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in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Marie Jenkins Schwartz. *Ties That Bound: Founding First Ladies and Slaves*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. 416 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-14755-0.

Reviewed by David Jamison (Miami University of Ohio Regionals)

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Commissioned by Caryn E. Neumann (Miami University of Ohio Regionals)

Marie Jenkins Schwartz's *Ties That Bound: Founding First Ladies and Slaves* provides an interesting look into lives that crossed lines of class, race, and gender. With this book, Schwartz attempts to "[examine] the relationships that developed between First Ladies and their slaves" (p. 2). She analyzes the lives of three out of the first four First Ladies in compartmentalized sections, interspersing her analyses of these colonial matrons with periodic *Downton Abbey*-style peeks into what might have been happening in the slave quarters at the time the events upstairs were going on. She succeeds a little better than might be expected given her sources, and has produced a very insightful yet readable, compelling, and fairly unbiased contribution to North American slave and women's studies scholarship.

Schwartz's expertise clearly shines when she is analyzing the various ways that both black female slaves and white female aristocrats negotiated the man's world of early nineteenth-century America. Female slaves were subject to both white male and black male corridors of power, not to mention their daily labor subjection by white females. As Schwartz documents, they also spent a tragic amount of energy trying to keep their families together, but the author can provide little insight into the impressions these events made on these women. Indeed, virtually all of what Schwartz gives us comes from correspondence written about them by their white owners. But this is the bane of the slave historian. Since most slaves did not leave written records, sometimes the very nature of slave scholarship is mysterious conjecture. So Schwartz sketches for us the contours of what Martha Washington's or Dolly Madison's female slaves might have felt, thought, heard, or saw based on their inter-

actions with whites. But as the class aspect of household slavery is often underanalyzed in favor of the more obviously distressed field slave community, this research is sorely needed. Schwartz shows her readers what the life of an elite female slave of that time might have been like, and how various historical subjects would have lived them. It is useful and thoughtful work, and Schwartz has a knack for imagery. Sally Hemings's story is an exception to the rule, though: there is a great deal of documented evidence on her life, and Martha Jefferson's section is dominated by both Hemings and Jefferson's daughter Patsy. Schwartz does an effective job balancing accounts of Hemings with Patsy, and one of the most intriguing aspects of the book is how Patsy negotiated the embarrassment that she felt at having an actively miscegenating father, but one whom she clearly loved and wanted to see happy. The tension between the two comprises the most emotionally rich moments of the book.

Ties That Bound provides enlightening depictions of both the savvy that aristocratic women utilized to achieve as much power as their husbands did (even though it was a different kind of power), as well as the disheartening distractions from self-empowerment that these women had to negotiate, such as fashion, rank, social status, jealousy, and other gender-conformist narratives of the day. The mind reels at the wonders that Madison or Washington might have been able to perform if they had not been preoccupied with what elite society would think about their social life (Madison) or what the number of slaves they owned said about what good patricians they were (Washington). Schwartz does a good job taking us into the hearts and minds of these women using the "letter, diaries, and other writings of

the First Ladies” (p. 10). The picture that is generated is one that, while in accord with contemporary feminist perspectives, might shock those who have been fooled by genteel depictions of helpless colonial armpieces; our nation’s first First Ladies were *pragmatic*, more pragmatic, in fact, than any of their ideologue husbands, who had the thanks of a grateful nation to assuage various economic and societal shortcomings. These women could not afford to be ideologues, and often supervised their domestic spaces with ruthless calculation.

The aspect of the book that makes it exceptional, however, is Schwartz’s refusal to confine her history to the typical archive-based method. Intertwined with each section are bits of public history, where Schwartz gives personal accounts of trips to museum exhibits on the First Ladies. In fact, Schwartz uses these flashforwards as a literary device, framing her main historical accounts with contemporary reflections, and to great effect. It is seldom intrusive—she inserts them right where her sources seem

to be running thin—and she buttresses her arguments by adding insights that the documents don’t reveal.

One criticism concerns not the book’s content, but Schwartz’s decision to omit our nation’s second First Lady, Abigail Adams, from biographical coverage. Adams was virulently opposed to owning slaves, although she seemed to be uninterested in criticizing her friends Washington, Patsy, or Madison for it. So, although an Adams biography would not fit into this book conceptually, I hold that her personal stand against slavery deserves some sort of mention. Not even addressing *why* she was omitted seems a bit of a perversion of anti-slavery history. I would also venture a structural critique: starting every section with the aristocrats reinforces hierarchical notions of class and race. The author cannot be faulted—historians lead with the best-documented subject. Still, it deserves mention. This is otherwise a fine and worthy contribution to intersectional studies.

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