



Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America

Linda K. Kerber

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Women of the Republic views the American Revolution through women's eyes. Previous histories have rarely recognized that the battle for independence was also a woman's war. The "women of the army" toiled in army hospitals, kitchens, and laundries. Civilian women were spies, fund raisers, innkeepers, suppliers of food and clothing. Recruiters, whether patriot or tory, found men more willing to join the army when their wives and daughters could be counted on to keep the farms in operation and to resist encroachment from squatters. "I have Don as much to Carrey on the warr as maney that Sett Now at the healm of government," wrote one impoverished woman, and she was right.

Women of the Republic is the result of a seven-year search for women's diaries, letters, and legal records. Achieving a remarkable comprehensiveness, it describes women's participation in the war, evaluates changes in their education in the late eighteenth century, describes the novels and histories women read and wrote, and analyzes their status in law and society. The rhetoric of the Revolution, full of insistence on rights and freedom in opposition to dictatorial masters, posed questions about the position of women in marriage as well as in the polity, but few of the implications of this rhetoric were recognized. How much liberty and equality for women? How much pursuit of happiness? How much justice?

When American political theory failed to define a program for the participation of women in the public arena, women themselves had to develop an ideology of female patriotism. They promoted the notion that women could guarantee the continuing health of the republic by nurturing public-spirited sons and husbands. This limited ideology of "Republican Motherhood" is a measure of the political and social conservatism of the Revolution. The subsequent history of women in America is the story of women's efforts to accomplish for themselves what the Revolution did not.

Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America Details

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Jenniet Galvan says

The American Revolution as a precipice for the evolution of women's roles in American society would be a fairly succinct description of this book.

Shonda Wilson says

Kerber's specifically feminine view of history is both academic and entertaining, while she does show bias, it is not some sort of hidden bias...her work is intentional and has an agenda, but very well written, well executed, and researched.

Marfy says

A very intelligent analysis of the world that women had to deal with before, during and after the Revolution. I learned a lot from this book and plan to return to it.

Paul says

After reading the exceptional biography Women of the Republic, regarding women's 'intellect and ideology in Revolutionary America' by Dr. Linda K. Kerber, I am left with a sense of bewilderment about the true meaning of Republican Motherhood. Instead of recognizing women (mothers) as competent partners in the raising of the children in post-colonial society, the males, and the budding middle class, who promoted that mothers be responsible for the raising of good citizens, were not so much convinced of the superb realities of a woman, as much as they were pursuing business affairs, due to the absence of the aristocracy.

Francesca says

This was such an incredible read! I lost count of how many times I would read about someone or something and think "why didn't they teach us this in high school?"

Doris Raines says

There. Is. Nothing. Like. Reading. A. Revolutionary. Book. About. Good. Strong. Women's.

Mathew Powers says

Stellar work. This book, along with Mary Beth Norton's *Liberty's Daughters* should be read together. I could pick at a few things in both books, but it doesn't take away from the brilliance of the research and prose of both works.

Dan Gorman says

While I find Linda Kerber's sharp divisions between public/private life and women's/men's spheres of society a bit old-fashioned, this book is a marvelous recreation of American [white] women's lives from 1768 to 1810. Kerber was one of the first recent historians to show the intellectual lives of revolutionary-era women, as they dealt with supply shortages, managed households, were terrorized by occupying armies, and imagined places for themselves in the republic. Most women did not embrace English philosophé Mary Wollstonecraft's call for radical equality, instead embracing "Republican Motherhood" — not totally equal to men, but arguing that they had a role in shaping the moral character of the nation.

Kerber thinks women practiced a strategy of "deference," accepting limits on equality in exchange for tangible gains. I am not sure this is the proper framework for understanding women's lives in this period; Kerber might be superimposing modern expectations of feminism onto these past women. The marginal improvements in divorce law and the civil courts, plus the opening of female schools, might not have seemed like a deferral of anything, but rather victories, to period women. What I'm getting at is, if the 20th-century vision of feminism was not yet imagined (or, at least, was imagined only by a few intellectuals, such as Wollstonecraft), was there anything that republican mothers were deferring? Or were they merely creating? Quibbles with this framework aside, I loved the book. Highly readable, highly educational.

Jack says

Kerber's argument is that the American Revolution was a turning point in the development of woman's political consciousness, but the republican experiment never became radical enough to accept women as civil or political beings. Her discussion of how women created political roles for themselves by mixing political and domestic life, particularly through the figure of the Republican Mother, has been most influential and has set the tone for most studies of women and politics in the early Republic. However, she falls prey to the same problems as many historians who study slavery in the early Republic, in that she assumes an ahistorical definitive nature of republican liberty and assesses American inability to meet that nature as a lapse of revolutionary logic. In addition, some of the indicators she uses to assess woman's liberty, such as the (in)ability to divorce, seem to be 20th century standards of liberty that she is applying to the 18th century. Fortunately, Women of the Republic marked a beginning rather than a culmination, and other historians in the last 25 years have worked to tie up her loose ends.

Andrew says

While this book resembled a sort of textbook one would read in an academic setting, I still found it extremely helpful in my Honors in the Major Thesis. Kerber, much like Nancy F. Cott takes many

dimensions of women's life throughout history, especially American history, and reflects onto words, the plight they have faced. More specifically discussing women's role in the revolution, Kerber shows a side of women that we are not accustomed to reading in modern-day history texts. She shows the woman who is willing to fight for her country, sacrifice for the good of the whole, and risk her life just as much as her husband.

I think that, by revealing this revolutionary information, Kerber shows our own preconceptions regarding gender roles. She forces the reader not only to look at the many instances of sexism women have had to put up with throughout history, but also realize the gender polarization that still lurks in today's society. As a reader, Kerber, much like Cott showed me that there is more than one way to get a point across. Through her implicit fact-set using explicit historical foundations, Kerber makes the reader reconsider gender-bias.

Collier Brown says

A fairly general survey of what most people, I think, know about women during the pre- and post-Revolutionary era. That women were considered the "custodians of civic morality" meant little when viewed in the light of their civic freedoms, or the lack thereof. Though a very small number of important Enlightenment thinkers actually ventured an opinion toward the status of women in a republic--John Locke being one of those famous few--, women continued to suffocate under the strictures of coverture laws and those stigmas so devastatingly ingrained in patriarchal society against women: intellectual ineptitude, for instance, and emotional instability. But that is to say nothing of the afflictions women suffered for being married to Tories and sympathizers with the Crown. Oftentimes, women were expelled from their communities and their property or husband's property confiscated.

According to Linda Kerber, women were forced to a political underground of petitions and private correspondences in order to flex their political muscle. Even after the war, things didn't change that much. But those political freedoms attained by the colonies and legislated via declaration(s) and constitutions made visible a particular standard of freedom grounded in the rhetoric of universal equality. America would have to contend with its own hypocrisies regarding the suffrage of both African Americans and women over the next century. In other words, the doors of coverture had been blown open, making protest and progress inevitable. Catalyst to this new world of possibility was the twin rise of political and industrial revolution during the nineteenth century. On the one hand, a generational shift allowed women more and more voice in public affairs, and on the other, an explosion in literacy due to the widespread effects of print culture made women's education not only important but necessary in order to train younger generations (the expectation being that women would spearhead the education of new republican youth at home) for their future citizenship.

A good read overall. Fantastic illustrations of women and how they were represented both physically and symbolically in pre/post Revolutionary America.
