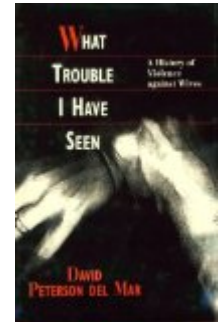


**David Peterson del Mar.** *What Trouble I Have Seen: A History of Violence against Wives.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996. xi + 244 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-95076-4.



**Reviewed by** Deborah L. Kitchen

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*What Trouble I Have Seen* by David Peterson Del Mar weaves together an extraordinary mix of contradictory threads in the histories of violence, westward expansion, race, economics, gender roles, work, attitudes about marriage and women, and changes in the economy to explain historical changes in violence against wives. It is both a local history of Oregon and a larger social analysis of changing national patterns. It is solid scholarship with an activist aim at understanding the problem in order to solve it.

The complexity of Peterson Del Mar's argument is commendable. He covers the incidence and nature of male violence against wives, women's resistance to it, and societal interventions in violent marriages. He argues that the rise of a production economy in the late nineteenth century encouraged "disciplined self-control," making wife beating less acceptable and less common than earlier. Simultaneously, greater privacy and concern for respectability decreased wives' resistance. Rates and severity of violence against wives increased again as twentieth-century consumerism proclaimed individual freedom and a

lessening of "self-restraint." On the other hand, lessened economic dependence increased wives' resistance. Shifts in the goals of violence against wives are more tangled. He sees a change over time from compelling wives' obedience to more affective purposes, and notes, in particular, a growing fear among men of becoming feminized.

Chapters are arranged chronologically, providing a panoramic view of Oregon from white settlement in the mid-nineteenth century through the 1990s. Peterson del Mar carefully makes distinctions of class and race and includes an interesting comparison of white and Native American women's experiences with and responses to husbands' violence. His analysis of Oregon's whipping post law in the early twentieth century is particularly cogent. By publicly punishing a few, already marginalized men, middle-class and elite men defined themselves and their behaviors as outside the problem, deflecting the growing feminist movement's critique of entrenched male power. Also good is Peterson Del Mar's assertion that violence against wives is an integral part of a shared, mainstream, masculine culture in the United

States in which ideas about and expectations of women held by abusive men are not essentially different from ideas and expectations of men who never abuse their wives.

The number and range of primary sources used to support his thesis is impressive. Roughly 3,500 Oregon divorce records are examined. Novels, films, comic strips, and newspaper commentaries are then used to illustrate and explain shifts seen in legal records, especially in his discussion of men's ambivalence toward women. His analysis is primarily qualitative, but he also tries to measure quantitative changes based on this qualitative reading of evidence.

Intuitively, he may be right about both the timing and nature of the historical shifts in violence against wives. It is a thought-provoking thesis. However, his use of statistical comparisons over time is problematical. Changes in raw numbers are compared without consideration for changes in population size, and some of the shifts he identifies quantitatively can be explained by changes in definitions of normal behavior, perceptions of individual rights, and processes used to deal with undesired behavior. A consideration of when marriages occurred and violence began, rather than solely when divorce papers were filed, would also improve the analysis. Therefore, these estimates are better considered as theoretical suggestions rather than measurements.

Despite these problems, which I suspect we will be wrestling with for years because of the nature of the sources, *What Trouble I Have Seen* is an immensely useful book. Peterson Del Mar's thesis regarding historical changes in the level and nature of violence against wives is a much-needed contribution, as he ties together disparate changes in society. His careful reading of legal documents blended with a variety of popular culture sources gives us greater insight into the problem.

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