Book Review

Sharon B. Sundue. *Industrious in Their Stations: Young People at Work in Urban America, 1720–1810*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009. 288 pp. Cloth $45.00.

The subtitle of this ambitious book evocatively and precisely indicates that this is not a study of child labor, as such, but of "Young People at Work." As James D. Schmidt shows in his recent *Industrial Violence and the Origins of Legal Child Labor*, work is never really just work. When it comes to introducing children and youth into the world of labor and economic responsibility, community standards and family needs interact with regional and even national values and priorities. Adding education (in its broadest definitions) to the equation completes the typical arc of coming of age in early America. Indeed, work often succeeds school more or less directly; in colonial and early national America, Sharon Sundue argues, "work training and education for children were understood as two sides of the same coin" (p. 13).

But these seemingly prosaic elements of every person's life were shaped by much larger considerations. Although *Industrious in Their Stations* explores the lives of the least influential people in eighteenth century America—children and the poor—there were larger issues at stake: how best to train children for productive lives, the responsibility of the larger community (at the town and colonial or state levels) to help maintain the welfare of families and children, and, even more important, the future of the American economy. Early eighteenth century America had far more natural than human resources, and children played a key role in developing those resources. For them, work was not an option but a responsibility. Children and youth were also central to developing notions of Republicanism and civic responsibility. Even as the growth of the New World economy demanded their participation, young people's education and politicization became high priorities in an American Republic seeking to distinguish itself from the ways and assumptions of the Old World.

Sundue seeks the intersection of these economic, philosophical, and political imperatives by studying the children and youth of Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston who appear in surviving account books, probate proceedings, records of poor relief and placing out programs, registers of labor and apprenticeship agreements, and charity school files, among other sources. Even though most American children lived in rural areas, Sundue argues that urban children's lives were more illustrative because cities were the crucibles of economic change, the

development of republican political ideals, and the rise of formal schooling.

Sundue organizes her book chronologically and geographically, which creates a certain amount of redundancy. But the theme that emerges is that the working and educational lives of American children over the century covered in the book were shaped overwhelmingly by the extent to which they could add to the economic development of the larger community. For instance, employers generally favored hiring adults to work on farms and in workshops, but the value of the labor of boys and girls rose and fell as the supply of grown workers waxed and waned, mainly due to fluctuations in immigration and the wars of the 1740s and 1760s. Far more boys than girls appear in the meager records, but Sundue is able to argue that girls' work was undervalued, partly because they were females living in a patriarchal society but primarily because their labor was less scarce than that of boys, whose work during planting and harvest or in shops earned good wages.

Sundue's most important contribution comes from her investigation of race. Slave children's contributions were more or less equivalent to northern white children's work. Indeed, the ways in which local officials determined the level of support required of destitute and orphaned white children by weighing the costs and benefits of certain kinds of schooling or apprenticeships were chillingly similar to the ways in which slave owners figured the value of young slaves based on the amount of work they could do compared to an adult slave. Rural and poor urban children, like young slaves, were expected to begin contributing to the economies of their families or their owners between the ages of five and seven. An interesting effect of the presence of slaves in southern society was that it effectively eliminated the low-level apprenticeships and jobs that, in northern cities, were filled by boys from the poorest families. At the same time, then, that the work options of boys from the middling classes—from families who would expect their sons to find work in the higher-paying skilled trades—were dwindling in the North, they were actually rising in Charleston, where middle-class boys could receive the education necessary to earn a good living as a builder, goldsmith, or other high-end tradesman. As a result, the lens through which Sundue views the era shows why southerners could insist that race, not class, was the most important factor in southerners' lives.

Sundue successfully shows the ways in which ambition, citizenship, communal responsibility, and family relationships were negotiated at a time when work was truly the dominant component of virtually every person's daily life. Parents, employers and entrepreneurs, educators, and politicians were constantly deciding who to support with

public funds and who to hire for sometimes precious jobs, working out the painful math of establishing realistic prospects for the material well-being of the urban poor, articulating reasonable expectations for economic growth and national progress, and adjusting the relationship between the greater economic good and their moral responsibilities. And through it all ran bright threads from the earliest decades of the American colonies: the Protestant hatred of idleness and an insistence that the desperately poor should not become an unreasonable burden on public resources. By the time of the American Revolution, another idea had developed: that education (or, rather, controlling access to certain kinds of education) and fitting children to do certain kinds of labor and skilled labor were not only ways of helping the young nation develop but could also help control the urban poor.

The experiences of children in the late colonial and early national periods foreshadowed the placing out of children in the American West via the famous "orphan trains" of the second half of the nineteenth century and offered a preview of the importance of the labor of young boys and girls in the expanding factory system during the second phase of the Industrial Revolution. Sundue successfully reveals the limits of republican rhetoric, which, it turns out, was no more accurate a description of the real value placed on making literate republicans out of all children than the prescriptive literature about childrearing that started to become popular in antebellum America was an accurate representation of childrearing practices. As Sundue concludes, "It appears that the post-Revolutionary proliferation of republican sentiments about education did not correspond with any real changes in the treatment of children at the bottom of the social hierarchy" (p. 189). In other words, economic opportunity trumped ideology.

This is generally a very useful book that provides an original examination of fairly familiar life experiences. But it might have been interesting to bring race more to the forefront. Although the entire book offers solid conclusions—there clearly are differences in how these three seaports dealt with labor and children, and it is important to understand those differences—the most original comparisons made in the book are of white and black (free as well as enslaved) children. Exploring the ways in which ideas about freedom—especially as northern states emancipated or began to emancipate slaves during and after the Revolution—played out in the lives of children of both races would have been a welcome addition.

Sundue suggests that her book will describe how work affected children, but we read very little about working conditions or about actual children (other than a handful whose lives are described in some detail in probate documents, for instance). But by exploring the

institutions and attitudes that poked and prodded children into certain economic roles, *Industrious in Their Stations* shows some of the ways in which the reality of life in early America failed to match American principles.

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