

*Ladies of Liberty: The Women Who Shaped Our Nation*, by Cokie Roberts, provides insight rarely found in the secondary sources used in the high school classroom: a first hand account of life in the early years of the republic from the female perspective. Through letters and journals Roberts offers an animated account of the women who witnessed the events following the Revolution through the War of 1812. Her "cast of characters" include first ladies, reformers, educators, explorers, writers, and talkers. Roberts is a journalist, not a historian - still, her work is thorough, scholarly and well documented.

*Ladies of Liberty* is framed between the inaugurations of the husband and son of the most famous woman of the early republic – Abigail Adams. Mrs. Adams makes Hillary Clinton look like a First Lady who minded her own business. However, between 1797 and 1825 she was not the only "republican mother" who left a mark on the new Republic. The reader discovers that Dolly Madison's heroism during the War of 1812 bordered on recklessness. Sacagawea and Mercy Otis Warren are usually recognized in the traditional histories, however, Roberts provides details and perspective that dispute the traditional textbook notion that these women were "contributors" rather than innovators. Less well known women (at least those who do not appear in the textbooks) Theodosia Burr, Eliza Hamilton and Elizabeth Paterson (a Baltimore socialite who married Napoleon's brother) are all profiled in captivating and suspenseful prose.

Roberts reinforces that women's history in the United States does not begin at Seneca Falls. It began long before women had rights. During Abigail Adam's tenure as

First Lady, women became activists, educators and writers. Women's public esteem improved as they were expected to raise and educate the virtuous citizen's of the new republic. Reformer Isabella Graham, embraced politics in the manner that so many women would – social activism on behalf of the poor. In 1797 she founded the *New York Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children*. In 1800, Republican, Margaret Bayard Smith dispatched reports on the nascent Washington society through letters to friends in Philadelphia; by 1820 she was a full fledged reporter. Her access to Thomas Jefferson allowed for volumes of letters and journal entries that provide the most intimate detail of his personal and social life as president.

*Ladies of Liberty* has been reviewed as a "gossipy" and entertaining history. It does include, but is not limited to gossip. Incidentally, gossip may have an important place in social history. Sociologists have begun to view gossip as an important source for understanding group interaction. The female perspective is a serious one. Lacking official power, the Washington wives understood the power they had to influence their husbands. Opinions were strong, and partisan. Margaret Bayard Smith's support and analysis of Jefferson is juxtaposed to Rosalie Calvert's adamantly anti-Jefferson views. Calvert was a wealthy plantation mistress whose letters provide a running commentary on the policies and politics of the new republic. She was born in Belgium and raised in the Netherlands. Her extensive correspondence with European friends and family espouse her ardent Federalist position. The nation was evolving and women were an important part of that evolution.

Traditionally, the female perspective has been left out of this period of history despite the fact that women were displaying acts of patriotism, bravery and sacrifice.

Women may have been left out of the traditional history, but their contributions did not go unnoticed by the men of the period. As president, Thomas Jefferson urged all in the government to read Mercy Otis Warren's history of the American Revolution. Jefferson's rival Aaron Burr, trusted his daughter Theodosia, "by far the best-educated woman of her time and country" to entertain heads of state in his absence and she remained "a prominent figure in Burr's alleged plot" to commit treason against the United States government. As it turns out, the men of the period "consulted with women constantly". In her introduction Roberts explains how much we learn from the intimate missives between husbands and wives and fathers and daughters. "When writing to the women the men were not just less guarded about their personal foibles, they were also more honest about their personal judgments". The founders confided in, and relied on, their wives and daughters for advise and council. Women were influencing policy – albeit quietly. Roberts gives the women of the early republic a voice. The female perspective is not only significant for its point of view, but for its depth.

Social history tells more of the real story and it motivates students to learn. Including women in the story is the responsibility of the history teacher. In spite of repeated evidence that our textbooks are flawed we are bound by budget, curriculum and testing constraints , so we to rely on them. James Lowen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me* has both liberal and conservatives concerned about the continued use of poorly written textbooks. In spite of this awareness, the backlash to the multicultural movement and the derogatory notion of political correctness has kept us stuck in isolating women's role in history to being a minor one.

History books used to include three sections at the end of each unit: *Women's Role*, and *Contributions of Native Americans* and *African Americans*. In response to the criticism that blacks, women and Native American were being treated as afterthoughts in the history books – more recent publications have eliminated that end of the chapter reference. Yet, the new editions make little, or no, mention in the main part of the text. (I refer to it as the black and white part of the page). In spite of significant changes, high school history classes continue to focus on the political history that centers on the nation-state, war and powerful men. Women have typically been delegated to sidebars and biographical sketches. These textboxes and appendixes, however, are virtually ignored by students and teachers alike. Unfortunately budget cuts are further binding us to the inadequate textbooks as sources for supplemental materials are drying up. Popular social histories can help fill in this gap.

At Marshfield High School we teach on a three levels: Advanced Placement, Level One Honors and Level Two College Prep. I teach only levels one and two. Next year I will teach AP. Ours is a male dominated and rather conservative department. In 2006, the AP essay question was on the "cult of true womanhood" and the "Republican motherhood". I will never forget the AP teacher's reaction. It was disgust. "I don't teach that stuff" he stated without remorse, concerned only that his students would not have been prepared. A book like *Ladies of Liberty* reminds me how to counter that pervasive attitude. I continue to be grateful for the attention to history in popular culture today. Social history motivates students. As I attempt to develop my students "historical habits of mind" I use anecdotes to hook student interest. I look forward to casting a wider web by asking students to use the anecdotes and the primary source "gossip" in a way that will

enable them to "perceive past events and issue as they were experienced by the people at the time".

I would not use Cokie Roberts book as a required source in my classroom. It will appear on recommended reading lists or as as a source for supplemental research. On its own, it would be a difficult read for my level one and two students. It assumes significant prior knowledge of American History. Most of my students are studying these topics for the first time. It is also a difficult source to use in parts. Six chapters are divided into the administrations of Adams through Monroe (with two chapters, each, devoted to Jefferson's and Madison's two terms of office). References are made in each chapter that requires some familiarity with the others, demonstrating throughout the small worldliness of the interrelationships amongst the influential women of the early republic. For Level one students I would consider reading the book's introduction prior to having them read some of the primary sources. Robert's introduction reinforces the notion that women were much more than bit players. They may have been behind the scenes but their influence was substantial. I would assign the exchange of letters between Abigail Adams and Thomas Jefferson that began as a result of the death of his daughter. What began as an expression of sympathy and an opportunity to heal old wounds evolved into a heated debate over how to interpret the Constitution. Without that tragedy Abigail Adams might never have reached out. She probably would never have attempted to reignite the friendship given the bitterness over the election of 1800. The exchange is exciting, suspenseful, and a colorful description of the differences between the Federalists and Democratic- Republicans. Additionally, learning about the British invasion on the nation's capital through the eye-witness accounts of Dolley Madison, and her family and

friends who were fearing for the nation and her personal safety, is riveting. Surrounding the event for which she is most remembered, saving the portrait of Washington, are acts of bravery and sacrifice that bear witness to the notion that women have not only earned a place in history, but have shaped the history.

The greatest use of this source is for me will be to return to being the kind of teacher and using the kind of sources I have steered away from (for reasons I won't complain about here.) I will get back to my teaching roots. Reading Cokie Roberts sent me to sources I regret not reading for this paper. My internet research labyrinth began with an article titled *Rethinking Republican Motherhood* by Margaert A. Nash. From there I went to Benjamin Rush's essay "*Thoughts Upon the Mode of Education in a Republic*". Nash's article has inspired to read Linda Kerber's *Women of the Republic* and Mary Beth Norton's *Liberty's Daughters*. Ultimately, I am motivated to elevating my passion for social history and today's popular media's depiction of it, with a more scholarly approach. For this I will be forever grateful to the Teaching American History grant.

A Book Review

*Ladies of Liberty:*

*The Women Who Shaped Our Nation*

by Cokie Roberts

Submitted by: Susan Healy

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