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Mark Boonshoft’s *Aristocratic Education and the Making of the American Republic* surveys the shifting political culture that gave rise to early American academies and the largely white male ruling elite that emerged from these institutions in the years after the American Revolution. The proliferation of private academies in the early republic is a well-known phenomenon, but herein Boonshoft reframes their genesis and influence in an extensively researched study of the interplay between politics, citizenship, and education at the “local, state, national, and geopolitical” levels, from the colonial period up to the educational reform movement of the 1830s. Boonshoft claims that, in the early republic, these institutions were closely allied with Federalist patrons and their values, before Jeffersonians too began to adapt them to their purposes around 1800. By the 1830s, school reformers’ “main objection was that [academies] seemed to re-create European-style aristocracy” (p. 2). The “aristocratic education” of the title is used as shorthand for the intergenerational replicability of social status cultivated by these academies. In explaining the backlash against academies, Boonshoft cleverly presents nineteenth-century educational reform as a political proxy war over undemocratic tendencies in America, in which expanding educational access was conceived of as the key to expanding democracy more generally. Reformers sought out state support of common schools, which they imagined would “elevate the bottom and democratize the top” of early American society (p. 8). Boonshoft rightly acknowledges that much of this reform work was aimed at leveling class-based inequity and fell short of addressing inequity rooted in race or gender. An epilogue connects past with present, and Boonshoft reflects on this legacy of unfulfilled reform by looking to modern chartered academies and segregated communities. This book is an important historiographical contribution to understanding the longer and more nuanced history of why Americans have come to associate education with citizenship and access to it with the spread of democracy. It likewise resituates the

The book is divided into three parts that examine phases in the making and remaking of American academies. The first part, “From Denominational Schools to Nationalist Institutions, 1730-1787,” links the establishment of academies to the Great Awakening and outlines various political threads that, Boonshoft argues, ultimately led to a secular, Federalist-driven vision of academies. Initially, an explosion of faith created an urgent need for sectarian academies to train ministers. Identifying the Presbyterian schism as a foundational moment, Boonshoft examines the 1727 founding of William Tennent’s “Log College” as the origin of the “colonial craze for academies” (p. 19). According to Boonshoft, Tennent’s attempts to train clergy sympathetic to his beliefs managed to offend Old Siders while “spawn[ing] a network of small academies that stretched from the Carolinas to northern New Jersey and had a major influence on colonial education” (p. 20). In response to Tennent’s success, Old Siders established academies of their own. Over time, these schools expanded beyond ministerial training and increasingly offered other forms of vocational training. In examining Benjamin Franklin’s 1749 plan for the Academy of Philadelphia, Boonshoft argues that the role of academies, which (like Academy of Philadelphia) would become privately run, state-sponsored institutions, would “soon turn toward the formation of a secular elite” (p. 21).

The second chapter explores the secular politicization of academies as institutions on the periphery of an Atlantic World in the years leading up to the American Revolution. Boonshoft observes that an educated class of officers emerged from the Revolutionary War, and while he is hesitant to claim that academies were directly or solely responsible for this phenomenon, he nonetheless concludes that academies had become “a powerful tool of elite formation in a world premised on equality” (p. 44). Boonshoft gauges the political affiliations of academy trustees in the 1780s and ’90s, finding links to Federalists who imagined an educated elite as a foil against what they perceived to be rising disorder and rebellion: “debates over academies and the proper balance of local and county authority mapped onto broader conflicts over the future of the republic” (p. 68). After the Revolution many academies adopted a “European-style curriculum” in which “nationalist-turned-Federalist cultural values” were “taught as American values” (p. 72). This ultimately sets up the second section of the book, which more closely explores this culture in these two crucial decades.

The second part, “The Culture of Academies, 1780-1800,” delves deeper into curriculum and national culture, wrestling with and contextualizing the slippery nature of “merit” in this period. On the one hand, emulating aristocracy in the years after the Revolution had become taboo, but elite control was a remedy for social disruption. Boonshoft claims that academy boosters argued that aristocracy would be replaced by meritocracy, but this naturalized an aristocratic system through the guise of “essential” merit, which Boonshoft says we should understand to be an innate quality in those deemed worthy. Academies would adjudicate who had merit or not. Circuitously, those who already had wealth and status were presumed to possess merit and, likewise, could pay to send their children to privately run academies. Boonshoft explores the replication of status in action through academy exhibitions, public examinations, and school prizes and competitions, probing who could possess merit, as well as how merit was mediated by gender and race. Here, the reader learns more about female academies and schools that educated people of color. To complete this section, Boonshoft juggles a staggering amount of scholarship and primary evidence, so in a way it seems greedy to want more of an explanation of the trajectory of these institutions in the vein of what was outlined for the largely white male academies in the first section of the book. Boonshoft suggests that male academies shaped the ex-
perience of female ones, and white academies those of nonwhite schools, and this is surely, to some extent, the case. Yet one cannot help but wonder whether any of these institutions may have more actively rejected this prevailing conception of essential merit, which of course did not benefit their students. But in problematizing merit and demonstrating its reach, Boonshoft prepares the reader to understand how moderate Jeffersonians initially aligned with a Federalist agenda, as well as how they increasingly came to embrace school reform.

This is detailed in the last section of the book, “From Aristocratic Education to Reform, 1787-1830,” in which Boonshoft explains a strange occurrence—state-sponsored support of private academies rather than public common schools—and the precipitating social, cultural, and political factors that led Jeffersonians to reject this practice. Moderate Jeffersonians still centered the academy in this period; Boonshoft explains that, “ultimately, [moderate Jeffersonians] hoped to sustain academies by strengthening the schools below them” (p. 151). And apart from Noah Webster, Federalists tended to emphasize education’s importance without necessarily advocating for its expansion. Radical Republicans, however, began to make “the case for equal, state-run education that prepared all men for political life and public service.” Among this political faction, there was a growing sense that individuals should “think for themselves and not merely defer to, or emulate, an existing elite” as a way of maintaining order (p. 153). Here Boonshoft turns to the evangelist Jedidiah Peck, an important figure in the founding of New York public schools, and his experiment in giving “all white men the tools to govern themselves” (p. 155). Peck, initially a Federalist, grew to adopt the Jeffersonian position and drafted an instrumental report in 1812 that lay the groundwork for the subsequent law that established district common schools somewhat removed from bureauocratic control. This success encouraged other states to follow suit.

The remainder of the section explores regional contingencies and the effects of economic panics on these efforts. Ultimately, as “common schooling grew more prevalent and academies democratized to train teachers” and shifted away from former Federalist agendas at both male and female academies, “demand for secondary education rose” (p. 170). Eventually, reformers believed that even these “democratized” academies were “incompatible with their vision” as they were not universally accessible, although Boonshoft cautions once more that this vision largely applied to white men: “when it came to Indians and Catholics, education was a tool of subjugation through assimilation” (pp. 170, 178). Although common schools failed to level hierarchies of race and gender through education, Boonshoft reminds the reader what was really at stake with this shift away from academies to common schools. He says: “Academy advocates had long felt free to ignore questions about the education of marginalized groups because they had never made universal access or equity a priority. But the first era of school reform made equal citizenship a rhetorical goal. Access to schools that teach the skills of citizenship and give people a public voice had become essential for those trying to protect their equality under the law” (p. 180). The cat, essentially, was out of the bag; and in explaining this, Boonshoft provides a fascinating and insightful throughline from religious awakening and up through the shifting politics of the early republic to the emergence of modern notions of education.
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