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BOOK REVIEW

Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility and Family Limitations in America, 1760–1820. Susan E. Klepp. 2009. NC, USA: The University of North Carolina Press. ISBN-13: 978-0-8078-5992-6. Price: £53.95. 352 pages (hardback)

This book has been published on behalf of the College of William and Mary and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in the USA, both of which coincidentally I came across this summer while in Virginia. It is very clear that Americans have a deep relationship with their colonial heritage and take huge pride in authenticating and recreating their origins, as anyone who has visited Williamsburg will have witnessed. Similarly, this book has been meticulously researched from a wealth of sources and challenges old assumptions on fertility and family planning in colonial times. The author's central theory is that American women began to reject the lifetime of childbearing and started to limit births more than 100 years in advance of

Western Europe, with the exception of France; an alternative 'American revolution' that was invented and implemented by women themselves.

This book is not easy bedtime reading material and has numerous footnotes with historical references. It relates to many diverse ethnic, cultural and religious groups such as Quakers, the Pennsylvania Dutch, rural and urban populations. There are attractive illustrations of women and family groups, often portrayed with fruit and flowers as iconic props representing 'female promise and procreation'. There is a complex association throughout with the demographics of enslaved women; I would have been interested in a chapter specifically on their lives and patterns of childbearing. Thomas Jefferson, the third USA president, took up with a slave, Sally Hemmings, after the death of his wife in 1782. Modern DNA testing has suggested his lineage continues in the current African-American population although, as a consummate politician, he denied any carnal relationship with

a slave at the time.

The birth control chapter states that most historians conclude that contraception was not significant in colonial America. The author disputes this and found examples to the contrary, but mainly referencing herbal remedies from diaries, chemists and doctors' notes. She found little reference to sexual abstinence other than with nursing mothers. Given the lack of effective contraception from the modern perspective, it is not exactly clear what underpins the revolutionary limitation of family size.

In summary, if you are writing a PhD on historical patterns of fertility in North America this book will be a godsend. For the rest of us, it may become a little dusty on the bookshelf but was an interesting read over the Christmas break nevertheless.

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