



**Carol Berkin.** *First Generations: Women in Colonial America.* New York: Hill & Wang, 1996. xiv + 234 pp. \$23.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-4561-7.



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## Women's Early America

Carol Berkin has written an elegantly spare introduction to the scholarship on women's experience in colonial America. She sets her book within a framework that emphasizes the diversity of female lives resulting from differences in race, region, religion, and class. Berkin also discusses how women's lives change over time as her book covers the period from first settlement to the early republic. Berkin has read widely in the secondary sources on women in colonial America and condensed a variety of interpretations into a narrative suitable for an undergraduate course. *First Generations* does not have footnotes, but Berkin includes an annotated bibliography.

Berkin organizes the early chapters of *First Generations* according to region and race; she has separate chapters on Native American women, African and African-American women, and white women in the Chesapeake, New England, and the Middle Colonies. She begins each chapter by describing in as much detail as is known the life of one woman from the region. This woman then serves as a foil for Berkin's discussion of marriage, work, legal standing, female agency, and "powerful" women.

Margaret Hardenbroeck, a Dutch trader, represents women in the middle colonies; she illustrates also the impact of culture on colonial women. Hardenbroeck moved to New Amsterdam from the Netherlands in 1659. She served as agent for a cousin who was an Amsterdam trader, and quickly became engaged in the colonial fur trade. Even when Hardenbroeck married, under the Dutch legal system she preserved both her legal identity and economic independence; as partners, she and her second husband, Frederick Philipsen, built a transatlantic packet line. But while the English takeover of the colony did not restrain the Philipsen firm's economic growth, it did destroy Hardenbroeck's legal rights. With the Dutch surrender, Hardenbroeck lost the right to buy or hold real property, or to act as an independent agent. As a feme covert, she could only act under her husband's guidance. Hardenbroeck's story, Berkin suggests, "might be used to illustrate the cultural diversity of the middle colonies" (p. 81). But it also illustrates Berkin's larger point: the cultural construction of women's roles varied across the boundaries of region, race, and time in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For Hardenbroeck, Berkin points out, "the transition from Dutch to English

norms was restrictive,” but for the historian “it is opportune” because it suggests the complexity of women’s roles (p. 82).

While region and race were crucial determinates of women’s behavior and norms in the seventeenth century, Berkin’s narrative suggests that by mid-eighteenth century class was the primary factor shaping women’s opportunities. Using the example of Eliza Lucas Pinckney, Berkin posits that gentility and education allowed Pinckney the opportunity “to master both male and female roles within her culture” (p. 130). Pinckney fulfilled traditional domestic responsibilities as daughter, wife, and mother, but also displayed business acumen as the administrator of her father’s and late husband’s plantations. She possessed “a consciousness of self and a confidence in reason” derived, according to Berkin, from her social class’s emphasis on individual rights and opportunities in the eighteenth century (p. 134). Pinckney herself gained her confidence from a privileged education and from her catholic reading habits. Berkin argues that by Eliza Lucas Pinckney’s generation “social class shattered the unity of gender in colonial American society” (p. 164).

Berkin’s assertion of the importance of class is a bold one which draws upon the work of Mary Beth Norton and the essays on consumerism edited by Cary Carson, et al.[1] Yet, in her contention of the rising power of class in the eighteenth century, Berkin may diminish other evidence suggesting class was already a crucial factor in women’s lives in the seventeenth-century colonies. The political and economic assertiveness of seventeenth-century Maryland resident Margaret Brent, who derived power from her own property ownership, her position as agent of colonial Governor Leonard Calvert, and her power of attorney for her brothers, has been well documented elsewhere.[2] In seventeenth-century Massachusetts, as Berkin notes, women accused of witchcraft were often women who had “fallen from the ranks of the respectable.” A husband’s wealth and prestige could shield a wife from accusation (pp. 47-48).[3] And certainly the most vulnerable white women in seventeenth-century America were indentured servants, whose lower-class status left them at risk of physical and sexual abuse. While the consumer revolution might have materially improved the lives of some eighteenth-century women, the class disparity in women’s lives stretched back to the earliest days of the colonies.

The question of sources recurs repeatedly in *First Generations*. As Berkin points out in her discussions of

Wetamo, leader of the Wampanoag tribe, or Mary Johnson, an African brought to the Chesapeake, we have evidence of only the most public outlines of most women’s lives—often only birth and death dates. For tens of thousands of women in colonial America, we have even less. We cannot tell what they thought of marriage, family life, their work, or the cultural limitations on their lives. Even in New England, the most literate and introspective region of English settlement, no seventeenth-century woman left behind a diary. Thus, what we know of women’s thoughts and ideas is filtered through the eyes of observing males, derived from legal records, or interpreted from demographic data. Berkin draws a useful lesson from these limitations: even a sympathetic reading of women’s lives, particularly those of non-white women, drawn from contemporary observers, may contain inadvertent distortions. Thus, she observes, the American Revolution was in one sense a victory for women as “like most social upheavals, the war generated a treasure trove of sources that have allowed historians to reconstruct women’s lives” (p. 169).

The lack of primary materials and Berkin’s reliance upon secondary sources also complicates cross-cultural comparisons; “studies of New England marriage patterns based on diaries and letters and studies of Chesapeake marriage patterns drawn from demographic data are equally valid, but they do not allow for a conclusive comparison,” Berkin observes (p. ix). At the same time, however, *First Generations* reminds readers of the considerable scholarship on women’s history that has developed over the past few decades and identifies new areas that remain to be explored. As Berkin also notes, however, she had to conclude her manuscript at a certain point in time; thus, she could not take advantage of recent scholarship by Cornelia Dayton, Kathleen Brown, or Mary Beth Norton.[4]

In her preface, Carol Berkin notes that *First Generations* is not a synthesis; she argues with justification that no “collective portrait” of colonial women can emerge when we know so much more about Euro-American women than about Native American or African-American women (p. ix). Yet, the book would still benefit from a chapter drawing together certain themes and comparisons that emerge. In her chapter on Native American women, for example, Berkin argues that most tribes saw menstruation as a period of heightened power among women, and some tribes required women’s seclusion in “moon houses” (pp. 65-66). Within European society, Berkin suggests, menstruation also brought women power. Women accused

of witchcraft tended to be of menopausal age; these were women at the height of their domestic authority but charged, as witches, of abusing their prerogatives. Stripped of the ability to continue bearing children, accused witches allegedly directed their anger and frustration against young children and infants (p. 47). Thus, both cultures saw women's menstrual cycles as conveyors of important, but dangerous, powers. Similarly, Berkin observes that Indians' contact with whites tended to intensify and distort existing social patterns rather than introduce new patterns among Native Americans. The growth of the fur trade, for example, dramatically increased the proportion of time and energy Indian men and women spent hunting animals and curing pelts. Enslaved African-American women also experienced, as a result of their work in the fields of North America, an intensification of their traditional agricultural responsibilities in Africa. But African women, torn from their culture and removed to an alien world, probably found their encounter with white culture to be more destructive than Native American women initially did. An analysis of such cultural similarities and differences could enhance the usefulness of *First Generations*.

In a brief survey such as *First Generations*, some omissions are, perhaps, inevitable. Berkin has little to say about the issue of conflict across gender frontiers. She does not discuss, for example, the rape of enslaved women by their masters and the ensuing conflict between white mistresses and their female slaves. Nor does *First Generations* delve far into the efforts of Euro-Americans to teach Native Americans to adopt "correct" gender roles and behavior. Perhaps more troubling, however, is that non-whites largely fall out of Berkin's narrative as she turns her discussion to eighteenth-century gentility and the American Revolution. The oversight is particularly regrettable given recent scholarship such as Sylvia Frey's *Water from the Rock*, which documents the crucial impact the war and revolutionary rhetoric had on the lives of African Americans.[5]

Nevertheless, *First Generations* should be an accessible book for undergraduates and a valuable introduction to the lives of colonial women. Berkin's clear prose, attention to sources, discussion of the limits and opportunities in colonial historiography, and her excellent bibliography will make the book a useful resource for students and faculty.

Notes:

[1]. Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott Foresman, 1980); Cary Carson, Ron Hoffman, and Peter Albert, eds. *Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994).

[2]. See, eg., Julia Cherry Spruill, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1972; orig. pub. 1938), 236-41.

[3]. See also Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987).

[4]. Cornelia Hughes Dayton, *Women Before the Bar: Gender, Law, and Society in Connecticut, 1639-1789* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1995); Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press for the IEAHC, 1996); Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York: Knopf, 1996).

[5]. Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).

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