

Shaker Historiography: A Brief Introduction to Writings on Shaker History"

**By Elizabeth De Wolfe, Ph.D., University of New England (Biddeford, Maine) and
Scott F. De Wolfe, De Wolfe & Wood Books (Alfred, Maine)**

I. Works By the Shakers:

See Mary L. Richmond's *Shaker Literature: A Bibliography*, Volume I, (Shaker Community, Inc. 1977) for the most complete list of publications by the Shakers. Some of the most important of the many works of Shaker-authored history include:

Bishop, Rufus and Seth Y. Wells, eds. *Testimonies of the Life, Character, Revelations and Doctrines of Our Ever Blessed Mother Ann Lee, and the Elders with Her . . .*

(Hancock, Mass., 1816)

Accounts of Mother Ann by those who knew her.

Evans, Frederick and Others. *Shakers. Compendium of the Origin, History, Principles, Rules and Regulations, Government, and Doctrines of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing.* (New York, 1859).

Early Shaker history and biographies of many early founders by this important progressive Shaker leader.

Green, Calvin and Seth Y. Wells. *Summary View of the Millennial Church* (Albany, N.Y. 1823)

A good summary of the religious and historical background of Shakerism.

McNemar, Richard. *The Kentucky Revival . . .* (Cincinnati, 1807).

History of the early nineteenth-century religious revival that gave rise to western Shaker communities, among other sectarian groups.

White, Anna and Leila Taylor. *Shakerism: Its Meaning and Message* (Ohio, 1904).

Shaker retrospective and plans for the future penned at a critical juncture in their history.

Periodicals: *The Shaker and Shakeress* (1871-1899-published under four different names) offers an important source of articles on late nineteenth-century Shakerism. *The Shaker Quarterly* (edited and published by the Sabbathday Lake Shakers) provides numerous articles on all aspects of Shaker history & belief by scholars and Shaker authors.

II. Works About the Shakers

Nineteenth-Century Works:

Apostate & Anti-Shaker Literature: an important perspective on nineteenth-century Shakerism is found in works by opponents and former members. These works vary from objective to vitriolic, but all offer perceptive commentary on Shaker life from those who found it less than heaven on earth. Some of the most important (and accessible) works include:

Brown, Thomas. *An Account of the People Called Shakers.* (Troy, N.Y., 1810).

Brown offers a dramatic account of his seduction into, and then away from, Shakerism.

Considered a moderately objective account.

Dyer, Mary Marshall. *A Portraiture of Shakerism.* (New Hampshire, 1822).

Dyer's largest and most complex account of what she saw as Shakerism's flaws. [see also De

Wolfe's *Shaking the Faith*, below]

Elkins, Hervey. *Fifteen Years in the Senior Order of the Shakers* (New Hampshire, 1853).

An engaging account of the life of a Shaker and the forces that pushed him to leave the faith.

Lamson, David. *Two Years Experience Among the Shakers: Being a Description of the Manners and Customs of that People* (Massachusetts, 1848).

Objective critique of Shakerism from a perpetual seeker of community.

Rathbun, Valentine. *An Account of the Matter, Form, and Manner of a New and Strange Religion*. (Providence, 1781).

The first apostate account that established the format the genre would take.

Additional Nineteenth-Century Works:

Bates, Barnabas. *Peculiarities of the Shakers . . .* (New York, 1832).

A good basic and early overview of the Shakers from a world's author.

Hinds, William. *American Communities: Brief Sketches of Economy, Zoar, Bethel, Aurora, Amana, Icaria, the Shakers, Oneida, Wallingford, and the Brotherhood of the New Life* (Oneida, N.Y., 1878).

Hinds visited several communal groups to gather information for his "brief sketches."

Lossing, Benson. "The Shakers" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 15 (July 1857)).

Engaging look at Mount Lebanon at mid-century.

Nordhoff, Charles. *The Communistic Societies of the United States* (New York, 1875).

In his travels among several communal societies, Nordhoff visited fourteen of sixteen Shaker communities. In addition to his observations, Nordhoff includes illustrations, extracts from hymns, accounts of spiritual manifestations, and portions of accounts of other observers (including Elkins, above).

Twentieth- and Twenty-first -Century Works:

Andrews, Edward. *The Community Industries of the Shakers* (Albany, 1932).

A still valuable reference featuring details of the various technical industries in which the Shakers engaged. Richly illustrated with photographs by William Winter.

----- *The People Called Shakers* (Oxford University Press, 1953).

Described by Mary Richmond as "the first comprehensive study by a non-Shaker of all aspects of Shaker history . . ." (7). Available today as a Dover Reprint (1963).

Andrews, Edward and Faith. *Shaker Furniture: The Craftsmanship of an American Communal Sect* (Yale, 1937).

The classic work on Shaker furniture with photographs by William Winter. For better or worse, this book reifies the stereotype of the Shakers as living ascetic, unadorned lives.

Brewer, Priscilla. *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives* (University Press of New England, 1986).

Study of New England Shaker communities supported by detailed demographics. Brewer's appendices of membership numbers, apostasy rates, and community demographics provide one of the very few sources for statistical information. Brewer argues that Shaker communities

suffered both a decline in the numbers of members as well as in the quality of members.

De Wolfe, Elizabeth. *Shaking the Faith: Women, Family and Mary M. Dyer's Anti-Shaker Campaign, 1815-1867* (Palgrave, 2002).

This biography of the Shakers' most notorious opponent is an important study of the structure and function of nineteenth-century anti-Shaker activity. De Wolfe argues that in the end, anti-Shakerism ironically served to strengthen the faith it had attempted to eradicate.

Emlen, Robert. *Shaker Village Views* (University Press of New England, 1987).

Richly illustrated collection and analysis of Shaker pictorial and mapping tradition. An important resource for understanding how the Shakers saw and depicted themselves.

Foster, Lawrence. *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community* (Oxford, 1981; University of Illinois, 1984).

A critical and close examination of the dimension of sexuality in three communal groups.

Foster's work introduced the perspective of historical anthropology to Shaker studies.

----- *Women, Family and Utopia: Communal Experiments of the Shakers, the Oneida Community, and the Mormons* (Syracuse, 1987).

A continuation of Foster's earlier work. In this study, Foster considers the ways communal experiments addressed "the changing role of women, the nature of the family, and impact of sexuality—in all its complexity—on society" (xiv).

Garrett, Clarke. *Spirit Possession and Popular Religion: From the Camisards to the Shakers* (Johns Hopkins, 1987).

Detailed examination of the eighteenth-century religious origins and historical context of the rise of Shakerism.

Humez, Jean M. *Mother's First-Born Daughters: Early Shaker Writings on Women and Religion* (Indiana University Press, 1993).

Anthology of Shaker women's writings. An important work adding the voice of women to Shaker history. Humez adds a scholarly introduction setting these works in the wider context of Shaker writing.

MacClean, John. *Shakers of Ohio* (Columbus, Ohio, 1907).

History of Shakerism in Ohio.

Madden, Etta M. *Bodies of Life: Shaker Literature and Literacies* (Greenwood, 1998).

Exploration of the Shaker use of a variety of means of literacy including poetry, funeral oratories and letters.

Marini, Stephen. *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England*. (Harvard University Press, 1982).

Sets the rise of Shakerism in the religious and social context of a rapidly changing New England in the late eighteenth century.

Patterson, Daniel. *The Shaker Spiritual* (Princeton, 1979).

Authoritative, annotated collection and analysis of the Shaker music tradition.

Pearson, Elmer R. and Julia Neal. *The Shaker Image*. (Hancock Shaker Village, 1974; second rev. ed 1994).

Collection of Shaker images from mid-nineteenth century onward. Valuable visual representations of Shaker life, material culture, and architecture.

Promey, Sally. *Spiritual Spectacles: Vision and Image in Mid-nineteenth-century Shakerism* (Indiana University Press, 1993).

Interdisciplinary study combining art history and the history of religion in the interpretation of the mid-nineteenth-century Spirit drawings.

Muller, Charles and Timothy Reiman, *The Shaker Chair* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).

In-depth study of the history of the Shaker chair industries.

Richmond, Mary. *Shaker Literature* (Shaker Community, Inc. 1977).

Two volume bibliography of literature by and about the Shakers. Established the classification system for identifying publications about Shakers. Volume one catalogs works authored by the Shakers, volume two is a bibliography of works about the Shakers.

Stein, Stephen. *The Shaker Experience in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

Comprehensive review and synthesis of Shaker history from early English origins to the late twentieth-century. Considered the definitive scholarly history of the sect.

Shaker Manuscript Collections:

The best source of Shaker history is found in the letters, journals, diaries and other writings left by Shakers over the last 230 years. In addition to manuscripts held by museums at former Shaker communities, important collections of original documents and microfilm include:

Western Reserve Historical Society Shaker Collection www.wrhs.org

Most extensive collection of Shaker manuscript documents from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. Available on microfilm. Additional collection of eighteenth and nineteenth-century publications by Shakers and former Shakers collected on microfiche.

New York Public Library Shaker Collection www.nypl.org

Also available on microfilm.

Faith and Edward Andrews Shaker Collection, Winterthur Museum & Library www.winterthur.org

The Winterthur Library offers several fellowships for research on Shaker topics.

Shaker Collection, Library of Congress www.loc.gov

Available on microfilm.

Sabbathday Lake Shaker Library, New Gloucester, Maine.

Housed at the last active Shaker community, the library holds a large collection of Shaker manuscripts, journals and other records, as well as microfilm collections from several other libraries.

Old Chatham Shaker Museum www.shakermuseumandlibrary.org

Records of the Mount Lebanon community among other material.

Kentucky University www.wku.edu

Western Shaker materials.