Pretty much any day, Americans can read denunciations of the nation’s founding generation and hear announcements that the society they and their descendants have created is not really a globally-recognized success but rather more of a failure, a society that has long professed equality and progress for residents of all sorts but actually functioned for the perpetuation of privilege.

Richard D. Brown, professor emeritus of history at the University of Connecticut, has provided a substantial work on the nation, its promises and performance, that suggests the yin and yang of the modern debate fits well with the period of the Revolution and the decades thereafter. It is a dense piece of scholarship, accompanied by more than six hundred endnotes, an extraordinary treasure for readers and future researchers.

Brown has organized his examination along lines that describe the story of equality, such as religious liberty, openness to new arrivals, racial discrimination, and rights for women and children. Among his most valuable contributions are his sections on the rights of women and children. He regularly returns to Abigail Adams’s letter to John, asserting the need for equal rights for women. Treating her letter as a respectable launching pad, he recounts developments through later decades, such as the Seneca Falls convention, the leadership of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the expanding role of women in churches, charitable societies, and public discourse.

As respects race, the founding generation talked a better line than it executed. Brown has researched and recounted similar disparities in other fields. For example, he documents the multiple trials that occurred when Massachusetts authorities prosecuted one Abner Kneeland for blasphemy in the 1830s. Among other things, Kneeland called Christ’s birth and mission “fable and fiction.” Notwithstanding the commonwealth’s constitutional affirmation that no one sect should be elevated over another, Kneeland was found guilty and jailed, a judgment affirmed by the state’s Supreme Judicial Court.

On this topic and others, much of Brown’s analysis focuses on states like Massachusetts, Connecticut, Virginia, and North Carolina, and to a lesser extent, New York. He observes that this focus flows from the availability of information about these parts of our geography and his

_Self-Evident Truths: Contesting Equal Rights from the Revolution to the Civil War_

By Richard D. Brown

(New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 2017. Pp. x, 387. Illustrations, notes, index. $40.00.)
own familiarity with the history of those places. These are fair grounds, and moreover, Brown does periodically strike out to other parts of the nation.

One such reaching out is his examination of declared aspiration versus reality as respects slavery in the Northwest Territory. The ordinance creating the territory, of course, outlawed slavery from the very beginning, and indeed the constitutions of the various newly created states largely reflected this same policy. Still, slavery and indentured servitude continued to exist. Brown notes Indiana’s very early abolition of both these evils, a contrast to Illinois, where notwithstanding legal declarations, indentures remained lawful into the 1840’s.

In all, Brown adheres to his early declaration: “Most of all Americans valued equal opportunities to acquire property, not equal distribution” (p. 24). He expresses disapproval of passing down property to one’s children, marking it as a practice that promotes inequality. It is an unusual observation, given that American inheritance tax rates rank fourth or fifth highest in a world where a good many Socialist nations have no such tax at all. To be sure, Brown sees serious tension in the nation over “equal rights, privilege, and pursuit of inequality.” He provides a solid work in support of that debate.


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**Tariff Wars and the Politics of Jacksonian America**
By William K. Bolt
(Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 2017. Pp. xvi, 301. Tables, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, $69.95; paper, $34.95.)

Finally, scholars and students of Jacksonian America have a monograph that explains convincingly why the tariff was one of the most important issues shaping the course of American politics from the War of 1812 to the eve of the Civil War. In covering the always volatile tariff issue from the 1812 Tariff to the Morrill Tariff of 1861—and including every tariff proposal, bill, and act in between—Bolt demonstrates beyond a doubt that few other issues, slavery included, dominated the