in women's issues broadened across the twentieth century did business assume a more threatening and ominous role as a major antagonist in a series of sexual discrimination and affirmative actions cases. With regard to some issues such as paid family-leave, big business jumped ahead of the government, offering its own assistance packages, while small business owners, many of whom were women, protested on grounds that such legislation would disadvantage them relative to larger rivals.

For Kwolek-Folland and the women whose experiences she surveys, business activities generally were growth-enhancing and value-creating activities. The historical purpose of business, after all, she concludes, has been "to make people's lives better or to raise the standard of living for as many as possible" (p. 216).

Sighs of relief among business historians are likely to be matched by discomfiting growls from feminists who have always seen more of the meanness than the magic in the market and in business activities. Inevitably, scholars in both camps will single out different aspects of the survey and synthesis for praise and criticism. However, as a business historian and free-farming feminist, with one eye on men and business institutions, and the other on businesswomen and the world, I want to focus my remarks on this unresolved paradox: Why has a study so steeped in the rhetoric of power and difference not revealed more about how power and difference actually operate in the business world? About what power means, how it is expressed and used, by whom for what ends? Why does a study about women and business so closely resemble the histories of women at work?

A Paradox and Some Puzzles

Social categories may well hide as much as they reveal about how power really works in the world of business. Businesswomen have been swept into the history of business armed with only one set of tools to differentiate them. Race, ethnicity, class, and gender have masked differences arising from women's individual capabilities and skills—they have made differences between and among women of the same social categories difficult to see and to understand; they have imposed an unnecessary uniformity upon women as a group.

The transformation of categories from inert, disembodied experiences into causal forces, stalls early on. Business practices are overwhelmed by cultural forces. Modern business tycoons stand atop the shoulders of Ojibwa traders, but it is difficult to differentiate one businesswoman and business from another or to account for

differences in the performance and profitability of business activities over time. Despite the fact that Indians held dramatically different conceptions of gender roles, of property, autonomy, and responsibility, Indian women emerge as American history's earliest businesswomen and consumers.

Women as a group appear to share more similarities than differences but the business experiences of men and women are allegedly more different than similar. These hypotheses remain to be tested. Women are described as having been more continuously and often circumscribed in their choices and activities by the "family claim" than men have been. Yet, histories of businessmen in the pre-industrial period have suggested that the family claim also structured the economic activity of men. We need to know whether women and men interpreted the claim differently and how their interpretations influenced economic outcomes.

Kwolek-Folland's definition of business is at war with business realities. Why has business as "activity" been yoked to the claim of "financial responsibility" rather than to market-and profit-oriented decisions, as has been customary in business history? The choice carries definite ethical and moral connotations. It broadens the population of businesswomen and businesses but pinches interpretive possibilities. The price is operational imprecision and ambiguity.

Activities are different from decisions. Activities indicate little more than a kind of busyness, industry, or work; they are described by their properties. Decisions are associated with choices that businesspeople make in the course of doing business, in order to remain in business. Financial responsibility literally refers to "a charge, a trust, or duty for which one is responsible."³ If a reasonable understanding of responsible is that it has to be within the power of the one who is responsible, then how is that determination to be made? What is meant by the assumption of financial responsibility, and how is "responsibility" to be determined? Kwolek-Folland does not consistently or systematically apply the definition. Instead, she offers an expansive interpretation whose meanings have to be squeezed from an ever changing business context.

Kwolek-Folland regards "independence" to be the core of the legal definition of business. The ability to negotiate contracts and to acquire, use, and dispose of property is severely impaired without legal recognition and protection of those rights. Without legal status as "independents," women could do business as dependents of others, but they could not profit from their own busi-

ness activities. Only as women gained legal recognition and protection as "independents" and autonomous individuals with the right to their own bodies, earnings, and profits in the late nineteenth century could they exploit the same opportunities available to men who had those privileges and rights.

The definition seems to deny that men and women have long strategized about the ways in which they could shift, avoid or elide financial responsibility. They have devised marriages and designed partnerships and firms with precisely these goals in mind. The definition may be appropriately applied to women who act as business proprietors, but how is it to be operationalized in a dynamic world full of business activities undertaken by many individuals and groups engaged in cooperative ventures, as members of family businesses, partnerships, or teams associated with single firms or corporate enterprise? What if businesswomen assume financial responsibility but are not held accountable?

By identifying women in business by their activities and roles as producers, entrepreneurs, professional, and managers, Kwolek-Folland constrains women's choices and robs them of the opportunity to exercise control or to assume financial responsibility. Without interrogating activities or roles, it is difficult to distinguish one businesswoman or type of business activity from another, except insofar as production differs from trade and sales and service. Managerial roles are gender coded but we need to know why and when the codes took the form they did with respect to different businesses over time. To what extent did individual women construct and reconstruct managerial roles to suit their own talents and capabilities?

In the 1950s entrepreneurial historians tried but generally failed in their efforts to use role theory to link men in business to society. Roles represent problematic psychological categories. Individuals and groups fulfill, perform and create roles. Activities do not necessarily conform to prescribed roles. Roles straight-jacket behavior but people also deviate from socially prescribed roles. How is the historian to determine when women are performing roles prescribed by society or crafting them as they proceed? How have women conceived of their roles in business and how have they actually behaved? Racial and ethnic differences have also mattered to people's conceptions of business roles, activities and results. The survey builds upon studies of black businesspeople to suggest that their business strategies often were community-building strategies as well. But not all of these interrelated strategies worked from the stand-

point of business longevity and profitability. What happened, for example, when and if black businesswomen deviated from social expectations of them as community builders?

Social categories need to be more systematically related to women's decision-making and organizational capabilities in particular businesses. Kwolek-Folland surveys how some women used skills developed in household and family or reform contexts to transform socially-oriented businesses or non-profit institutions into profitable businesses. However, we also need to know what kinds of decisions they made, and which family or household decisions informed their business decisions. Businesses differ according to operating rules and the short and long run goals with respect to other institutions and society. Decisions and risks which women undertake as owners or managers of hospitals are likely to be different than the kinds of decisions made by women as family partners, heads of families, or by businesswomen involved in the intensely competitive cosmetic and restaurant businesses. Why were some women able to transform household skills into effective business practices, when others could not? Household production and consumption decisions of nineteenth-century middle-class women and twentieth-century farm women gather social significance primarily as gender dividing strategies. But we also need to know how these decisions structured economic behavior and outcomes.

The study suppresses the competitive forces that are at the heart of the American business system. Although it argues from difference, it homogenizes women as a group who seldom compete on the same playing field, either with men or with other women in the same industry. Except in rare instances, outcomes are seldom revealed nor evaluated. Individual female rodeo riders compete with men, but we do not know whether they competed effectively or not. We learn of Ellen Demorest's pattern business but not of the competition she experienced from Ebenezer Butterick, who eventually dominated the industry.

"Status" is another concept that creates problems for the survey and synthesis. Kwolek-Folland employs status as a legal concept, as signifier of reputation, of income and class, of women's visibility and relative equality/inequality in regard to men and other women. Yet indicators of status do not always mesh with economic realities. Given that social attitudes about women's place have remained stubbornly resistant to change, Kwolek-Folland's assertion that by the end of the nineteenth century women had achieved a legal status equal to that

of men in business is problematic. Women could now do business and profit from their own endeavors, but to what extent did they? Data on female labor force participation and occupations pose interpretive difficulties here. What are the causal lines of influence between changes in legal status and business activities?

The survey recognizes the difficulty of positioning irrational and rational forces on the same economic stage. The problem is not simply a disagreement about matters of meaning and definition. It also relates to the interpretive tools that are used to analyze the evidence. To demonstrate how irrational notions about race undermined the "myth of rationality" in business, Kwolek-Folland offers a singular notable example, drawn from the history of financial industries. White providers of life insurance in the late nineteenth century refused to sell insurance policies to black customers on the basis of actuarial information which suggested that blacks had higher mortality rates than whites. Citing evidence which linked higher mortality rates to environmental conditions rather than to stereotypical notions about blacks as a group, she concludes that white managers acted irrationally.

However, by allowing culture to subsume gender and race, and economic rationalism to define business practice, Kwolek-Folland misses an opportunity to examine how and why notions of rationality, with respect to culture and economics, sometimes complement rather than clash. If managers did not know what evidence demonstrated, they are more likely to make unilateral decisions on the basis of cultural predisposition and habit. As long as other white competitors refused to market to blacks and social attitudes condoned discrimination, then these actions may well have produced economically efficient outcomes. Managers would have behaved irrationally, from an economic standpoint, only if they refused to sell to blacks when other rivals were busily cashing in.

Determining why businesspeople do what they do has never been easy. But economic tools of principal-agent theory are available to determine more precisely when and why some individuals, rather than behaving act more like the utility-maximizing automatons of neo-classical economics, act opportunistically and with guile.

Kwolek-Folland's discourse about power is more tantalizing than effective. Instead of directly confronting issues of power in the market, as business historians have done when they analyze why some firms or businessmen wield greater market power than others, she assumes that power adheres primarily in social categories and in-

stitutional structures. Power floats ambiguously on the surface of business life, seeping from institutional structures and emanating from unequal relationships between people and things. What kind of power is at issue is unclear. Kwolek-Folland defines power as direct authority and indirect influence, yet it is unclear how power and influence operate with regard to women in business. Is it the power and control that derives from ownership status, from position, from skill, from unique talents in a competitive market? Is it the power that comes from having more money and using it to buy more capital to invest? Is it the competitive power that comes from being in a technologically cutting-edge industry at the right time? Is it the power that is embedded in women's networks and political activities, in the battle for suffrage and property rights? Is it the power that derives from impotence and image, from gender and race, as the case of government policies suggest?

Some businesswomen, like Oprah Winfrey, clearly have power. The survey suggests that Oprah's power derives from ownership of Harpo Entertainment Group. "Winfrey's control over this conglomerate," reports Kwolek-Folland, "gave her the ability—rare in the business world—to shape the concern according to her personal vision" (p. 196).

Mere ownership does not necessarily give control nor does it create an ability to control. Businesspeople who own assets must also be skilled enough and willing and able to use power to exert the kind of control that is necessary in order to make money in an a high-stakes, intensely competitive game. Business historians will want to know more about how Oprah acquired control and secured the assets necessary to build and grow Harpo Productions. Why and when did she choose the conglomerate form? Was this organizational form particularly suited to the entertainment business and Oprah's managerial style? The ability to shape business according to one's own vision may well be important to some women and men in business, but some visions are likely to be more effective than others in generating and sustaining returns.

The survey suggests several reasons why power is important in business. Power seems to be important because women don't have enough of it relative to men, or because men have more of it than women and use it to keep women from getting it, and because more businessmen seem ready to wield it than businesswomen. Power is also important with respect to the ability to control business and influence government policy and legal outcomes.

Yet, power is notable by its absence from legislative debates over economic rights, suffrage, property, and citizenship, from debates about regulatory policies regarding small and big businesses. The survey suggests that more women battled for economic rights than for suffrage, but given that the nineteenth-century suffrage campaign proved more effective than the campaigns for economic rights, we need to know why. Feminists and other leaders of women's organizations put in only brief appearances in the book, and when they do, the survey reduces the infighting among feminist leaders regarding different strategies to common goals. Business historians will want to know more about business' roles in coalition building strategies. Which businesses and businesspeople allied with female protagonists or antagonists in these struggles?

In the twentieth-century women's leaders appear to have garnered more legislative victories despite the persistence of traditional attitudes regarding women's roles. Why? Kwolek-Folland attributes the results to a massive social revolution. Other scholars have suggested that business may well have had a hand in the "conquest of cool" that fueled a cultural counter-revolution.^[4] What was business' role in these twentieth-century revolutions compared to its role in nineteenth century women's rights campaigns?

The problem and the opportunity with the survey and synthesis at this stage is that historians of women and business have focused upon a different set of differences. Whereas business historians have studied the differences that emanate from the structure, behavior, conduct, and performance of businesspeople and firms, historians of women have stressed the agency of individuals and groups and the politics of liberation. Business historians have investigated a different power dynamic, one associated with price and product competition, with cost-saving technologies, and with decision-making strategies instead of that associated with meaning and understanding. Business historians have concerned themselves primarily with market power, with the ability of firms to dominate industries and throw their weight around without being held publicly accountable. They have studied regulatory patterns to determine the extent to which government policies, such as anti-trust, have clipped or augmented the market power of particular firms in particular industries.

Kwolek-Folland expects other approaches and perspectives to increase the scholarly returns from efforts to understand women and business. She underscores how the American business system came to be built upon

the notion of difference while simultaneously revealing the dangers of arguments based on difference. Beliefs about women's differences from men in the late nineteenth century opened some doors for some women but closed others and barred women's continuous advance in the business world. Arguments on the basis of gender differences kept women outsiders in the business world even as women made a place for themselves in the business world.

Just as a business system built on gender difference is likely to crumble when difference is no longer valued, so too is a synthesis built upon difference likely to unravel as women and men occupy the same historical stage. Kwolek-Folland's survey necessarily homogenizes women in order to emphasize the differences between their experiences and those of men, in terms of business opportunities, ownership and managerial rights, and access to credit, among other things. Just how different those experiences were in fact remains to be determined by more systematic comparison of their roles and activities with respect to a variety of sectors and industries. Business historians are likely to see more of the differences between iron-manufacturer Rebecca Lukens and prostitute Sarah Bowman and more similarities between Rebecca Lukens and her male competitor in Delaware. Nevertheless, only by constructing numerous bridges with a variety of tools are we likely to understand precisely what difference men and women and business institutions have made to the growth and development of various economic sectors over time.

If we are to turn problems of difference into exciting new research opportunities, I caution against traveling alone down a separate but equal road. Women and men in business have interacted throughout history inside and outside of markets and firms, as family members, as marriage and business partners, and as competitors, in different industries over time. They have suffered asymmetries of power and inequities of income. Their occupations as businesspeople have been jointly shaped by a structure of sexual inequality. But they have both been engaged in a joint enterprise that has as its ultimate objective, the generation of a higher standard of living for everyone. Regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or class, business is still business and only survives in the long run if it generates some income above its costs. As a market-oriented activity and institution, the study of business forces a focus on the interaction between men and women, on

the interconnections between families and firms, on the transgressing of private and public boundaries. Bringing women into business raises new questions about how business institutions deal with ideas of "masculinity" and "femininity" and about how women deal with and view the business world.[5]

Kwolek-Folland has done more than grasp the possibilities. She has constructed one bridge over troubled waters. It is up to others to undertake the painstaking empirical research needed to build additional bridges. Only then are women likely to undergo the transformation from workers in business to businesspeople with different personalities, skills, competitive and organizational abilities, business experiences, and institutional means of support.

Notes

[1]. For an illuminating discussion of the pros and cons of synthesis, see Eric Monkonen, "The Dangers of Synthesis," in Notes and Comment, *American Historical Review*, vol. 91, no.5 (December, 1986), 1146-1157.

[2]. Zora Putnam Wilkins, *Letters of a Business Woman to Her Daughter and Letters of a Business Girl to Her Mother* (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1923), p.4, and Edith Mae Cummings, *Pots, Pans and Millions: A Study of Woman's Right to Be in Business, Her Proclivities and Capacity for Success* (National School of Business Science for Women: Washington, D.C., 1929), p. 100.

[3]. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), r.v. "responsibility," p. 2514.

[4]. Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, And the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

[5]. See Mary A. Yeager, "General Introduction," Vol. I, *Women in Business*, 3 vols., The International Library of Critical Writings in Business History (Aldershot, UK and Brookfield, US: Elgar Reference Collection, forthcoming March 1999).

Copyright (c) 1999 by EH.NET and H-Net. All rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational uses if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact the EH.NET Administrator. (administrator@eh.net; Telephone: 513-529-2850; Fax: 513-529-3308)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Mary A. Yeager. Review of Kwolek-Folland, Angel, *Incorporating Women: A History of Women and Business in the United States*. H-Business, H-Net Reviews. April, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3032>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.