



Sexual Revolution in Early America

Richard Godbeer

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In 1695, John Miller, a clergyman traveling through New York, found it appalling that so many couples lived together without ever being married and that no one viewed "ante-nuptial fornication" as anything scandalous or sinful. Charles Woodmason, an Anglican minister in South Carolina in 1766, described the region as a "stage of debauchery" in which polygamy was "very common," "concubinage general," and "bastardy no disrepute." These depictions of colonial North America's sexual culture sharply contradict the stereotype of Puritanical abstinence that persists in the popular imagination.

In *Sexual Revolution in Early America*, Richard Godbeer boldly overturns conventional wisdom about the sexual values and customs of colonial Americans. His eye-opening historical account spans two centuries and most of British North America, from New England to the Caribbean, exploring the social, political, and legal dynamics that shaped a diverse sexual culture. Drawing on exhaustive research into diaries, letters, and other private papers, as well as legal records and official documents, Godbeer's absorbing narrative uncovers a persistent struggle between the moral authorities and the widespread expression of popular customs and individual urges.

Godbeer begins with a discussion of the complex attitude that the Puritans had toward sexuality. For example, although believing that sex could be morally corrupting, they also considered it to be such an essential element of a healthy marriage that they excommunicated those who denied "conjugal fellowship" to their spouses. He next examines the ways in which race and class affected the debate about sexual mores, from anxieties about Anglo-Indian sexual relations to the sense of sexual entitlement that planters held over their African slaves. He concludes by detailing the fundamental shift in sexual culture during the eighteenth century towards the acceptance of a more individualistic concept of sexual desire and fulfillment. Today's moral critics, in their attempts to convince Americans of the social and spiritual consequences of unregulated sexual behavior, often harken back to a more innocent age; as this groundbreaking work makes clear, America's sexual culture has always been rich, vibrant, and contentious.

Sexual Revolution in Early America Details

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From Reader Review Sexual Revolution in Early America for online ebook

amanduhwood says

Godbeer discusses a number of sexual revolutions that occur in the 17th and 18th centuries - Puritan ideals, effective autonomy, and the change in the status/function of women. Highlights include the discussions of Christ as a bridegroom, the differences between the Northern and Southern New England communities re: regulation or lack thereof, Perfectionists and spiritual marriage, and the Great Awakening.

Emily says

Loved the Puritan part, didn't read the Southern part, but Kelly says it was crap.

Nina says

Very interesting. Our ancestors, especially the Puritans, were a whole lot sexier than we would have imagined. The book was a little repetitive, but it picked up speed as it went along. I was particularly fascinated by the chapter on sexuality and divinity, since the Puritans used the imagery of Christ as lover and bridegroom even to men, including Christ "impregnating" the soul, the offspring of which was "the babe of grace." Hadn't known that securing child support from fathers dated clear back to colonial times.

Andee Nero says

This was a really entertaining book and it also adds dimension to our conceptions of early America, but I felt like it was too heavily focused on New England and the Southern colonies. The chapter on Pennsylvania only looks at the 18th century. Also, when looking at 18th century English novels, Godbeer doesn't take into account works like Fanny Hill, Evelina or Love in Excess, which would complicate his narrative. It didn't feel like this was enough evidence to say that there was a "sexual revolution in early America."

Kris says

Hard to imagine a book about SEX being so dry and sleep inducing, but Godbeer pulls it off! In places, he actually does get rather interesting but his laundry lists of sexual misdemeanors really only serves to prove his scholarship in digging them out of mouldering records of the early colonies. If he provides any conjectures or conclusions of any sort it is in the last third of the book after the point I gave up in boredom. I'm not certain what I thought the book would be exactly but a 500 page listing of gossip, rumour, intermixed with actual instances of rape was certainly not it. I saw no evidence of any kind of revolution, sexual or otherwise.

And I have to say that the early Puritan fathers have officially squicked me out with all their raptures over being "ravished by Christ." Yeah no, just no...

Laura says

Great book on why it's anachronistic for people to say that American's hesitancy to discuss sexual matters is not based on our "Puritan roots".

Marc says

An exceptionally enlightening, thorough and substantial account of colonial society that would otherwise go unexplored; Godbeer's interwoven analysis that frontier society must accommodate its margins to ensure survival makes this a model for academic literature

sofie jacobsen says

I really liked his writing style. The majority of the book was quoted from court cases and diaries. It was all very interesting and it did demonstrate that the colonial era had consistent exposure to couples that cohabitated, or had premarital sex, as well being either polygamous, or homosexual, or interracial.

There were a couple of things that made me curious- he didn't include (unless I somehow missed this) any stories of peoples living in New York or other Northern states. (Philadelphia was mentioned in the last 70 pages).

Most of the stories were 1. lower to middle class individuals 2. all located in the Southern states. 3. None of the statistics were listed with the population of that area (for example a statistic was listed claiming that 500 women were recorded to being pregnant in the 1790's in the area, but Godbeer failed to compare that to the population number).

I really feel like it was put together well and I did enjoy reading it. Some of the stories were very scandalous.

One thing that was interesting was that alteration of women and men's roles. In the years 1400-1650 women were stereotyped to being lustful, tempters, and sinners, etc. About 15 years before the American Revolution, their role changed to being defined as spiritual caretakers of men, women are at fault if men have lustful thoughts, and men were lustful and unchangeable. Court cases demonstrated that change as well as various letters and documents. It's interesting because that is still the belief held: that if a woman is a rape victim the thought is: "well, she was wearing skimpy clothes, or was asking for it in another form, etc."

Emily Brown says

incredibly interesting! there were chapters i wasn't interested in, so i can't vouch for those, but the ones i read were well researched and full of new ideas.

Grady McCallie says

A delightful and illuminating survey of competing and evolving views of sexuality in British colonial North America. In a series of chapters that could easily stand alone (and, in some cases, probably did, as journal articles), Godbeer maps out the efforts of religious and civil leaders in New England to control sexual behaviors; the attitudes towards interracial marriage in the mid-Atlantic and southern colonies; the ways families tried to protect their daughters in an era of increasing freedom, by inviting courting into the house; the ways various colonial communities policies deviant behaviors; and the way the gentry and common colonists began to construct and describe women's responsibilities in the mid-1700s. There's a lot of information in this book, both specific examples drawn from courts records and diaries, and overarching analysis by Godbeer, so it's not a fast read. But the subject - sex - is intrinsically interesting, and Godbeer keeps the discussion moving. The title is a misnomer; what Godbeer describes isn't a 'revolution', it's a cultural diversity across space, and a slow evolution of views in the same places over time.

Jillian says

Good stuff, covers a whoooole lot of ground, divided into three sections--the first few chapters are about New England, the middle chapters about the south, and the last section focuses on the American Revolution. Very thorough but written clearly and accessibly. I'd imagine the length of the book and its density of scholarship would turn off a casual reader, but it's actually very readable. There are a lot of excerpts from primary sources to sink your teeth into, like a man who repeatedly attempted to engage other men in sex, to the point where the whole town knew about him; or William Byrd's misogynist adulteries; or a Philadelphia man who didn't let constant STIs slow down his rabid philandering.
