

## Bearing Independence:

### The Concept of Social Childbirth in Martha Ballard's Life Writing

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Abstract: Martha Ballard worked as an 18th-century midwife in Hallowell, Maine. Her diary, an important historical account of her time, represents the concept of social childbirth. Women formed a female community around the expecting mother shortly before, during, and after giving birth to support her and allow for a period of recuperation. As a midwife, Martha Ballard was the most important woman to attend the expecting mother. This article argues that this significant status, which Ballard performs in her diary, allowed her and other midwives to break through traditional gender roles, to earn a personal income, travel freely, and live a more independent life.

Keywords: Martha Ballard, life writing, social childbirth, midwifery, late eighteenth century, gender studies

### The Origin of Martha Ballard's *Diary*

On September 25, 1884, Dr. Emma Louisa Call was the first female doctor admitted into the Massachusetts Medical Society (MMS) after nearly 30 years of debates regarding the admission of female physicians (MMS Committee on Women in Medicine). In the same year that the first female physician was formally recognized by her male colleagues and entered an institution dominated by male physicians, Dr. Mary Hobart, who would become a member of the MMS as well, received her great-great-grandmother's diary, which had been handed down by the women of the family for generations (Ulrich, *Tale* 346). Mary Hobart, a physician who focused on obstetrics, felt a strong connection to the author of this diary, Martha Ballard, who had worked as a midwife in the 18th century.

Martha Ballard was born in 1735 in Massachusetts (Ulrich, *Tale* 4) and married Ephraim Ballard, who was ten years her senior, in 1754 (Ballard, Dec. 19, 1785). In 1777 they started to live a pioneer life in Hallowell (Ulrich, *Tale* 16), which was still surrounded by and secluded in Maine's forests at the time. Ephraim Ballard was a farmer, a saw- and gristmill operator, and a surveyor (Ulrich, "Girls" 73). His wife Martha was, among other things, a mother of nine, a business woman, a cook, a producer of everyday items like candles and

clothes, a healer, and a midwife. She started to write her diary on January 1, 1785, shortly before she turned fifty. The last entry was written on May 7, 1812, about three weeks before her death (Ulrich, *Tale* 341). The only time Martha Ballard wrote her own name in her diary was on December 31, 1787, which allowed later generations to identify her as the author of these writings.

Ballard's diary qualifies as life writing according to the definition of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, who "understand *life writing* as a general term for writing that takes a life, one's own or another's, as its subject" (49, emphasis in original). Martha Ballard was an 18th century pioneer living in what was considered 'wilderness' with her family, who frequently had to manage the family business on her own while her husband was away on his travels (Ulrich, "Girls" 73-4). She, as an individual, needs to be seen as situated in a certain lifestyle that was governed by social norms and conventions. Similarly, her diary is located in a specific time and place, which, according to Smith and Watson, needs to be taken into consideration when dealing with the concept of life writing because "self life writing shares features with the novel, biography, and history" (18). Smith's and Watson's "notion of autobiographical practice [can be seen] as social action" (18). Therefore, Ballard's writings not only tell us something about the life of Martha Ballard and her family but they also articulate the story of the community of Hallowell. Ballard writes about her own health, her daily chores, her personal income, the travels of herself and her family members, and social calls. At the same time her diary documents births and deaths within the community, gives an historic account of important elections and trials<sup>1</sup>, and also reports on something as mundane as the weather.

Furthermore, Martha Ballard describes the practice of social childbirth, which was common in the 18th and early 19th century. Expecting mothers and women who had just given birth would be attended by female relatives, friends, and acquaintances who would keep the household running and allow the new mother time to rest and heal. The practice of social

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<sup>1</sup> Ballard, for example, writes that she had to attend a trial as a witness (Ballard, Dec. 22, 1789). She describes the case concerning sexual assault in great detail in the diary entry of Dec. 23, 1789. Ballard also mentions other trials and court procedures, for example in her diary entries dated Jan. 27, 1787, May 2, 1788, June 17, 1790, Sep. 24, 1792, March 27, 1798, Jan. 22, 1799, and Aug. 28, 1799. She also points out the dates of elections (Ballard, May 31, 1786, May 30, 1787, May 28, 1788, May 30, 1804, May 29, 1805, May 27, 1807, May 25, 1808).

childbirth allowed women to become part of a female community that was able to act without male intervention within an all-female space—at least for a limited period of time. This happened against common expectations that decisions were to be made by men. Practicing social childbirth allowed women to leave the sphere of their own houses and homes and to enter some other woman’s house in order to share knowledge and sustain a community of mutual support. I will argue that the practice functioned as a means of empowerment, and a basis for women’s independence by allowing them to travel freely—at least for a limited amount of time while assisting during and after childbirth—and also by earning an income.

### Social Childbirth as Basis for Women’s Independence in the 18th and Early 19th Century

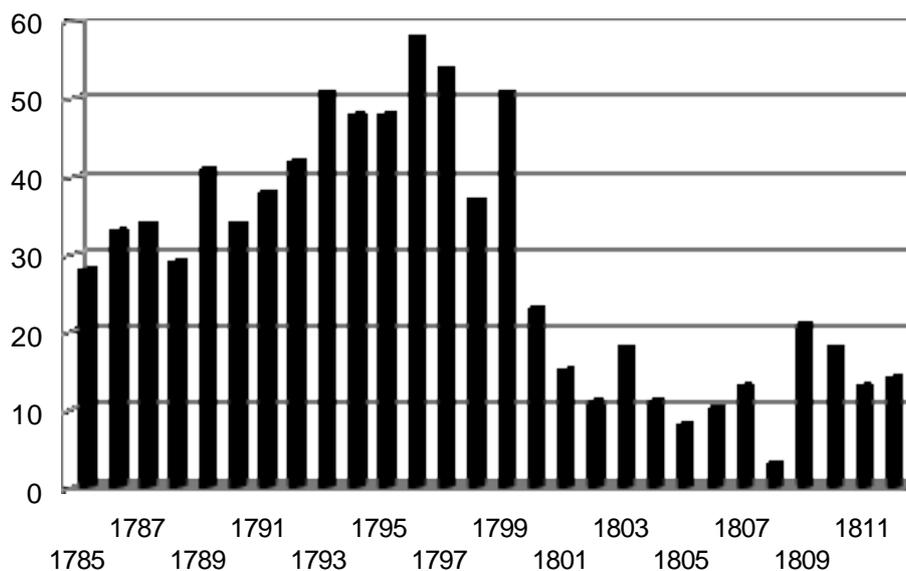


Fig. 1. Births Martha Ballard was called to attend according to her diary. Chart created by author, based on Ballard’s *Diary*.

During the 27-year period spanning her diary, Martha Ballard mentions that she was called to attend roughly 800 births and on average she attended about 30 births per year (cf. fig.1). It is important to note that this chart only visualizes the births Martha Ballard recorded in her diary. She most likely attended other births before January 1, 1785, the beginning of her life writing. An obvious peak occurred between 1785 and 1800 with a swift decline in the

following years. In 1796 Martha Ballard was called to 58 births while she only attended three births in 1808. It is likely that Ballard was called to attend more births when she herself was in her fifties because she was more flexible to travel and stay away from her family considering that her own children were grown up. Later on, in her seventies, it was presumably more challenging for her to travel due to her health. Additionally, it became a more common practice among white women to call male physicians to attend births and female midwives were less likely to be called to assist during births.

Frequently, the diary entries documenting her involvement in the birthing process also describe what was later called the practice of social childbirth. Richard and Dorothy Wertz establish this term in their book *Lying-In: A History of Childbirth in America*, which was first published in 1977. They trace the practices of childbirth common in the colonial period back to “English customs” and argue that the assistance in childbirth was an exclusively female practice (Wertz 1). Social childbirth is defined as a ritual where “female friends and relatives came to the expectant woman to provide comfort and practical aid” (Wertz 2). This ritual allowed “the mother to ‘lie-in,’ to keep to her bed for three or four weeks, sometimes longer, while others took over the responsibility of the household” (Wertz 4). Richard and Dorothy Wertz also argue that “[t]he event of birth presented an important, perhaps the primary, occasion for female solidarity” (4). Men are excluded from this place, allowing for the creation of a “female social space” (Stone 42) for a limited amount of time. Therefore, social childbirth is a practice that has allowed women to connect with each other and has strengthened a community dominated by women within the larger patriarchal society.

Throughout all of the over 800 diary entries describing births in Martha Ballard’s diary the phrase “to call [the expectant mother’s] women together” is used frequently (cf. Ballard, Nov. 21, 1785; Feb. 18, 1786; May 11, 1786). Martha Ballard also mentions other women who assisted expecting mothers in childbirth or sat up with the mother after the birth.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Wenda Trevathan argues that there are “three important differences between the mechanisms of birth in humans relative to other primates. First, because human babies almost always emerge facing away from the mother [...], it is difficult for the mother to reach down [...] to catch the baby and to clear an airway or remove the umbilical cord [...] Secondly, modern humans give birth to secondarily altricial infants who require extensive care from the time of delivery. [...] Thirdly, [the] powerful maternal emotions around labor and birth [...] may have provided the evolutionary impetus for women to seek out support” (Davis-Floyd and Cheyney 7-8). It can be argued that an expecting mother therefore tries to create a supportive community in case of emergency and complications during the birthing process. This

Childbirth was accepted as a singularly female business with female relatives and friends providing a social safety net (by performing—one might add—unpaid labor for the most part). However, it should not be underestimated that this happened within an all-female space in which men did not exert control or exercise power. As Foucault rightly asserts, male control with regard to medical developments and clinical-hegemonic structures was institutionalized with “the birth of the clinic” at the end of the 18th century. On October 28, 1804, for example, Ballard writes that she “was Calld by friend Easty to go and See his wife who was in Labour. the Case was performed by wido[w] Babcock Just before [they arrived. Martha Ballard dressed] the infant and [saw] to their being made Comfortable.” On another occasion she explains that she “tarried all night, mrs Cain & Ben Whites wife also” (Ballard, Mar. 6, 1798). The commonness of this practice becomes even more evident when Martha Ballard specifically describes a situation on October 25, 1792, when she was detained due to a storm and found Mrs. Burtun who had given birth, but was “in Danger for want of assistance.”

Martha Ballard was situated in a specific place within this female community: as a midwife she had the necessary medical expertise to attend the births and to visit the mothers and newborns in the days following the birth to monitor their health. She did not stay to take over household chores and was paid for her medical knowledge, not her housekeeping skills. These household chores were taken over by (unpaid) women as part of the concept of social childbirth to allow the new mother time to recover from giving birth. Mrs. Chamberlain, for example, gave birth to a daughter on September 13, 1785, and Mrs. Ballard went back to see them on September 17, September 18, and September 21 to make sure that the child was healthy. In her diary entry from September 21 she mentioned Mrs. Savage who apparently stayed with Mrs. Chamberlain to take over some of the new mother’s chores. Usually Martha Ballard stayed for a few weeks when it was one of her own daughters who gave birth, because she did not only participate in this female community as a midwife but also as a grandmother and mother and as such was expected to perform some of her daughter’s housekeeping duties. She therefore occupied more than one social role in these instances. She visited her daughter Lucy on May 1, 1789, and stayed until May 5. She nevertheless

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community can also be seen as an emotional support system which explains why family members and close friends—not strangers—become part of this female space.

frequently went back to see her daughter in the following four weeks because Lucy was feverish and in danger of dying (Ballard, May 18, 20, 24-5, 27-30, July 17, 1789). At the time, Lucy herself was the mother of seven children and it was necessary for her female friends and family to come and help her with daily chores to keep the household running. This shows the strict separation into gendered working spheres. Women were expected to support each other in times of need without financial remuneration and without the help of men while they were not supposed to work in male-dominated working spheres. This speaks to a female solidarity that went beyond the nuclear family, but also to the denigration or low esteem of such female work.

### **Importance of Travel**

In order to fulfill the custom of social childbirth and for Martha Ballard to work as a midwife it was socially acceptable for women to travel freely. As a midwife, Martha Ballard frequently had to leave her home in the middle of the night, regardless of season, time, or weather. While it was common for her to be accompanied by the husband of the expectant woman or a close male family friend, she also went alone. An example is provided in the diary entry from March 17, 1789:

I was Call[e]d at ye 12<sup>th</sup> h[our] to go to Georg Boltons wife in travil. Mr Ballard went after his horse which was lent to Polly Savage. I waited 2 hours & mr Usher Came with Capt Savages Mare. I [set] out alone & [arrived] Safe. My anxiety was great for ye woman, but I found her Safe. She was Safe [dealt] at ye 9<sup>th</sup> h Evn & I return[e]d at 2.

This entry shows that Martha Ballard was dutiful and independent enough to ride a horse alone to an expectant mother. Readers also learn that she sometimes went back home in the middle of the night. At the same time it becomes evident that her behavior in this situation did not conform to social expectations. She defended her social digressions by emphasizing Mrs. Bolton's dangerous situation and points out that she waited for her male escorts to arrive. She felt the need to defend her social standing and behavior in a society that apparently did not support the idea of women traveling alone.

This independence to travel was also necessary when she had to look after more than one expectant mother. While there were other midwives in Hallowell and also a few doctors in the surrounding area, Martha Ballard nevertheless sometimes attended three births in two

days. At the same time she visited sick people as well since she was not only a midwife but also a healer.<sup>3</sup> On August 15, 1789, Martha Ballard wrote:

I was [called] at 1h morn to See mrs Allin, find her not very sick. Was [called] from thence to Doct. Colmans Lady in travil. She [called] her women & was Safe [dealt] of a fine Son at ye 11<sup>th</sup> h. I was [called] from there to See mrs Pond at Winthrop, find her in [difficult] [c]ircumstances. Applied Some remedies & gave Directions & Left medi[c]in[e], Left her at Sun Set. Came to mr Pollards at ye 10<sup>th</sup> h Even. Very Dark & rainy as I Came down [...] was Conducted over ye river by mr mc Farling. by Joseph foster to mr Allins, find [them] all well. His Lady was [ceased] with travil a little before day & was Safe [dealt] at 8<sup>th</sup> h morn of a fine [daughter] & I [arrived] Safe at home.

River crossings, riding on horseback or sleighs, stormy and cold weather, and nighttime visits are all part of Martha Ballard's travels. She frequently describes falls from horses and breaking into the ice during the seasons of spring and fall, always attributing her survival to divine intervention (cf. Ballard, Apr. 24, 1789), thus putting herself in the tradition of the Puritan goodwife.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, it is important to remember that life on the frontier gave women such as Martha Ballard a certain leeway and freedom (including to get oneself in dangerous situations), and her writerly adherence to the Puritan goodwife paradigm in this sense might be part of a strategy to prevent any possible criticism of her behavior.

### Importance of Personal Income

A further major factor that allowed Martha Ballard and other women, like Mrs. Fletcher, who worked as a midwife as well (Ballard, July 19, 1787), to lead a rather independent life was their personal income. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich establishes that there was a strict division of labor between genders ("Girls" 71) and argues that "a separate female economy [existed] beneath the level of traditional documentation" as women "were trading with each other (and sometimes with men) independent of their husbands" ("Girls" 72). On July 29, 1786, Ballard wrote, for example, that she "went to Mr Edsons Carried 31 skeins of Linning warp for her to weave 11 ½ skeins of Tow yarn and 8 of Cottne" (cf. "Girls" 80). Additionally, she was able "to buy a new dress in the summer of 1791" despite "Mr. Ballard's relinquishment

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<sup>3</sup> She, for example, treats dysentery (April 21, 1786), rashes (July 27, 1786), and colds (April 11, 1795). For reasons of length it is not possible to analyze all accounts sufficiently in this article which is why a thorough analysis of this aspect has been excluded.

<sup>4</sup> Similar to Martha Ballard, who claims to act as a midwife because of her religious beliefs (cf. Wertz 9), traditional midwives nowadays "often [...] will have religious legitimacy" for their calling (MacCormack 12).

of the sawmills in March" ("Girls" 88) and to pay her own staff ("Girls" 83). In her diary, Martha Ballard records monetary and commodity transfers and refers to "female dairywomen, nurses, spinners, weavers, dressmakers, a bonnet maker, a chair caner, and seven midwives" ("Girls" 84), indicating that women participated in the male-dominated economy of Hallowell as partners who, to some degree, acted independently of men.

Ballard benefited from the practice of social childbirth as her gender allowed her to enter this female community. At the same time, her expertise as midwife distinguished her from other women who were part of this social community. Ballard's special role allowed her to earn an income while participating in this otherwise nonmonetary smaller economy dominated by women. She was able to price her services as a midwife according to her own discretion. This can be seen in a diary entry from February 15, 1787, where she points out that she "[received] 6 [shillings] of mr Read as fee. 2 [shillings] remain Due for medicin[e]." She meticulously keeps account of her income and marks the births in her diary with Xs in a separate column when the fee has been paid (cf. Ballard, Nov. 21, 1785; Jan. 22, 1786; May 3, 1786; May 12, 1786). Even her own son-in-law, Mr. Town, pays her for her services as a midwife (Ballard, Nov. 24, 1791). Other times she is paid with goods. In her entry from April 20, 1786, she, for example, writes that her husband brought "home 6 [gallons] of [rum], 2 lb coffee, 5 lb Sugar & Some Tabacco & 1-1/4 Bushl of Salt from Jos Williams for [her], for assisting his wife in travil with her Last Child."

The practice of social childbirth, which was dominated by women, allowed Martha Ballard to improve her own home production of goods such as cloth and candles. With her own income she was able to employ single women to help with the production of these items and with household chores such as laundry. Not her husband, but Martha Ballard herself was responsible for this part of the family economy, and she was paid for her goods directly without interference from her husband. Therefore, she was partially independent from her husband's income. This made both parties within the household more equal partners since both contributed to the family economy in a time when women were excluded from a majority of legal and political rights and men were seen as the representative of a family in the public sphere.

## Conclusion: Relationship between Midwives and Doctors

It is important to note that during the time when Martha Ballard worked as midwife in Hallowell childbirth was seen as an organic and everyday process and not a process that needed medical treatment because of its pathologization. Martha Ballard only called for a doctor in very difficult cases (cf. Ballard, Nov. 11, 1785; May 19, 1792), and she herself was called to attend the births of Doctor Colman's children (cf. Ballard, Aug. 26-27, 1788; Sep. 6, 1794). While childbirth was seen as a condition without need for 'medical' intervention, substantial intervention was offered by 'the (unpaid) mother's women' and midwives.

This attitude changed over time among white middle- and upper-class society and childbirth came to be seen as a medical condition or 'disease' that needed to be cured (Bogdan 93, Plant 121). With the standardization of the medical professions, the gender of midwives changed as well: so-called "man-midwives [...] found forceps useful to speed delivery, whether difficult or not, and to represent their triumph over nature and over their own competitors" (Wertz 42). Women lost their supportive role in the birthing process and were replaced by male doctors, who tried to bar women from the professional occupation.<sup>5</sup> As one physician explained vitriolically in 1820, "[i]t is one of the first and happiest fruits of improved medical education in America, that [women] were excluded from the practice" of childbirth ("Remarks"). In the context of industrialization, women were excluded from a profession that used to be dominated by women and the majority of expecting mothers preferred a hospital to give birth instead of the female social space common before. The medical expertise formerly attributed to women was taken over by male physicians (Stone 42).

The fact that the attitude towards midwives changed dramatically in medical terms in the course of the 19th century can also be seen in Martha Ballard's diary. She reports how, during one of the last births she attended on March 27, 1812, Doctor Ellis was initially called to attend Mrs. Savage's birth, but it was Martha Ballard who "perform[e]d the Case," seemingly because of the doctor's inexperience. While Mrs. Savage trusted in the—male—doctor, an experienced—female—midwife was necessary to help her give birth. During her

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<sup>5</sup> As Plant points out, "[b]y 1930, physicians attended roughly 85 percent of all births, with midwifery persisting only in the rural South and Southwest and within some urban immigrant communities" (120).

lifetime Martha Ballard remained able to assert her independence, but experiences for later midwives would change drastically. They were marginalized and forced to become more dependent on men as social norms changed. The ritual of social childbirth was altered accordingly. Looking back to 1884, the year Dr. Mary Hobart received Martha Ballard's diary, it becomes obvious that while times had changed, Martha Ballard seems to have been more independent and had to fight less hard for this independence than her great-great granddaughter 100 years later.

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