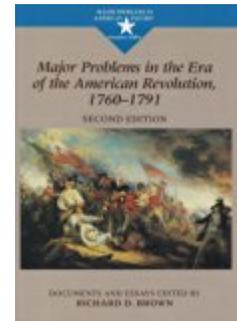


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard D. Brown, ed. *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760-1791*. New York and Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000. xii + 522. \$76.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-395-90344-5.

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The Benefits and Problems of Culture and Politics in *Major Problems*

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Let's face it, no collection of primary sources and essays is going to completely satisfy everyone. Each text has its strengths and weaknesses. In every course book I have used or examined, there are documents included I would have left out and others I cannot believe were overlooked. The difficulties of inclusion and exclusion are problems instructors encounter throughout the process of designing a course, from writing lectures to deciding what texts and monographs to use. The twin issues of exclusion and inclusion are also at the heart of the strengths and weaknesses of a book to be considered for survey courses, the second edition of *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760-1791*, edited by Richard Brown.

In the new edition of *Major Problems* Richard Brown attempts to rectify the overly political focus of the first edition by devoting "more space to culture and society in the Revolutionary era" (xiv). The format for the new edition, chapters comprised of primary sources and interpretive essays, is similar to the original. Twelve of the fourteen chapters in *Major Problems* use a combination of primary sources and interpretive essays by leading scholars to help students understand the major events and people of the period. The introductory and concluding chapters do not include primary sources and are each composed of three interpretive essays, all new, that introduce and offer conclusions about this era.

Despite the similar formats, the second edition differs from the original in several ways. Brown states that the biggest contrast between the two editions is his new use of an organizing framework based on Gordon Wood's *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. The application of the new intellectual framework is more apparent in Brown's selection of new essays than in the primary documents. A second change is that the second edition places more emphasis on culture and society during the Revolutionary era. This is reflected in the removal of several political documents (such as John Dickinson's opposition to colonial independence; several sources documenting the relationship between France and the colonies; and John Adams's celebration of independence) and the incorporation of socio-political documents (such as those on the Oneida and Chickasaw Indians; a slave, Venture Smith, earning his freedom in Connecticut; and Anna Green Winslow's views on growing up in colonial Boston). Along with new introductory and concluding chapters, the second edition has 16 new documents and 19 new essays; still, it comes in at approximately 100 pages less than the first edition, largely because it has 16 fewer primary documents and 7 fewer essays.

The biggest change in the second edition is the addition of three new chapters: Chapter 2, "Society and Politics on the Eve of the Revolution," which addresses the changing nature of colonial North American society and political culture on the eve of the American Revolution; and Chapters 8 and 9 on African Americans and

women. Whereas the first edition combined issues relating to blacks and women into one chapter, each of these groups now has its own chapter. Although Brown created a new Chapter 8, "Are All Men Equal? The African-American Challenge," and Chapter 9, "Gender and Citizenship in a Revolutionary Republic," several of the primary sources used in these chapters were also present in the first edition. So although there are two new chapters, much of the material from the first edition chapter was simply separated. Also, Brown made an intriguing editorial choice in Chapters 8 and 9 when he included Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and the Declaration of Sentiments of the Seneca Falls Convention respectively to illustrate the deferment of equality for these two groups. While these two documents demonstrate the persistence of inequality, Brown's use of them is curious since he does not employ documents outside the text's basic timeframe of 1760-1791 in any of the other chapters. Therefore, while these two documents are of unquestionable historical importance, they are out of sync with the organization of other chapters, and as such, they take up space that could have been better used with documents from the period. In this regard, these chapters are an opportunity lost, especially since their primary documents' sections are also the two smallest in the text and would have benefited from additional documents.

The strength of the new edition is Brown's selection of interpretive essays. He effectively updates and uses essays that illustrate leading areas of scholarship from the last decade. Selections by Rosemarie Zagari, Alfred F. Young, Jack Rakove, Linda Kerber, and Sylvia Frey, among others, broaden the range of issues and ideas not found in the documents. A particularly effective use of an essay is the combination of *Common Sense* with Pauline Maier's discussion of the pamphlet in "Declaring Independence." The essays Brown selected for the introduction and conclusion sensibly introduce students to the major political issues of the era and establish how Wood's *Radicalism* is the intellectual nexus of the collection. The only complaint with these essays is that there is a great deal of historiographical references in them that can confuse students, especially since the series does not footnote the essays. Without the footnotes students will probably not know who Jack Greene or Edward Shils are, or that the "Smith" (8) Gordon Wood refers to at the start of his essay is Barbara Clark Smith, author of the previous essay.

While Brown makes a good case for his argument that "the American Revolution and the formation of the Constitution remain central in the history of the United

States" (xiii), he is not as successful in his aim of supplying students with a "full consideration of the complex ways in which the Revolution generated change in some ways but reinforced continuity in others" (xiv). Although this era is one the most highly politicized in American history, the second edition of *Major Problems* nonetheless still suffers from an overemphasis on the political developments of this period. Aside from Chapter 2, there is little documentation provided on such social and cultural topics as the changing nature of the economy, gender issues, American social life, and immigration, and what little exists is used in relation to the politics of the American Revolution. In every chapter, even the new ones on African Americans and women, virtually all the documents relate to political activities and political inequities of the era.

The new edition certainly improves upon the first, but it still has some serious flaws. There are three primary shortcomings with *Major Problems*. First, while the essays selected are excellent, the decision to edit them and not include footnotes reduces their effectiveness in the classroom. Although their main function is to acquaint survey students with some of the historiographical arguments surrounding the major events and people of this era, students are not well served by the exclusion of the footnotes. Anecdotally, the complaint I most often hear from students about essay collections (aside from their being boring reading) is the lack of footnotes. Students want to know what sources authors use and how they use them. The decision not to use footnotes is hardly a practice unique to the *Major Problems* series, but this is a problem that all collections of this ilk should be held accountable for committing. Although edited down, most of the essays are still accessible and understandable for students; however, a few essays, such as Jan Lewis's "Women Were Recognized in the Constitution" are difficult to follow, and as mentioned above, may expect too much historiographical background from students.

A second concern is that the preponderance of documents and essays used are from only two states, Massachusetts and Virginia. Based on the documents used in this collection, it would be easy for a student to draw the conclusion that residents from Massachusetts and Virginia, and occasionally from Pennsylvania, were the only people in North America really fighting for independence from Great Britain and concerned with the nature and form of the Constitution. Of the 85 documents used in *Major Problems*, 34 are from Virginia and Massachusetts and 28 are of what I term national in nature (documents such as the Declaration of Indepen-

dence, debates on the Constitution, *The Federalist Papers*, etc.). Of the remaining 23 documents, 14 are from Britain and Pennsylvania. Delaware, Georgia, Maryland, New Hampshire, North Carolina, and Rhode Island do not receive even one mention in the sources. The oversight of these primarily southern states is particularly egregious. Since each southern state has a plethora of its the colonial and state records published, finding suitable sources that students are not overly familiar with could have been easily accomplished. This dearth of southern sources hurts the overall text in a variety of ways. Students could have been given a much better sense of the already existing tensions between the northern and southern states with the inclusion of documents on topics such as northern Quakers' desires that their southern brethren renounce slavery, how southern and northern German pietists dealt with the issue of slavery, or what southern women thought about the issue of political equality. The second chapter's emphasis on society and politics would have greatly benefited from the discussion of such topics as the Regulator movements in North and South Carolina, southern colonists' concerns over the Britain's alliances with Native Americans, and internal migration. The lack of regional diversity also constitutes a problem with the otherwise effective section of suggested readings found at the end of each chapter where, again, the vast majority of readings are northern and with a strong New England bias. Finally, the lack of southern sources hinders students seeing connections between the regions.

A third complaint is the citation style used with the essays. If part of what we do as historians in the classroom is to teach students proper historical methods, we also must expect this from books we use. As noted above, the articles used are a solid collection, but the citation method for where they can be found is extremely uneven. For example, T.H. Breen's article "Boycotts Made the Revolution Radical" is given a full cite, except for page numbers, while Richard Beeman's "The Emergence of Popular Politics" is noted only as having been used with the permission of the *William and Mary Quarterly*. Another citation concern is the failure to acknowledge that the essays used in the collection have new titles. For example, in *Major Problems* the title of Edward Countryman's essay is "The Revolution Rearranged North America's Human Landscape," but the essay's original title in the *William and Mary Quarterly* was "Indians, the Colonial Orders, and the Social Significance of the American Revolution," and Brown does not acknowledge this change in the citation of the article. While this lack of

consistency may be standard practice in essay collections, students should be given the full citation if they want to pursue the arguments and issues of a particular essay. This is the first time in a book review I have mentioned a complaint about an author's or editor's citation methods, but I felt compelled to do so here because part of what we should be teaching students is how to correctly cite sources. When the very books we assign them are inconsistent or use standards we would not accept, we send mixed signals to students about how much and why we value accurate citation practices.

This edition also would have been enhanced by the inclusion of a chapter on the transatlantic connections between the colonies and Europe and Africa. With the rise of transatlantic and borderlands studies in the last decade, these topics are important areas of study that needed inclusion in this edition, and not just partial discussion in a few of the interpretive essays. Documents on the Paxton Boys, colonial lobbyists, the Spanish borderlands, African cultural connections, and colonial immigration would have enhanced the Revolutionary picture Brown presents, as well as providing students with a better sense that the colonists' struggles with Britain were part of a broader world of concerns about life and society in the eighteenth century.

Despite these many caveats, *Major Problems* can be a useful text for a survey course, especially for an instructor who wants to pay special attention to the political developments of this era, but the text's narrow chronology and sources would make it a better addition in an upper division course. Brown has put together a solid collection of primary documents and essays that capably explores the political turbulence of this era. Instructors who want to spend a significant portion of time and emphasis on the Revolutionary and Constitutional periods in their U.S. survey courses would benefit most from this text.

Still, at 522 pages and covering the time period from 1760 to 1791, *Major Problems* runs the contradictory risks of being too long of a read (Is it worth the place of two monographs?) while covering too narrow of a time period for a survey course. Also, while Brown's head notes provide some background information on each document, at only a sentence or two they are often too brief to give students sufficient context for evaluating of the document and facilitating their classroom engagement of the material. Ironically, another Houghton Mifflin text, *Bibliobase*, provides a better model for using head notes when describing the primary documents in a collection.

Bibliobase also provides instructors the flexibility to select documents that emphasize their academic interests and concerns.

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