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**John Gilbert McCurdy.** *Citizen Bachelors: Manhood and the Creation of the United States.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. xi + 268 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4788-4.

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## Singled Out

âA Batchelor lives in fair Natureâs despite,

He cumbers the earth without use or delight,

And robs Dame Posterity out of her right;

And therefore, unless he can shew good and sufficient cause for remaining in his solitary state, ought to have a heavy taxation laid on his shoulders.â

These lines, printed in the December 1778 edition of the *Westminster Magazine* (London), encapsulate only a few of the prejudices against single men that prevailed in early modern Anglo-American literary and political discourse.[1] While the *Westminster* author censured the bachelorâs perverse nonprocreativity, other writers denounced his sexual profligacy, his greed, and his cold heart. Believing that the bachelor contributed little of value to society, lawmakers and social commentators alike argued–in much greater earnest than twenty-first-century readers might surmise from the playful juxtaposition of poetry and policy quoted above–that the bachelor ought to be taxed out of existence. In fact, many single men in England and America did face heavy, discriminatory taxation, but rather than obliterating âthe solitary state,â such policies served instead to politicize bachelors and to draw them fully to the brink of citizenship. In *Citizen Bachelors: Manhood and the Creation of the United States*, John Gilbert McCurdy writes the history of this remarkable development. His narrative is convincing, elegant, and often astonishing.

McCurdy explores both the lived experiences of single men and the social construction of bachelorhood as a gendered identity. Whereas Howard P. Chudacoff turned to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to observe the heyday of the bachelor, McCurdy shifts toward the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to witness the era of his birth.[2] Though highly attentive to the English origins of bachelor norms and regulations, his book focuses primarily upon Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. He predicates his analysis upon a close examination of diaries, periodical and pamphlet literature, laws, tax records, and primary and secondary demographic research.

*Citizen Bachelors* opens in mid-sixteenth-century England. There, rapid population growth and intense inflationary pressures produced massive unemployment and poverty, as well as vagrancy exacerbated by the enclosure of grazable lands. To ameliorate these conditions, Parliament enacted a series of laws between 1549 and 1562 known collectively as the statutes of laborers and artificers. These laws required single persons to attach themselves to settled households and to contract for specified terms of employment. Decades later and an ocean apart, the colonial legislatures of New England adopted similar labor laws, certain of which applied only to men and none of which were commonly enforced against women. As McCurdy explains, âMasterlessness in New England was a masculine crimeâ (p. 35).

Meanwhile, in the Chesapeake, a severe shortage of single women compelled most men to wait for marriage. As numerous men took up housekeeping without a wife, âa nascent bachelor lifestyleâ began to emerge. Single men pooled resources to hire servants. Single planters dubbed their estates âBatchellors Choyce, Bachelorâs Chance, and Batchellors Delight.â And single males participated in bachelor-governor Francis Nicholsonâs Olympic-style games (pp. 45-46).

As Britainâs North American colonies matured, the implementation of new tax laws further differentiated single men as a legal category. In 1653, the town of Marshfield in Plymouth Colony imposed a poll tax upon unmarried men working âat their own hands.â In so doing, Marshfield became the first jurisdiction in England or America to bestow this sort of civic responsibility upon men without households (p. 60). Meanwhile, Pennsylvania authorities levied a poll tax upon single men and granted property tax exemptions to fathers with âa great charge of childrenâ (p. 61). As a result, single men âpaid higher taxes than the vast majority of the provinceâs taxable populationâ (p. 62).

By distinguishing single men both from married men and from single women, these colonial taxation schemes called the bachelor into legal existence. Chesapeake legislation accomplished much the same. In 1725, the Maryland assembly granted debtor relief to married men and fathers, but not to bachelors. Similarly, during the Seven Yearsâ War, the Virginia House of Burgesses authorized Governor Robert Dinwiddie to draft âyoung men … who have not wives or children.â These laws fostered a new concept of citizenship âin which all men owed the community some obligation that could either be executed through paternity or through special services to the stateâ (p. 82).

Having investigated the unique legal standing of single men in England and America, McCurdy turns readersâ attention to literary representations of the bachelor, focusing first upon political pamphlets. Alarmed by a steep decline in marriage rates in the late seventeenth century, English political economists condemned nonprocreative sexuality. Anticipating Thomas Malthusâs conceptualization of marriage as an economic choice, these writers advocated the imposition of new taxes to heighten the costs of bachelorhood. Unlike colonial American bachelor taxes, levied to raise revenue, these English proposals explicitly sought to promote marriage.

British belletrists, inspired by ideals of romantic love and companionate marriage, likewise denounced bachelor licentiousness and avarice, but they did not wholly condemn the single state. The *Tatler*âs Richard Steele and the *Spectator*âs Joseph Addison both adopted the narrative personas of benignly chaste bachelors. They placed the bachelorsâ sins–homosexual behavior notably absent from the list–alongside other human imperfections and kept the possibility of the bachelorâs redemption within view. Even lascivious old men might fall in love.

Colonial scribblers could not match the British literati for output, but Benjamin Franklin kept pace with their wit. Surveying Franklinâs most famous works, including the letters of Silence Dogood (1722), âThe Speech of Miss Polly Bakerâ (1747), *Poor Richardâs Almanac* (1732-58), and *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind* (1751), McCurdy asserts that âFranklinâs approach was consistently antibachelorâ (p. 107). Franklin considered the failure to marry a failure of manliness. Too often disgraced by the indulgence of luxury, bachelorhood, as Franklin saw it, was decidedly *not* the way to wealth. Such a perspective, McCurdy accedes, does not readily square with the amorous, even rakish life that Franklin himself led. Yet it also breaks awkwardly against another of Franklinâs writings, the oft-anthologized âAdvice to a Young Man on the Choice of a Mistressâ (1745). In that circulated but unpublished epistle, Franklin paid tongue-in-cheek tribute to the institution of marriage, declaring it the âmost natural State of Man.â He further likened the bachelor to an âodd Half of a Pair of Scissars,â as potent a metaphor of uselessness as ever one was.[3] But after perfunctorily admonishing his reader to wed, Franklin lustily celebrated recreational sex with well-seasoned women. In so doing, his âAdvice to a Young Manâ provided counsel for bachelors wishing to avoid loneliness, bastardy, bad sex, ill repute, indebted-

ness, and sexually transmitted disease.

From law and literature, McCurdy turns to lived experience. A close reading of two dozen diaries kept by college-educated New England males leads McCurdy to conclude that during the mid 1700s young men came to embrace bachelorhood as an opportunity for travel, homosociability, the acquisition of consumer goods, and the pursuit of romantic encounters. McCurdy cautions against the class and urban biases of this source material, but he also argues that âbachelorhood had somewhat of a trickle-down effect in late colonial America. Single men in rural areas found their lives changed as wellâ (p. 121). In support of this assertion, McCurdy examines a sixty-year span of tax assessments from Concord Township, a predominately Quaker, rural district in Chester County, Pennsylvania. Not particularly religious, but not particularly rowdy either, the 267 men who paid bachelor taxes between 1715 and 1775 acquired a reputation for material ostentation, lending credence to Franklin's apprehensions about bachelorhood and luxury. McCurdy rounds out this, his fourth of five chapters, with a lively analysis of Dr. Alexander Hamiltonâs Ancient and Honorable Tuesday Club, many of whose members passed from bachelorhood to marriage during the brief history of that âgelasticâ institution.

By the late eighteenth century, more than two hundred years of discriminatory legislation had differentiated the bachelor, while a succession of Restoration and Augustan penmen had affixed upon him a litany of vices, and even a virtue or two. Perhaps because earlier writers had so thoroughly stigmatized single men, American patriots invoked bachelorhood to disparage not only the effeminate luxuriance of the British citizenry but also the hypermasculine bloodlust of those mercenaries who fought on Britainâs behalf. Simultaneously, however, the War of Independence brought new civic and political opportunities for single men. Revolutionary bachelors once again paid heavy wartime taxes and performed a disproportionate share of military duty.

The Revolution, moreover, ushered in new ideas about republican citizenship. By extending suffrage to adult male taxpayers without regard to property ownership, the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 enfranchised large numbers of single men, a fact not particularly lamented by Pennsylvania Republicans, who found much else to fault in their stateâs new liberal government. By 1792, half of the states in the union had likewise granted limited or full voting rights to male taxpayers and by 1800 nearly every state had repealed its bachelor laws (pp. 177, 180). These reforms resulted in large part from bachelorsâ contributions to the Revolutionary War. âThe taxing and drafting of single men,â McCurdy declares, âadvanced the notion that there was no meaningful legal difference between the rights and obligations of free white men because of marital statusâ (p. 196).

McCurdyâs focus upon the founding of the American republic unfortunately draws his attention away from ongoing developments in Great Britain. Had McCurdy contrasted the history of male suffrage in the United States with that in the United Kingdom, particularly through the electoral reforms of the early 1830s, he would have provided readers with a greater sense of the divergence or possibly the reconvergence of notions of bachelorhood and citizenship in the Anglophone world. McCurdyâs book also raises unanswered questions about race. Because enslaved African Americans exercised little of the personal autonomy characteristic of bachelorhood, and because poets and pamphleteers who wrote about bachelors rarely bore single men of color in mind, McCurdy rightly limits his study to white males. But if bachelorhood was a unique prerogative of white men, to what extent did it function as a marker of racial distinction? Did whiteness depend upon bachelorhood? If so, where and how?

McCurdyâs narrative, more subtle and nuanced than may be fully explicated here, makes a vital contribution to the study of early American manhood and masculinity. At little more than two hundred pages of body text, *Citizen Bachelors* is anything but thin. McCurdy explores the many paradoxes that riddled bachelorhood as a legal and literary construct in the eighteenth century, rather than explaining those paradoxes away. Throughout the book, McCurdy explicitly engages the scholarship of Richard Godbeer, Mark Kann, Anne Lombard, and Thomas A. Foster, among others. Though his evidentiary base is unfortunately limited in places, McCurdy judiciously tightens and qualifies his conclusions. McCurdy also supplements his work with an appendix of laws that will provide invaluable assistance to scholars wishing to conduct research in the field of British North American legal history. Written in clear, uncluttered prose and offering rich rewards for scholars of gender, sexuality, the family, and the law, *Citizen Bachelors* should be singled out for careful reading.

Notes

[1]. "Cases of Compulsive Bachelors Answered," *Westminster Magazine* (December 1778), 637.

[2]. Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[3]. Benjamin Franklin, "Old Mistresses Apologue," June 25, 1745, in Leonard W. Labaree, ed., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin,* 39 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959-), 3: 27-31.