

## CONTRIBUTOR BIO

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## **BETWEEN DOMESTICITY AND REVOLUTION: INHERENT CONTRADICTIONS IN THE EARLY WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

*Laura Neylan*

In 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and other notable women's rights activists created the Declaration of Rights and Sentiments at the Seneca Falls Convention. These women pushed for equal rights in antebellum America, yet these rights would not be recognized until the twentieth century. The prevalence of the cult of domesticity ideology helps to explain this discrepancy. According to historian Catherine Clinton, "the creation of the cult of domesticity, the redefinition of the home as women's domain, was a delicate process designed to channel women's contributions into a proper course."<sup>1</sup> While some women of the mid-nineteenth century wanted to assert their independence, many women and especially men endeavored to keep women in the domestic sphere.<sup>2</sup> They also defined the ideal woman as virtuous.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, these competing ideas made antebellum America a transitional period for women's rights.

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Clinton, *The Other Civil War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), 40.

<sup>2</sup> Natasha Kristen Kraus, *A New Type of Womanhood* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

One book, *A Domestic History of the American Revolution* written by Elizabeth Fries Ellet in 1850, exemplifies the transitional nature of women's rights in this period. This history focuses on the roles of women in the American Revolution. I argue that *A Domestic History of the American Revolution* reflects the transitional period of antebellum America in that the author both emphasizes the stereotypical virtuousness of women and audaciously conveys their abilities to exist outside their stereotypical realm. I will assess the way that the author portrays Revolutionary era women in her book and secondly consider the example that the author herself presents. Although she associates domesticity with femininity, she challenges male dominance not only by writing a history, but also by writing one that focuses so heavily on the experiences of women during this period.

Historians have argued that a "cult of true womanhood," or "a belief system that prescribed and proscribed respectable femaleness during the antebellum and postbellum periods," initiated and perpetuated the necessity of portraying women as virtuous.<sup>4</sup> Historian Natasha Kristen Kraus emphasizes that this cult of true womanhood cultivated "four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity."<sup>5</sup> In her *Domestic History of the American Revolution*, Ellet conveys each of these stereotypical female virtues. For my purposes, I will focus on piety and domesticity. Interestingly, in the same passages that illustrate these virtues, Ellet simultaneously demonstrates the independent capabilities of women.

Ellet portrays the stereotypical piety of women but also portrays women's abilities to act outside of their prescribed gender sphere. A story about women on the home front of Wyoming perfectly illustrates this contradiction. The British troops and their Native American allies set fire to a house in which women hid from the soldiers.<sup>6</sup> Ellet describes the women loading guns with gunpowder and spitting liquids onto the fire to defend this home.<sup>7</sup> Eventually, when all hope seemed to be lost and "death appeared inevitable, the prayers of the pious mother seemed to be answered by direct interposition from Heaven."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Fries Ellet, *A Domestic History of the American Revolution* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1850), 145.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

The British troops turned back from the house just in time.<sup>9</sup> This anecdote emphasizes the piety of one of the women of the house, as her faith alone rescued her from near death. God answered the woman's prayers directly, implying that she maintained a very close relationship with God, as well as demonstrating Ellet's stereotypical portrayal of women as devout.

The same passage, however, depicts women loading guns and putting out the fire in order to protect themselves and their home—a responsibility usually given to men.<sup>10</sup> The fact that the woman in the passage chose to defend her home may merely reflect the fact that her husband was not there to complete this task himself. Yet regardless of her husband's presence, this woman capably defended her home both through stereotypically female means and stereotypically male means. Additionally, the reader should note the inherent contradiction in this passage: a woman acted outside of the virtues of true womanhood in order to defend one of these said virtues—domesticity.

While in the previous passage Ellet inadvertently refers to domesticity, in other parts of the book she blatantly employs the stereotypical portrayal of women as domestic creatures. Yet even as she conveys women as domestic, she also demonstrates their importance to the political patriotic cause. In the following passage, Ellet utilizes a metaphor that characterizes women as domestic while simultaneously discussing women's vast political contribution to the Revolutionary War:

It is almost impossible now to appreciate the vast influence of women's patriotism upon the destinies of the infant republic. We have no means of showing the important part she bore in maintaining the struggle, and in laying the foundations on which so mighty and majestic a structure has arisen. We can only dwell upon individual instances of magnanimity, fortitude, self-sacrifice and heroism, bearing the impress of the feeling of Revolutionary days, indicative of the spirit which animated all, and to which, in its various and multiform exhibitions, we are not less indebted for national freedom, than to the swords of the patriots who poured out their blood.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

Ellet first identifies America as the “infant republic,” implying not only that the country is new, but also that someone had to give birth to it.<sup>12</sup> Because women carry children and give birth, women metaphorically gave birth to this “infant republic.”<sup>13</sup> Therein, this passage portrays the stereotypical domestic role of women. The author tries to convey the integral, often underestimated, role that women played in the Revolution but she illustrates this message with the use of a metaphor that contradictorily reaffirms the stereotypical domesticity of women. Ellet’s verb choice also illuminates this contradiction, as she demonstrates the burdens that women “bore” in the conflict and discusses that women were “bearing” the revolutionary spirit.<sup>14</sup> This particular verb again evokes the notion of women giving birth to the new nation. Ultimately, although Ellet attempts to portray that women contributed equally as much as men to the Revolutionary War—a revolutionary concept in itself—the language that she utilizes to portray this message actually reasserts the stereotypical female value of domesticity.

Ellet knowingly portrays women as both pious and domestic, two of the most important characteristics cultivated by the “cult of true womanhood” as determined by historian Natasha Kraus.<sup>15</sup> However, it seems that the inherent contradictions found within these passages do not trouble Ellet. In the first instance, Ellet stereotypically depicts one particular woman as pious but also concedes that this woman can operate successfully outside of her prescribed sphere—the home. In the second excerpt, the author intends to draw the reader’s attention to the part that women played in the Revolution, yet she articulates this point by employing a stereotypical metaphor. It seems that what appear to be blatant contradictions to modern readers were fully logical to the author in antebellum America. These contradictions ultimately manifest the transitional period of women’s rights in which they were written.

Just as Ellet’s portrayal of stereotypical, virtuous women becomes convoluted with instances of women’s abilities to act outside of their gender sphere, Ellet’s depictions of women’s initiatives outside their female realm are marked by virtuousness. In one example, a British officer revealed to a local woman

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Kraus, 26.

that his troops planned to surprise General Washington's army.<sup>16</sup> The woman then decided to trek to the location of Washington's army to give him advance warning.<sup>17</sup> This woman clearly acted outside of her gender sphere and made decisions without her husband's counsel: "again she returned to her chamber; but her mind was more disquieted than ever, for she thought of the danger that threatened the lives of thousands of her countrymen. Her resolution at length was formed, and at dawn of day she waked her husband, and informed him flour was wanted for the use of the household, and that it was necessary she should go to Frankford to procure it."<sup>18</sup> Though she claimed to be walking to Frankford for flour, she actually made the journey to alert General Washington.<sup>19</sup> Ellet emphasizes that the decision was "her resolution"—not the prerogative of her husband.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, she woke her husband to tell him she was going, not to ask for permission.<sup>21</sup> This woman endeavored to enter a stereotypically male sphere of action, and she did not ask for permission. The woman was ultimately successful; the British troops arrived at Washington's camp only to see his army already on the march.<sup>22</sup>

While this anecdote illustrates women's capability to navigate outside the home, it also subverts this message by reaffirming women's ties to the home. The woman cannot just decide to act and then follow through. She must provide an excuse to her husband. Although independent-minded, her submissiveness can be seen through her responsibility to inform her husband where she was going and why. Furthermore, the excuse that the woman made—that the house required additional flour—affirms her ties to her stereotypical gender sphere.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, even when Ellet depicts women functioning outside of their stereotypical gender sphere, she simultaneously affirms women's relationship to this sphere.

The author's contradictory portrayal of the history of women during the Revolution clearly reflects the transitional period of the mid-nineteenth century, but the author's inferred ideas and potential motivation to write this book also

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

reveal much about this complex era of women's rights. Ellet's chosen title for her book, *A Domestic History of the American Revolution*, perfectly illuminates the inherent contradictions of this period. The term *domestic* refers both to the nation as well as to the home and, as previously stated, historians define the cult of domesticity as a redefinition of the home as a woman's sphere.<sup>24</sup> However, Ellet's use of the term in her title arguably reflects a different definition. If domestic here simply referred to the home, the reader would expect to find anecdotes of only the home front. Ellet includes many stories about the home front during the war, but she also incorporates many narratives that are not located in a home.<sup>25</sup> The main continuity between the stories that occur at home and the anecdotes that unfold elsewhere is that they both focus primarily on women. Ellet depicts women that followed behind their soldier-husbands in wagons, women kidnapped by Native Americans, and women that positioned themselves as spies for the British or American armies.<sup>26</sup> Although Ellet portrays women as domestic under the home definition, the variety of locations found in Ellet's stories suggests that Ellet associates domesticity with femininity more so than with the home front. Ellet's association of femininity with domesticity conveys the strength of the concept of the virtuous woman. Regardless of where a woman goes, she is domestic by Ellet's definition. Thus, Ellet can be classified as a proponent of the cult of domesticity.

This identification alone, however, would be too simple. The author, like others of the period, both promoted the stereotypical depiction of women but also challenged it. According to Clinton, "many of the advocates of domesticity developed attitudes antithetical to those promoted by men. The emphasis on female values and female culture posed a serious challenge to male hegemony."<sup>27</sup> Regardless of how Ellet portrayed women, the fact that she mentioned them at all was revolutionary for this era. The presence of a history focused primarily on the role of women in the revolution threatened the gender hierarchy of the mid-nineteenth century.

Ellet's decision to write this book, too, demonstrates an attempt to expand the acceptable role of women in society. As noted by Clinton, "women

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<sup>24</sup> Clinton, 40.

<sup>25</sup> Ellet.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Clinton, 47.

pioneered by incorporating new interests into their realm: religion, literature, and art, to name a few. Most women may have been confined to domesticity, but the ways in which they challenged their imprisonment were diverse and fascinating.”<sup>28</sup> *A Domestic History of the American Revolution*, then, exemplifies Ellet’s efforts to “challenge” the female sex’s “imprisonment.”<sup>29</sup> Clinton accurately characterizes the challenges to female inferiority as fascinating; the contradictions of Ellet’s work exemplify the complex forces at work in society in antebellum America.

In conclusion, the female-focused anecdotes of *A Domestic History of the American Revolution* reflect the transitional period of the mid-nineteenth century because they both uphold the standard of the virtuous women and convey that women could successfully navigate the world outside of their prescribed gender sphere. The author, too, exemplifies this era of transition as her writing both identifies domesticity and femininity as nearly synonymous and represents an attempt to break free of her gender sphere. *A Domestic History of the American Revolution*, then, can be seen as a vestige of the transitional early women’s rights movement; a movement not fully realized until the twentieth century. The standard of the virtuous women and convey that women could successfully navigate the world outside of their prescribed gender sphere. The author, too, exemplifies this era of transition as her writing both identifies domesticity and femininity as nearly synonymous and represents an attempt to break free of her gender sphere. *A Domestic History of the American Revolution*, then, can be seen as a vestige of the transitional early women’s rights movement; a movement not fully realized until the twentieth century.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

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