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Wilma W. Dunaway, "Women, Work, and Family in the Antebellum Mountain South" (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) reviewed for *Journal of the Early Republic*, Vol 32, No. 1, p171. Version of record available from University of Pennsylvania Press. [ISSN: 0275-1275], [DOI: 10.1353/jer.2012.0011].

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[Review of] Women, Work, and Family in the Antebellum Mountain South. By Wilma A. Dunaway.

(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. 320. Cloth, \$90.00.)

Reviewed by Sheila R. Phipps

Abstract: Book Review

In *Women, Work, and Family in the Antebellum Mountain South*, Wilma Dunaway fulfills ambitious goals. Foremost, she provides ample evidence to support her assertion that southern Appalachian women were not the uninvolved, two-dimensional, passive segment of the population they have been so long portrayed. She offers a much more dynamic picture of the mountain landscape by adding in the diverse racial, ethnic, and class distinctions among women who lived through the antebellum era. In addition, she debunks the notion that these women had little impact on the region by providing a comprehensive look at the many ways they contributed to the Appalachian economy. In all, *Women, Work, and Family in the Antebellum Mountain South* is an important addition to Appalachian historiography.

To accomplish these goals, Dunaway uses an impressive array of sources. From personal papers and diaries to plantation account books and court records, from church minutes and census records to apprentice records and guardian bond books, she has made use of all sources she could find to provide this compelling inside look at the lives of antebellum Appalachian women. Admittedly, because women did not often show up in deed books or ever on tax rolls, nor were many of these women literate, she had to make do with few voices of the women she studied. But, by pressing out what she could from reports, records, and accounts written about women, she presents a textured picture of life in the

region. Additionally, she offers clear statistical tables, such as the one listing the percentage of her study groups involved in occupations from boardinghouse owner to textile worker (132).

Dunaway focuses her attention on three groups of women: Cherokees, enslaved and free blacks, and poor whites. Dunaway treats the Cherokee women's experience by beginning with a backward look at alterations to their communities brought on by the intrusion of whites and demands from the fur trade. Cherokee women were drawn into the white market economy, which reduced their traditional autonomy and ultimately threatened their way of life when Council laws began to reflect the patriarchal influence of the white legal system. Black women faced racism imbedded in law as well as sexual exploitation, even if they were free. While slave women lived under the threat of having their children sold away from them, poor white women also could face the threat of losing their children to a legal system that held the power to judge them unfit. Although all of these women ultimately felt the weight of white patriarchal hegemony, Dunaway effectively reveals the complex differences between and among southern Appalachian women.

The three-dimensional nature of Dunaway's inclusive goals could have been an organizational problem but there is order to her evidence. Part I is descriptive, revealing the distinctive facets of Appalachian women, and explaining why it would be unreasonable to expect them to share a sisterhood of experiences. Within this section, she provides chapters on ethnic and religious conflicts, indigenous acceptance and resistance to white intrusion, black women's struggles against racism and slavery, and class distinctions among whites. Part II covers Appalachian women's productive and reproductive labors, separated into chapters on agricultural and nonagricultural labor and on the regulations over family and motherhood.

The second half of Dunaway's book promises to be the most enlightening for scholars. Instead of a story that places women in the home, tending to housework as their sole contribution to American settlement and development, Dunaway's chapters on agricultural and nonagricultural labor vividly expose the many ways women contributed to their family's and the region's economy. Besides Cherokee women (by their own traditions) and slave women (by force) working in fields, white women also helped or substituted for their husbands in fields, sometimes out of necessity, and sometimes because they preferred to work outside. They took part in the slaughter of livestock and produced goods within the home that could be sold or bartered. Dunaway argues that, although males were in command of the public spaces of the market, women's contribution to the agricultural goods sold there should not be discounted by historians.

Possibly the most important myth-breaking Dunaway does is in her chapter on women's nonagricultural labor. Although most women performed craft or textile production in their homes, she found that "by 1820, women and children represented nearly 12 percent of the region's manufacturing labor force," in textile factories, flour and paper mills, and even industries extracting timber, iron ore, copper ore, and salt (175). Some were artisans, some ran taverns and boardinghouses, and some worked as domestic laborers in spas.

A curious aspect of Dunaway's work is her treatment of the separate spheres ideology promoted as the ideal gender construction for middle-class Americans and ultimately identified by women's historians as a framework for studying women's place in the nineteenth century.¹ She successfully supports her argument that the southern Appalachian women she studied did not follow the ideology, but then berates women's historians who "have far too often engaged in academic legitimization of the racist, sexist gender ideologies of southern slaveholders and of affluent New Englanders by treating as factual

representation of women's lives" without naming them or the context within which they framed their arguments (5). She also points to contemporary advocates of separate-spheres ideology denigrating women who did not follow it but she does not indicate if the women who had neither the opportunity nor the luxury of following those middle-class notions were even aware of them. Did they own the prescriptive literature? Could they even read it?

There are other problems that readers will encounter. When discussing slave or poor white women, she often neglects to point out how their experiences were distinctively Appalachian. In addition, some of her examples come from areas outside of the region, such as counties in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. But these minor problems do not detract from the great contribution *Women, Work, and Family in the Antebellum Mountain South* will provide for the literature on Appalachian history.

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1. For examples of these works, see Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York, 1980); Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven, CT, 1977); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1988); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County New York, 1790–1865* (Cambridge, UK, 1981); and Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966), 151–74.