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# Abraham in Arms: War and Gender in Colonial New England

Kyle F. Zelner

*University of Southern Mississippi*, [Kyle.Zelner@usm.edu](mailto:Kyle.Zelner@usm.edu)

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troubling. On its surface, it is a counterpart of the official term “assimilation,” which has been interrogated as a euphemism for genocide. As Lakota scholar Edward Valandra argues in *Not Without Our Consent: Lakota Resistance to Termination, 1950–59* (2006), genocide was a “culturally sanctioned program,” and the language of law and policy urged Euroamericans to view the destruction of Indian peoples through “assimilation” or “integration” as a neutral process. While Rosen acknowledges “the underside” (p. 202) of assimilation policies, “incorporation” (to describe a supposed success of Indian policy) is nonetheless embedded in the discourse of race and works to gloss over the brute realities of racism and the policing of racialized boundaries between whites and “others” in everyday social interactions—the micro-sites of power relations where those being “incorporated” learn how far the terrain of white authority extends and what is possible for themselves as “citizens,” and what isn’t.

Amy Den Ouden, *Professor of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts–Boston*, is author of *BEYOND CONQUEST: NATIVE PEOPLES AND THE STRUGGLE FOR HISTORY IN NEW ENGLAND* (2005), as well as “*Locating the Cannibals: Conquest, North American Ethnohistory, and the Threat of Objectivity*,” in *HISTORY AND ANTHROPOLOGY* (2007).

*Abraham in Arms: War and Gender in Colonial New England*. By Ann M. Little. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. Pp. x, 262. \$45.00 cloth; \$22.50 paper.)

Fifteen years ago, the topic of colonial military history—more specifically the study of war in the colonial Northeast—was a subject most thought dead. Firmly entrenched in the realm of traditional military history, the issue had seemingly been abandoned by professional historians. Yet hope was not lost. Following Jill Lepore’s *The Name of War* (1999), historians such as Jenny Hale Pulsipher, James D. Drake, Guy Chet, Evan Haefeli, and Kevin Sweeney wrote a string of books that brought the study of warfare in pre-Revolutionary New England back to the forefront of colonial American historiography. With the publication of *Abraham in Arms*, Ann M. Little enters this intellectual arena. Combining her interests in cultural and gender history with the techniques of ethnohistory, Little argues that “ideas about gender and family life were central to the ways in which these people [Indians and the colonists of New England and New France]

understood and explained their experience of cross-cultural warfare” (p. 2). Believing that Indians and Europeans were more alike in this regard than different, Little maintains that colonial conflict can best be understood through the worth society placed on masculinity—specifically men’s accomplishments on the battlefield. Yet rather than taking the words of the past at “face value,” Little urges scholars instead to read between the lines for each writer’s true agenda, especially when dealing with Indians’ and Europeans’ ideas of masculinity, for members of each group were reluctant, she contends, to admit any similarity to the other.

Examining seventeenth-century conflict between English colonists and Indians, *Abraham in Arms*’s first chapter establishes the gendered nature of Early American warfare. Focusing on evidence from the Pequot War (1636–37), King Philip’s War (1675–78), and King William’s War (1688–97), Little claims that “in both cultures, masculinity was defined in part by military success, and political power was often built upon demonstrated military prowess; therefore men on both sides had something to lose or gain from the outcome of each battle beyond victory for their countrymen and allies” (p. 14). This, according to Little, caused wars of the period to be suffused with gender anxiety. In chapter 2, Little extends her arguments into the early eighteenth century. Narrowing in on Native Americans’ practice of stripping clothing from the bodies of both dead combatants and live prisoners, she argues that the forced nakedness of European victims and “cultural cross-dressing” were highly distressing to the English, who saw such practices as violating not only their ethnic identity but also—and most importantly—established gender roles.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the experiences of Native and European women in war and during captivity. The traumatic experience of captivity offered both sides, now forced to live together, new insights into the family practices of the other, leading in turn to a rash of colonial captivity narratives. Penned by formerly captive New England women (or their ministers), these accounts served as pointed propaganda pieces in which the authors, seeking to show the disorderly nature of Indian households (especially in relation to English families), placed the blame for this family anarchy directly on weak Indian men. If Indian men “could not control their wives and children,” these English women wondered, “how could these failed men be expected to govern themselves properly?” (p. 93). Chapter 4 also adds Little’s perspective to the well-studied issue of French success (and relative Indian failure) in convincing English captives—mostly

females—to settle and marry into the new society after being taken prisoner, while the book's last chapter examines the imperial wars of the eighteenth century. Trying to come to grips with an important change in the way male New Englanders conceived of their manhood, a new "imperial masculinity," Little contends that "what had once been a masculinity based on household headship, Christian piety, and the duty to protect both family and faith by force of arms became a masculinity based around the more abstract notions of Anglo-American nationalism, anti-Catholicism, and soldiering for the empire" (p. 167).

*Abraham in Arms* offers a fresh, creative interpretation of the central place warfare held in colonial New England society, as Little's deep research into certain primary sources and imaginative use of that evidence forces the reader to look at these issues in new ways. However, the study's focus on masculinity and gender serves it better in some sections than others, and the documentation often points to reasons other than gender (class, race/ethnicity, religion, or nationality) as keys to the differing perceptions and meanings surrounding colonial warfare. The weakest section is the first chapter, which attempts to prove that masculinity in seventeenth-century New England was based predominantly on military prowess, which in turn determined political power in New England society. If that was the case, then why did colonial men continually vote to decrease the number of training days throughout the period; why did vast numbers of men, many of them elites, ask to be excused from militia duty and training; why did numerous high-status men try to exempt themselves (or their sons) from actual wartime service; and why, especially in the eighteenth century, were the vast majority of men who actually fought New England's early imperial wars little better than a mixed rabble consisting of the lower sort and semi-professional bounty hunters? If military prowess was the path to political power, should not the opposite have been true? While there is, of course, a difference between actually fighting wars and the perceptions surrounding military service, one would expect some overlap. Finally, Little also overlooks factors of religious and commercial ability. Many, if not most, of the true elite of colonial New England gained their social status and political power (and perhaps their masculinity) from their success in such pursuits, not on the battlefield.

The book is on stronger ground once it enters the eighteenth century. Little's treatment of wartime captivity is innovative and compelling, while the conclusion—that captivity narratives were above all

gendered propaganda pieces aimed at stripping Indians of political authority in the highly contested imperial arena of colonial North America—is masterful. Also forceful is the idea that a shift in masculinity accompanied the transition, during the eighteenth century, to an imperial mode of warfare; this argument should send a new wave of researchers into the archives to explore its ramifications. For these reasons and others, *Abraham in Arms* is an important book which deserves to be widely read and hotly debated.

Kyle F. Zelner, *Assistant Professor of History and a Fellow of the Center for the Study of War & Society at the University of Southern Mississippi, is the author of the forthcoming book A RABBLE IN ARMS: MASSACHUSETTS TOWNS AND MILITIAMEN DURING KING PHILIP'S WAR* (2009).

*A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States.* By Stephen Mihm. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. Pp. xii, 457. \$29.95.)

During the financial panic of 2008, leading economist Paul Krugman, writing in the *New York Times* on 21 March and 14 April, described how “false beliefs” governing real estate values, fraudulent marketing of little-understood “mortgage-backed” securities, and the indifference of federal regulators led to a “crisis of confidence,” which brought the United States financial system to the verge of a catastrophic collapse. These recent events make *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States*, Stephen Mihm’s excellent new history of counterfeiting in nineteenth-century America, even more compelling. From its very beginnings, “capitalism was little more than a confidence game,” Mihm writes. “As long as confidence flourished, even the most far-fetched speculations could get off the ground, wealth would increase, and bank notes . . . would circulate” (p. 11).

Seeking to trace the “magical transformation of flimsy paper into concrete capital” (pp. 15–16), Mihm illuminates the nature of paper currency by charting the growth of an antebellum economy of counterfeit bank notes. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the expanding market economy generated a tremendous demand for currency, but the federal government abdicated its Constitutional obligation to provide a national money supply. Into this void stepped hundreds of note-issuing, state-chartered banks and corporations,