

*A Midwife's Tale*, produced by Laurie Kahn-Leavitt and directed by Richard Rogers. (A Blueberry Hill film, 1997, 80 minutes)

*A Midwife's Tale*, which aired on PBS in January, 1997, as part of the "American Experience" collection, is the documentary based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning narrative of the same name written by historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. The book, based on the diary of Martha Ballard, details her life beginning in 1785, when she was 50, and ending with her death in 1812. Ballard's diary records her work as a midwife and her home life in the Kennebec River region of Maine, and the book contains selections from Ballard's diary followed by explanations and details by Ulrich. The film, directed by Richard P. Rogers and written and produced by Laurie Kahn-Leavitt, follows much the same pattern.

The documentary opens with scenery of the Kennebec River and is overlaid with a voice, representing Martha Ballard, reading diary entries. The voice narrates the scene developing of a woman in labor and Ballard (played by actress Kaiulani Lee) overseeing the birth. Ulrich reflects on not knowing even what Ballard looked like and proceeds with discussion about the diary. This is how the film develops: scenes taken from the diary alternating with clips of Ulrich discussing the diary and researching it.

During the film, Ulrich addresses the difficulties of unraveling a diary of this magnitude. She demonstrates some of the techniques she used to fit the diary into a logical framework for historical research, dwelling on the complexity involved in the people and relationships, saying, "A diary like this is just filled with names. Kind of like walking into a room and seeing a bunch of strangers; you don't know who they are." Ulrich also discusses the difficulty of finding other information on Ballard, a problem historians often face when doing research into women's history of the early Federal period.

*A Midwife's Tale* achieves an interesting and, at times, dramatic account of Martha Ballard's life and the late eighteenth century, but one point in the film could have been improved: some events were introduced but not concluded. The most obvious example is the deaths by of Ballard's neighbors, the Purrinton family. The murders are dramatized but not explained in terms of the details or motivation for them, nor even

how they affected Ballard. The book does all of this, but for those who have not read it, and even for those who have, there is a lack of closure. In these instances one feels that the film's makers are using the film to advertise the book, rather than creating a historical account of Martha Ballard or acknowledging the time and dedication required of Ulrich to interpret the diary.

All in all, though, it is a good film, portraying Martha's life in context with documented historical events of the period. The documentary vividly brings diary entries to life. The reenactments of the time period are well conceived, portraying everything from women in labor (or as Ballard calls it, "travail") to the hypothetical morning rituals of the Ballard family members, all with great attention to detail. Many of the day-to-day activities portrayed are purely supposition by Ulrich and Kahn-Leavitt. But the little details, like the intricacies of dressing and the processes of weaving, mixing ink and making soap, help to animate the atmosphere of eighteenth-century Maine, especially in regards to the lives of women.

For those who have read the book, the documentary will help bring the people and events to life and show Ulrich's determination in organizing the information in the diary into a coherent historical work. Even the viewer who meets Martha Ballard for the first time in this film will still get an interesting look at American domestic life in the late eighteenth century. Watching the documentary will probably inspire a reading of the book for additional details.

Kember Stagner