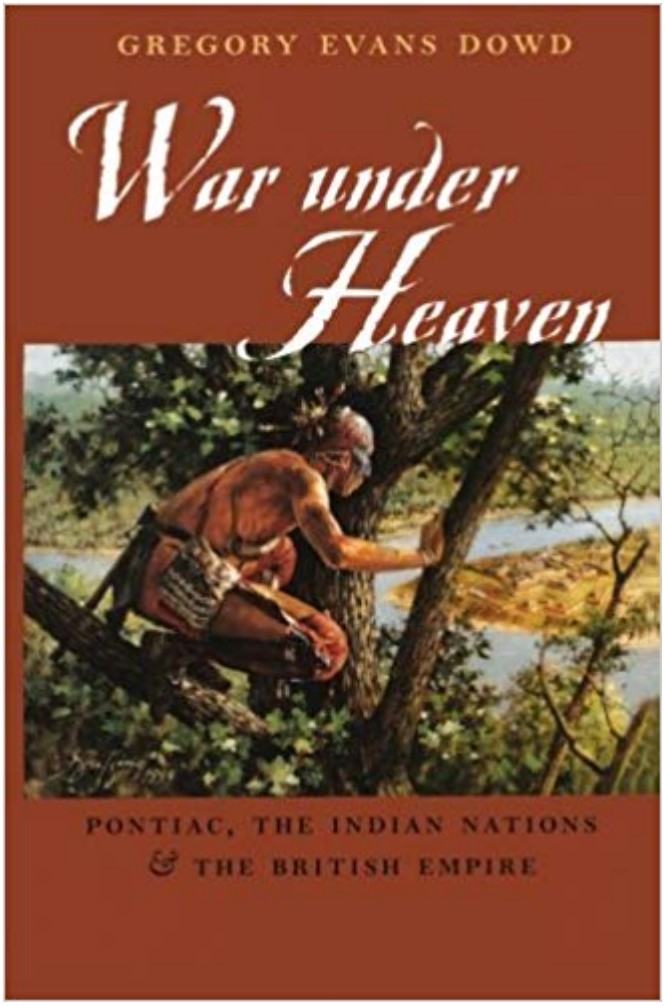
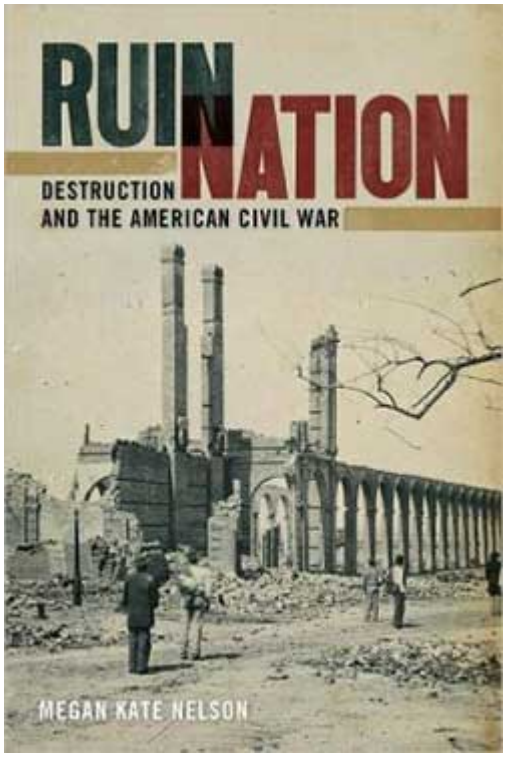
A Redesigned Pontiac for the Twenty-First Century



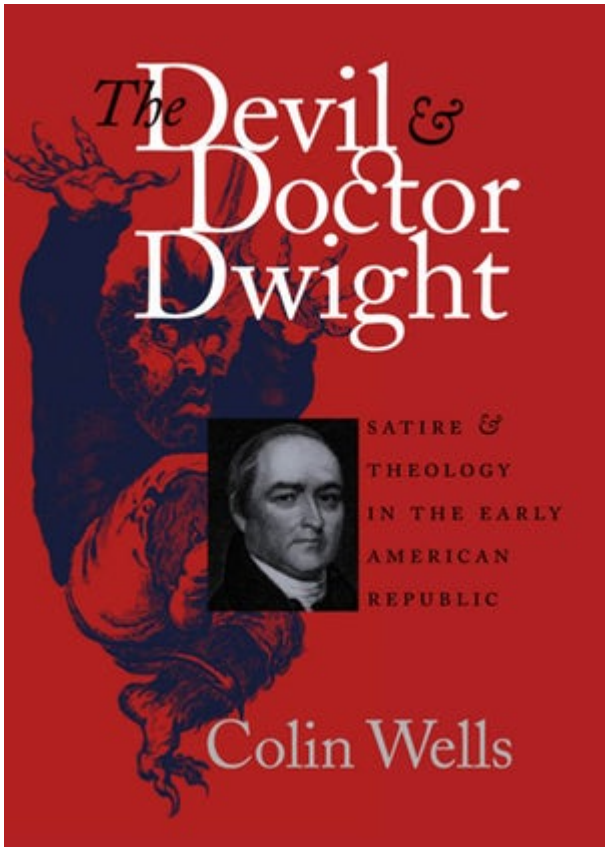
“Convinced of their superior might, the British decided they could do as they pleased. After all, with the French gone, they were now the only game in town. It was time for the Indians to bend to their rules.”

Battlefields, Bodies, and the Built Environment



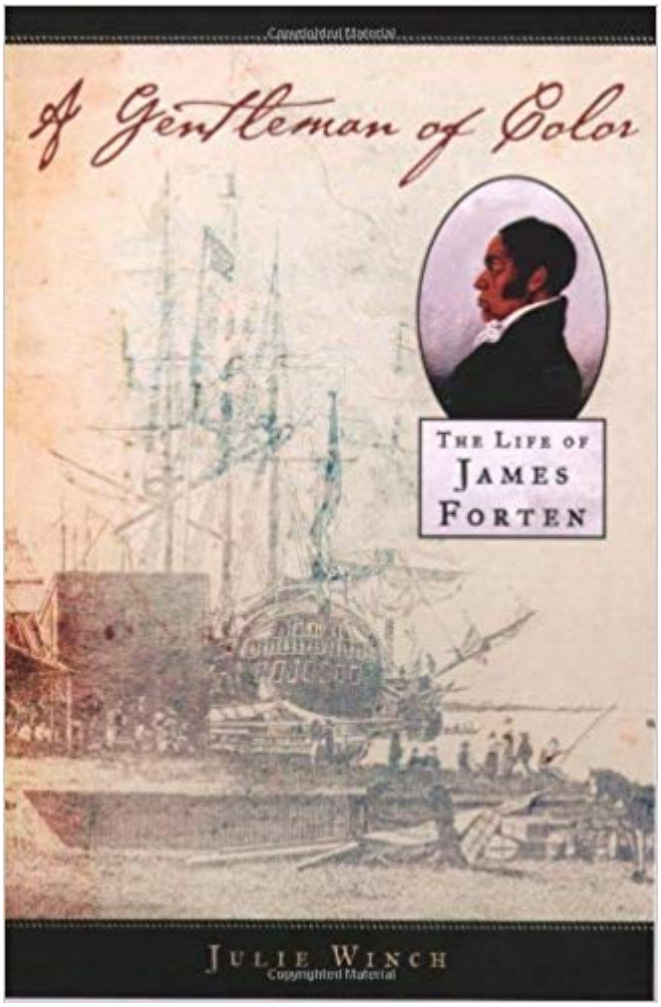
The ruins of living beings provoked a twinned awe and horror at the transformative power of new technologies.

An American Dunciad



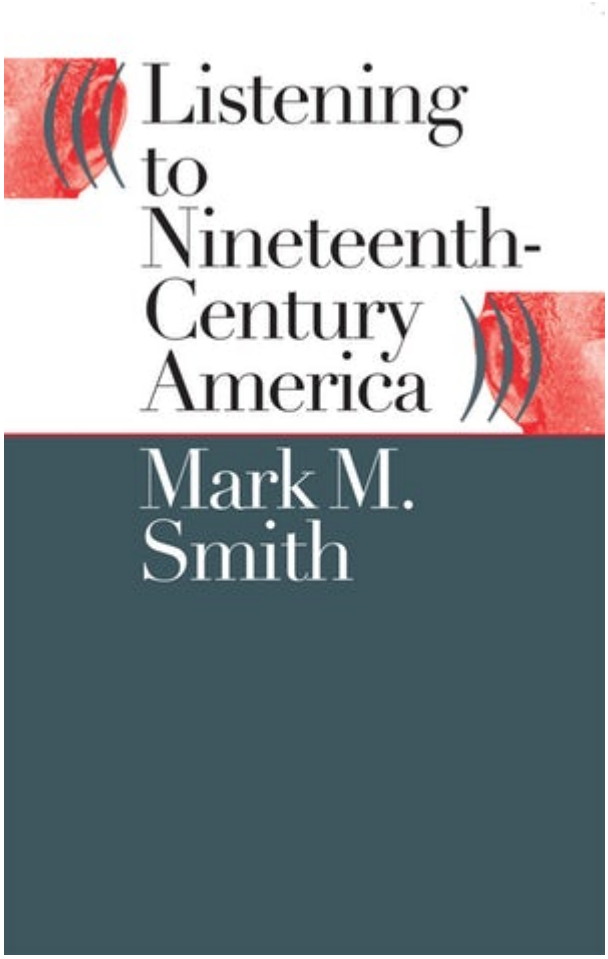
“While Augustan satires were primarily concerned with defending the civic virtues enshrined by classical republican ideology, rather than the doctrines of Calvinist orthodoxy, both belief systems were based on an Augustinian understanding of human nature as tending toward corruption.”

A Founder of Color



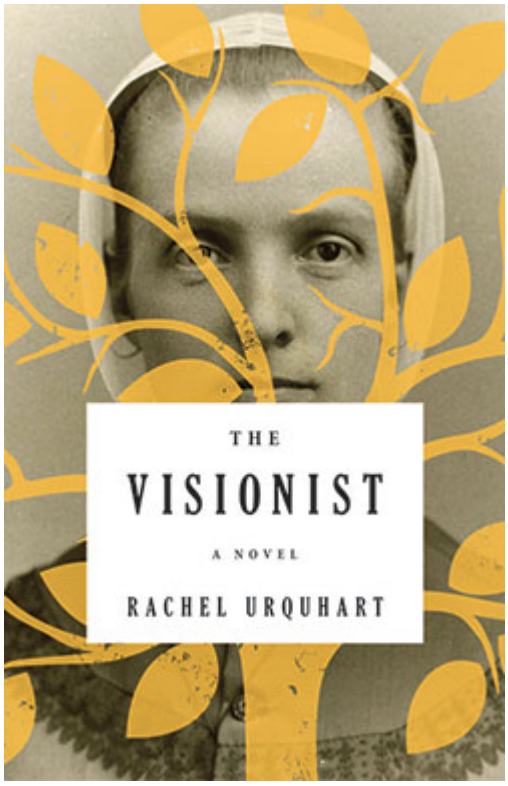
“As the best biography does, Winch’s portrait of Forten illuminates not only the man’s life but his times.”

Hearing History



“Does history, as currently written, represent only one-fifth of lived experience?”

Suspension of (Dis)belief



Rachel Urquhart, The Visionist: A Novel. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2014. 352 pp., $18.55.

I've always been a big proponent of historical fiction, for the life and imagination it brings to often dry historical documents—indeed, one could say that historical fiction (embarrassingly, novels toward the romantic side) is what kept my interest in history alive through the stultifying middle- and high-school curriculum until I could discover social, cultural, and women's history in college. However, today as a professionally trained historian, I most enjoy historical fiction in fields not too closely aligned to my own field—and it is here that this review thankfully lies, just a bit far afield of my own knowledge, but close enough to be educational.

As with many inquiries into the past, Urquhart's interest in the Shakers' past stems from her own personal memories of family get-togethers in her grandfather's big farmhouse just north of Boston. Her grandfather, also a writer (he worked, among other things, on the *Gone with the Wind* screenplay), purchased a farm in the 1930s. Urquhart found out later that the farmhouse had originally been a Shaker meeting house, the center of a strange but thriving religious community in the mid-nineteenth century that had died (perhaps unsurprisingly) with its last celibate devotees. In this, her first novel, Urquhart tries to raise the ghosts from a familiar space, and in so doing sheds light on nineteenth-century Shaker culture while also giving us a tragic drama of families and an engaging mystery. As a result, this genre-bending novel can be enjoyed by a range of audiences, from murder-mystery fans to highbrow literary folks, to historians looking for faithful representations of the past.

The storyline, simply put, is one of childhood trauma and familial estrangement. *The Visionist* focuses on four main characters whose perspectives structure each of the book's chapters. The center of the tale is Polly, the daughter of an abusive man and a mother paralyzed by shame. Polly is spurred to a terrifying act to help the family escape his clutches, only to find that her mother guiltily indentures her and her brother to a community of Shakers several towns away. Simon Pryor is the lone male voice among the main characters. He is a sympathetic, self-described scoundrel who works for the even-more-conniving Hurlbut family, the county's wealthy scions. Pryor finds himself morally awakened by the plight of Polly and her mother even though he has been instructed to destroy their claims to their family farm. In the Shaker world, we hear first from Sister Charity, a young woman raised entirely in "The City of Hope" (originally called Albion, Mass., just north of Boston—but this seems to be a fictional setting). Charity has internalized all of the precepts of the Shakers' leader, Mother Ann Lee, yet she feels drawn to Polly after she spontaneously performs "spiritual gifts" in one of the first Sunday meetings. While Charity is sure of Polly's saintliness, Elder Sister Agnes, the fourth interlocutor, is suspicious of Polly's purported visions and eager to extract a confession from her, acting with an eye towards the religious group's sustainability in ways both admirable and questionable.

Some historical fiction uses costume and place merely as a backdrop to modern issues; others bring to life a foreign way of thinking about the world to educate the empathic mind. Urquhart's is the latter. Her strengths as a historical novelist are first and foremost her intensive study of the Shakers, a society of celibates whose theology pushed them to live apart from the world, yet who somehow drew on it for new converts and new sources of land and income. We learn myriad small details of Shaker worship and theology—that adherents believed in careful, rectilinear living (from cutting one's food into squares to planning buildings and grounds on similarly severe lines). The story reveals how Albion was one of the communities to experience a cluster of extraordinary visions from young women in the generation after their founder Mother Ann's death (the decades preceding the start of this novel, also referred to as the Era of Manifestations by Shaker historians). We learn how the Shakers took in children whose parents had fallen on hard times, binding the youngsters through an indenture contract until age 18, when they would decide whether to stay with the group and to sign over to the Shakers all their worldly belongings (including inheritances). Moreover, the Shakers demanded that these youngsters adhere to the precept that there be no more "flesh" brothers and sisters inside their communities, a point made heartbreakingly clear in the turmoil Polly feels as she and her younger brother begin their first few months in the City of Hope. We gain many small nuggets of daily life through descriptions of Charity's training in medicinals and through her tutoring of Polly in the everyday life of the gender-separate, celibate world that was the Shakers'.

Urquhart occasionally blends in passages from Shaker theological texts, as she does quite well with *The Youth's Guide to Zion* in one exchange between Polly and Elder Sister Agnes (172-77). In another great scene, she describes a pauper

auction (the “New England method” for dealing with the financial constraints of poor relief). If I were a historian of the nineteenth century, I might quibble that this practice seems to have been phased out by the 1840s (when this book is set) with the rise of poorhouses—but I am not and thus I appreciated the perhaps slightly anachronistic historical tidbit. We can be sure Urquhart did her homework. A three-page bibliography closes the novel with suggestions from popular and scholarly works, including several theses. She also thanks Ted Widmer of the John Carter Brown Library and early Americanist John Demos as well as various curators and historians of Shaker life with whom she consulted. Perhaps the most evocative passage in the book for an audience of historians will be Urquhart’s ventriloquizing of the researcher’s daily routine:

Property deeds and church records of marriages, births, and deaths: Does society offer up documents of a more paradoxically dry nature? They testify to our ownership of the very earth upon which we live, our most costly oath, our grand entry, and our final bow. Still, it seems to me that they are written solely to be sorted in the wrong spot by a bespectacled clerk, pale as a grub and sporting suspenders (161).

Simon Pryor grumbles, as many of us do, of hours spent in futile search “in the bowels of the Ashland courthouse, dust and faded ink mak[ing] an enemy of me” (161).

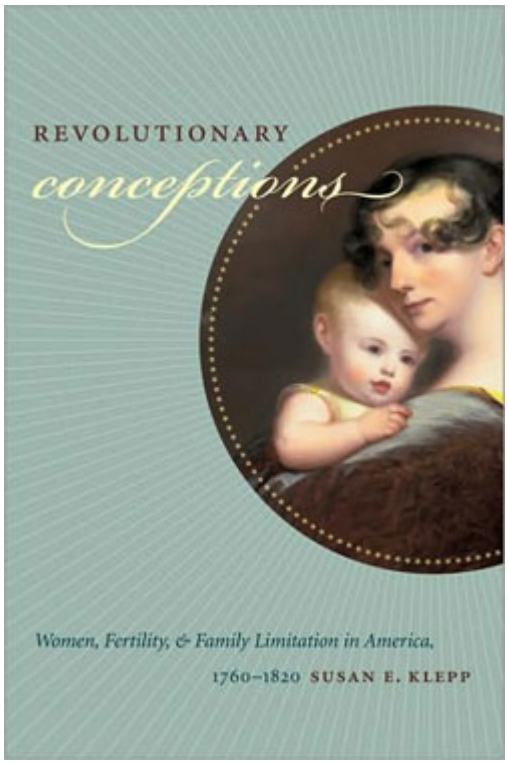
But are the novel’s characters as convincing as its historical trappings? Although Urquhart gives ample attention to the hypnotic lure of Shaker dancing and the City of Hope’s peaceful and ordered passing of days, Polly’s almost instantaneous acceptance of industry as the key to her salvation seems an unlikely way to deal with trauma. Sister Charity’s spiritual worldview is more fleshed out—although it may not make her more sympathetic to modern secular readers. Urquhart’s is a classic tale of shame and redemption. To me, the novel felt sluggish until about a third of the way through, when we began to hear more from Simon Pryor, the most fully drawn character in the novel. In many ways, it is Pryor’s action, along with the slow unfolding of Polly’s secret, which drives the rhythm of the narrative. Therefore, it should not be a surprise that he sees her as the one to save him from his cynicism and bitterness. But we never hear from Polly what she feels about his final acts. Despite Urquhart’s attempt to tie up loose ends, I felt disturbed by the ending, which I could only see as bringing further tragedy. Perhaps it is this uneasiness that the author intended, a fluttering of feeling that defies any certainty of the meaning of past, present, or future.

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The Fertility Revolution



Women were not merely objects of male colonists' desires; they also gloried in their reproductive abilities.

The Feminist Forebears of Affective

Design



A critical awareness of the process of working, and sometimes failing, to conceptualize history and its possible futures, says Klein, is what the humanities can offer data visualization.

The Long Goodbye: Breaking away from Great Britain in the Early Republic



I do not see the nation unfolding in a linear progression away from “Britishness” and towards cultural independence. Instead, what my research shows is that in the years following the Revolution […] Americans vacillated between emulation and repudiation of the mother country.

The Evil Necessity



My primary goal was to understand how impressment worked, not to settle once and for all the question of “how bad was it?”