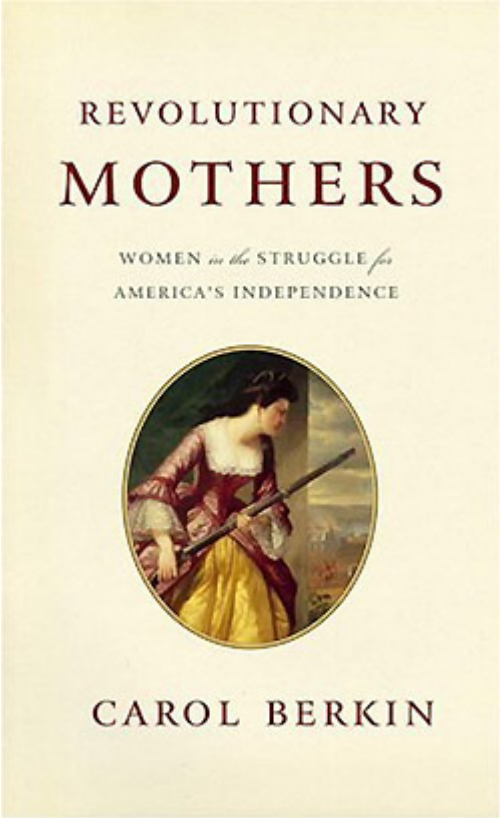
Enduring Independence

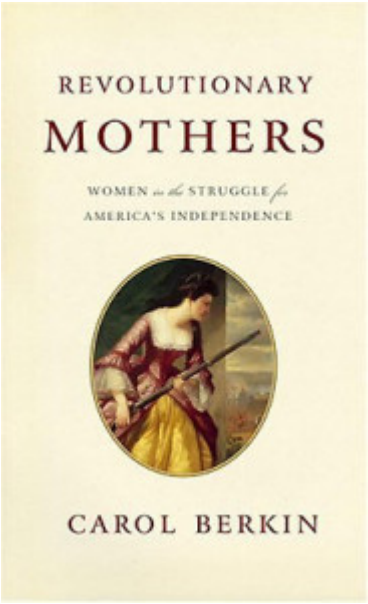


Since the men, from a party or fear of a frown
Are kept by a sugar-plum quietly down
Supinely asleep—and depriv'd of their sight
Are stripp'd of their freedom, and robb'd of their right;
If the sons, so degenerate! the blessings despise
Let the Daughters of Liberty nobly arise.

—Hannah Griffitts

In this elegant, well-written book, Carol Berkin provides us with a wonderfully diverse range of female characters, from liberty's daughters to Mohawk mothers, who experienced the turmoil of the American Revolution and its aftermath. Abigail Adams is here, urging her husband to "remember the ladies" when he helps draft the new nation's laws and modify the harsh restrictions of coverture, under which a married woman could not legally control her own property, earnings, or children. So is Frederika von Riedesel, who traveled to North America with three young daughters to join her husband, a German general in the British army. Riedesel nursed wounded soldiers in a cellar while bullets flew outside, openly criticized General Burgoyne for drinking and carousing while his men starved at Saratoga, and toiled as a prisoner of war for four years with a nearly incapacitated spouse. We also learn about Nanyehi, a

Cherokee “warrior and diplomat,” who negotiated peace treaties, rescued white captives, and, for her troubles, was taught to spin and churn in the English fashion.



Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America’s Independence

In these and many other fascinating accounts, Berkin focuses on wartime realities, not the ideological causes or implications of the American Revolution. After a succinct summary of the prevailing mid-eighteenth-century view of white women as first and foremost men’s helpmates, she explores how these women struggled to survive wartime scarcity, murderous home-front fighting, the grim realities of life with the army, relocation and abandonment. Politics are secondary because, in Berkin’s view, although the Revolution may have eventually inspired movements for white women’s and African Americans’ rights, the experience of war bred short-term social conservatism. The “Daughters of Liberty” nobly arose only to sit back down again. “No sweeping social revolution followed in the wake of the political revolution; indeed, like women and men after many wars, white Americans seemed more eager to return to the life that had been disrupted than to create a new one” (x). The transformations of the war, she argues, tended to be personal and often temporary.

How, then, were these women different from those in any war where the lines between battlefront and home front were blurry? The answer for Berkin is the larger context of their actions—the economic weapons of nonconsumption, the political language of dependence and independence, the legal challenges to natural hierarchy—which touched women’s lives and women’s roles in new ways. From the first glimmerings of the Revolution, in the boycotts of the 1760s, free women were front and center, as their domestic activities and decisions about what to eat and what to wear took on new political and economic importance. Skilled as frugal housewives who knew how to strike a bargain and

evaluate quality, these same free wives, mothers, and sisters added political criteria to their decision making. Some women went further by signing public declarations resolving to eschew the corrupting commodities and gathering in the homes and yards of clergymen to spin thread symbolizing self-sufficiency and liberty. But the political implications of these civic-minded activities evaporated as soon as the war ended, leaving only a small group of intellectuals to champion better education for free white women—to make them better mothers.

In place of powdered wigs and radical ideals, Berkin shows us bloody legs and dirty shirts. Thousands of women experienced the war close-up, as camp followers who washed, cooked, nursed, sewed, and served as sexual partners for soldiers. As Berkin deftly demonstrates, joining the British or Continental army as a camp follower was an independent choice. It fostered new experiences and travel over hundreds of miles, and the wages women received for performing maintenance tasks for soldiers meant the difference between eating and starving for themselves and their children. Yet it was not a liberating choice. In fact, becoming a camp follower not only placed women under a regimented male hierarchy, it also marked them as unfit to receive the perquisites of new attitudes that were emerging among the upper classes about the delicacy and sensibility of ladies. Women who drank in the tents, stripped corpses for clothing, and took regular payment for washing duties (unlike wives, mothers, and sisters who washed for free) were ugly “furies” and “wild beasts,” to be kept with the baggage at the back of the line. These camp followers contrasted sharply with the officers’ wives, who received the best housing when they visited and served not as reminders of the grim horrors of war, but of what many men were fighting for: a prosperous civilian life marked by predictable differences between “masculine” and “feminine.” Women’s helpmate role might have been similar across classes, but war highlighted the significant differences in how they fulfilled that role.

African American, Native American, and loyalist women each get a separate chapter in this book, “told separately in order to avoid treating them as detours, or deviations, from the dominant story and in order to ensure that their perceptions of events are not portrayed as a misunderstanding” (xvii-xviii). In exploring the lives of enslaved African Americans, Berkin’s focus on the disruption of war rather than its ideological justification serves her well, since it was that very disruption—masters and mistresses who fled, invading armies who offered refuge, the confusion and turmoil that made slave patrols difficult—that created the opportunities for African Americans “to enjoy small blessings of liberty at last” (122). Those blessings could be small, indeed. Midway through the war, Mary Postill and her children escaped to British-occupied Charleston where they received certificates of freedom. Hired as a servant by a devious loyalist, Postill found herself reenslaved, transported to Florida, then Canada, and, after a brief escape attempt with her daughters, literally sold down the river.

The case of loyalist women, who also coped as best they could in the face of

community hostility and exile, raises deeper political questions, which Berkin leaves open. When the wife of a loyalist stayed behind on the family farm, was she an innocent proxy to be pitied? A treasonous collaborator whose property should be seized? A patriot who had defied her wifely obligations to follow her husband and so deserved respect? These questions had practical wartime answers but also pointed to deeper social and legal dilemmas, which Berkin notes but does not explore at length. Again and again in these case studies, female choices made under duress signal the ambiguities of economic and political agency in the late eighteenth century.

Writing her *Women of the American Revolution* a decade before the Civil War, historian Elizabeth Ellet created an Abigail Adams, a Martha Washington, and other Revolutionary women that suited the needs of her nineteenth-century readers. In her retelling, powerful and humble women alike proved their worth in their devotion to family. Self-sacrificing and virtuous, these women, as Ellet portrayed them, exhibited "endurance in the face of tragedy and an ability to inspire and encourage the men whose lives they touched" (xii). Berkin's book, which opens with a tribute to Ellet, raises an important question in our current age of "founders' chic": what does this new cast of Revolutionary women say about our needs in the twenty-first century? Founding "fathers" and "brothers" get their titles from imagined and metaphorical relationships to future generations and to each other. Berkin's "Revolutionary Mothers" are less the mothers of us all and more mothers in fact—people who were constrained and encouraged by real family relationships that gave meaning to their wartime activities. Motivated by pragmatism more than idealism, they testify to tough-minded female endurance that wins applause but not power.

Further Reading:

Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville, 2002); Susan Branson, *These Fiery, Frenchified Dames: Women and Political Culture in Early National Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2001); T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York, 2004); Sylvia Frey, *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, 1991); Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, 1980); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (1980; Ithaca, 1996); Alfred F. Young, *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier* (New York, 2004).

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