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Review of The hanging of Ephraim Wheeler : a story of rape, incest, and justice in early America

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LJ Review Cover Sheet and Survey

Your name: Michael F. Russo

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Title of the book: *The Hanging of Ephraim Wheeler: A Story of Rape, Incest, and Justice in Early America*

Author or editor of the book: Irene Quenzler Brown and Richard D. Brown

This book is recommended for: public & academic libraries

Comments for your editor:

Review

Author: Irene Quenzler Brown and Richard D. Brown

Title: *The Hanging of Ephraim Wheeler: A Story of Rape, Incest, and Justice in Early America*

Publisher: Harvard University Press

Release date: April 2003

Number of pages: 432 pages.

Features: 14 half tones, 1 map; index; annotations

Format: Hard cover

ISBN: 0-674-01020-5

Price: \$26.95

This story of early American crime and punishment reads like “*The Crucible Meets In Cold Blood.*” In the Massachusetts of 1805, Ephraim Wheeler, an illiterate ne’er-do-well, is charged with the unheard-of crime of raping his own daughter. What follows the accusation is a wrenching tale of law, compassion, and the search for justice. Using an impressive variety of primary and secondary sources, including contemporary accounts, Brown and Brown have pieced together a sad and compelling narrative peopled by folks who are uncannily familiar.

The authors, both historians, use this episode to explore the very contemporary issue of capital punishment, much as playwright Arthur Miller examined McCarthyism through the context of the Salem witch trials. The moral controversy over taking a man’s life “in cold blood,” no matter his offense, was as real then as it is now, and this work focuses effectively on the spirited public debate over the new nation’s attempts to retreat from England’s hanging tradition.

The insertion, at the end, of the authors’ own opinion of the injustice they feel was done to Wheeler seems out of place. That small complaint aside, however, this is a very worthy treatment of an important and timeless topic.

Recommended for public and academic libraries.

Michael F. Russo

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