Midwife, Mortician, Physician, Pharmacist

Bloom, Lynn Z . Belles Lettres ; Arlington Vol. 6, Iss. 1, (Fall 1990): 48.

ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Although "few New England women of her generation left writing in nay form," Ballard, of Hallowell, Maine, Kept this diary for over twenty-sever years, "9,965 days to be exact," making this not only the most extensive midwife's diary of the Revolutionary War era, but also an exceedingly rare and full document. "Without the diary her biography would be little more than succession of dates," notes [Laurel Thatcher Ulrich] of Ballard's birth in 1735, her marriage in 1754, the births of her nine children (1756-79), the deaths of three in 1769, and her own death 1812, commemorated by a one-sentence obituary: "Died in Augusta, Mrs. [Martha Ballard], consort of Mr. Ephraim Ballard, aged 77 years."

Yet the few male historians who knew about Ballard's diary "found much of it," says Ulrich, "`trivial and unimportant...being but a repetition of what has been recited many times'" - a judgement echoed unthinkingly even in Wertz's generally excellent feminist history of midwifery, Lying-in (1977): "like diaries of farm women, it is filled with trivia about domestic chores and pastimes." Exactly so, says Ulrich, "It is in the very dailiness, the exhaustive, repetitious dailiness, that the real power of Martha Ballard's book lies. "To extract the river crossings," as one historian did, "without noting the cold days spent `footing' stocking, to abstract the births without nothing the cold days spent `footing' stockings, to abstract the birth without recording the long autumns spent winding quills, pickling meat, and sorting cabbages, is to destroy the sinews of this earnest, steady, gentle, and courageous record." In this record, written at times Ballard had "crossed the river or waded through snow to sit over tedious labor, when she felt overwhelmed or enlivened by the very `trivia' [male] historians have dismissed,' the diarist emerges as a woman of enormous energy, strength, tenacity, and capability.

The tea-drinking was important as a continuation of "meetings at the bedsides of gravely ill children," for "birth, illness, and death wove Hallowell's female community together." Ballard's social visit, following the death of an infant, "cannot have been a casual one. Was it a practical errand that brought her there, or a deeper need to consolidate the experience she had shared a few hours before" by extending sympathy after a "profoundly disturbing nightwatch...to a young mother still new to the circle of matrons?" "Female healers," asserts Ulrich, "identified with the patients they served in ways that male physicians could not" - and she explains why.

FULL TEXT

Midwife, Mortician, Physician, Pharmacist

A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, based on Her Diary, 1785, by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. New York: Knopf, 1990, $24.95, 444 pp.

The biographer of any unknown person is working against the grain. Biographers of the famous and the infamous, ranging from Simone de Beauvoir to Lyndon Johnson to Jesse James, can count on rewards such as reviews, readers, reputation, and royalty checks to provide some recompense for their decade (or more) of hard work. Indeed, with a wealth of well-known people to choose from, why would a biographer be willing to spend to spend so much effort recreating the works and days of a person likely to remain unknown even after the book is published?

Ulrich, a historian at the University of New Hampshire, provides an answer in A Midwife's Tale, a superbly researched and elegantly written biography. Contemporary women scholars are committed to calling attention to the lives of ordinary women, who weave the fabric of daily life, transmitting its culture and values. Women, after all, comprise fifty-one percent of history but for centuries have been ignored by male scholars focusing on Great White Men. We realize now that everyone has story to tell, majority and minority, native-born and immigrant, old and young and middle-aged. So a historian like Ulrich can take the bare-bones diary of Ballard, a Revolutionary War midwife, provide an extensive cultural and historical context, and recreate a life both meaningful and memorable

Although "few New England women of her generation left writing in nay form," Ballard, of Hallowell, Maine, Kept this diary for over twenty-sever years, "9,965 days to be exact," making this not only the most extensive midwife's diary of the Revolutionary War era, but also an exceedingly rare and full document. "Without the diary her biography would be little more than succession of dates," notes Ulrich of Ballard's birth in 1735, her marriage in 1754, the births of her nine children (1756-79), the deaths of three in 1769, and her own death 1812, commemorated by a one-sentence obituary: "Died in Augusta, Mrs. Martha, consort of Mr. Ephraim Ballard, aged 77 years."

Without the diary, observes Ulrich, "we would know nothing...of the 816 deliveries she performed between 1785 and 1812. We would not even be certain she had bee a midwife." But between the diary and Ulrich's analysis, Ballard becomes, "in twentieth-century terms, simultaneously a midwife, nurse, physician, mortician, pharmacist, and attentive wife. Furthermore, in the very act of recording her work, she becomes a keeper of vital records, a chronicler of the medical history of her town."

Yet the few male historians who knew about Ballard's diary "found much of it," says Ulrich, "`trivial and unimportant...being but a repetition of what has been recited many times'" - a judgement echoed unthinkingly even in Wertz's generally excellent feminist history of midwifery, Lying-in (1977): "like diaries of farm women, it is filled with trivia about domestic chores and pastimes." Exactly so, says Ulrich, "It is in the very dailiness, the exhaustive, repetitious dailiness, that the real power of Martha Ballard's book lies. "To extract the river crossings," as one historian did, "without noting the cold days spent `footing' stocking, to abstract the births without nothing the cold days spent `footing' stockings, to abstract the birth without recording the long autumns spent winding quills, pickling meat, and sorting cabbages, is to destroy the sinews of this earnest, steady, gentle, and courageous record." In this record, written at times Ballard had "crossed the river or waded through snow to sit over tedious labor, when she felt overwhelmed or enlivened by the very `trivia' [male] historians have dismissed,' the diarist emerges as a woman of enormous energy, strength, tenacity, and capability.

Ulrich has chosen ten moth-long representative segments of the diary, written between August, 1787 and May, 1809, for extensive analysis and commentary; the forty diary pages occupy less than ten percent of the text. Each chapter is devoted to an aspect of social, cultural, or medical history in which women were of particular prominence: midwifery, domestic economy(particularly weaving), litigation (including rape), marriage and illegitimate births childbirth practices, housework, seduction, murder, indebtedness, and gardening.

Ballard's typical entries are terse and to the point. Many consist of a few short sentences; rarely do they exceed 100 words. Ulrich provides the full orchestration for Ballard's descant, without which the author would remain a shadowy presence in an elliptical, allusive coded account. Consider three entries for August 1787, in the chapter devoted to contextualizing the practice of midwifery:

13 William McMaster Expired at 3 O Clock this morn. Mrs. Patin &I laid the Child. Poor mother, how Distressing her

case, near the hour of Labour and three Children more very sick. I set our for home. Called at Mrs Howards. I find her son very Low. At Mr Williams. She is very ill indeed. Now at home. It is nine O Clock morn. I feel as if I must take some rest. Mr Ballad is going to Pittston on Business. Dolly is beginning to weave the handkerchiefs. Ephraim &I went to see Mrs Williams at Evening. I find her some Better. death of Wm Mc Master [Ballard's patient] 14 Clear &hott. I pikt the safron. Mrs Patten here. Mr., Ballard &I &all the girls attended funeral of William McMaster. Their other Children are mending. James Howard very low. I drank Tea at Mr Pollards. Called at Mr Porters. 24 called from Shaws [where she had delivered a daughter the night before] to James Hinklys wife in travail. Put her safe to Bed with a son at 7 O Clock this morn. Left her as well as if usual for her. Came to Mr Shaws received 6/8. Received 6/8 of Mr Hinkly also. Come to Mr Cowens. Find his dafters &Jedy ill. Claton &David came inn from Sandy river. People well there. Arrived a home 5 afternoon. Doctor Coneys wife delivered of a dafter Last Evening at 10 o'clock. Birth James Hinkleys son [Ballard's delivery]

To understand these entries fully requires a great deal of interpretation. Who are all these people? Why would anyone except a demographer or an epidemiologist in later years care about these records of birth, illness, and death? What difference does it make to anyone, let alone subsequent generations, that Ballard "pikt safron," and "drank Tea at Mr Pollards," or even that the stayed up all night delivering two babies in different households and spent the following day tending the sick until 5 p.m.? Why did she bother to record the birth of a baby ("Doctor Coneys wife") she herself didn't deliver?

Ulrich answers these questions, providing synthesis, analysis, and context for the raw material. She approaches the passage just quoted from several angles, "as a case study of an epidemic, as an exemplar of Martha's therapies, and as a window into the broader system of social medicine." Thus Ulrich explains that between August 13 and 24 the midwife:

performed four deliveries, answered one obstetrical false alarm, made sixteen medical calls, prepared three bodies for burial, dispensed pills to one neighbor, harvested and prepared herbs for another, and doctored her own husband's sore throat.

The tea-drinking was important as a continuation of "meetings at the bedsides of gravely ill children," for "birth, illness, and death wove Hallowell's female community together." Ballard's social visit, following the death of an infant, "cannot have been a casual one. Was it a practical errand that brought her there, or a deeper need to consolidate the experience she had shared a few hours before" by extending sympathy after a "profoundly disturbing nightwatch...to a young mother still new to the circle of matrons?" "Female healers," asserts Ulrich, "identified with the patients they served in ways that male physicians could not" - and she explains why.

This is typical of Ulrich's contextual interpretation, which enriches and makes meaningful every one of Ballard's entries. For instance, she follows a discussion of "the courting patterns and matrimonial customs of eighteenth-century Hallowell," which "wove couples into the larger community, reinforcing gender roles, celebrating group identity, and ...maintaining the boundaries with which sexuality might be expressed" with an interpretation of Ballard's entry for October 23, 1791. The midwife was summoned to Sally Pierce: "Because this was going to be an illegitimate birth, she knew what she had to ask. She also knew what Sally would say: "She was safe delivered at 1 hour pm of a fine son, her illness very severe but I left her cleverly &returned ...about sun set. Sally declared that my son Jonathan was the father of her child."

Ulrich focuses not on the implied human drama, but on whether there was a social and legal doubt standard governing illegitimate births. Novels of the period notwithstanding, "there is no evidence that in rural communities women who bore children out of wedlock were either ruined or abandoned." Nevertheless, it was important to

determine to identity of the "reputed father": so he would pay child support: "The assumption was that a woman asked to testify at the height of travail would not lie." (The couple married several months later and lived uneasily ever after.)

Every page of A Midwife's Tale is full of similar concerns, a re-creation of life and death, works and days presented with insight, elegance, and eloquence. We care about Martha Ballard because Ulrich shows us why she's important, an extraordinary ordinary person whose life history expands and enriches our understanding not only of her times, but also of our own.

Photo (Laurel Thatcher Ulrich)

DETAILS

Subject:	Health; Literature; Preventive medicine; Practitioner patient relationship; Children; Patients; Feminism; Deception; Women; Physicians; Deaths
Publication title:	Belles Lettres; Arlington
Volume:	6
Issue:	1
Pages:	48
Number of pages:	0
Publication year:	1990
Publication date:	Fall 1990
Publisher:	Belles Lettres
Place of publication:	Arlington
Country of publication:	United States, Arlington
Publication subject:	Literature, Women's Interests, Publishing And Book Trade
ISSN:	08842957
Source type:	Magazine
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Book review
Document feature:	Photo

Accession number:	SFLNSIBLT0996BLDZ503000053
ProQuest document ID:	222314253
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/magazines/midwife-mortician-physician-pharmacist/docview/222314253/se-2?accountid=12528
Copyright:	Copyright Belles Lettres Fall 1990
Last updated:	2019-08-13
Database:	ProQuest One Academic,ProQuest One Literature

LINKS

Linking Service