Book Review


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In The Overflowing of Friendship: Love Between Men and the Creation of the American Republic, Richard Godbeer asserts that ‘fraternal orders such as the Freemasons depicted their organizations as the spearheads for a new social order based on the cultivation of sympathetic love between men’ (p. 12). Godbeer is careful to contextualize this ‘love between men’, taking pains to describe it in eighteenth-century terms—a platonic love that had little to do with sex. The book examines these emotional bonds or ‘romantic friendships’ among American men of the eighteenth century, positing that they ‘came to be seen as crucial to the nation-building project and its creation of worthy republican citizens’ (p. 12).

Godbeer pursues his subject from three perspectives—those of the men themselves; their relatives and friends; and their society, in general. His first chapter describes one group of three young men in Philadelphia, relating the story of their relationship, drawn almost exclusively from their journals. This chapter introduces the context for intimate male friendships in the early republic. Chapter two widens the lens by exploring how these friendships evolved over the lives of eighteenth-century men as they became husbands and fathers. It also introduces the engaging concept that the idea and fact of male friendship played a vital role in establishing the ‘new civic ethos’ of post-Revolutionary America. Chapters three and four turn to a discussion of friendships among clergy and Continental Army soldiers, respectively.

The book concludes with a chapter that ‘considers the place that sentimental friendship occupied within late eighteenth-century republican ideology as Americans envisaged the creation of a post-revolutionary society’ (p. 16). This chapter includes a section on freemasonry, acknowledging the influence of the fraternity on societal ideas of brotherhood. While masonic historians will not find anything new in the summary of the development of eighteenth-century American freemasonry, Godbeer’s use of the fraternity’s language of brotherly love to advance his larger argument is laudable. Where many scholars would have ignored the impact of freemasonry altogether, this work does not and is strengthened as a result. Arguably, Godbeer could have gone even further by addressing the masonic membership of George Washington and his aides in the chapter about the Continental Army, as well as by identifying whether some of the men in his descriptive examples throughout were masons or not.

The book makes substantial use of primary sources—personal and public writings including letters, diaries, journals, newspaper and magazine articles, sermons and political tracts—and shows a good grounding in the secondary source literature.
related to early republic history and gender studies. A more substantial interweaving of the primary sources and secondary literature would be useful in some chapters, particularly in terms of the evolution of gender studies. In addition, the lack of any use of eighteenth-century visual sources or material culture seems a startling omission. Undoubtedly, there were cartoons and illustrations of aspects of male friendship, which would only add to the analysis presented. These sources might also help to broaden the socio-economic picture of male friendship, offering insight about lower-class men and their relationships with other men.

Overall, Godbeer ably demonstrates that patterns of male friendship provided a language and guide for American society as it shifted from a patriarchal model of authority to a brotherhood of men ‘reflecting the egalitarian spirit of the new republic’ (p. 156). He provokes new ideas and questions about the formation of the American republic and demonstrates the value of interlacing freemasonry with social and cultural studies.