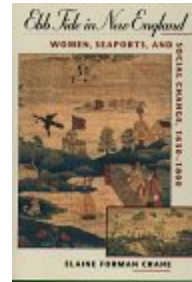


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elaine Forman Crane. *Ebb Tide in New England: Women, Seaports, and Social Change 1630-1800*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998. x + 333 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55553-336-6; \$29.95 (library), ISBN 978-1-55553-337-3.

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## The Women of Urban, Coastal New England

In *Ebb Tide in New England*, Elaine Crane brings us an informative and engaging study of womanhood in four seaport towns of colonial New England. Focusing on religious, social, economic, and legal-political developments in Boston and Salem, Massachusetts, Newport, Rhode Island, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Crane builds a powerful and persuasive argument for the complex ways that New England women were marginalized and poverty increasingly feminized as the seventeenth century gave way to the eighteenth.

Crane's book is not a happy story. She sets out, as she asserts in her Prologue, to challenge Whig interpretations of a progressive American history. She also takes to task many recent historians (of women's and cultural history) whose works have emphasized women's agency, subversion, and activism, rather than their victimization and marginalization. Returning, in many respects, to older and more overtly feminist analytical models of the 1960s and 1970s, Crane makes the evolution of patriarchy central to her examination of New England women's lives. The women of colonial New England, she makes clear, did not benefit from the development of an increasingly stable and prosperous society. Rather, as New England moved further away from its frontier beginnings, women found themselves pushed to the religious, social, economic, and political margins of their respective urban communities as the "patriarchal aspirations" (p. 7) of the men around them, coupled with the gendered effects accompanying the gradual rise of a market economy, worked to hamper female progress and, in

some cases, actually reversed the strides some women had made into the public sphere.

While the rise of patriarchy in early America might sound like familiar interpretive ground to those versed in women's history of the 1960s or 1970s, demographic factors distinguish Crane's work and make its message especially poignant. At the time of settlement, she notes, white men outnumbered white women in each of these four seaport towns. By the eighteenth century, however, the affects of warfare, disease, and a maritime culture that took many men away from home for long periods of time had reversed earlier demographic patterns. By 1700, and certainly by 1776, white women "dramatically outnumbered" (p. 12) white men. The populations of these seaports (as well as many other maritime communities of coastal New England) had been "feminized." Yet, as Crane details, women's numerical predominance did not translate into increased access to or possession of religious, social, economic, or legal-political power. Rather, in an ironic historical twist, these women, she found, actually lost ground over time. Whether single women, wives whose husbands were away, or widows, New England's urban women were increasingly shut out of leadership decisions in their churches, closed out of higher paying craft and service occupations, and restricted by the legal-political workings of New England's colonial court system—all while being held to higher moral standards than their male counterparts. Female majorities were being ruled by increasingly close-minded and semi-tyrannical male minorities. And in separate chapters fo-

cusing on the church, the economy, the law, and moral governance, Crane paints the often depressing picture for readers.

So, who or what was to blame for the declining status of New England's urban women by the eighteenth century? Here Crane offers several answers. Men are the most obvious culprits. Men's desire for order (defined in increasingly gendered terms over time), their hope of adapting European-style patriarchal models to the American setting, and their ready access to leadership roles in New England's ecclesiastical, economic, and legal-political institutions, aided them in controlling and excluding women. Over time, New England men rendered the women around them invisible in a whole variety of real and metaphorical ways. Yet, Crane posits other answers as well—answers that demonstrate in subtle and direct ways how closely the rise of patriarchy was connected to larger, structural changes in the economic and legal-political worlds. As Crane asserts, New England's evolving market economy holds much of the blame for women's diminished status. As production grew more specialized, as markets were more tightly regulated, and as cash replaced barter, the importance of the household economy—and women's centrality within it—declined. Women, even independent, urban women, found they had fewer roles to play in the increasingly public and gendered spaces associated with New England's new market economy. Finally, as a testament to the truly broad sweep of this work and Crane's vision as an historian, she ultimately holds all of western society responsible for the aggregate patterns she identifies in these four seaport communities. "The System"—religious, social, economic, and political—of the Western World in the early modern period, she argues, worked against women's interests.

The Protestant Reformation did not consistently benefit women. The English Civil War did not consistently benefit women. The political philosophy of theorists like John Locke did not consistently benefit women. And the American Revolution most certainly did not benefit women. Colonial New England, Crane reminds us, was one piece of a much larger social puzzle whose form was changing dramatically over time. While the founding of America and the establishment of new societies in New England and elsewhere arrested the march of patriarchy across the Atlantic, they did so only temporarily. As New England matured, so too did the social structures, institutions, and philosophies American colonists had carried over with them from Europe.

Crane presents a forceful and convincing argument for the myriad ways patriarchy, the market economy, and the larger workings of western society affected the women of urban New England (and in certain respects, colonial America more generally). Her evidence too is enlightening. This reader does have one reservation, however, about the way the book is structured. There are two almost wholly distinct works here. The first, reflected in chapters one and six (the opening and closing chapters of the book), includes a sweeping comparative discussion of the women (and men) of early America and Europe. Here Crane asserts quite persuasively that Early American women did not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they experienced many of the same social and economic trends that affected their European counterparts—especially those in England and France. Indeed, as Crane reminds us, patriarchy and the ideologies that upheld it (like Republican Motherhood) originated in European culture, and only later were translated into the American context. The second, presented in chapters two through five, focuses specifically on her stated goal: an exploration of the feminization of poverty in four seaport towns of colonial New England. Crane is at her best in these sections. Here is where she presents the bulk of her evidence (including many fascinating stories of individual women's experiences culled from local records) to support her arguments about the marginalization of New England's urban women. While each of these two sections is historiographically significant, highly informative, and overall enjoyable reading, this reader remains a bit concerned that readers are ultimately the ones left with the interpretive task of linking these two sections together.

Finally, while Crane makes significant and admirable attempts to make her study racially inclusive, her discussions of the experiences of Indian and African-American women are hampered by the parameters imposed by limited quantities of available evidence. African-American and Indian women's lives, therefore, remain marginal to her larger (and much more extensively documented) points about the white women of these seaport communities. While it is clear that the presence of Indian and African-American women often problematized New England men's assertions of patriarchy (see, for example, her interesting discussion of John Winthrop's mixed reactions to negotiating land deals and peace treaties with the Bay Colony's Squaw sachems [pp. 146-148]), Crane's work is first and foremost a valuable study of white, urban, New England women—and not their African-American or Indian counterparts.

In the end, even though any number of women, as individuals, could and did wend their way through the increasingly gendered maze of life in colonial New England, “collectively,” as Crane notes, “they suffered a deterioration in economic standing, a growing public invisibility, and a heightened reliance on male decision making...during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (p. 242).” Indeed, for Crane, it is the aggregate patterns—the rules rather than the exceptions—that most effectively highlight broader discussions of women’s status in early

America. And in this valuable and informative study, she gives us a fine example of how such aggregate patterns can be used to paint a nuanced portrait of women’s lives in four of colonial New England’s most important seaport communities.

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