

Everyday Crimes: Social Violence and Civil Rights in Early America

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Review

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Ryan, Kelly A. *Everyday Crimes: Social Violence and Civil Rights in Early America*. New York University Press, 2019. \$39.00 ISBN 9781479869619

Kelly Ryan's *Everyday Crimes* provides perhaps the most in-depth study to date of violence against legally-dependent people in early America. Focusing on the legal experiences these oft-abused groups – married white women, enslaved and free blacks, and young servants and apprentices – from the colonial period to the Jeffersonian era, Ryan argues that, through direct action to draw attention to cruelty and resist violence in their everyday lives, these individuals brought about a shift in cultural and legal norms. As a result, by the first decades of the nineteenth century, a tradition of defending vulnerable populations had emerged which, while it did not eliminate or even reduce the preponderance of violence against vulnerable people, nevertheless gave these people many more options to obtain both legal and extra-legal redress for their suffering and laid the groundwork for future breakthroughs in human rights.

Drawing primarily from legal records from New York and Massachusetts, Ryan uses the interactions of dependent people with the courts both to highlight cultural norms and to demonstrate how those norms changed from the mid-seventeenth century to the 1810s. Dividing the work into three eras – the colonial period, the revolutionary era, and the post-revolutionary regime – Ryan traces how attitudes towards violence changed in mainstream society. In doing so, she pays special attention to the differences between urban and rural communities, as well as differing circumstances of white women, African Americans, and youthful servants, drawing distinctions when necessary between groups, regions, and legal regimes. By mining court records for both qualitative and quantitative data, Ryan convincingly demonstrates how attitudes towards cruelty changed over a century and a half, as well as how victims themselves drove those changes through their own acts of resistance. These acts not only involved bringing suits against

cruel husbands and masters before magistrates and justices of the peace, but also running away, seeking help from neighbors and friends, and even violently resisting continued abuse. All of these acts had an effect on changing notions of the role of violence in the enforcement of gender, racial, and social hierarchies. And although legally-sanctioned violence persisted throughout the period as an accepted form of discipline, dependent groups nevertheless succeeded in curbing the most extreme abuses, especially for white women and youthful servants but also in smaller ways for enslaved and free African Americans, at least in the North.

The strengths of *Everyday Crimes* lies in the careful attention the book pays to the everyday experiences of vulnerable people and their own agency in changing their living conditions. Each chapter opens with a vignette of a woman, an enslaved person, or a servant who resisted violence perpetrated by someone with state-sanctioned power over them. While the majority of these are drawn from trial records and court testimony, Ryan excels at moving beyond dry legal records to provide nuanced accounts of the lives of people often glossed over even in recent historical scholarship. Often, she supplements court documents with reporting from newspapers and the occasional printed memoir, further fleshing out the experiential dimension of the study. When combined with sharp analysis and a compelling argument, these narratives provide a satisfying account of the quotidian experience of violence in diverse communities in New York and Massachusetts and elevates the book from a useful but dry legal history to an invaluable resource for understanding the lives of ordinary people in early America.

While *Everyday Crimes* succeeds in making a persuasive argument backed by a mountain of archival research, Ryan's approach to the topic does have a few drawbacks. Although the author takes great pains to emphasize extra-legal as well as legal acts of resistance, the reliance of the book on court records and newspapers, the core source base of official and printed documents necessarily limits the scope of the study, and one wonders how deeper exploration of manuscripts and correspondence might change the narrative. Similarly, the focus on New York and Massachusetts raises questions about the portability of the argument – while large and important regions, these areas are not necessarily representative of attitudes across British North America or the early United States. Legal regimes and attitudes towards gender, race, and servitude varied greatly from region to region, and the inclusion of a Southern or border state may have led to different conclusions, especially in the case of violence against African Americans. Finally, the temporal scope of the study – spanning from the 1650s to the 1810s –

prevents it from engaging fully with the deep historiographies of social power relationships in the colonial, revolutionary, and early Republic periods, and experts in each of these eras will likely notice spots where such engagement would enhance or at times alter the overall argument.

Still, Ryan has produced an important work that both breaks new conceptual ground and provides valuable narrative evidence on the everyday lives of the downtrodden and ignored in early New York and Massachusetts. By combining detailed narrative with ambitious argument and careful attention to change over time, *Everyday Crimes* is an essential read for students of social history of the colonial and early national period as well as legal scholars and those interested in disenfranchised groups in early American history.

Donald F. Johnson is a historian of popular politics during the American Revolutionary Era and an assistant professor of history at North Dakota State University. He is the author of the forthcoming monograph, *Occupied America: British Military Rule and the Experience of Revolution* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).