

John Carroll University Carroll Collected

History

12-2009

Review of Gentlewomen and Learned Ladies: Women and Elite Formation in Eighteenth- Century Philadelphia

Daniel P. Kilbride

John Carroll University, dkilbride@jcu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://collected.jcu.edu/hist-facpub>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kilbride, Daniel P., "Review of Gentlewomen and Learned Ladies: Women and Elite Formation in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia" (2009). *History*. 28.

<http://collected.jcu.edu/hist-facpub/28>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Carroll Collected. It has been accepted for inclusion in History by an authorized administrator of Carroll Collected. For more information, please contact connell@jcu.edu.

Gentlewomen and Learned Ladies: Women and Elite Formation in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia. By Sarah Fatherly. (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2008. 244 pp. \$47.50, ISBN 978-0-934223-94-2.)

Sarah Fatherly's slim volume adds to a large literature that traces the construction of upper-class culture in the colonial and early national periods. The book purports to challenge this scholarship by focusing on the self-conscious contributions of women in establishing that world. Fatherly situates *Gentlewomen and Learned Ladies* alongside works by Cynthia Kierner and Catherine Allgor that recognize women's significant contributions to fashioning genteel life. She focuses on a specific and highly distinctive milieu. In this case it is eighteenth-century Philadelphia, where the business of elite formation was complicated by the demands of Quaker piety.

Philadelphia's merchant women established the foundation for a stable upper-class culture in the decades following 1720. Mercantile Philadelphians found it difficult to make convincing claims to elite status. Seeking ways (apart from wealth) to establish social eminence, women and men sought to emulate the culture of the British gentry. Invested with considerable autonomy to choose marriage partners, Quaker women established a social and religious network to enforce partnerships within the circle of elite Philadelphia families. Because women often helped manage mercantile houses, they were familiar with the market in British luxury goods. Women focused on procuring fine textiles for their households, circumventing Quaker concerns about the impropriety of luxury goods.

Women also followed British models of education. Philadelphians pursued so-called ornamental subjects, such as dancing, French, painting, and playing the violin. But Fatherly emphasizes their acquisition of more substantive areas of knowledge, such as botany, astronomy, and history. Both types of subjects set upper-class women apart from their social inferiors. Women applied some of the lessons of their education by establishing a Philadelphia version of the town and country life enjoyed by the London gentry. A winter season in the city featuring dinner parties and dancing assemblies was balanced by summers centered around nature excursions and estate tourism. As the imperial crisis loomed, women applied the literary skills they developed during their educations by writing patriotic poetry, organizing boycotts, and discussing the issues of the day. Once the nation acquired independence, elite women sought to reassert their social authority by ritually healing Loyalist-Patriot divisions by participating in the celebration of the dauphin's birthday in 1782. Fatherly argues that thanks in large part to women's work, Philadelphia's upper class entered the early national period with the same unity it had enjoyed in colonial times.

Gentlewomen and Learned Ladies is admirably clear, concise, and straightforward. It is extremely narrowly focused on the interior lives of elite women, however. There is no indication that the practices established by elite women to cement their social status actually worked. Fatherly does not engage literature on colonial-era deference, working-class life, and political culture that might shed light on that question. Also, much of this territory has been covered before by Susan Stabile and David S. Shields, whose work is not cited here. Nevertheless, this book is an informative and well-researched contribution to the literature on privileged women's lives in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world.

Daniel Kilbride
John Carroll University
University Heights, Ohio