



Emily Bingham. *Mordecai: An Early American Family.* New York: Hill & Wang, 2003. xii + 346 pp. \$27.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8090-7016-9; \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-2756-9.



Reviewed by Edith B. Gelles (Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Stanford University)

Published on H-SHEAR (September, 2005)

All in the Family

When, in the last quarter of the last century, historians of women and feminist historians began the project of correcting the vast historical record in order to incorporate the half of the population that had been left out of the prevailing story, they projected a loose three-step process. The first step was the excavation and retrieval of source material, finding the women; the next step was writing the history of women, a story that was parallel but not identical to men's story; and finally there would be what was termed "mainstreaming," or writing history that told the story of both sexes in the past simultaneously. For a long while, steps one and two flourished and library shelves filled up with a dazzling array of books on women's history. The third step has foundered, as well it may continue to do; perhaps the stories are not congruent, perhaps not compatible.

If you are from the school of thought that is devoted to separate spheres, which I am, or to feminist essentialist theory, which I sometimes am, then perhaps the third step is more challenging than we thought. Certainly women thought about and even acted in spheres that historians have heretofore relegated to men. Women were

political; women participated in the economy; women experienced wars; women went to church. But when the stories of these enterprises or institutions are written, women are most often relegated to a side bar, or a brief and obligatory page or two or six, or one chapter of an edition. The big political, military and economic histories are still male. Women rarely appear in starring roles outside of books about women's activities.

And they appear in one other venue. The family is one site where both women and men behave as agents, interacting and relating together and separately as they go about their business of conducting their lives. While biographies, too, have flourished, the biography of a family poses a huge challenge, both for the availability of source material and the immensity of the project of following generations of descendants over time and possibly geography. Family histories have remained in the province of literature.[1] This is only one reason that the book under consideration here is so valuable.

Mordecai: An Early American Family was first published in 2003, and now appears in a paperback edition. In her first-rate history of this southern family, Emily

Bingham records the story of three generations of the Mordecais and she embeds this family in the context of nineteenth-century American history as they experienced social upheavals, economic success and tribulations, and geographic migration. The foundation that sustains these manifold branches is the rise of the middle class in nineteenth-century America. In this case, however, the family possessed one unique attribute that complicated their status; they were also Jewish. The entire process of assimilation, of becoming American middle class, was complicated by the Mordecais' religious background.

The family was not famous, though some family members did have minor repute in their time, but they are exemplary. They were a large family, and they spread out, starting in Philadelphia and New York City; moving to the South, where they and their kin briefly put down roots in one place before uprooting and moving on; living in Warrenton, N.C., and Raleigh and Richmond; moving to Baltimore, and Tennessee and Alabama, to upstate New York, rural Indiana and Boston. All the while, over the long nineteenth century, they wrote letters, telling each other about their happiness and their hurts, their studies and their labors, their children and their friendships, their literary tastes and distastes, and mostly just maintaining family ties at the most intimate level, which included feuds and apostasy as well as love and loyalty. And all these generations of Mordecais preserved letters that have found their way into archives, primarily in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, where Emily Bingham earned her doctorate by writing one of the best dissertations I have read, now revised into a book, about this peripatetic family.

Because they were so spread out and so verbally literate (thousands of letters exist), the challenge of producing a coherent story that follows each cluster of correspondents while maintaining the big picture is daunting. They were so numerous and so diverse, and so large a record survives for so long a time, that the smooth and seemingly effortless story line that Bingham has written is a major achievement. Her Ivesian symphony in four long movements charts the course of the major performers in each generation.

The Mordecai (pronounced Mor-de-key) prelude begins before the American Revolution in Philadelphia, where one Moses Mordecai was shipped as a debtor from Britain. There, the traditional Jewish community did not recognize his marriage to Elizabeth Whitlock, a convert,

so their son, Jacob, who would become the patriarch of the family recorded in this history, grew up with the conflicted religious background of a never-sanctioned marriage. Jacob, in turn, married into the highly respectable New York Jewish family of Myer Myers, the renowned silversmith.[2]

Jacob's marriage to Judith Myers was a love match that overcame the reservations of her observant father. The couple eventually moved to the South where Jacob expected to earn his fortune. He never did, at least not on his own and in business as he had anticipated. Instead, plagued by failures (some of his own doing, some through unfortunate circumstances), he moved about until settling in Warrenton, North Carolina. Judith, always fragile, bore him six surviving children and then, sadly, perished before her thirtieth birthday. Jacob was bereft, as well as incompetent, and for a short period the young family was separated as the little children were sent to live with various relatives. Several years passed, while Jacob mourned and the children experienced loneliness and homesickness. Then, Jacob re-married, this time to Judy's younger sister, Rebecca, by whom he had another seven children. If Jacob was deficient as a provider, he was prolific as a father.

Through fortuitous circumstances, the reconstituted family started a school for girls, called the Mordecai School, that in about twenty years became immensely successful and earned the family the means to become middle class. The success of this academy that has provided historians of education the basis for a number of scholarly works on female education in early America was founded upon the labors of the now grown children of Jacob and Judy.[3] Rachel Mordecai emerged as the director of the school, aided by her siblings Ellen and Sol, especially, who taught a full range of academic subjects to young southern girls (and some boys). All the while, the family grew and dispersed. The eldest son, Moses, went on to become a successful businessman in North Carolina, where he married into the wealthy Lane family. Bingham also narrates the intriguing story of Ellen's attachment to her younger brother Sol, implying a chaste passionate relationship. When the school was sold for a nice profit in 1818, younger daughter Caroline remained behind to marry the new owner, a former music teacher at the academy, Achilles Plunkett, in another instance of outmarriage from this marginally Jewish family, which moved now to a farm (that would not thrive) near Richmond.

Bingham's credible theme in constructing this diffi-

cult narrative of the Mordecai family is “enlightened domesticity,” a protective myth created by Jacob after Judy’s death, a covenant among the family members that fused “bourgeois domesticity, intellectual cultivation and religious liberalism.” With emphasis on family loyalty, education and tolerance, the Mordecai children were to be a “‘little faithful band of love and duty,’ guided by affection, responsibility, and a deep respect for learning. They pledged to stick by one another through thick and thin, to recognize their God but always tolerate others, and to improve themselves and the world around them” (p. 5). This covenant would prove to be the key to the family’s upward mobility as well as the eventual abandonment by most of the Mordecais of their Jewish roots.

Many of the Mordecais were very long-lived. Jacob, for instance, survived to his late 70s and to the end served as a benign but firm patriarch to his errant children. Others died young. Rachel, perhaps the most interesting figure of this multifaceted family, devoted herself to running the school and afterwards supported the family in diverse ways, before finally marrying in her early 30s. Bingham relates the vexed story of Rachel’s conflicted relationship with Judaism. She began a lifelong correspondence with the British author and educator Maria Edgeworth when, upon reading anti-Semitic remarks in an Edgeworth novel, she wrote to express her indignation. Edgeworth’s response was to write another novel featuring a heroic Jewish character. Rachel’s marriage to the wealthy Baltimore widower, Aaron Lazarus, produced four children whom Rachel struggled to educate according to the precepts she had developed as a teacher at the school and as primary mentor to her young sister Eliza, a task that led to exhaustion and despondency. Rachel’s life ended young and in great conflict as on her deathbed she converted to Christianity. Ellen lived long as a spinster and Christian convert, who proselytized among her kin after Jacob’s death and wrote books about her spiritual journey. Sam, following in the footsteps of his father, earned and lost fortunes and never married, while George married late. Sol became a doctor and moved to Mobile, Alabama, where he stayed and married Caroline Waller, to the grief of Ellen. Alfred added to the family luster by becoming a cadet at West Point, one of the first Jews to enter the academy, and later a respected ordinance officer in the army, a post he resigned at the outbreak of the Civil War, because he could not fight for his country against the South of his origins.

Most of the Mordecai family remained staunchly loyal to their adopted South during the Civil War, although there were exceptions. Alfred Mordecai Jr.,

whose father had resigned his commission rather than violate his southern roots, fought on the Union side. His cousin, Waller, son of Sol, died at the age of eighteen, supporting the South. The women in Richmond did “war work” and lived on “hominy, bacon, cornmeal and vegetables” (pp. 252, 254). In a surprising reversal of fortunes, Sam, the ne’er-do-well second son, prospered by selling his Confederate bonds to invest in cotton. Many of the older generation died off during the war, including Becky (the long-suffering stepmother), Eliza and Caroline.

Bingham focuses her spotlight on the third-generation figures of Marx Edgeworth Lazarus and Ellen Lazarus Allen, older children of Rachel, for theirs is another kind of American story. Raised by their mother, who adhered firmly to her energetically enlightened approach to education, they, in turn, joined radical experimental social and religious groups. Marx became a follower of Mary Gove Nichols and introduced his younger sister to a culture of utopian, free sex, vegetarian and spiritualist groups, much to the horror of their upper-middle-class relatives in Richmond, Raleigh and Philadelphia. Both ended badly. Ellen’s marriage to a utopian visionary led to too many children and too little money, a life of hard labor and poverty. Marx wandered around in search of his vision, gradually fading both physically and mentally.

In the end it was Eliza’s daughter, Caroline Myers Cohen, widowed and childless in the early twentieth century, who recognized the uniqueness and the pathos of her forebears and wrote their first brief history. She was one of a few who remained within the Jewish fold from a family that for over a century had experimented with the American dream of upward mobility and assimilation. Their journey followed the route mapped in a covenant written by their patriarch Jacob, a covenant that demanded for redemption love and loyalty, faith and tolerance, education and work. Bingham notes, finally, the irony of this family history: “Beginning in the 1790s as triple outsiders by virtue of being newcomers to the South, being Jewish, and being Jews unsuccessful in business, the Mordecais potently expressed the pride, aspirations, and tensions that have marked countless families hoping to secure advancement and a respectable place in America” (pp. 263-264).

I have no quarrel with this fine family biography. Bingham is a wonderful stylist, so it is a pleasure to read. Her eye for detail, her choice of stories to relate, and the threads that knit these stories together are of high qual-

ity. The themes of family covenant and myth, wedded to the American myth and the nineteenth-century American experience, are first-rate. If I have a complaint it is that in some respects the dissertation was better. At least I found that the cutting that went into producing an abbreviated book left out some of the most poignant stories. For instance, there was poor Caroline Mordecai Plunkett, whose entire family—her husband and three children—succumbed to epidemic. In the end, after years of struggling to carry on by herself, she went insane and was institutionalized.

On the other hand, so many and so vast are the elements of this family's history, of family history in general, of social history, of nineteenth-century American history, that, like the Forsytes, one wishes for more volumes to follow.

Notes

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/>

Citation: Edith B. Gelles. Review of Bingham, Emily, *Mordecai: An Early American Family*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. September, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10895>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.

[1]. *The Forsyte Saga*, of course, comes to mind, but also the novels of Jane Austin, George Elliot and, more recently, Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), as well as the fiction of Chang-Rae Lee.

[2]. A major retrospective of Myer Myers's work was held at the Yale University Art Gallery in 2001. See David L. Barquist, *Myer Myers: Jewish Silversmith in Colonial New York* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 2001).

[3]. Christie Anne Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South* (New York: New York University Press, 1994); and Penny Leigh Richards, "A Thousand Images, Painfully Pleasing," (Ph.D. diss.: University of North Carolina, 1996).