BOOK REVIEW


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 pride in authenticating and celebrating their origins, as anyone who has visited Williamsburg will attest.

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 thesis is that American women began to reject the lifestyle 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This book is not easy bedtime reading material and has numerous footnotes with historical references.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 the Quakers, the Pennsylvania Dutch, rural and urban populations. There are attractive illustrations of women and family groups, often portrayed with a 'female promise and procreation'. There is a complex association with the demographics of enslaved women; I would have liked more analysis in this chapter specifically on their lives and patterns of childbearing. Thomas Jefferson, the third USA president, took up 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.

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