After the Siege

Jacqueline Barbara Carr

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Foreword to the
Humanities Open Book Edition

The re-issue in electronic format of Jacqueline Barbara Carr’s After the Siege is a welcome event. The book is a necessary complement to other scholarship on early Boston that is more readily available. An intensive, laborious, and imaginative use of town documents, including the Taking Books, which were the records of town tax collectors, After the Siege builds upon the work of Anne Haven Thwing, Carl Bridenbaugh, and Darrett Rutman and describes the impact of the Revolution on Boston. As students of Boston’s history know, Thwing’s exhaustive, detailed work is an invaluable resource for any social history of early Boston. While Bridenbaugh introduced scholars to the importance of urban social history in his two landmark, synthetic volumes, Cities in the Wilderness and Cities in Revolt, he was a traditionalist, descriptive, and dependent upon an impressionistic selection of small, ordinary events and anecdotes for his explanations of social change. During the sixties, social historians, departing from the approach of Bridenbaugh and other social historians, enthusiastically embraced the methods of the Annales school, French historians who championed the study of long-term social developments over the immediacy of sensational
events, of *histoire totale* and the *longue durée*, and who frequently borrowed methods from social scientists to access and analyze evidence, particularly that which is quantifiable, more systematically. Enterprising young scholars focused more intently upon discrete, geographical subjects and dived deeply into different and previously less used data to access the intimate lives of ordinary people and reconstruct the *mentalité* of communities. No American subject in this new historiographic tradition attracted more attention than seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England towns, and it seemed the answers to compelling, seemingly unanswerable questions would be possible.

In its examination of Boston during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, *After the Siege* is a mature work, a worthy addition to this historiographic tradition that responds to critics of *longue durée* history. Using the techniques of thick description beloved by the *Annalistes*, Carr crafts her many biographies around the pivotal moment of the British occupation in 1775–76. Like the most careful of New Social historians, she painstakingly constructs rich and detailed stories of barely visible Bostonians from material a former archivist once characterized as “extremely low-grade ore.” Her method allows illustration of the personal devastation wrought by the British occupation, the economic and social dislocation of the siege, and post-war reconstruction. Through her close analysis of Bostonians at work and play, she traces the city’s transition from provincial, Puritan town to cosmopolitan city. She notes the changes impelled by Boston’s growth, its growing demand for new services, the evolution of town institutions, and the emergence of a new generation of business and community leaders.

Carr’s study still reflects the continued challenges of balancing event and *longue durée* history. Seeing economic behavior through the perspective of personal biography, for example, limits views of the impact of transatlantic or global forces—the more fashionable perspective these days but with its own conceptual limitations—and can lead to overly optimistic estimations of social success or
dysfunction. Nonetheless, even in doing so, After the Siege still provides charming, intimate details of the lives of ordinary Bostonians while documenting the impact of the Revolution on Boston not available elsewhere.

After the Siege is a rare book in its representation of the New Social History; its strengths lie in its exploitation of less-used and obscure sources to reconstruct the lives of Bostonians and to provide details of how they lived, worked, and played. It is also a pivotal book, one that provides the kind of thick description the Annalistes sought as a scholarly goal and which, along with Bridenbaugh and Rutman, builds the detailed, empirical foundation for a grand synthesis.iii

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2 Gary B. Nash's Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness and the Origins of the American Revolution (Harvard University Press, 1979) reflects some of the thick description of social conditions that characterizes the New Social History, but it is used more instrumentally in an event-driven narrative.
3 See Mark Peterson, The City-State of Boston: The Rise and Fall of an Atlantic Power, 1630-1865, which will be issued in 2019 by Princeton University Press.
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