H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elaine Forman Crane. *Ebb Tide in New England: Women, Seaports, and Social Change 1630-1800.* Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998. x + 333 pp. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55553-336-6; $29.95 (library), ISBN 978-1-55553-337-3.

Elaine Forman Crane. *Ebb Tide in New England: Women, Seaports, and Social Change 1630-1800.* Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998. x + 333 pp.

Reviewed by Jonathan M. Beagle (University of New Hampshire)

Published on H-Grad (November, 1998)

Recent studies of colonial American women have begun to reassess the character of women's relation to the institutional developments of the colonial polity. Against earlier claims of improvement, these works charge that the course of colonial development instead circumscribed female autonomy by depriving women of important avenues of self-assertion. With Ebb Tide in New England, Elaine Forman Crane furthers this trend by documenting the declining agency of women in four prominent colonial seaports: Salem, Portsmouth, Boston, and Newport. Informed by European precedent and wider colonial developments, she argues, each locale instituted patriarchal controls that mitigated women's growing numerical dominance and marginalized their presence in the counting houses and courtrooms. By the eve of American independence, the result was a degree of female dependence and deprivation hitherto unknown in New England. Far from ameliorating their deteriorating circumstances, however, the Revolution and its legacy of Republican Motherhood actually reinforced it by advocating the submission of the woman's self to family and nation.

Crane introduces her subject by charting the demographic evolution of the aforementioned seaports and finds that through a combination of circumstances women came to numerically predominate each in the eighteenth century. Whereas early in the settlement process men outnumbered women, the cumulative effects of population increase, commercial development, and imperial wars later skewed the sex ratio rather decisively in favor of women, thus reducing the pool of marriageable men and expanding the numbers of single and widowed women. Contrary to her initial expectations, however, Crane found that women's numerical superiority did not translate into increased agency. In fact, agency was instead concentrated in the hands of men through the consolidation of patriarchal institutions, a process that Crane contends had important European antecedents.

In a chapter entitled "The European Connection," the author points to four main areas in which women had been losing status in European society even prior to colonial settlement: religion, the law, the economy, and education. Challenging the supposition that Protestantism served as a force for improvement in women's lives, Crane finds the erosion of Catholic tradition and the loss of convents to have divested women of educational opportunity and contemplative lives outside of male purview. Moreover, it deprived them of inspira-

tional female iconography. The growing prevalence of Roman law over Germanic practice during the early modern period further reduced the status of women in society by generally constricting their legal autonomy. The expansion of market economies on national and international levels additionally worked to reduce women's involvement in economic production and exchange. Overarching these developments was the rise of the state, which, as it matured, increasingly usurped the authoritative role of the family and reduced it to subordinate status. Such was the legacy carried over in the "collective memory" of the American colonists and applied to the development of their own societies, much to the detriment of women.

Yet Crane finds the initial phase of the settlement process to have afforded new England greater latitude of activity than either their European contemporaries or subsequent generations of American women would enjoy. The incoherent state of institutional development created an anomalous public space where they could visibly assert an influence over community affairs. As the sex ratio in the commercial seaports increasingly began to favor women though, various institutions coalesced around patriarchy and entrenched male control. In successive chapters on religion, the economy, and the law, Crane details the steady erosion of women's agency in the face of such change. Silenced in church, saddled with legal restrictions, and marginalized by a market economy, women's agency in the public sphere waned and they began to dominate the ranks of the urban poor. The Revolution proved no salve, for its rhetoric anchored women in the long tradition of "conjugal patriarchy." In this regard, Republican Motherhood was little more than a new name for an old European practice of reinforcing the boundaries of female agency against transgression.

Carefully researched and clearly argued, Ebb Tide in New England represents an important addition to the literature on colonial women, as Crane weighs in against Whiggish notions that women's status was improved by the maturation of American society and the principles of the Revolution. As she puts it, "Whig assumptions, though in other ways liberal, are antithetical to the female experience, and this is nowhere more demonstrable than during the two centuries preceding Independence in the New England towns under consideration here." (p.3) Such an antithetical relationship may, however, be overstating the case, substituting unremitting decline for unyielding progress. Indeed, there may have been more interplay than Crane admits. In this regard, her metaphor of the tide is apt, but only if we recall that tidal currents often form strong undertows that move against the dominant current. By the standard of institutional participation, women were losing visibility and agency by the eighteenth century. But with the Great Awakening and the Revolution itself, the eighteenth century also witnessed significant challenges to institutional authority that created spaces where women might exercise greater agency. As such, female autonomy may not have been wholly washed out to sea by institutional patriarchy, but it was indeed tossed about amongst the ebbs and flows of colonial development.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

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

https://networks.h-net.org/h-grad

Citation: Jonathan M. Beagle. Review of Crane, Elaine Forman, *Ebb Tide in New England: Women, Seaports, and Social Change 1630-1800* and Elaine Forman Crane, *Ebb Tide in New England: Women, Seaports, and Social Change 1630-1800.* H-Grad, H-Net Reviews. November, 1998.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2522

Copyright © 1998 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.