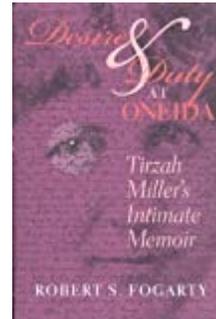


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Robert S. Fogarty.** *Desire and Duty at Oneida: Tirzah Miller's Intimate Memoir.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. xiv + 204 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33693-4.



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## Revisiting

Revisiting “Free Love” and Eugenics at Oneida: A Woman’s Perspective

Robert Fogarty’s edition of Oneida community member Tirzah Miller’s personal writing, *Desire and Duty at Oneida*, provides a refreshing addition to the many volumes of scholarship dedicated to communities with alternative sexual practices. In *Desire and Duty*, which is one of three edited volumes published since the Oneida Community archives were opened to the public in 1993, Tirzah’s heart-wrenching journal describes the mixed emotions she experienced from her early twenties to mid-thirties, a period during which she had numerous sexual partners and came to understand the force of her “magnetic” personality.

Along with Fogarty’s edition of Victor Hawley’s journal (*Special Love, Special Sex* [Syracuse University Press, 1994]) and Lawrence Foster’s edition of George Wallingford Noyes’s account of the community’s early years (*Free Love in Utopia* [University of Illinois Press, 2001]), *Desire and Duty at Oneida* revises scholars’ understanding of the ambivalences associated with living in communal societies. While in the past many have speculated

about conflicts emerging from John Humphrey Noyes’s charismatic and controlling personality, Miller’s account validates (as do the others) both her willingness to uphold her duty to the community’s perfectionist ideals, and moments of what she considered to be self-centered desires.

Among the sexual and social encounters Miller describes are those with two uncles, one the father of her first child and the other, John Humphrey Noyes, the founder of the community, and its radical practice of “complex marriage.” Known by outsiders as “free love,” the concept of complex marriage was based upon a belief in biblical communism, which in Noyes’s eyes included the sharing of sexual partners. Miller’s fascinating record also includes her emotional involvement with, and her detachment from, other sexual partners, including two with whom she bore children.

Especially painful are those descriptions of her frequent meetings with John Humphrey Noyes, and his suggestions regarding her sexual relations and the relations of others in the community. Noyes’s suggestions fell within the purview of two community practices: “mutual criticism,” a confrontational reprimanding, and “ascend-

ing fellowship,” the belief that those greater in perfection would bring along those less perfect through appropriate guidance via physical and spiritual relationships. Thus, Fogarty’s title, *Desire and Duty*, captures the ambivalences expressed in Miller’s writing as she strives to live up to community ideals under Noyes’s direct guidance. Fogarty’s subtitle, *Tirzah Miller’s Intimate Memoir*, however, is a bit misleading. For contemporary readers “memoir” suggests an extended narrative account written in reflection upon past events, as the writer remembers them to have been experienced. Miller’s record, though “intimate” as the title suggests, is a fragmented journal rather than a coherent narrative.

Miller’s journal might stand alone as a fascinating text. Her writing skills reflect the emphasis on education and the arts within Oneida, and she wrote for, and eventually edited, the community’s published periodical, *The Circular*. In fact, standing as an epigraph to the published journal is “Eros,” the poem she composed in 1864, demonstrating even at the young age of twenty-one both her poetic prowess and romantic, sexual sensitivity. Yet, in spite of Miller’s verbal dexterity and seemingly unrepressed expression of sentiment (compared to Shaker Isaac Newton Youngs or Puritan Michael Wigglesworth, who wrote in code; or Victor Hawley, who wrote in shorthand), Fogarty’s thorough introduction and deft editorial comments help resurrect Miller’s life for contemporary readers.

Miller’s journal covers the period 1867 to 1879, which Fogarty describes as the height of the community’s experimentation with stirpiculture (now known as eugenics). To set the context for Miller’s reaction to these new plans, Fogarty includes in his introduction several sections, treating: 1) the utopian impulse in America, including the flurry of community building in the “burned-over” district of upstate New York in the mid-nineteenth century; 2) the upbringing and theological training of John Humphrey Noyes, a graduate of Dartmouth who later enrolled in seminary at both Andover Newton and Yale; 3) Noyes’s founding of the community at Oneida, and his teachings of Biblical communism, complex marriage, male continence (for birth control and vital economy), ascending and descending fellowship, and mutual criticism.

Another editorial apparatus which assists readers is the “cast of characters” Fogarty provides. This explains names, nicknames, and initials entered in Miller’s record, which usually stand without introduction. Centering the volume are sixteen pages of illustrations, largely photos of the people involved, which aid in bringing the charac-

ters to life and in reminding us that the people we see in formal, nineteenth-century poses had passions as strong as those we experience today.

One of the beauties of Fogarty’s work is the relatively small number of editorial notes that punctuate Miller’s prose. Seven pages, consisting of sixty-six endnotes, illuminate remarks that might otherwise be opaque. Because Fogarty’s introduction so ably lays the groundwork for approaching her record, readers need not be distracted unnecessarily by flipping back and forth to the volume’s final pages. Certainly the notes assist in clarifying some details, but those who wish to remain immersed in Miller’s confessional may do so.

Fogarty divides Miller’s journal into three sections, which he labels according to the most significant emotional forces of each period. Each is connected to one of the three children Miller bore, physical reminders of her relationships with specific men of the community. The first focuses on the young Miller’s relationship with her uncle George Wallingford Noyes, who died just before she gave birth to his son. A gap, which Fogarty suggests was prompted by the emotional loss of George, follows this period.

Next is the period in which she became passionately involved with Edward Inslee, a musician, as was Miller herself, with whom she conceived a child. John Humphrey Noyes disapproved of the “special love,” probably because of jealousy, since he had admitted to Miller that she was his favorite lover. Noyes manipulated relationships within the community to keep Inslee, Miller, and her second child, Haydn, apart. One symbol of Noyes’s control was his influence on this child’s name. Haydn’s name marked the musical bond between Inslee and Miller; Miller changed his name to Paul at Noyes’s suggestion, willingly submitting her desire to her duty.

In the third section, after Inslee left the community, Miller continued to be involved with several men. She submitted herself to the stirpiculture experiments of the community, although she expressed concerns about bearing and mothering a third child. During this phase of her life, Fogarty argues, Miller had come to fully recognize her “magnetism”: the power she exerted over men, a power that, Noyes said, bewitched them. She had a third child by James Herrick, whom she came to love, and whom she would eventually marry, after the community’s dissolution.

In his introduction, Fogarty compares Miller with the females of Henry James’s fiction, and asserts that the

author was motivated stylistically by novels of her day more than by the Bible and doctrinal works. The romantic and confessional elements of Miller's record, along with her sexual awakening, are clear, yet this type of literary language might make some (those who do not appreciate nineteenth-century women's fiction) dismiss the story as sentimental and, therefore, less significant to a rational understanding of higher truths about humanity and human nature than other American utopian texts. Readers of Fogarty's introduction should bear in mind that these literary allusions serve two purposes. First, Fogarty is explaining a shift from first generation concerns with biblical spirituality to a more secular and self-centered spirituality of the second generation of community members. Second, he is suggesting her generic and literary influences. (Miller also records Noyes's encouragement regarding her literary development).

For those interested in women's journals and autobiographies as a field of study, this stylistic element of

Miller's writing is an area open to further analysis. For this subject, the published journal by Victor Hawley and the voluminous written sources of the Oneida collection (held at Syracuse University) would be logical sources to consult. In addition, Tirzah Miller's journal is an important first person account for those who teach women's literature and women's studies, because it offers an extremely frank view of a young woman's experience with her sexual identity in Victorian America.

Reminiscent of the landmark importance of the historical and editorial work of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich to the study of colonial New England women's lives, Fogarty's volume presents new facets, not only of the Oneida group and the ambivalent commitments of some communitarians, but also the strong sentiments of a nineteenth-century woman. It is a worthwhile addition to any class on nineteenth-century American life, and essential to scholars for what it offers to studies of utopias and women's sexuality.

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