



Ruth Watts. *Gender, Power and the Unitarians in England 1760-1860.* New York: Longman, 1998. xii + 236 pp. \$79.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-28826-3.



Reviewed by Robert J. Naeher (The Emma Willard School, Troy, NY)

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Hurrah for the Unitarians!

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Ruth Watts has written a valuable book that is in many ways a model of how intellectual and religious history should be approached. While this work can seem at times to be relentlessly celebratory, Watts takes seriously issues of gender and class, and gives significant attention to the interplay between key figures with contextual cultural and intellectual forces as Unitarians made contributions in the areas of reform and education. Her organizational structure is clear and logical, with the first half of the book devoted to 1760-1815, and the second half to 1816-1860. This split allows Watts to look at Unitarian developments and contributions both before and after the 1813 Act of Unitarian Toleration. Watts has amassed an extraordinary amount of detail about the formative years of this movement, and has performed an important service by presenting it in such an accessible manner.

The strengths of this book are many. Watts has provided an appropriately nuanced view of class sensibilities, interests, misunderstandings, and resentments, and has shown how these could prove both to free and to constrain women. She has also given us a good overview

of the main characters, sentiments, and convictions concerning not only the education of 18th century Unitarians, but also of the major social developments in England during this period. She recognizes the importance of educational theory and practice in relation to notions of gender and class, and her book is in large part a sustained and even passionate assertion that curriculum was, and remains today, "a social class issue" (pp. 52, 59).

Watts asserts that the Unitarians were a significant force for reform in their society, championing not only religious toleration but in addition such causes as the Anti-Corn Law League and municipal reform. Furthermore, and seemingly most important in Watts' view, their educational psychology of associationism (described below) led Unitarians to challenge "time-honoured assumptions about women" and to develop a more egalitarian concept of gender. Watts argues that though they were few in number, and primarily of the middle class, Unitarians laid a foundation that "potentially affected all women and their position in society." Firmly believing that knowledge was power, they sought to give education to women as well as men, and in so

doing “contributed to female emancipation” (pp. 7-10).

The first half of the book, chapters 1-5, covers the period 1760-1815. Watts maintains that the Unitarians during this period challenged religious, political, economic, social and educational norms without immediate success, but that their ideas lived on and had significant influence primarily because of their work in education. In chapter one, Watts looks at the general context of ideas on women and their education, and notes particularly the contributions of “rational educationists” such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mary Wolstonecraft, and of evangelical reformers such as Hannah More. Chapter two investigates the educational ideals of the Unitarians and how they put those ideas into practice. Watts looks most closely at the ideas of Joseph Priestly and Thomas Hartley, and at the influence of Hartley’s “associationist psychology” on Priestly’s thinking. Knowledge became the power that enabled both men and women to become virtuous beings, and that allowed them to manipulate the material world to their advantage.

In chapter three, “Ideas into Practice: Unitarians in Education,” Watts asserts that the Unitarians ran many schools, though never establishing them as explicitly Unitarian, and that these schools often attracted children of liberal Anglicans. Traditionalists, however, feared that the new subjects offered at these dissenting academies compromised “a narrow professionalism” that threatened, in Watts’ words, to “fragment ...the elitist culture of the upper classes,” and consequently saw Unitarian theorists such as Priestly as profoundly dangerous. Ironically, the Unitarians themselves, as they sought to improve the lives of the poor, wanted to do so through philanthropy, and not by changing the fundamental economic structure (pp. 59, 73). Chapter Four, “Unitarians and Women, 1760-1815,” looks at the relationships between Unitarian educational philosophy and traditional understandings of gendered roles, and at whether this philosophy enabled Unitarian women “to fulfill their familial role in a distinctive way” or “lead them beyond the usual confines of womanhood” (p. 77).

Part Two of this work, including chapters five through ten, covers the years 1816-1860. In chapter five, “The Unitarian Context,” Watts again takes care to look at the political and cultural context of Unitarianism, this time after the Act of 1813 granting toleration to Unitarians, and the ways in which the Unitarians’ ideas on education and gender were interrelated with their contributions to political changes and cultural developments. Watts is also attentive to the import of religious thought

and sensitivities during this period, and notes that while the increasingly popular and influential evangelicalism continued to stress “the female virtues of humility, submissiveness, duty, and purity,” and thereby granted status to women as morally superior, this new status was held “within greater limits.”

In particular, a woman’s supposed reliance on feelings “rendered her unfit for deep or close reasoning.” In Unitarianism, on the other hand, Watts declares, “females as well as males enjoyed the freedom and responsibility of the individual search for religious truth.” Nonetheless, while Unitarians “gave a much greater significance to domestic roles,” they “did not envisage women stepping much outside them.” Watts also looks at the Unitarians’ connections with Utilitarianism and continental thinkers such as Swiss educationist Johann Pestalozzi and the Scottish George Combe (pp. 116, 118).

Chapter six, “Schooling for Unitarians,” argues the significance of Unitarian efforts in educational reform. Watts shows that “a disproportionate number of future progressive educationists, professional and business men, industrialists, scientists, public figures and reformers,” came from Unitarian schools, and that the practical emphasis of Unitarian educational reformers continued to mesh well with the pragmatism of the rising business class. Furthermore, though Unitarian schools did not educate a large proportion of the English populace, Watts asserts that they had a great influence on educational thought and practice through their example. It was simply not possible that the Unitarians, “highly unpopular in religion, particularly with evangelicals, could provide education for the middle classes as a whole,” but their influence was still felt (pp. 136, 140).

Chapter seven, “Knowledge is power: gentlemen of England,” focuses on Unitarian efforts to reform higher education. While Unitarians rejected “the ethos of the [English] universities and their narrow curriculum,” they nonetheless used Scottish universities, and in addition worked for educational reform through the institution of the Unitarian chapel. Watts comments that many English commercial towns “had one or more substantial Unitarian chapels with a significant elite of the mercantile, banking, medical and legal men of the area who were prominent in establishing a whole range of informal agencies of middle-class education.” Religion and class again limited their impact, however (pp. 144, 150-1).

Chapter eight looks at Unitarian concern for the education of the working class. Watts again sees a gendered conservatism in Unitarian efforts, and notes that

the stories of Unitarian success in educating the working class all had to do with men. Significant attention is given to Unitarian educational reformer Mary Carpenter's heroic efforts to educate working-class youth, and to her consistent care at the same time not to violate society's gendered expectations. "Aware," Watts writes, "of how jealous the lords of creation are of the interference of women," Carpenter did not initially attend the Parliamentary Committee of 1852 investigating the question of criminal and destitute children. "It was evidence of her growing reputation," Watts adds, "that her controversial opinions were [nonetheless] sought in such a place," and that the government responded with some state aid for education and reform work among this population (p. 177).

Watts closes this chapter commenting on the mixture of humanitarian and class concepts that was "reflected throughout Unitarian initiatives for the working class." The poor were given ultimate responsibility for their problems, as drink, parental neglect, and moral destitution were seen as the causes of poverty rather than the economic, political, or legislative structures. Watts concludes that "educational initiatives for the working class from middle-class Unitarians were marked by a generosity of scope unusual for the age but tempered by economic assumptions which favoured their own position in society." Watts also reminds us that "females were included in this educational generosity but on a lesser scale than men" (pp. 162, 168, 177, 180).

Chapter nine, "Political economy, adult education, class and gender," notes that "unitarian involvement in working-class education was permeated by class attitudes," and that the poor often resented the Unitarians of the new industrial middle classes teaching them moral economy. Unitarians established mechanics institutes and science institutes, in their consistent belief that knowledge would bring power. As they realized that the instructional level was often above the capacities of their mechanic students, Unitarians shifted to more general and moral instruction. John Rely Beard, a Unitarian reformer sensitive to the cause of women, suggested that their should be institutes for women that would "instruct them in their future duties as domestic servants or mothers of labouring families." Watts concludes that, once again, Unitarians' attention to women "could inspire women and stimulate a demand for their better education whilst the more firmly entrenching them in their traditional roles" (p. 193).

In chapter ten, "Unitarians and gender issues in the

1850s: the seeds of feminism," Watts concludes that the religious and educational beliefs of the Unitarians led them to be in the forefront of women's education, even though "the intersection of class and gender often militated against the greater freedom of women" (p. 202). Class constraints, apparently, were more difficult to overcome than gendered ones, although the results, for women at least, were similar.

Minor flaws fall into two categories. First, despite evident care and attention to detail in the preparation of a truly handsome volume, this still very evidently a revised dissertation, and suffers from the repetition of key points that sometimes characterizes such works. Secondly, there is a lack of critical analysis and probing of individuals' character and experiences that leads this to come across at times as a flat and celebratory work. I almost felt at times that I was reading an institutional history of a movement that was not yet an institution, and that what I suspect were the most interesting struggles and interpersonal dynamics were left out. The book is eminently successful in giving an overview of the origins of the Unitarian movement, and an overview that is eminently sensitive to gender and cultural context. Nonetheless, while the celebratory tone underscores Watts' passion for her subjects, the lack of a critical perspective leads one to doubt at times that the full story is being told. We learn concerning Mary Carpenter's teaching of working-class youth, for example, that "it was her calm authority, respectful sympathy and imaginative teaching approach which tamed the wild, irrepressible children and young people into orderly, but enthusiastic and responsive classes." We also see an example of Carpenter's "imaginative sympathy" in her "planting [of] creepers against the walls" (p. 175). While Carpenter must have been a truly gifted teacher, one suspects that, despite the creepers, she may have experienced significant struggles, discouragements, and perhaps even doubts, and that we are denied a richer understanding of her strengths and triumphs by not seeing more of her struggle. One also wonders of the liberality of an education that is judged successful by the orderliness and enthusiasm of its classes.

Thirdly, and this is related to the overall celebratory tone, deficiencies of the Unitarian reform effort are seen as resulting from the constraints of the times, while advancements are the result of their thoughtful efforts. While this may in fact be true, it does become a bit wearing after a while to hear repeatedly that the Unitarians were "quite advanced for the day." Could there be some elements in Unitarian thought that are not derivative

from the larger intellectual and social context that contributed to these assumptions concerning women? If the Unitarians were profoundly forward thinking in many areas, why were they so in line with their times in viewing women as occupying such separate spheres (pp. 175, 194, 197)?

There is a useful glossary at the beginning of the book to help readers with terms such as atonement, arrianism, empiricism, evangelicalism, sociniasm, and theism, making the book more accessible to readers unfamiliar with the theological and intellectual currents of the time. While extremely helpful, however, the glossary is at times so brief as to suggest distortion. The definition of deism, to give just one example, is "belief in the existence of God without accepting revelation," alluding to the deists' rejection of the Bible as "special revelation" but a bit misleading when one thinks of the clockwork universe as a natural reflection, or revelation, of God's orderly work in creation. I applaud Watts for having rec-

ognized the need for such a glossary with this work, for the succinctness of her definitions, and for making me want to know more, and recognize that her abbreviation at points is a necessary reflection of the grand scope of this ambitious work.

In conclusion, this is a clearly organized and well-written book that provides a valuable overview not only of Unitarian thought and action between 1760 and 1860, but of educational theory and assumptions concerning gender as well. It is accessible for undergraduates as well as graduate students, and would make be useful in courses on the history of education as well as those on cultural, social, or intellectual history of the 19th century. It deserves a wide readership.

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