

**Review of Gunlög Fur, *A Nation of Women: Gender and Colonial Encounters among the Delaware Indians* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. 264 pp. Cloth, 39.95, ISBN 978-0-8122-4182-2).**

Rachel Wheeler, 2011

Gunlög Fur's *A Nation of Women* is an ambitious book. It is essentially an overview of Delaware history and cultural change in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from a gender studies perspective. During this time, the Delaware were commonly referred to as women in diplomatic contexts, and Fur's book attempts to unpack the meanings behind this designation, first by examining the "roles and responsibilities of women" among the Delaware, and the "historical conditions that made such a gendered designation possible." She examines gender both as an "organizing principle for subsistence activities, division of labor and exchange, and dispersion of power" as well as "a process of thought and belief" that "finds sanction in the spiritual realm" (2-3).

In her agenda and methodology, Fur thus reveals herself as influenced by ethnohistory and women's history movements. She is clearly indebted to both, but shares with other scholars of her generation a resistance to binary thinking, whether male/female or Indian/white. The pioneering generation of ethnohistorians was concerned to write Native Americans back into American history. Likewise, the first generation of women's historians strove to reconstruct women's experiences. Both fields aimed to show the strength, resilience and creativity of their subjects in the face of persistent oppression. Reflecting wider cultural trends, the rising scholars in both fields are to the parent generation what Barack Obama is to Jesse Jackson, indebted but compelled by a different set of concerns. Fur, like many of her cohort (myself included), aims to "complicate" our understanding of identity, and Fur does this by exploring the varied and dynamic understandings of gender among and within communities of Delaware, Iroquois and European-Americans. On the whole, Fur's work is persuasive and nuanced, and reveals the fruitfulness of applying gender studies perspectives to bring new understandings to a longstanding interpretive puzzle: making sense of the Delaware designation as women. Nonetheless, I found myself occasionally troubled by the shadow of Marxist-inflected early studies of native women, which romanticized pre-contact native society as one of utopian gender complementarity. [1]

Chapter one provides an overview of Delaware/Lenape history and culture in contact with Europeans in the seventeenth century, one made richer for her ability to work in the Dutch and Swedish sources. In Chapters two and three, Fur explores the Moravian mission to the Delaware, focusing on the village of Meniologomekah, as a site of colonial encounter, and thus, a site of cultural formation. Chapter three focuses on missionary "sightings" of the devil to examine the tensions between native and missionary gender ideals. Chapter four then examines the more positive ways in which Delaware women were able to "strengthen their role in the Indian community though their contacts with the missionaries, in spite of the fact that the Christians insisted on establishing patriarchal and hierarchical social relationships." (p. 11) Chapter five leaves the missions and is really the culmination of the previous chapters.

In "Metaphors and National Identity: Delaware-as-Women," Fur provides what should be the definitive interpretation of the designation of the Delawares as women beginning in the late 1600s and continuing for about a century, a topic that has bedeviled historians since the eighteenth century. Her goal is to "tease apart the meanings conveyed in the metaphor that proclaimed Delawares to be women to see

how it related to Delaware perceptions of themselves and of their society." (161). Fur essentially affirms the Delaware account conveyed by Moravian missionary, John Heckewelder, in which the Delaware, in the late seventeenth century, accepted the designation of woman, signifying an esteemed position as peace-makers. Over time, it served Iroquois and colonial British interests to redefine the Delaware as "women" in accordance with European ideas of gender, and thus the Delaware were depicted as emasculated and subjugated by the Iroquois.

On the whole, Fur's analysis is persuasive, but some of the building blocks are less persuasive than others. For example, I found her use of the Moravian sources problematic on two levels. While I applaud Fur's work for its nuance in reading native actions and motives, the same openness is not applied to the Moravian missionaries, who are painted with a broad brush as agents of colonialism. This was the standard view of first generation ethnohistorians, but it has been steadily chipped away by more recent scholarship on missions and Native Christianity, very little of which is visible in Fur's footnotes. I have argued that Moravian mission policy differed dramatically from those of Anglo-Protestant missionaries, but Fur's Moravians are virtually indistinguishable, and this view shapes her reading of the sources. [2] Having worked in many of the same sources on which Fur's chapter three is based, I believe an alternate interpretation is possible. Fur depicts the missionaries as imposing European hierarchical values on Indians in their dealings on marriage, and ironically, by so doing, Fur diminishes native agency. The example of a woman who is cast out of Gnadenhütten is a case in point (109-112). Despite the involvement of native leaders in decision, Fur reads the expulsion of the woman for "lewd" behavior as the imposition of missionary values. The whole event could be read instead as the effort of a community torn by disease and other problems that accompanied colonialism to work out its communal values.

I found her use of the Moravian sources problematic in many respects at a more nuts and bolts level. These concerns may not be enough to undermine her interpretation, but they will frustrate any scholar who tries to follow in her footsteps. In reading chapter two, I was initially impressed with Fur's use of statistics--for example counting the number of times women brought forward concerns to the missionaries--to uncover deeper patterns. Having worked in these same Moravian sources, I was curious to look up the sources cited for Table 2 (92). First, I was surprised to see a citation to Box 177 of the Records of the Moravian Mission Collection (cited by Fur as MAB), as that box relates to the Moravian mission of the late-eighteenth century on the White River. [3] It quickly became clear to me that she intended Box 117, which has to do with Gnadenhütten. I thought perhaps this was a typo, but Box 177 appears throughout the notes and also in Table 1 (67), and in every instance it should be Box 117. This would perhaps not be so problematic if the notes included the title of the document, i.e., "Gnadenhütten Diary." It may have been editorial mandates that kept these titles out, but specialists are likely to want to know whether the quote comes from Meniolagomekah mission diary, Gnadenhütten conference notes, or a personal letter from one missionary to another. A more user-friendly scholarly apparatus would have helped future scholars to more easily follow in the important path she has charted.

There is one final matter I found somewhat problematic and frustrating because it could have been resolved in the editorial process. Occasionally, Fur's ideological commitments result in gratuitous statements or unsubstantiated claims, the most glaring example of which is a seeming non-sequitor, "both Indian and white men lamented the suffering of Indian women, suggesting to modern readers that women have always been at the mercy of men's inability to control themselves and their insatiable

sexual appetites" (103). Such universalizing claims undermine Fur's more nuanced arguments, arguments that deserve to be heard.

#### **Notes**

1. See, for example, the work of Mona Etienne and Eleanor Burke Leacock, eds, *Women and Colonization: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Praeger, 1980) and Carol Devens, *Countering Colonization: Native American Women and Great Lakes Missions, 1630-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
2. Rachel Wheeler, *To Live upon Hope: Mohicans and Missionaries in the Eighteenth-Century Northeast* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).
3. In the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem, Penn.