

# interpreter

## The Hand That Rocked the Cradle

*What are the important women's issues that must be addressed in interpretation? We asked a sampling of those who know best: ladies among us who in either first or third person shape our visitors' perceptions of what it was like to be a woman in Williamsburg in the 1700s. Two of our authors work at trades, two portray female slaves, and two assume characters of white mistresses of households.*

### From Anderson's Blacksmith Shop

In the eighteenth century women worked in a variety of trades that today seem surprising. Yet William Hutton, a traveler to the English Midlands, offers his own surprise:

When I first approached Birmingham, from Walsall, in 1741, I was surprised at the prodigious number of blacksmith's shops upon the road; and could not conceive how a county though populous, could support so many people of the same occupation. In some of these shops I observed one or more females . . . wielding the hammer with all the grace of the sex. (*Annals of the Laboring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660-1900*, by K. D. M. Snell.)

To me, this observation by Hutton is typical. Examples of women as smiths occurred as early as the fourteenth century and continue to our own time. A drawing in the Holkham Bible Picture Book (ca. 1325-1330, Plate 2) clearly shows a woman with hammer in hand, forging nails while her husband nearby points to his injured hand. Women working as apprentices with their fathers or husbands, and occasionally on their own, seem to be an ordinary occurrence throughout the medieval period. Alice Clark concludes in her *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, a study of English working women, that:

The assistance of the wife was so important in her husband's business that she engaged servants to free her from

household drudgery. . . . The share which the wife took in her husband's business was determined rather by the question whether he carried it on at home or abroad than by any special appropriateness of the said business to the feminine disposition. Thus, though women were seldom carpenters or masons, they figure as pewterers and smiths.

Women worked in a broad range of occupations (their work being based primarily on need and social status), however, most people today focus on women whose lives most closely correspond to their own experiences or expectations. The following is another example of a woman's experience in trade:

A few Days ago the Wife of Mr. Slade, Shipwright at Deptford, was delivered of a Daughter. It is remarkable, that this Gentlewoman is the same Person who is not improperly stiled the female Shipwright . . . dressed herself in Mens Apparel. . . . She bound herself Apprentice to a Shipwright, served the whole Term, and worked at the Business two Years afterwards. . . . The above mentioned Person, who is now her Husband, worked with her a considerable Time in the Yard, and observed that she always regularly went through, though sometimes with great Difficulty and Fatigue, her stated Day's Labour with the rest of the Men. (*Virginia Gazette*, Purdie and Dixon, October 14, 1773, supplement.)

These examples are all from England. What were women in the colonial South doing in the eighteenth century? Surviving documents give us two examples of women operating smiths' businesses after their husbands' deaths. In both households slaves were listed as smiths, but the documents do not reveal what work the widows actually did. These records do suggest an involvement with and responsibility for family businesses that women are still familiar with today.

—Margret (Kelly) Kellam  
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### From Margaret Hunter's Shop

If you stand out in front of the Millinery Shop for any length of time, you will hear this conversation:

"I'm not going into a lady's hat shop."

"Now dear, I spent more time than I wanted to at the gunsmith, so you can come see the hats."

The visitors enter. The perception is that this is a place strictly for women. Women work in the shop, women are the customers, and the subject is hats. The visitors are correct on all three counts, but they are perceiving the shop across two different centuries.

The first challenge is to help visitors sort out great-grandmother's nineteenth-century millinery shop along with Scarlett O'Hara's barbeque hat and waistline from the eighteenth-century trade in all its diversity, and recognize the milliner as merchant-importer as well as designer of clothing and accessories. Next, men have a place here—not only as milliners but also as customers! Teenage girls actually suffer when told that their fathers may have been the ones to do the shopping. Fathers brighten visibly. Moreover, a few milliners were men, and on rare occasions male tailors were employed in the shop.

We have daily opportunities to interpret this eighteenth-century business in its complexity, its fashions, and its women. Yet we feel the satisfaction of a job well done when we are able to help visitors understand their perceptions concerning Victorian ideas and myths relating to southern women in general and can separate twentieth-century issues from eighteenth-century life.

As the visitor leaves, one often hears, "I always thought milliners were just hat makers."

"Well, wife, if I did the shopping . . ."

—Janea Whitacre

### From Wetherburn's Tavern Kitchen

Ignorant of the English language, unable to read or write, reduced to the point where in some ways they were no longer recognized as women, African women entered the New World at the lowest level of the social hierarchy.

But many historians acknowledge that the woman was the focus of the African-American family, and without her there was no sense of family. Family structure in the traditional sense that we know it today was not possible. With fathers frequently held on other—sometimes distant—properties, African-American

mothers bore almost the entire responsibility for childrearing. In many cases, fathers were not able to visit their children as often as once a week. In addition to the long and strenuous workday, either in the field or as domestic workers, slave mothers had to cook, spin, and sew for their families as well as care for their children.

In Virginia, the law stated that the status of the child was determined by the status of the mother when the infant was born. Most slave owners apparently tried to keep mothers and their young children together. One reason might have been so that the children could learn useful skills, but it was more likely because white planters understood and accepted the important and practical relationship between mothers and their young.

The fact that slaves were treated as property and not as human beings made them very dependent on one another for identity and support. The extended family, which consisted of many unrelated or distantly related blacks, was an important feature of this emerging slave community. These newfound relatives worked together, prayed together, and shared their many beliefs about humankind and the world.

—Bridgette Jackson

### From the Powell Kitchen

Most eighteenth-century women were primarily occupied with domestic and health issues involving their families. Slave women shared these concerns, but because of the great emphasis placed on family and ancestors in African cultures, the African-American woman also assumed responsibility for preserving whatever form of family cohesiveness that was possible in a slaveholding society. She struggled for the very survival of the family itself.

How could slave women do this in a system that allowed the breaking up of families by not legalizing slave marriages, a system that guaranteed perpetuation of slavery from one generation to another? Family unity was accomplished in part through oral literature.

Oral literature or telling stories and proverbs is one of the major legacies of African culture. These stories and proverbs changed in the New World to include morals that taught young slaves how to survive. Although these stories are often entertaining, entertainment was not the primary function of oral literature.

We must be very careful when interpreting  
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slave culture because if we perpetuate stereotypes instead of educating people, we may do more harm than good. Therefore, when character interpreters who portray slaves tell stories or choose *not* to tell stories, it is because storytelling was so important and we don't want to give the wrong impression. We don't want any of our visitors to go away thinking "Oh, slavery wasn't so bad for black people because they sat around singing, dancing, and telling stories." That is why we as interpreters must recognize that there is a right and wrong place or time to tell stories. While it was the most important tool used to educate slave children, it should not be misused so that our visitors and fellow interpreters expect every slave interpretation to end with an amusing story or anecdote.

—Rosemarie Byrd

**From Mr. Powell's House**

What were the concerns of the eighteenth-century housewife? They were as varied as the women themselves, but some are the same as today's. You are invited to read the following "letter" from Mrs. Annabelle Powell dictated to her daughter for Annabelle's sister and consider what concerns she is expressing to a close family member. It may be necessary to read between the lines, but that is where so much of our social history is found.

Dearest Sister,

I hope this letter finds all of your family in good health. We have suffered through the usual ills of the winter season and thank the good Lord, we have all survived once again. My own dear girls were both brought low with an ague and rattling phlegm of the chest. It pained my heart to listen to their labored breathing. Rose's little Sarah was taken with the chin cough and no sooner was she improved than Rose took sick. I was without her work for upwards of two weeks. I feel I can burden you with these thoughts having assured you that none was taken from us.

The garden is already plowed and planted and as soon as I am easy in my mind that we shall have no late frost I will make you a visit. If you will send to let me know what you have need of I will bring what you require to replenish your apothecary. Dr. Galt has assured me that he has a ready supply of most everything necessary.

Hannah and Nancy are extremely ex-

cited about Public Times. You may remember I intended to suggest to my dear husband that our girls be allowed to attend the dances at the Raleigh with us this season. Mr. Powell has been more than generous. Not only are they to attend the dances, but are having new gowns from the mantua maker! Mr. Powell is exceedingly pleased with *his* idea. I'm sure my girls will not lack for partners. I can only hope that they will not fix their affections too soon. I have already told them that I should like them to wait their marriages until they have passed their twentieth year.

Samuel Spur who worked with Mr. Powell on the Bell Tower last year came to visit last week. I could not help but hear them talking about a new building to be constructed in our city. It seems our late governor Fauquier proposed the construction of a Public Hospital for lunatics and the Burgesses have approved the money to be spent. I can only hope that Mr. Powell's reputation will secure to him the contract. It would surely be a feather in his cap.

I am afraid I must weary you with my tittle-tattle. Pray give my regards to all your family and let me have word from you soon.

I am your most affectionate Sister  
Annabelle Powell

—Kristen Everly

**From Mr. Geddy's House**

"Providence hath bequeathed, for the better economy of the world, that the men who are by their birthright born superior are the natural law givers, have been bestowed with the better share of reason—by which means, we of the female sex are better prepared for that compliance which is necessary for the performance of those duties which are assigned to us."

Each time I utter those eighteenth-century words to a twentieth-century audience, I take particular care to put into proper context those assigned roles and the sense of domestic and utilitarian order that prevailed two hundred years ago.

Women, prepared for compliance, schooled in domestic economy, and considering their "chief duty the getting of a husband," confound our modern sensibilities. They leave us to question how we as interpreters can bestow a sense of dignity and a share of honor upon

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what, in many ways, is a totally foreign scene. The challenge remains always to frame the picture of life, which will provoke the visitor to look below the surface patriarchal rhetoric at the women who understood the necessity of their condition and rose to many challenges and frightening possibilities.

The first conclusions are that in this primitive world all men are tyrannical chauvinists and all women mindless, spiritless victims. It is so very easy to categorize, to write off those ladies who "have a long way to come," at first glance. A simple recitation of a woman's day with her duties as manager of the household, family doctor, childbearer, and mother all set against amazing odds and primitive conditions vividly brings home the state of female endurance, capability, and courage. The simple "facts" of a woman's life are more than enough to inspire admiration and respect. These must be balanced against the harsh simplistic philosophies accepted by both men and women of another time. The words that survive need to be repeated, but more important, the lives they lived need to be interpreted and appreciated. Our objective is not to judge or to shade with our own modern outlook, but to present the world of eighteenth-century women for what it was—what the women of those times endured and thus became.

—Mary Wiseman

## Museums of Influence

by Kenneth Hudson

*A book review by Charles R. Longworth*

Anyone with a serious interest in the world's museums will find Kenneth Hudson's *Museums of Influence* worth a careful reading and a valuable addition to a personal library. Carefully researched, well illustrated, and written in an active and engaging style, Mr. Hudson's book is a treasure and a pleasure. The author, a highly seasoned and clearly astute observer and scholar of museums everywhere, has traveled the world as a museum consultant to UNESCO. As a BBC journalist, he brings to his writings an inquiring mind and an awareness of the place of museums in the mass culture.

Probably the least convincing aspect of *Museums of Influence* is the title and its implications. To select thirty-seven museums from

the thousands in the world is at the least an act of courage, and the arbitrariness of the number and those chosen will undoubtedly cause some controversy and disagreement from the directors of those fine museums not included. The choices are not clearly justified by criteria that are defined in the early pages of the book. Nor are the thirty-seven "winners" identified in the table of contents, leaving the reader venturing into the text on uncertain ground and possibly frustrated, certainly not convinced that the journey is worth undertaking. Hudson offers only that his choices are based on "what I have seen or heard" and "the judgment of the considerable number of well-informed people with whom I have discussed the subject."

However, chapter one, an engaging essay on the origins and cross influences of museums, soon dispels any doubt about Hudson's capabilities of making much of his fascinating subject and puts aside to great extent a search for the criteria he uses to isolate "a museum of influence." It's just a good, interesting book! And as one moves into subsequent chapters, each on a category of museums (e.g., Temples of Art; Science, Technology, and Industry; History When It Happened), he develops criteria that fit the circumstances and amply explain his choices.

We are well aware of the tremendous growth in the numbers and varieties of museums; Hudson says the rate is 10 percent every five years. Fewer of us may be aware of the history of museums and the social, political, and economic forces that spawned some of the great museums in nineteenth-century Europe and twentieth-century America. Not that the "museums of influence" are exclusively Anglo-American. Chapter headings give museum locations as cities only, omitting countries, but I believe there are eight British, seven French, six American, and five German museums cited, two Swiss and Swedish, and one each from Denmark, the Netherlands, Greece, Poland, Israel, Mexico, and Tanzania.

In the United States the museums range from the Metropolitan in New York to Anacostia in Washington and include the Museum of Modern Art, Colonial Williamsburg, Brooklyn Children's Museum, and the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago.

Museums are human creations, of course, but war and prosperity seem to help. The Natural History Museum of London had the largest natural history collections in the world

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in the nineteenth century "because British trading and military interests covered the globe, and for natural history ethnology, as well as for archaeology, scientific specimens in great profusion came back with the merchant ships and the Navy." Not so for the Germans until after the Franco-Prussian war, when growth in the navy combined with German prosperity spawned accessioning on a scale rivaling Great Britain. But the "British got there first" and enabled those who followed to profit by "mistakes and experiences of the pioneers."

In France the Louvre, as the central art museum in Paris is popularly known, was a consequence of the French Revolution, which nationalized the property of the church, and of Napoleon's campaigns, "which swept the artistic treasures of Europe into the booty-wagons of the conquerors."

In the United States, Dr. Henry W. Bellows, preaching to his All Souls Church congregation in 1869, said, "Who is to say when we through the redundant wealth with which our prosperity threatens to possess us, shall be able to outbid the world in any market for those great recondite Works of Art which are so necessary for the cultivation of every people." Hudson notes "Dr. Bellow's prophecy as we well know has come horribly true." (*Museums of Influence*, published in 1987, probably was written before the Japanese bought their \$40 million van Gogh!) In the subsequent formation of the Metropolitan Museum the appeal to donors included reference to the opportunity to buy works of art at "low rates" from landed aristocratic families impoverished by war and revolution.

Hudson admires Colonial Williamsburg and devotes ample text and illustrative space to explaining its influence. "The influence of the Colonial Williamsburg project within the United States has been enormous in increasing the interest of Americans in their own past, in providing insight into the technical problems involved, and in demonstrating how such an ambitious and costly venture could be made financially viable. Its example has been followed in many places abroad, although the debt has not always been acknowledged." Hudson goes on to praise our research, crafts program, black history program, historical archaeology, reproductions program, and museum management training. "Colonial Williamsburg was and still is a powerful seminal influence and as with any institution which has brought about a revolution in thinking and

practice, one forgets too easily and ungratefully, what the situation was before the revolution took place."

Given our current disposition at Colonial Williamsburg it is interesting to read Hudson's views on social history. He quotes G. M. Trevelyan's 1944 definition of social history as "the history of a people with the politics left out." Elsewhere Hudson says, "Site museums have a life in reality about them which other types of museums cannot hope to approach." This sums up neatly, I think, our constant collective vigilance to tell Williamsburg's social history as a background for the grand political achievements of our eighteenth-century Virginia leaders and not as our primary interpretive theme.

There is much, much more: the changing taxonomy of museum collections; the introduction of shops, restaurants, and catalogs; the evolution of display and exhibition techniques; the effect of television on natural history museums; the disjunction between art and crafts; the departure from the history of art as an organizing principle; the perils and necessities of establishment support; the beginning of traveling exhibits; study collections and exhibits; private museums; the essential importance of balancing entertainment and education to assure a continuing appeal to visitors; and it goes on.

Hudson is visitor-oriented, stressing the need to balance between education and entertainment and advising that the modern museum director "must be fully and constantly aware of the ways in which the other media approach the public."

The most arresting line in this most excellent book is at the very end of a summary chapter in which Hudson suggests subject areas for future museums. This is an insightful look at the world's problems. Whether each is a fit subject for museum education raises some doubt. But whatever the subjects, and however new or old, large or small the museum, we must all be mindful of "the apparent paradox that successful popularization can be achieved only on a basis of sound scholarship."

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*Note: Mr. Hudson will talk on "Museums of Influence" at the Hennage Auditorium on Friday, September 23, 1988, from 4:00-5:00 p.m.*

## Your *Interpreter*

How many of you read the *Interpreter*? What kinds of articles would you like published? By whom? What do you like and dislike about the *Interpreter*?

Our editorial committee wanted answers to these and other questions, so we asked a random group of interpreters and supervisors from each of HAPO's departments to respond to a questionnaire evaluating the *Interpreter*. Visitor aide Holly Wisner and Scott Philyaw, an intern, conducted the survey, and Conny Graft is tabulating the results. Conny will write a full report for the September *Interpreter*. In the meantime we can answer a few questions that came up.

**What is the purpose of each of HAPO's publications?**

The primary objective for the *Interpreter* is to provide current and relevant historical information that can be used by interpreters on the job; it is a vehicle for describing Colonial Williamsburg's programmatic initiatives and concerns; and it can serve as a forum for the exchange of ideas among interpreters.

*Fresh Advice*s is an occasional research supplement to the *Interpreter*. The main intent is to inform interpreters about current research from archaeologists, architects, curators, and historians long before final reports are issued. Generally each issue of *Fresh Advice*s covers a single topic in depth.

*Questions & Answers* responds to interpreters' specific questions that relate to eighteenth-century Williamsburg and Virginia. *Q & A* may contain a series of miscellaneous questions, but at other times may address only one or two topics. To have your questions answered phone Jane Strauss at ext. 7619 or write her a note at the Greenhow Lumber House through interoffice mail.

Many of you have heard about the forthcoming *Historic Trades Annual*. This publication is being developed by members of the department of historic trades and will be devoted to "the study of the people and the processes of traditional trades and technology." It will be published annually and will be for sale. The editors hope that many articles will be prepared by Colonial Williamsburg researchers and other specialists.

**How are articles and authors chosen for the *Interpreter*?**

The editorial planning committee (Barbara Beaman, Lou Powers, Barney Barnes, George Collins, Conny Graft, Liza Gusler, Cathy Hellier, and Bill Tramposch) meets periodically to decide on historical content, programmatic news, book reviews, and other information that should be made available to interpreters. We also decide who is a likely candidate to write on any given subject.

Sometimes we learn of an interpreter's or other staff member's special study on a subject, and we ask him or her to contribute. Other times interpreters come to us with a written piece or an idea for an article. In most cases we ask the volunteer for a simple outline of the proposed article so we have a clear understanding of its scope and direction.

If you are interested in writing an article, book review, poem, or in sharing news from your interpretive area, please let any of us know. We are always looking for material that interpreters will enjoy knowing about.

Did you know that an index for the *Interpreter*, *Fresh Advice*s, and *Questions & Answers* as well as a compiled list of all the "King's English" columns is yours just for the asking? Come by the Davidson Shop or phone Nancy Dudley on ext. 7624 to get your copies. Also, some of you have asked that complete sets of the three newsletters be kept in the Foundation Library. They are up there for your use. Don't hesitate to ask the reference librarian to help you find them.

Thanks to all of you who let Holly or Scott interview you. We appreciate your time and thoughtful responses. You have given us many excellent suggestions that we look forward to implementing. If anyone who was not interviewed has suggestions or would like to answer the questionnaire, please call Conny Graft on ext. 7216.

—BB

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