past is unlike the present. The blow-by-blow account of the Battle of Bunker Hill is of far less interest than the moment when one wonders what might have happened had Warren not been killed. Had Warren become commander in chief, might the American Revolution have been inflected by Massachusetts even more than it was? If so, could antislavery have prevailed as a significant element of revolutionary ideology? Such a course would have made for a very different history of the United States. For that thought alone, this book is worth reading.

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In Defiant Brides, the experienced biographer Nancy Rubin Stuart braids together the lives of Peggy Shippen Arnold and Lucy Flucker Knox to create a lively story of how two strong, Revolutionary-era women coped with the challenges that resulted from their unconventional marriages. Beautiful, willful Peggy Shippen, child of a wealthy, loyalist-leaning Quaker family in Philadelphia, married against her parents’ wishes. She chose the thin-skinned, saturnine, thirty-five-year-old widower Colonel Benedict Arnold, who came to oversee Philadelphia after the British occupation ended in 1778. Lovely, animated Lucy Flucker, daughter of a prosperous tory official in Boston, defied her parents by marrying a young, rotund bookseller, Henry Knox. Knox, as capable at artillery as he was with books, rose to become one of George Washington’s most dependable colleagues and the first secretary of war in the president’s administration. In her research, Stuart has used the papers of both families in addition to a wide variety of archives, local newspapers, and secondary sources. The product is a readable and original work that is strong on incident and energy but a little underdeveloped in historical context and interpretation.

The two privileged heroines never met, but there were connections. Lucy had tried to help Arnold woo a Boston heiress—unsuccessfully, as it turned out. Arnold, recovering from a leg wound, had shared his carriage with Lucy, who was traveling to Philadelphia to meet her
husband. And Arnold introduced his bride-to-be to Henry Knox when the colonel was appearing before Congress. Knox knew the dashing British lieutenant John Andre, a friend and flirt of Peggy’s who would later facilitate her husband’s attempted treason.

Stuart dramatically narrates the tale of Arnold’s foiled effort to betray West Point, including the famous scene in which a hysterical Peggy convinces George Washington that she has lost her wits. Peggy’s friendship with Andre, condemned for his role in Arnold’s betrayal, adds pathos to his execution. Early on, Stuart informs us that whigs thought Peggy’s father was a spy, and although she does not explicitly link this suspicion to Peggy’s support for Arnold’s action, the author persuades us with Peggy’s words and a portrayal of her lifelong intelligence and agency that she was a full participant and co-conspirator with her husband.

Arnold’s defection meant that Peggy lived out her years in London, while his luxurious habits and dubious quests for cash, including a fire he may have set to get the insurance money, put them deeper and deeper in debt. His long absences and infidelity left Peggy alone to care for their five “little plagues” (p. 177). As she wrote to her father in an appeal for funds, London society required her to keep up appearances. After Arnold’s demise in 1801, Peggy suffered increasingly from migraines, edema, and leg pain. Nevertheless, she labored to rescue herself and her children from her husband’s financial misadventures. Stuart’s evidence suggests that Peggy’s youthful defiance and pride also ensured that she would not shed the façade of the loving wife of a man who grew increasingly rancorous, selfish, and unstable.

Lucy, although a patriot, soon grew tired of the Revolution that separated her from her husband. She spent the dangerous war years trying to remain close to Henry. She was often pregnant, bearing thirteen children but burying ten of them. Mourning was her frequent companion. Over the years, she managed to enjoy—and often organized—military and government entertainments, leading numerous dances with Washington, who relished her company. She waited impatiently for the time when she and Henry could settle down together, and she once asked him to leave the army to make her happy.

As Stuart points out, both young women married men less affluent than they, and Knox, like Arnold, spent his later years trying to acquire a fortune. His dealings, too, were not always principled, but they were successful, allowing him and Lucy to retire to a grand mansion in
Maine. But Lucy’s turbulent spirit and tendency to bicker and Knox’s compulsion to spend beyond his means kept tranquility at bay.

Stuart’s last book, on Mercy Otis Warren and her friends John and Abigail Adams, covered more political and intellectual territory than this work—doubtless because her previous subjects wrote copiously about politics and ideology. We learn little about Lucy and Peggy’s views except that each married a “radical” man and each “naturally” followed his path. I am not sure “radical” adequately describes these men; more important, although affection and sexual attraction may be “natural,” love and marriage are social constructs. Some background on the legal and economic condition of eighteenth-century wives—in both Great Britain and the new United States—might have helped us better understand what shaped these women’s behavior and thinking. I would have liked to know in more detail how they comprehended the meaning of the Revolution and its aftermath as well as how they responded to their husbands’ unseemly scrambles for wealth. It would also have been useful to have some information on the theatrics of elite eighteenth-century life. Stuart shows us that Arnold sent Peggy the same elaborate note declaring his love as he had written to the Boston heiress he courted. A few comments about letters as performances—and their possible origins in writing manuals—would have been helpful in showing us why Arnold might have considered his love letter too valuable to discard after only one use. But even though Defiant Brides is a bit short on context and analysis, Stuart has recuperated the compelling lives of two remarkable women.

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In the late eighteenth century, deist and freethinking societies were being established in cities across the newly formed United States. Their influence, many Christian Americans feared, was fraying the country’s moral fiber. College officials worried that skepticism was