

BOOK REVIEWS

Jews and Gentiles in Early America, 1654–1800. By WILLIAM PENCAK. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005. xiv, 321 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliographical note, index. \$29.95.)

William Pencak has written a first-rate study of Jews in colonial and revolutionary America. Jews constituted perhaps one-twentieth of 1 percent of the total population at the end of the eighteenth century; it is estimated that their total number may have been as high as 1,300 in the 1770s and perhaps 3,000 in the 1790s. Their major colonial settlements were in Newport, Rhode Island, New York City, Philadelphia, Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia. In Philadelphia, where the largest contingent dwelled, there were perhaps fifty Jewish families at the time of the Revolution; in the 1770s, as few as sixteen Jews could be found in Savannah, the smallest of the settlements. By the late 1760s, the Rhode Island Jewish community had evaporated.

One may wonder why a historian would devote so many years to studying such a small group of people. Pencak argues that their influence far exceeded their numbers. They were among the most prominent merchants in several locales, were disproportionately represented among the colonial elite, and originated many of the ideas upon which the United States was founded. The Puritans had considered themselves the “New Israel” and had tried to model their society on principles laid out in the Old Testament. At the time of the Revolution, Pencak writes, “the new nation had succeeded both Massachusetts and Israel as God’s chosen, republican people,” while the “Hebrew Bible . . . contains almost all the relevant discussions of government and the moral mission of a nation specially favored by God” (1).

This extremely detailed work, based on extensive research in both primary and secondary sources, will be appreciated by students of American Jewish and American ethnic history. Pencak’s analysis is subtle, nuanced, and substantial. He spends an entire introductory chapter on anti-Semitism, where it existed, and how it compared in intensity with European manifestations. He acknowledges that it was much more prevalent in the Old World, and though settlers brought their feelings and attitudes with them when they arrived in the British colonies, they were meliorated by preexisting thoughts and conditions there. In times of crisis, populist (i.e. lower-class) anti-Semitism seemed more virulent, but attitudes toward Jews were not class based: almost all Christians believed Jews were inferior and misguided and that society would be best served if they converted to the true faith. Perhaps one-third of the Jews did just that, while a large proportion of them refrained from marrying or bearing heirs.

On the other hand, despite cultural hostility, many individual Jews were welcomed and praised for their “contributions” to a society desperately in need of labor, capital, and connections with European financiers. Moreover, there were many instances when Jews and gentiles developed warm relations with one another. During the Revolution, most, but not all, Jews supported the cause in whatever ways they could. Therefore, from a “Jewish” point of view, they were entitled to equal treatment and opportunity—which rarely existed in colonial America or the new nation—as they were, indeed, among the first families of the nation. Sometimes politicians’ rhetoric endorsed that sentiment, but rarely did their practices.

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Passion Is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution. By NICOLE EUSTACE. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. x, 613 pp. Illustrations, figures, tables, appendices, notes, index. \$45.)

This fascinating book examines the place that eighteenth-century Americans of British descent accorded emotion in the articulation of social and political identities. Focusing on the specific cultural context of Pennsylvania, Nicole Eustace argues that colonists there saw the cultivation and expression of emotion as an important marker of gender, class, ethnicity, and race—alongside the exercise of reason, which has received so much attention from historians of this period. In privileging particular kinds of emotion as being indicative of gentility, civility, and manliness, colonial elites distinguished themselves from other North American inhabitants—white commoners, Indians, and black slaves—whose lack or excess of emotion signified their deficiencies.

Eustace begins by discussing colonial responses to Alexander Pope’s ideas. His reconciliation of passion with civic virtue proved increasingly popular among Pennsylvanians during the middle third of the eighteenth century, despite considerable opposition from some quarters, not least the powerful Quaker presence in the colony. In subsequent chapters, she examines a spectrum of emotional exchanges—in public and private settings—that expressed feelings such as love, rage, sympathy, and grief. In each chapter, she shows the ways in which privileged Pennsylvanians carefully distinguished between worthy and unworthy forms of passion. Eustace demonstrates compellingly that the expression of emotion was critical to the delineation of social status and political power.

At every turn Eustace is sensitive to contestations that threatened to disrupt these convenient distinctions, such as the Paxton “boys,” who, in the 1760s, responded to elites’ denials of their full manhood by scornfully recasting emotional refinement as a form of effeminacy. Throughout the latter part of the book,