

UCLA

UCLA Historical Journal

Title

William Pencak. *Jews and Gentiles in Early America. 1654-1800*. Ann Arbor; University of Michigan Press. 2005. Pp. xiv, 321. \$29.95

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8r11v1bw>

Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 21(0)

Author

Greenberg, Erik

Publication Date

2006

Copyright Information

Copyright 2006 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

boiler explosions provided another opportunity for middle class language to employ the physiological metaphor in the interests of their own authority in society. Such explosions were physical problems that had violent physical consequences, and only the mental labor of the engineer could save the helpless laboring victims of mechanical failure. It is in this example of steam boiler explosions, however, that the insufficiency of the “languages of class” model appears almost in spite of itself. If the job of the historian is to reconstruct the past accurately, would it not be more accurate to understand the occurrence of a steam boiler explosion not merely as an opportunity for middle class discursive activity, but instead as a horrible resurgence in the social world of the raw reality of class difference? Despite Rice’s stated desire to understand class not as material experience but as linguistically constructed prior to experience, the steam boiler serves as the perfect counter-example; that is, if we consider that laborers were totally subject to the contingency of mechanical malfunction, then our perspective should be one of the irreducible, perhaps not totally expressible, material experience of alienation as an unavoidable part of the true story of industrial society.

Matthew E. Crow

University of California, Los Angeles

William Pencak. *Jews and Gentiles in Early America, 1654-1800*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 2005. Pp. xiv, 321. \$29.95

In his preface, William Pencak notes that his study of early American Jewry began in response to a conversation with Penn State historian A. Gregg Roeber in the winter of 1998-99. Roeber asked Pencak if he knew anything about colonial Pennsylvania’s Jews to which Pencak replied, “No. Does anybody?” Naturally those familiar with the historic literature on American Jewry would have directed Pencak to the work of Jacob Rader Marcus. For over three decades, Marcus was not only the Dean of American Jewish History, he was also the prime archivist in the field, creating the American Jewish Archives at the flagship campus of the Reform movement’s Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Marcus’ works and his archives continue to exert a great deal of influence over the historiography of American Jews. Clearly Pencak discovered Marcus and the archives because his book frequently cites both and rarely deviates from the narrative of Rabbi Marcus’ initial studies. To be sure, *Jews and Gentiles in Early America* does offer some unique insights into the history of early American Jewry, particularly in those

sections that examine political anti-Semitism, but Pencak's study of the early Jewish communities of New York City, Newport, Rhode Island, Charleston, South Carolina, Savannah, Georgia, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania proves a little too ambitious for a 268 page monograph. By trying to study so many communities at once Pencak favors breadth over depth. At some points in the book he merely repeats the story of early American Jewry made famous by Marcus, while at other points the book's broad focus undermines the possibility of a more in depth study of Pencak's significant insights concerning political anti-Semitism in both colonial America and the early Republic.

Rather than a unified study, Pencak's book consists of five discrete essays on the five above-mentioned communities, each of which attempts to answer the author's four guiding questions: "When were Jews welcomed, and despised, and by whom? Why did anti-Semitism or its converse, philo-Semitism, occur when it did? Why did Jewish communities grow, decline, remain stable, and quarrel among themselves? What was the role of Jews in the American Revolution and the politics of the early republic?" (v). Pencak's separate studies answer these questions with varying degrees of success. His chapter on New York, for example, offers considerable detail on the internecine squabbles within the city's first synagogue, Shearith Israel, while providing precious little information on the push and pull factors that led to the growth of the city's Jewish population. By contrast, his study of Philadelphia, by far the most well-developed and complete account in the book, offers a plethora of information about community formation, Jewish occupations, kinship networks, anti and philo-Semitism, as well as Jewish participation in the non-importation movement of the 1760s and their involvement in the Revolutionary War. His middle three chapters on Newport, Charleston, and Savannah, like his section on New York, also lack the greater development found in the Philadelphia chapter. That is not to say that these sections are not interesting, they merely lack the detail and analysis found in Pencak's work on the City of Brotherly Love.

By far, Pencak's most important contribution to Jewish-American historiography is his study of popular anti-Semitism and its political uses, and so we must also think about his work in relation to the most significant studies on the history of political anti-Semitism such as Andrew Whitside's *The Socialism of Fools*, Fritz Stern's *The Politics of Cultural Despair*, and Richard S. Levy's *The Downfall of the Anti-Semitic Political Parties in Imperial Germany* to name just a few. Though the above cited titles focus exclusively on Europe, their examination of the political uses of popular anti-Semitism prove particularly applicable to the Pencak's most noteworthy historiographic contribution. When viewed in the light of these aforementioned studies, *Jews and Gentiles in Early America* demonstrates that political anti-Semitism was not merely a European phenomenon, and that throughout the early modern and modern periods, unscrupulous politicians on both sides of the Atlantic have exploited anti Jewish sentiment to forward their own

political agendas.

According to Pencak, popular anti-Semitism in early America was a typical component of "gentile cultural baggage." Still the political use of such prejudice generally "required some catalyst to bring it to the surface" (3-5). Prior to the Revolution, anti-Jewish hostility rarely took on political overtones. It is interesting to note, however, that anti-Semites in colonial New York occasionally elected prominent Jewish merchants to lowly civic positions (such as constables, assessors and collectors), thereby demeaning Jewish New Yorkers and compelling them to avoid service by paying fines or hiring deputies to carry out these menial tasks. These political slights notwithstanding, it is only during the years of the early Republic that the first serious uses of political anti-Semitism took place. At first, since Jews generally supported Hamiltonian economic policies, Jeffersonian anti-federalist newspapers singled out Jews as a group of elite and greedy usurers who profited at the expense of ordinary people. After the French Revolution, however, political anti-Semitism became a Federalist propaganda tool. Like Jefferson, Jews supported the Revolution in France, which, after all, granted French Jews full political and civic equality. In response, Pencak asserts, "Federalist polemicists [depicted Jews as] the leaders of a motley crew of Irishmen, 'Jacobins,' Frenchmen, African Americans, and the poor striving to wrest government from a virtuous elite" (232). It is worth noting that Pencak's book does not suggest that anti-Semitism in early America ever took on the violent character it did in Europe and Russia. Still, the author makes clear that early American politicians had no problem demonizing Jews for their own benefit.

Ultimately, whether or not readers find *Jews and Gentiles in Early America* a useful book largely depends on their familiarity with American Jewish history and their specific research needs. For those already well-versed on the topic, Pencak's study offers little new information on the development of the Jewish community in British America and the early Republic. This reader wonders whether Pencak would have been better served by narrowing his study to one of the five cities in the book, or if the relatively small size of the early American Jewish community (approximately 3,000 by the author's estimate) precludes a more in-depth piece. Still, Pencak's work on anti-Semitism is worth a closer read and may, in fact, inform future works on the political uses of anti Jewish prejudice in America. For readers less familiar with the early history of American Jewry, Pencak's book is as good a place as any to start. While one may find the middle chapters of the book wanting, if nothing else it is a useful primer in an under-researched field. One thing is for certain though, the next time someone asks Professor Pencak if he knows anything about the Jewish community in colonial Pennsylvania, he can answer "yes."

Erik Greenberg

University of California, Los Angeles