In 1783, following the death of her father, the Rev. William Smith, Elizabeth Shaw affirmed the strength — and indispensability — of her bond with her sisters, Abigail Adams and Mary Cranch. "I believe there were never three sisters more generally alike in their opinion of Things than we," Elizabeth wrote. "I too am one of those Beings that feel vastly more than I express — whether it be Joy, or Grief."

In "Dear Abigail," biographer Diane Jacobs draws on the letters and diaries of the Smith sisters to provide an informative account of domestic life in their influential extended family in 18th-century America. Mary, Abigail and Elizabeth, Jacobs argues, were ahead of their time in their support of greater opportunities and rights for women.

Crafting a narrative from correspondence that veers from bowel complaints to romantic attachments, from congressional debates to portraits of the beau monde, Jacobs effectively and engagingly re-creates everyday existence in the households of her subjects. A pan used to warm a couple’s feet in bed, she indicates, was a popular wedding present. Abigail’s remedy for “throat distemper” was quinine-laden powdered bark, from the Peruvian cinchona tree.

Jacobs is somewhat less sure-handed with religion and politics. Her comments about carrying on “the torch of the Puritan ethic” and the “outsized effect” of Congregational ministers on community attitudes, for example, should be set in the context of declining church attendance at the end of the 18th century. Her narrative occasionally suffers as well from her almost exclusive reliance on letters and diaries, which, inevitably, produce gaps and ambiguities. A lot more might be said, for example, about Royall Tyler, the onetime beau of Nabby Adams, Abigail’s daughter.

As Jacobs emphasizes, the Smith sisters were, indeed, ahead of their time. Mary played a key role in the selection of ministers in her village. Elizabeth founded a coeducational school. Abigail, who famously asked her husband, President John Adams, in 1776 to “Remember the Ladies,” 20 years later put in a word for a liberal Massachusetts Constitution that permitted women to vote.

It should be noted, however, that they were also women of their time. Mary, Abigail and Elizabeth virtually always subordinated their needs and desires to those of their husbands and children. Nor is it certain that they were “increasingly convinced of their
importance in the larger world.” Moreover, as Jacobs acknowledges, toward the end of her life Abigail maintained, “Nature has assigned to each sex its particular duties and sphere of action.”

And so it seems appropriate for Jacobs to end her estimable book by urging readers, “Find these sisters in the history of their country and their sex.”

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin professor of American studies at Cornell University.

© 2014 Star Tribune