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Elizabeth A. De Wolfe. Shaking the Faith: Women, Family, and Mary Marshall Dyer's Anti-Shaker Campaign, 1815-1867. New York and Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xiv + 233 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-29503-5.

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## When Two Worlds Collide: Mary Dyer, the Shakers, and the Clash of Family Values

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In 1813, Mary Marshall Dyer moved from Stewartstown, New Hampshire, to the Enfield, New Hampshire, Shaker community with her husband Joseph and their five children. Two years later she renounced her faith, although her family remained with the Shakers (also known as Believers). She spent the rest of her life as a "career apostate," denouncing the Shakers at every turn as she tried to reconstitute her shattered family. Elizabeth A. De Wolfe's Shaking the Faith: Women, Family, and Mary Marshall Dyer's Anti-Shaker Campaign, 1815-1867, provides an in-depth analysis of a woman who, though virtually unknown today, was one of history's foremost detractors of the Shaker faith.

When Mary left the Shakers, she did so because she believed that they were destroying her family. There was a grain of truth to her accusation. Shakers reared children independently of their parents in order to weaken biological ties and strengthen the children's commitment to the community. Mary did not want to relinquish her maternal role, and she spent the next twenty years trying to retrieve her children and obtain the financial support of her husband. Both goals proved elusive. While still resident with the Shakers, Mary had agreed with Joseph to indenture their children to the community. Thus, she had no legal basis for demanding the return of her children once she left. She also lost her legal claim on her husband. Soon after she apostatized, Joseph "advertised" Mary, that is, he placed an ad in a newspaper absolving himself of any debt that she might contract. By law, a husband was responsible for his wife's debts, but Mary had left the Shakers, and hence, her home with Joseph, and thus negated her rights as a wife. Disconnected from both her biological and her Shaker families, Mary's social isolation fueled her attacks on the Believers. Grounding her arguments in her position as an aggrieved wife and mother, she offered herself as living proof that the Shakers destroyed families, the very foundation of society.

After her departure, Mary entered into the network of Shaker apostates. Unlike seceders, defined by De Wolfe as people who left the Believers but moved on quietly with their lives, apostates were so angered by their experience with the Shakers that they publicly attacked the group in print and in person. Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century proved a receptive audience to these fulminations. Many Americans found Shaker beliefs and practices threatening. Celibacy, dancing, and communal living seemed antithetical to American values embodied in notions of the nuclear family and possessive individualism. Building on such fears, Mary used public opinion to strengthen her case. After negotiations with Joseph over her support broke down, Mary appeared before the New Hampshire legislature in 1818, pleading for a divorce and the return of her children. Articles about her dilemma appeared in newspapers, and she documented the Shakers' "abusive" behavior and rejection of "normal" family life in A Brief Statement of the Sufferings of Mary Dyer. To lend credence to her story she included affidavits from eve-witnesses, many of whom were ex-Shakers. In response, the Enfield Shakers published rebuttals in newspapers and pamphlets, one of which was written by Joseph Dyer, who described his wife as a cruel, selfish, and domineering woman.

The legislature denied Mary's petition; they also denied a second petition she presented the following year. Undaunted, she raised a mob from the town of Enfield and stormed the Shakers, demanding the return of her children. When this action failed, she toured New Hampshire seeking more affidavits for use in a third petition to the legislature and a second book against the Shakers. She also instigated an unsuccessful lawsuit brought by James Willis against Joseph for her board and other expenses.

These setbacks fueled Mary's anger, and the 1820s were her most active years as a "career apostate." Her second book, *A Portraiture of Shakerism* (1822), propelled Mary into the national spotlight. Wherever she went, she warned of the dangers of Shakerism. The Shakers, in turn, published vigorously in their own defense. Yet despite their attempts to defuse her attacks, Mary's precarious situation spurred the New Hampshire legislature to pass a law in 1824 that allowed divorce in cases where one partner joined a religious group that renounced marriage. Mary finally received her divorce in 1830.

After her divorce, Mary disappeared from public view. She emerged again in the late 1840s with yet another book and another petition to the state legislature for a law constraining the Shakers. By now it was too late for her to reclaim her own children-two were dead and the others were adults-but she vowed to fight on behalf of future mothers and children who would need protection from the grasping hands of religious sects. The legislature rejected the original bill but did reduce the waiting period for a divorce from three years to six months so that the spouses of partners who joined the Shakers could remarry sooner and create stable families. Despite this minor victory, Mary Dyer's popularity was already on the wane. As De Wolfe notes, by the mid-nineteenth century, Americans no longer feared the Shakers, but saw them as quaint and harmless. Apostate literature reflected this change in attitude. Apostate authors replaced searing attacks on the Believers with a mix of focused complaints about, and grudging admiration for, Shaker life. In fact, some apostates took Mary to task for her vociferous assaults on the Believers' character. Mary, herself, published one final anti-Shaker work in 1852, but her power to move the American public was gone. She lived the rest of her years quietly in her home near the Enfield Shakers, unable to reconstitute her shattered family. Joseph and four of their children died as Shakers. One son left the Believers but never developed a close relationship with Mary. She died in January 1867 and was buried in a nearby cemetery, alone in death as she had been in life.

Elizabeth De Wolfe's book is an important addition to the growing field of Shaker studies. Thoroughly researched, well organized, and cogently argued, *Shaking the Faith* will also be of interest to scholars from other disciplines including history, American studies, religious studies, and women's studies. De Wolfe presents an interesting and important case study of a particularly outspoken Shaker apostate. Although scholars such as Lawrence Foster and Jean Humez have dealt with Mary Dyer in their work, De Wolfe's is the first full-length account of her life.[1] Equally important, De Wolfe

places Mary within the broader scope of anti-Shaker activity and illustrates how this apostate network facilitated a sustained attack on Shakerism.[2] De Wolfe's skillful handling of the material and her detailed analysis of Mary's texts reveal a side of Shaker history we seldom see up close.

De Wolfe also contextualizes Mary Dyer's activities in relation to larger developments in American history. Especially important is De Wolfe's focus on the ways in which apostates and the Shakers both used print culture. Beginning with Mary's first publication in 1818, De Wolfe argues that Mary set in motion the "commodification of [her] story as it was told and retold first across space and then time. The name Mary Dyer became a rallying cry-reified in print as a symbol of anti-Shaker activity" (p. 57). Her attacks forced the Shakers to respond in kind, and the "print war" that resulted carried the story of Mary and Joseph's bitter struggle well beyond the borders of New Hampshire. De Wolfe makes clear, however, that Mary was not the only one who used print media to fan the flames of hatred. She places Shaker apostate accounts within a larger tradition of American "anti" narratives-nineteenth-century anti-Masonic, anti-Catholic, and anti-Mormon tracts and the modern day genre of anti-cult literature. Ultimately, she argues, Mary's anti-Shaker campaign was "part of a broader and pervasive American experience of fear, mistrust, and suspicion of difference" (p. 18).

De Wolfe also highlights how gender and family were integral to Mary's prolonged assault on the Believers, and her work adds to the growing body of literature that uses these issues as a starting point for understanding Shaker society.[3] Mary's gender was central to her power as an apostate. By claiming that she was only trying to resume her rightful place as wife and mother, (roles denied her by Joseph's refusal to cooperate and the Shakers' refusal to release her children), Mary justified her very public, hence "unfeminine," position as speaker and activist. At the same time, Mary was also constrained by societal expectations. Unable to command Joseph's support, she pursued divorce as her only avenue to security. Yet as a divorced woman without children whom she could care for, or who could care for her, Mary lived on the margins of society. In fact, family, or its absence, played a significant role in anti-Shaker activity. Mary's rhetoric was powerful because it articulated what many feared, that by enforcing celibacy and breaking apart nuclear families, the Shakers were a menace to American society. The Shakers, of course, believed that their family structure strengthened their communities. The historical tensions generated by these competing visions underscore the multivalent discourses that continue to sustain the ongoing debate in America over what constitutes a "normal" family. De Wolfe's study of Mary Dyer could not be more timely.

## Notes:

- [1]. Lawrence Foster, Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community (New York and Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University Press, 1981); Jean M. Humez, "'A Woman Mighty to Pull You Down': Married Women's Rights and Female Anger in the Anti-Shaker Narratives of Eunice Chapman and Mary Dyer," Journal of Women's History 6 (Summer 1994): 90-110.
- [2]. Recent work that looks at the larger spectrum of anti-Shaker activity is Suzanne Thurman, "The Seat of Sin, the Site of Salvation: The Shaker Body and the Nineteenth-Century American Imagination," *Nineteenth Century Studies* 15 (2001): 1-18.
  - [3]. See, Suzanne R. Thurman, "O Sisters Ain't You

Happy?": Gender, Family, and Community Among the Harvard and Shirley Shakers, 1781-1918 (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2002); Priscilla Brewer, "'Tho of the Weaker Sex': A Reassessment of Gender Equality among the Shakers," in Women in Spiritual and Communitarian Societies in the United States, ed. Wendy E. Chmielewski, Louis J. Kern, and Marlyn Klee-Hartzell (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1993): 133-49; Jean Humez, ed., Mother's First-Born Daughters: Early Shaker Writings on Women and Religion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Marjorie Procter-Smith, Women in Shaker Community and Worship: A Feminist Analysis of the Uses of Religious Symbolism (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985); Louis Kern, An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias-The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); Foster, Religion and Sexuality.

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