Historians have long described the early national era as a critical period of expansion in women’s educational and intellectual opportunities. Although the expansion was stimulated by enlightenment and liberal republican beliefs in women’s inherent capacity for reason and potential for intellectual equality, contemporary discussion of women’s education was, nonetheless, fraught with tension. Women were expected to fulfill fundamentally different and subordinate social roles; as Nancy Cott has explained, “the usefulness, scope, and justification of women’s education were linked to their ‘stations’ of daughter, wife and mother.”[1] Too much intellectual equality, in other words, was regarded with suspicion and disdain as a potential threat to social and domestic harmony. In To Read My Heart: The Journal of Rachel Van Dyke, 1810-1811, Lucia McMahon and Deborah Schriver offer an important, previously unpublished record that illuminates one girl’s struggle to deal with these pressures as she formed her own identity as a well educated young woman coming of age in the new nation.

The daughter of an upper-middle-class storekeeper and farmer in New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rachel Van Dyke’s journal begins at a transitional moment in her life: the completion of her formal schooling at the age of seventeen at one of the hundreds of female academies that were founded in the period, intended “for the purposes of giving to young Misses a more accurate and extensive education” (pp. 313). Determined to use her journal “to practice expressing my sentiments” (pp. 26), Van Dyke detailed her continuing daily efforts to “improve” herself through the study of Latin, chemistry, botany, philosophy, history, and literature, and her struggle to balance these intellectual pursuits with social obligations and her “other work” about the house, sewing and supervising domestic servants. Van Dyke’s writing is particularly expressive and emotional; the source offers a wealth of her own reflections on her private studies and the frustrations and satisfaction derived from them, as well as her feelings about her other, non-academic tasks. In this, the journal is an important source for readers studying women’s own responses to their new intellectual opportunities, documenting one young woman’s efforts “to make sense of her own identity” (pp. 19).

Van Dyke was a particularly keen observer of events and people; the diary is, therefore, a good account of middle-class life in a growing college town. Courtship, marriage, and funeral rituals are described in emotional detail; the journal compellingly evokes the sights and sounds of early nineteenth-century New Brunswick. The diary also offers rich detail on Van Dyke’s religious life as a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, offering some insight into the sources of a young woman’s spiritual satisfaction. It concludes, in fact, with a spiritual turning point in Van Dyke’s life upon the death of her father, just over a year after the journal began.

Of further interest are Van Dyke’s observations on her female peers, in particular the girls and young women with whom she cultivated friendships. Like so many of her contemporaries, Van Dyke carefully analyzed the character of the people with whom she interacted, measuring herself against their virtues and faults. In this, she reflected contemporary ideas about developing her own “sensibility” by seeking to cultivate highly affectionate “true friendships” with like-minded young women. McMahon offers an interesting interpretation of...
these relationships in the concluding interpretive essay, suggesting that Van Dyke was, in fact, able to create an identity for herself as an educated woman by evaluating her female peers in terms of their educational aspirations, and seeking friends who shared her intellectual interests, effectively "validating her own sense of self in relation to others" (pp. 317).

All of this material is contextualized well by McMahon in her concluding essay, or by Schriver in an introduction that offers an extensive reconstruction of the social landscape in New Brunswick at the time, complete with maps and pictures. The source itself is extensively annotated; in particular, the hundreds of cryptic references to literature in the text have been decoded, providing essential information for readers. The authors have also done a good job reconstructing the rest of Rachel Van Dyke’s life from fragmentary evidence in the book’s epilogue. The volume is well produced, with a wealth of supporting material, and a nearly exhaustive bibliography and index.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this historical source is the documentation of Rachel Van Dyke’s relationship with her former teacher and sometime Latin tutor, Ebenezer Grosvenor. Judged by Van Dyke to be “different from the generality of young men” (pp. 81), Grosvenor appears to have been an enthusiastic supporter of her intellectual efforts. The two shared and discussed literature and their own poetry; gradually the relationship developed into a romance. A critical, and perhaps unique part of their friendship was the exchange of their journals for critique and comment. McMahon and Schriver have done an excellent job transcribing and documenting Grosvenor’s coded marginalia and Van Dyke’s responses to these. Termed a crucial aspect of their “romantic readership” in her concluding interpretive essay, McMahon offers a provocative interpretation of the diary sharing, arguing that it was “an attempt to script an ideal shared self which simultaneously denied or transcended their sexual difference, while also highlighting their romantic attraction for each other” (pp. 325).

While McMahon contextualizes the relationship within existing historiography, I was left wondering how exceptional this kind of exchange in particular, or the contents of this journal more generally, were. Much of McMahon’s interpretation hinges on the notion that Van Dyke and Grosvenor believed that they were revealing a private “inner self” through these exchanges; were they alone during this period, or was this an adaptation of a wider practice? In the previous century, of course, journal exchanges appear to have been fairly common. To cite just two well known examples, Esther Edwards Burr kept her journal as a set of letters to her close friend Sarah Prince that she would send from time to time, while Elizabeth Drinker also recorded her intention of sharing her own diary and reading others’ on numerous occasions. Why had these exchanges taken on new meaning in the early national period? [2] In short, I would like to see the source contextualized within the genre itself: how did Van Dyke’s journal compare to others kept by her peers during this period?

Overall, this is an excellent source for scholars and students alike, that offers a new complexity to the story of women’s education in this period. The story of Van Dyke and Grosvenor’s friendship in particular offers an important counterpoint to the kind of heterosocial relationships that are typically cited for this period, generally described as guided by the ideas that fundamental dissimilarity between the sexes and female subordination were the basis for compatibility. Van Dyke’s journal could, therefore, serve as an excellent teaching tool if set beside Eliza Southgate Bowne’s letters to Moses Porter, complicating the discussion of separate spheres ideology.[3]

Notes


[3]. A Girl’s Life Eighty Years Ago: Selections From the Letters of Eliza Southgate Bowne, with an introduction by Clarence Cook (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887).

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