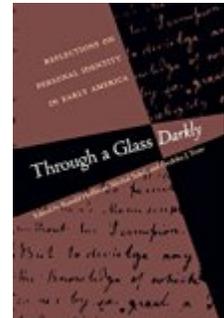




**Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, Fredrika J. Teute, eds..** *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xii + 464 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2336-1.



**Mechal Sobel Ronald Hoffman, and Fredrika J. Teute, eds..** *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xii + 464 pp , , .

**Reviewed by** Millie Jackson

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This collection of thirteen essays grew out of a 1993 conference to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Institute of Early American History and Culture. According to Ronald Hoffman, one of the editors, these essays represent the trend of historical research in the 1990s. They truly do. The essays present creative ways of looking at the kinds of historical and archival documents we have always relied upon as well as ideas for examining items, such as cupboards, that we may not automatically consider when conducting research.

The historians who have written articles for this book provide a fascinating view of the self in early America. The essays in this collection are divided into three strands: histories, texts, and reflections. Each strand is introduced by an essay written by Greg Denning. Essays are included by

authors such as Kenneth Lockridge, Rhys Isaac, Mary Beth Norton, and James H. Merrell.

In part one, the "Histories of Self," five scholars analyze individuals' diaries, letters and personal accounts focusing on tensions between the traditional and changing cultures in early America. The "narratives of self-describing" (p. 5) in this section probe the lives of ordinary individuals who struggled with living their lives during the era. Analysis of public opinions are the important in many of the essays. For example, Alan Taylor explores the paradoxes surrounding the beating and subsequent murder of a child and the trial of her father in "The Unhappy Stephen Arnold": An Episode of Murder and Penitence in the Early Republic." The spectacle surrounding the trial and planned public hanging provides a view of small town America. Definitions of gender are explored by Mary Beth Norton in her essay, "Communal Definitions of Gendered Identity in Seventeenth-

Century English America." Norton examines the choice of gender identity and the consequences of being identified as a male or female. She investigates the problems and sometimes the advantages of being misidentified using the case of Thomas(ine) Hall as the main example.

In part two, "Texts of Self," the writers extend beyond manuscript materials to material culture. In what Dening describes as "moments of cultural edginess" (p. 157), the essayists look for revelations of self in the inscriptions on such items as illustrations in journals and diaries. Dening writes that, "The self is materialized in these expressions, in song, dance, sculptured stone, words and paper" (p. 159). Laura Thatcher Ulrich "reads" the cupboards that women used to store linens and dishes in her "Hannah Barnard's Cupboard: Female Property and Identity in Eighteenth-Century New England." Through the inscriptions she traces the genealogy and history of not only the cupboards, but also of the families who owned them. Ulrich speculates on the meanings of inscriptions and women's lives and how we can interpret them at the end of the twentieth century.

The final section explores "reflections on reflections" (p. 344). Definitions of abuse, pain, and race are all analyzed in this section. The essays do not just tell the stories, they try to "fulfill the historian's obligation" to explain the stories. The gendered views of pain and the consequences of not having medical attention are part of what Elaine Forman Crane addresses in her essay, "I have suffer'd much today": The defining force of pain in Early America." Physical pain, mentioned in diaries and letters, provides a discourse, particularly for what women suffered. Examining spirituality and religious beliefs are important to other essays in this section. W. Jeffrey Bolster contemplates the place of black sailors in "An Inner Diaspora: Black Sailors Making Selves." He does not only look the social standing of the black sailors, he also analyzes the influence of spiritual beliefs.

This is an important collection of essays, especially for those interested in interdisciplinary studies. Though many traditional types of sources are consulted (manuscripts, diaries, journals), the authors push boundaries to consider the non-traditional object as well. Interpretations and views of daily life are broadened and the meaning of what it meant to live in seventeenth and eighteenth century America is reexamined. There are several more essays than those briefly mentioned in this review. All are worth reading and discussing. These essays should also encourage us to think about the possibilities that still exist for thinking about not only the self in Early America, but all aspects of life.

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