

Spring 2011

Review of Sensibility and the American Revolution, by S. Knott

Thomas J. Humphrey
Cleveland State University, tom.humphrey@csuohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clhist_facpub

 Part of the [History Commons](#)

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Publisher's Statement

Copyright 2011 George Mason University . Available on publisher's site at
<http://jsh.oxfordjournals.org/content/44/3/979.full.pdf+html>.

Original Citation

Thomas J. Humphrey, "Sensibility and the American Revolution, by S. Knott," *Journal of Social History* 44 no. 3 (2011): 979-981.

Repository Citation

Humphrey, Thomas J., "Review of Sensibility and the American Revolution, by S. Knott" (2011). *History Faculty Publications*. 6.
https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clhist_facpub/6

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

Sensibility and the American Revolution. By Sarah Knott (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009. xiii plus 338 pp.).

In *Sensibility and the American Revolution*, Sarah Knott sets for herself the task of explaining the explosion of sensibility in the second half of the eighteenth century. To complete that task, Knott must follow the complicated, subtle, and multi-layered subject that is the sentimental project. It is a wonderful journey. In the book, Knott provides a luminous, crisply written intellectual history of the inhabitants of North America in the Revolutionary period who sought to change their society and themselves by positioning themselves as thinking and sensing beings. As these sensible actors realized their personal and societal connections and linked the individual inexorably with society, they became the agents of the change they formulated. For them, the state and the sensible self went hand in hand. For Knott, however, the sentimental project had deeper implications. Rather than accept the prevailing argument that the proponents of the American sentimental project sat on the peripheries of both empire and sensibility, Knott argues that they sat closer to the center and, as a result, were crucial to the development of a trans-Atlantic notion of sensibility, the struggle against British imperialism, and the foundation of the new country. In the process, Knott gives us a powerful way of analyzing the development of the creation of the American identity in all its forms.

Knott starts by offering a definition of sensibility, which is no simple task. If culture is one of the three or four hardest words in the English language to define, sensibility must be high on the list. To compress Knott's subtle analysis only flattens its complexities, but suffice to say that Knott describes sensibility as an awareness of the connections between one's mind and body. At the same time, the sensible self reflected on one's place in the world, and sensible people saw how they interacted with others. They understood that these interactions, and their perceptions of self in the community, shaped the society they inhabited.

Knott concentrates on the connection between the sensible self and society because it emerged most markedly at the same time that Revolutionaries struggled for independence and then wrote and debated the Constitution. She examines these overlapping subjects by developing four themes across three roughly chronological sections. First, the sentimental project was an anglicizing process through which colonists constructed a "shared transatlantic culture of sensibil-

ity" that flowed between Britain and the North American mainland colonies (24). Colonists, however, were trying to reconcile their particular sense of Britishness with the Britain that ruled the empire, a paradox that ultimately drove them from the Britain. Second, the process of anglicization required people to draw on literature and sources produced throughout the Atlantic world, making the process British, and colonial, but with a trans-Atlantic twist. Third, the sentimental project flourished largely among the middling sort and elites, but it influenced much of the rest of society. Fourth, as much as sensibility molded the perspectives of the men who fought the British and ruled the new country, it informed the decisions of sensible men at war.

In the first section of the book, Knott outlines the trans-Atlantic history of sensibility by studying the history of print culture and the increase in medical literature in late-colonial Philadelphia, a city at the hub of the Middle Atlantic and, thus, at the center of the growing literature of sensibility. Printers such as Robert Bell increasingly published and disseminated the work of physicians such as Benjamin Rush, who described how a person's network of nerves connected one's mind to one's body and implied how a similar set of connections linked each individual in society. Men like Bell and Rush helped create a vital conduit for the anglicizing literature on which the project of the sensible self drew inspiration.

In the second section, Knott describes how Revolutionaries infused the movement for independence with the rhetoric and morality of sensibility. They turned a trans-Atlantic trend into an American construct and used the rhetoric to soften the radicalism that characterized aspects of the Revolutionary movement. That language also helped the sensible men who waged war come to grips with actions they deemed otherwise insensible. Revolutionaries invoked this perspective as they linked the physical body with the body politic they were constructing, making the sentimental project a powerful answer to the question of home rule. Sensibility took on a facet of pragmatism after the war as people debated who should rule the body politic at home. The sentimental project made one answer to that question, the Constitution, both a paean to individuality as much as a pillar of community interconnectivity.

In the third section, Knott recounts changes in the sentimental project after ratification, when the group who supported it began to disagree over how the government under it should behave. Socially, people began to invoke sensibility in their discussions of women's rights, national politics in the Untied States, slavery, and the French Revolution. But part of the change in the project, however, was also the reaction to it, indicating that the sentimental project had gained enough credibility and stability to be something people reacted against. In the end, the sensibility brewed in the crucible of the American Revolution and fully articulated in the writing and debate over the Constitution became an authoritative trend that, Knott concludes, likely sat more at the center than historians have previously believed.

Knott has certainly produced a masterful book, but her subtle analysis raises at least as many questions as it answers. For example, Knott focuses on Philadelphia and draws on material for other parts of the mainland colonies, but the questions she asks could be asked of other regions under Britain's dominion. What of the sentimental project in the British West Indies, or in cities such centers as Glasgow or Edinburgh, two centers that had a great impact on colonial North Americans? Despite these triflings, Sarah Knott has written a book which will, in

REVIEWS

981

short order, show us a new way of examining the foundation of American society and culture.

Cleveland State University

Thomas J. Humphrey