New Book by Elizabeth De Wolfe Explores 19th Century Shaker Marriage Breakup

The connected but conflicting views of marriage, family life, and Shakerism in the early republic form the core of University of New England Professor of History Elizabeth De Wolfe's new book, "DomesticBroils: Shakers, Antebellum Marriage, and the Narratives of Mary and Joseph Dyer."

Biddeford, ME (Vocus) August 6, 2010 — In 1813, Joseph Dyer, his wife Mary, and their five children joined the Shaker community in Enfield, N.H. Joseph quickly adapted to the Shaker way of life, but Mary chafed under its strictures and eventually left the community two years later.

When the local elders and her husband refused to release the couple’s children to Mary, she embarked on what would become a 50-year campaign against the Shakers, beginning with the publication in 1818 of "A Brief Statement of the Sufferings of Mary Dyer."

The following year the Shakers countered by publishing Joseph's "A Compendious Narrative," a scathing attack on what the title page called “the character, disposition and conduct of Mary Dyer.”

University of New England Professor of History Elizabeth De Wolfe returns to this marital dispute for the second time in her new book, "Domestic Broils: Shakers, Antebellum Marriage, and the Narratives of Mary and Joseph Dyer" (University of Massachusetts Press).

Reproduced for the first time since their original publication, the Dyers’ dueling accounts of the breakup of their marriage form the core of "Domestic Broils."

In Mary’s telling, the deceptions of a cruel husband, backed by an unyielding Shaker hierarchy, destroyed what had once been a happy, productive family. Joseph’s narrative counters these claims by alleging that Mary abused her children, neglected her husband, and engaged in extramarital affairs.

In her introduction to the volume, De Wolfe places the Dyers’ marital dispute in a broader historical context, drawing on their personal testimony to examine connected but conflicting views of marriage, family life, and Shakerism in the early republic.

She also shows how the growing world of print facilitated the transformation of a private family quarrel into a public debate. Salacious, riveting, and immensely popular throughout New England, the Dyers’ narratives not only captured imaginations but also reflected public anxieties over rapid cultural change in antebellum America.


In a pre-publication review, Christian Goodwillie, coeditor of "Millennial Praises: A Shaker Hymnal," writes...
that "Domestic Broils" is: “A significant contribution that simultaneously dissects and contextualizes two primary sources relevant to women’s studies, religious studies, communal studies, gender studies, and the history of the early American republic.”

About Elizabeth De Wolfe


De Wolfe is chair of the UNE’s Department of History and co-founder of the Women’s & Gender Studies Program. She teaches courses in women’s history, American culture, and communal societies. In 2004 she was awarded the University of New England’s highest honor, the Kenneally Cup, in recognition of her excellence in teaching and service; she also held UNE’s Ludcke Chair of Liberal Arts and Sciences in 2008-09.

De Wolfe recently completed a year-long sabbatical during which she conducted research at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. and at the archives of Historic New England in Boston.

Of her current project, she says “It is a 19th-century project about a politician in power, a mistress, and a national scandal. The real past is better than fiction: Fist fights break out in court, a 'girl spy' is employed, and the mistress wins.”

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