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Gone for a soldier, gone to become a man: an old but important story about identity, gender, status, and manhood in early America that John A. Ruddiman examines in Becoming Men of Some Consequence: Youth and Military Service in the Revolutionary War. In this deeply researched and well-written book, Ruddiman delineates the hopes, choices, and experiences of young men, and their pursuit of the rank and identity of men. Probing beyond the simple condition of youth, this work “interrogates how age and position in the life course interacted with family, emotion, expectations for advancing in life, and the gendered aspirations and prescriptions” (9) of youth and manhood. Thus do youth and manhood serve as refractive lenses for a sophisticated study of gender, hope, and agency. In the telling, young men’s pursuit of personal independence and the status of men of some consequence dovetail with the larger colonial struggle for political independence and the quest to become a republic of some consequence.

In five tightly linked chapters, Ruddiman explores the textures and meanings of manhood and individual independence in revolutionary America, subtly juxtaposing and mirroring these personal efforts against the larger colonial fight for political independence. In this struggle for “sovereignty and power” (4) writ small, Ruddiman teases out the nuances of manhood idealized, realized, and attained. While regional and class variations in the construction of manhood existed, there were four common, even unifying, elements throughout the colonies that upheld the larger ideal of manhood: “economic competence, demonstrating social utility, and earning respect from other men,” with marriage as the ultimate badge “of both mature adulthood and respectable manhood” (5). These young men—some adolescents, none quite children, yet none quite men—shaped their conceptions and pursuits of manhood according to the larger idealized dictates and expectations of colonial society and the often countervailing ones of the Continental army.

Military service was a shared, if inequitable, experience that coursed through the lives of many young men. Out of a potential pool of five hundred thousand men of military age, upwards of two hundred thousand
served as militiamen, state soldiers, or Continentals. They served for varying lengths of time ranging from a few weeks to several years. The impact of service on soldiers’ lives depended not on their ranks but on the duration and type of service. The shorter the service, the greater the likelihood of the young soldier’s successful reentry into society. After 1777, short service meant time in the militia or state troops. The vast majority of long-serving Continentals, however, discovered that there was no payoff for the delay or investment of their lives in the Glorious Cause. Lost skills, civilian suspicion of soldiers, near-worthless Continental scrip, economic desperation and dislocation, posttraumatic shock, weakened physical constitutions, and a host of other personal, local, state, and national factors militated against these stalwarts in their attempts to enter society as men of some consequence.

By interrogating young soldiers’ acts, beliefs, and expectations in relation to social and military authority and culture, Ruddiman aims to challenge long-standing views about the enduring universality of soldiers’ experiences and to link young soldiers’ lives to the broader forces at work in revolutionary America. While Ruddiman speaks deftly and convincingly to soldiers’ actions and their connection to the larger forces at work, he falls short in explicitly refuting “an unhistorical assumption about the timeless universality of soldiers’ experiences” (8). This is not to say that the universal soldier has ever existed; in this Ruddiman is on sure ground. However, much of what soldiers wrote regarding their military service and expectations, met or shattered, echoed in later generations of American soldiers’ accounts. If soldiers’ experiences were not universal, more than ample evidence exists to suggest that more subtly expressed and idealized multigenerational threads of continuity did continue through the nineteenth century.

Driven by “Ambition, Coercion, and Choice” (17), young men entered the ranks of the Continental army in search of their competence or a step toward it. Coming most often from the economically

and socially marginalized, the unmarried, and the propertyless, these would-be soldiers joined or were compelled to join the army by a sense of adventure, by the desire to advance economically and socially, or because their communities deemed them worthy of joining the rank and file of the army, for they were marginal and thus expendable. Once the "rage militaire" (22) of 1775 and 1776 had passed, and society's better sort had drifted away from shouldering arms in the regular service, society's neediest filled the void. Inspired by patriotic rhetoric and their own ambitions and hopes or influenced by societal pressures, young men stepped forward into the ranks of the army, hoping to lay the foundations for their future competencies.

Once in uniform, a generous term to be sure, soldiers discovered that the Continental army's culture often mirrored civil society's but was just as often at variance with their expectations for manly behavior. As in the civilian sphere, the regard of one's peers counted for much but was also shaped by one's class or aspirations. No matter the view of masculinity, it ultimately boiled down to "a man's command over his household" (58). Without a household to command, young soldiers earned their peers' regard through their relationships to others, be they fellow soldiers or officers, superiors, subordinates, civilians, or women. The world of the army was one of learning and adapting to the new and unfamiliar. Drill, discipline, new social hierarchies, new expectations of conduct in camp and in battle, all of it contributed to young men shaping their new personae as soldiers, their new personae as men. While restraint and circumspection were respected in middling and polite circles, enlisted men and junior officers alike prized drinking, swearing, and fornicating as badges of status and proofs of their virility and manhood.

Despite the rhetoric appealing to "collective and organized military resistance" (90) in defense of Americans' liberties, many Americans remained wedded to traditional notions that taught them to distrust standing armies and soldiers. Close contact with soldiers convinced many communities that their wariness was justified. Even when not in battle, armies were engines of destruction as they devoured food, seized or destroyed property, and brought disorder. As the war lengthened, behavior worsened, and the chasm widened. The only hope for soldiers' welcome into society was to "appear in civilian eyes as familiar youths worthy of care, trust, and affection" (91), a hard row to hoe.

As soldiers reentered society, most found that their lives deferred had become livelihoods lost. Having started out with little, veterans who had hoped to gain a footing in society through their service more often than not discovered that they had stumbled if not fallen. Physical destruction, economic and social dislocation, congressional parsimony, straitened personal circumstances, and so much more worked against veterans'
reintegration into society, a familiar if not timeless tale in American history. *Becoming Men of Some Consequence* is a worthy contribution to studies of early American military, gender, and cultural history. Scholars in these fields would do well to consider this work.