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Carol Berkin, Leslie Horowitz, eds. *Women's Voices, Women's Lives: Documents in Early American History.* Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998. xii + 203 pp. $20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55553-350-2; $45.00 (library), ISBN 978-1-55553-351-9.

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Providing a Documentary History of Women in Early America

Carol Berkin and Leslie Horowitz endeavor to provide a window into the life experiences of women in the formative years of American and U.S. history in *Women's Voices, Women's Lives.* By examining documents from the mid-1600s through the early nineteenth century, the editors hope "to provide an introduction to the lives of early American women" and "to provide an introduction to the documentary sources from which historians reconstruct the lives of these women (p. 3)." Further, Berkin and Horowitz hope, as they express in the introduction of the book, to engender an appreciation for the challenges and rewards of historical research and writing.

The editors have divided their book into six topical chapters entitled "Sex and Reproduction," "Marriage and Family," "Women's Work," "Religion," "Politics and the Legal System," and "A Changing Gender Ideology." Each chapter is introduced by an explanatory essay providing a historical and sociological background for the documents that follow. Each document or excerpt within the chapters is prefaced with a full bibliographical citation and a brief background of the circumstances surrounding the particular entry.

The introduction to the book states that the editors' goal is to show the lives of early American women "conveyed through their own words whenever possible rather than through commentary by the men around them (p. 3)." A worthy task. Unfortunately, the women's voices are only but a whisper in the documents chosen by Berkin and Horowitz. Of the 117 documents included in the book, only 31 can be attributed directly to a woman's hand. The other 86 documents are taken from court records such as depositions, testimony, and petitions, advice books written by men, and men's letters and journals. The authors argue that the court records offer a valuable voice to women who did not have the time or wherewithal to keep a diary or to write many letters. The major weakness in court documents as a reflection of women's experiences is the fact that these records would have been written by male clerks or barristers, and therefore, it is hard to know if they wrote what women said verbatim, or used editorial license.

The bulk of the documents cited in the book address the lives of white women. The editors admit in their introduction they hoped to include information regarding the lives of African-American women (both free and slave) as well as Native American women, but there is a dearth of primary sources for these groups. Nevertheless they endeavor to include in each chapter several items relevant to the lives of these women. Most of the documents, as is expected given the limits of literacy among Native Americans and the African-American population at the time, are secondary accounts primarily written by men. Thus, these excerpts provide more of an indication how men of the period viewed these women than of the lives of the women themselves.

The limitations of the documents chosen for inclusion in the book are exacerbated by the lack of follow-up information for most of the accounts. The reader is introduced to a situation, such as a trial for infanticide or a hearing concerning lewd behavior, and the relevant quote or document excerpt is provided by the compilers, but then the matter is dropped. The editors do not try to enlighten the reader as to the outcome of the particular case or the consequences experienced by the woman involved. Thus, one is left hanging–wondering if the woman being tried for infanticide was found guilty or was she acquitted? Was the advice given by a father to a daughter regarding the choice of a husband followed or disregarded? More research and the addition of just a few additional sentences at the end of each entry would help bring these women to life. This expansion of the text would help the reader see how different women were viewed by society at the time and what consequences their actions brought upon them.

_Women's Voices, Women's Lives, could be used as a tool in the teaching of early American history if the documents were fleshed out. Most of the entries are brief, and excerpts from the book could be assigned as foundations for student journals, essay writing, or for class discussions. The major impediment to its usefulness for research purposes and classroom use, however, is the absence of an index. Nor is there a bibliography or bibliographical essay at the end of the book to help the scholar ascertain what sources were consulted in the compiling of the book. The information only appears as a preface before its accompanying account.

Collecting primary documents in an effort to illustrate the condition of women in the early history of this nation is a worthy undertaking; unfortunately, *Women's Voices, Women's Lives* falls short of its goal. What information is given is locked away in a text that provides no tools to help the reader mine the deposits therein.

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