

Eastern Illinois University The Keep

Faculty Research & Creative Activity

History

Summer 2009

Charles R. Foy review of Simon Middleton and Billy G. Smith, "Class Matters: Early North America and the Atlantic World," *Journal of the Early Republic* 27:2 (Summer 2009): 168-171.

Charles R. Foy
Eastern Illinois University, crfoy@eiu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/history_fac

 Part of the [Social History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Foy, Charles R., "Charles R. Foy review of Simon Middleton and Billy G. Smith, "Class Matters: Early North America and the Atlantic World," *Journal of the Early Republic* 27:2 (Summer 2009): 168-171." (2009). *Faculty Research & Creative Activity*. 28.
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/history_fac/28

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Research & Creative Activity by an authorized administrator of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.



Project
MUSE[®]

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

Anatomy of a Panic,” won the 2008 Allan Nevins Prize from the Society of American Historians.

Class Matters: Early North America and the Atlantic World. Edited by Simon Middleton and Billy G. Smith. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. Pp. 344. Cloth, \$49.95.)

Reviewed by Charles R. Foy

Simon Middleton and Billy G. Smith have deeply enriched our knowledge of colonial workers, Middleton with his work on New York artisans and craftsmen and Smith with numerous publications considering the lives of Philadelphia’s “lower sort.” No idlers, Middleton and Smith have not been content to let their monographs nudge other historians to acknowledge and integrate class with their own work. Instead, from the hills of Sheffield, England, to the mountains of Montana, Middleton and Smith have set out like itinerant preachers to gather Early Americanists together under a revivalist’s tent to hear the glories and wonders of class analysis. They have organized conferences, edited special issues of journals, and now have brought forth this compilation of essays on class in early America. In short, *Class Matters* is the culmination of an ongoing effort by Smith and Middleton to make class, often disparaged during the past two decades as of little use, once again a relevant category of historical analysis.¹ Does *Class Matters* further their cause? In a word, yes.

Middleton and Smith do not preach a single dogmatic approach to class analysis. Rather, they seek to encourage scores of different approaches, recognizing that the variety of early modern contexts makes a unified approach inapt. Their intent is reflected in the diversity and

1. In September 2003, Smith and Middleton organized the conference “Class and Class Struggles in North America and the Atlantic World, 1500–1820.” A collection of six essays from that conference was published in *Labor* 1 (Winter 2004). The next year Smith and Middleton organized a conference on “Deference in Early America,” which produced essays edited by the two men in *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. Smith and Middleton subsequently provided the introduction to the April 2006 issue on Class in Early America in the *William and Mary Quarterly*.

scope of the essays in *Class Matters*. Applying a multitude of approaches, each of the collection's authors agrees that socioeconomic inequality remains critical to understanding the lives of all those who lived in the Atlantic world during the transition from the early modern to the modern era. The essays are transnational, ranging across the Atlantic from Glasgow to West Africa, the West Indies, North American ports, and interior regions occupied by Native Americans and tenant farmers. The essays apply class analysis to the lives of diverse groups of peoples: women, Native Americans, slaves, laborers, the middle class, and the elite. The wide range of these writings reinforces the editors' point that class analysis is applicable to all geographic regions and groups.

The collection's opening section considers the dynamics of class relations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Daniel K. Richter's chapter on Eastern Native America provides fresh insights concerning modes of stratification among peoples to whom class analysis is infrequently applied. Daniel R. Mandell explores the changing nature of race among Native Americans as increasing numbers of black and white seamen sought to create "alternative ways of life" by living with northern coastal tribes. Ty M. Reese's consideration of Cape Coast laborers demonstrates the significant variations among the Atlantic working class as race and ethnicity often separated those whose economic status was similar. Natalie Zacek addresses class through an analysis of how changing imperial control of St. Kitts resulted in increased wealth for a few landowners. New York artisans are shown by Simon Middleton to have collaboratively asserted privileges to counteract elites who sought to use the growing English state in the seventeenth century to assert control of resources in the Americas. Readers will complete this section both with a better appreciation for the Atlantic proletariat, as well as the immense diversity among the region's lower sorts.

Class Matters' second section examines the growth of an American middle class in the era of the American Revolution and its articulation of corporate and industrial ideologies. Lawrence A. Peskin's and Andrew M. Schocket's essays on industrialization and the creation of an elite class in the early republic stress institution building to illuminate class concerns. In doing so, each provides a solid, meticulously researched analysis of class development. Konstantin Dierks and Susan Branson approach the formation of the middle class in the same era through analysis of technical literature and the memoir of a woman imprisoned for kidnapping Pennsylvania's governor. Their essays demonstrate the middle

class's increasing desire for a "purposeful economic and cultural life" (108) that was often defined through an antipathy toward those lacking the responsibility, materialism, and sentimentality middle-class individuals valued.

The final group of essays focuses on North America's most vulnerable—its tenant farmers, victims of capital punishment, and pauper children. In each of the section's three essays the authors describe how elite Americans exercised power to structure the lives of weaker members of their communities. Through an examination of the lives of Hudson River tenant farmers, Thomas J. Humphrey provides a compelling case that property ownership was key to elite Americans' power. Gabriele Gottlieb persuasively depicts rituals of public executions as a means by which officials asserted authority and the lower sort resisted that authority. Sharon Braslaw Sundue's chapter on pauper indentures demonstrates elites' intertwined motivations of seeking to provide labor for local markets while at the same time perpetuating social hierarchies. All three essays leave little doubt as to the strength and importance of elites' power over the lower sorts.

In the afterword, Christopher Tomlins seeks to move the debate away from whether class is a useful historical tool to a consideration of the methods by which class analysis should be conducted. Granting that by "structur[ing] the universe of time under discussion" class struggles provide a distinct meaning to history, Tomlins calls for historians to breathe life into the dusty landscape of class analysis by taking up the legacies of historical materialism. He beseeches others to avoid the easy temptation of seeing history as progress but instead to contextualize and understand how people in the past suffered. Tomlins's emphasis on contextualizing class struggles within and against imperial forces provides a useful framework, both in understanding individual lives as well as the larger Atlantic empires in which they resided.

Whether one finds a stress on institution building productive, believes that Simon Newman's emphasis on collective self-improvement is a more profitable approach, or finds one of the other thirteen essayists' varying approaches to class particularly compelling, readers of *Class Matters* will discover in the collection a sense of the difficulties of class analysis and the diverse range of meanings of class. With this book, Middleton and Smith have admirably succeeded in energizing the study of social relations in the Atlantic world.

CHARLES R. FOY is an assistant professor of early American and Atlantic history at Eastern Illinois University. His articles on slavery and free-

dom in the Atlantic have appeared in *Early American Studies*, *Commonplace*, *Proceedings of the 2007 Naval History Symposium* and *Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Power in Maritime America*. His research focuses on slavery in colonial British North America and the Black Atlantic.

Beyond the Farm: National Ambitions in Rural New England. By J. M. Opal. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. Pp. 261. Cloth, \$39.95.)

Reviewed by Brian Connolly

The transition to capitalism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has generated a vast amount of scholarship over the last couple decades, but as Paul Gilje has noted, the most difficult aspect to articulate has been “the mindset—mentality—of capitalism.”¹ In *Beyond the Farm*, J. M. Opal attempts this most difficult of tasks by tracing the contours of ambition in early national rural New England. Opal convincingly takes the reader through the transformations of ambition in rural New England as they intersected with the emergence of liberalism, capitalism, the nation, and modernity.

Ambition was a culturally fraught term in the early republic, retaining its earlier connotation of a dangerous passion while simultaneously being harnessed to larger, national projects of progress. As one might expect, ambition was a highly gendered concept, and Opal convincingly explores this by tracing the lives of six “ordinary” men in rural New England, all of whom came of age in the early republic. In this way, Opal adds much needed depth to the myriad discussions of the gendered and raced nation. By tying the lives of these six men to larger discourses of national formation through the category of ambition, Opal takes the reader through the often unconscious ways in which the nation was coded as a white, male republic. Ambition, Opal convincingly argues, was a trait open only to white, educated men.

The first part of the book situates ambition in four overlapping cultural, social, and political contexts: the Enlightenment, the Revolution, Constitutional ratification, and the widespread establishment of indepen-

1. Paul A. Gilje, “The Rise of Capitalism in the Early Republic,” in *Wages of Independence: Capitalism in the Early American Republic*, ed. Paul A. Gilje (Madison, WI, 1997).