

Zion's Whistleblowers: Reflections on Shaker Apostate and Anti-Shaker Writings

By Carol Medlicott

A review of: *Writings of Shaker Apostates and Anti-Shakers, 1782-1850*, edited by Christian Goodwillie. London: Pickering & Chatto, April 2013. 3 volume set. 1088 pp. 23.4 x 15.6 cm.

Introduction

During the summer of 2013, Americans were both captivated and scandalized by the revelations of Edward Snowden, a former CIA employee and intelligence insider, who abruptly left his post with a National Security Agency contractor and sought asylum overseas while at the same time handing over a mass of classified documents about US intelligence gathering practices. The American press continues to reel over Snowden's revelations, which have generated considerable criticism of the Obama administration and its intelligence-gathering procedures. In particular, what appears to be a policy of broad-based telephone surveillance of American citizens and foreign allies alike has come under considerable scrutiny. Some have hailed Snowden as a hero and an American patriot, while others have criticized his motives and called into question his competency. Snowden has insisted that his aim was to reveal to an unsuspecting American public the extent of what he believes are aggressive and unscrupulous technology-based surveillance practices.

At exactly the same time that Britain's *Guardian* newspaper was making public the extensive revelations of intelligence insider Edward Snowden, another British press was releasing to the reading public the most extensive collection of Shaker apostate writings ever assembled. While considerably less explosive today, many of these Shaker apostate writings would have been every bit as provocative to readers at the time of their initial release in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Like the Snowden revelations,

the anti-Shaker writings presume to afford the reader an inside look into a system that would otherwise remain murky to outsiders.

This essay will begin with some brief background on the Shakers and on the dynamics of insider-outsider information before turning to *Writings of Shaker Apostates and Anti-Shakers, 1782-1850*, the three-volume set newly released by British publisher Pickering & Chatto and edited by Christian Goodwillie. I will present a descriptive summary of the volumes, then turn to a discussion of key themes, motives of the writers, and the reasons that such writings diminished in number and intensity, along with some specific highlights. In closing, I will consider the utility of such writings for the contemporary reader. Further, as an appendix to this essay, I have compiled a table that provides a complete listing of the contents of the three volumes, specific categorical facts about each, and a very brief abstract of the themes addressed by each writer.

Seeking the Insider's Perspective

The Edward Snowden controversy should be instructive for students of communal and intentional groups. We are all too aware that most intentional groups, past and present, define boundaries to separate themselves from the broader society and that penetrating those boundaries to learn the “truth” of what goes on within self-isolated groups can be difficult. Likewise, for the majority of Americans, the U.S. intelligence community is a mysterious walled-off entity, whose shadowy ranks are accessible only to those secretive specialists who hold the requisite security clearances. For most of us, it is a world beyond our ken, and we can only achieve a glimpse on a few rare instances. Perhaps someone on the inside might be “outed,” generating tales of hidden intrigue, or some insider might choose to release a scandalous tell-all memoir. Or perhaps a defector announces his willingness to expose the secrets of the intelligence organization he has decided to renounce.

Any system or institution based on strict separation is uniquely vulnerable to the potential for damage from disaffected former members. Whether from an intelligence service, as in the case of Snowden, or from a totalitarian state, a company, or an enigmatic intentional community, a defector is an ambiguous figure. His information is welcomed by some, yet at the same time regarded by others with suspicion. Some might expend

considerable effort to “debunk” the defector’s revelations. But because of his insider status, the defector holds singular power to effect real damage on the system he has left behind. Still, for all his potential power, the defector’s ultimate fate is usually uncertain. Whether from North Korea or a contemporary religious group, an exit from any closed and secretive community often leads to a sadly troubled life in which the apostate is unable to adjust.

It is an easy matter to find examples of withdrawn and secretive intentional communities whose opaque practices become a little more transparent as a result of the public revelations of disaffected former members. Often such information is mishandled and any scholarly value is diminished. In contemporary America, for instance, revelations from former members across a range of intentional communities—from Hutterites and Amish to “fundamentalist” Mormons—have become popular fodder for “reality” television. But far from being mere entertainment, firsthand observations from former insiders of intentional communities hold considerable value, even though the scholarly use of such information demands critical consideration of the testifiers’ motives and perspectives. Through their long history, the Shakers have had abundant experience with apostasy and persecution and have survived despite the circulation of slanderous accounts generated by former insiders and aggrieved individuals.

Commonly known as the “Shakers,” the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing is the longest-running religious communal group in American history, with origins older than the nation itself. From the Society’s beginnings, the Shakers sought separation from the American mainstream. That separation quickly became one of the Shakers’ key distinguishing features and the basis of provocation. The majority of religious denominations in America were content to share a diverse social landscape with a range of churches and spiritual groups. For most Americans, membership in a religious congregation offered structure for *part* of one’s social, cultural, and spiritual practice, but seldom for all of it. But from the beginning, the Shakers sought a comprehensive commitment from each convert, a commitment which meant that each convert agreed to make a conscious separation from the World and to allow his or her entire existence to be governed and dictated by Shaker principles, rules, and guidelines. For most other Americans, one’s religious denomination might impose relatively few obligations beyond recommended periodic

worship practices. But for Shakers, the chosen religious life was both all-encompassing and sequestered. Shakers established separate settlements, separate housing, separate economic practices, separate schools, separate social spheres, separate forms of artistic and cultural expression, separate value systems. When one also factors in the radical nature of Shaker theology, the unusual social mores, and the curious worship practices, it is not surprising that the Shakers have provoked strong reactions from observers through much of their long history in America.

During a prolonged period of their history, from the early 1780s through at least the 1850s, the Shakers were regarded by many Americans as a group so withdrawn and enigmatic as to elude critical scrutiny. Initially, the Shakers published little about their beliefs and practices and they withdrew from mainstream society, even while they aggressively proselytized. Because practically no objective information about the Shakers was available, the publicized accounts of Shaker “defectors”—one-time followers who later repudiated their conversion and departed—found a ready audience. The publications of the ardent Shaker apostate Valentine Rathbun in the early 1780s opened this genre of writing. Rathbun had been among the very first Baptists from the region near Albany, New York, to seek out Ann Lee and her followers on their plot of land in the bleak marshlands of Niskayuna. Rathbun visited her there in late May 1780. It was only one week after the infamous Dark Day, and the members of Rathbun’s New Light Baptist congregation were all filled with spiritual expectations. Rathbun was utterly captivated by Ann Lee’s words and demeanor, as well as her singing, and became instantly infatuated with Shakerism. Whether he ever resided at Niskayuna is questionable. At that early period, becoming a Shaker meant simply making a confession of sin to Ann Lee or a member of her retinue and adopting their unorthodox mode of worship. No formalized theology existed, nor did communal property ownership, collective economic practices, or regulated lifestyles. Three months later, Rathbun repudiated his new faith. But during that summer of 1780 Rathbun witnessed Shaker worship at its most frenzied. Apparently dazed by the experience, he took it upon himself to publicize his observations, in the hope that his writing could be instrumental in preventing others from falling in with what he ever after regarded as a dangerous and misguided sect. From this genesis, a steady procession of anti-Shaker accounts by former Shaker insiders was launched on the American public for more than seventy years, on through to the middle of the nineteenth century.

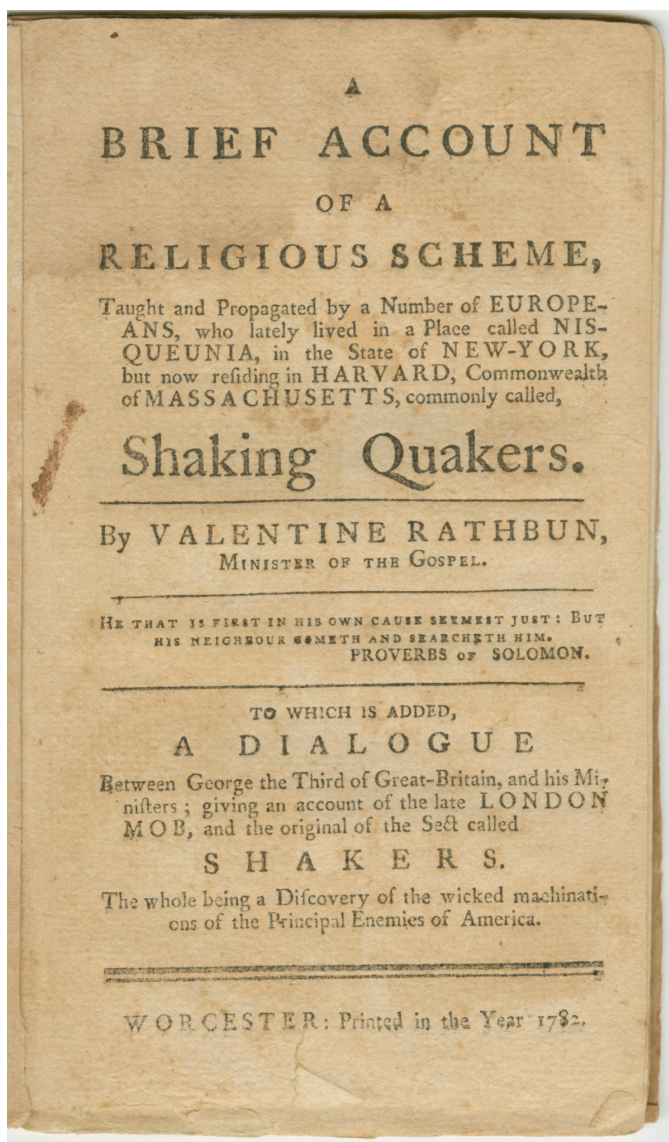


Figure 1. Title page of Valentine Rathbun's *A Brief Account of a Religious Scheme ... Commonly called Shaking Quakers*. Rathbun was one of the earliest Shaker apostate writers, and his main objections concern the excessive and irrational nature of Shaker worship behaviors. His account also introduced the powerful idea of the Shakers being a political scheme launched by the British crown to undermine American social stability.

An Assemblage of Insider Voices

Thanks to the British publisher Pickering & Chatto, a three-volume set representing the most complete array of anti-Shaker publications ever assembled is now available to the reader and researcher. Pickering & Chatto specializes in assembling edited collections of primary sources ranging across a broad array of themes in Anglo and American history. In 2010, Pickering & Chatto launched an American Communal Studies series, which will present edited sets of obscure primary sources pertaining to an extensive assortment of American intentional and communal groups drawn from well over two centuries of American religious history. Many of the titles in this series will be multi-volume sets. The aim of the series is to make available for the student of communal society history a range of primary sources that would otherwise be difficult—or in some case, virtually impossible—to access. *Writings of Shaker Apostates and Anti-Shakers, 1782-1850* represents the first title in this series. This three-volume set contains a rich and extensive collection of anti-Shaker writings drawn from the earlier generations of the Shaker experience in America. Although the contents were published by their various authors in the past, most are virtually unknown today.

The editor of *Writings of Shaker Apostates and Anti-Shakers* is Christian Goodwillie, whose credentials as a Shaker historian and researcher are well known. This project was an outgrowth of Goodwillie's passion for early Shaker history together with his impressive expertise in early American print culture. Strong themes in Goodwillie's work have been how the early Shakers intersected American print culture, as well as how the image of the Shakers evolved through early imprints of their own and others' making. As a scholar and curator of early American religious history, Goodwillie is devoted to promoting antiquarian study. It is impossible to imagine any Shaker scholar besides Goodwillie who could have brought this ambitious and creative project to fruition.

The thirty-nine texts assembled in these three volumes represent a broad geographic swath of the Shaker world, including both eastern- and western-oriented accounts. A slight majority (twenty-two) of accounts address events among the Shakers at the eastern New York communities, the New Hampshire communities, and the major Massachusetts communities of Harvard and Hancock. But a significant number (seventeen) of the accounts offer impressions developed among the western Shaker

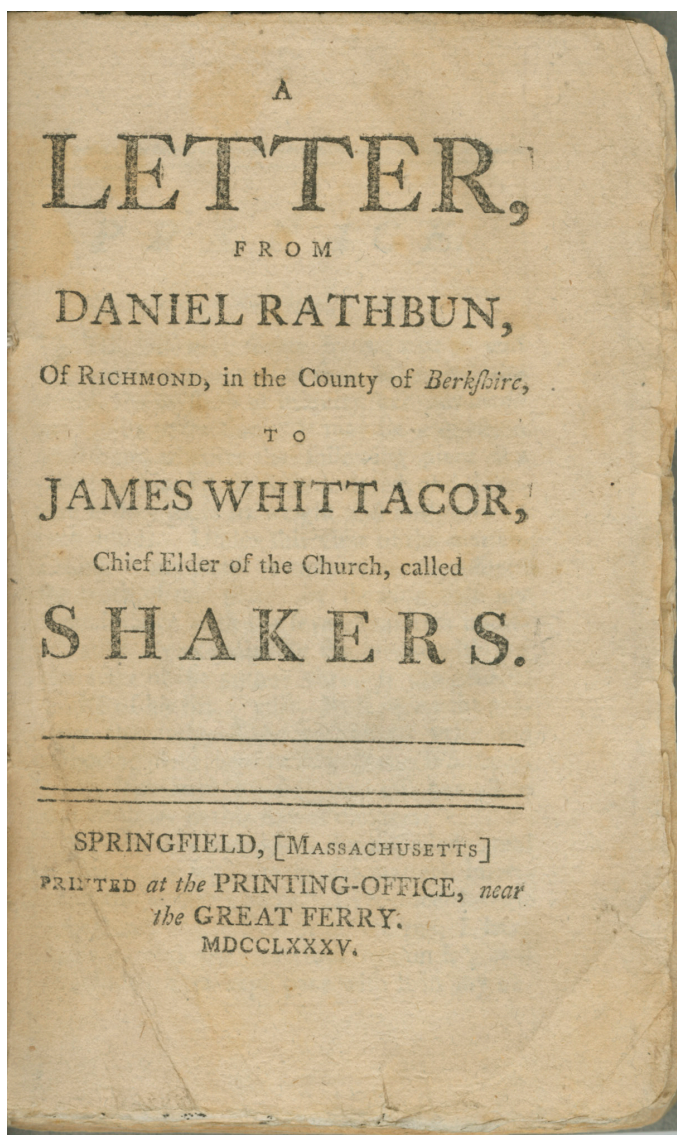


Figure 2. Title page of Daniel Rathbun's *A Letter ... to Jame Whittacor, Chief Elder of the Church Called Shakers*. He claims to have witnessed a range of excessive behaviors, from nakedness to sadistic abuse to drunkenness on the part of the principal Shaker spiritual figures. Much of his narrative frames Shakerism as tantamount to Roman Catholicism, with the Shakers forced into the "popish" idolatry of their leaders.

settlements of Union Village, Ohio; Pleasant Hill, Kentucky; and West Union, Indiana. A few parts of the Shaker world are entirely missing, and the reader is left with the impression that Shaker settlements in Maine, Connecticut, western New York, and elsewhere happily eluded the attention of anti-Shaker writers.

Twenty-one of the texts assembled—over half the total—are authored by Shaker apostates. Some of these individuals had been among the Shakers for only a few months, while others had lived as Shakers for as much as twenty years or more. The remaining eighteen texts come from a variety of observers, some of whom had extensive direct contact with the Shakers, while others seemed to rely on the publications of others. The writings of over thirty individual authors are included. The four authors represented by multiple narratives include apostates well known for making careers out of their anti-Shaker diatribes, such as Valentine Rathbun, Eunice Chapman, and James Smith.

Yet, as editor Christian Goodwillie informs the reader, these thirty-nine texts are not a comprehensive collection of apostate and anti-Shaker narratives, nor even a representative one. Rather, they are texts that heretofore have been too obscure for the average reader to access. Many excellent Shaker apostate and anti-Shaker writings are, in fact, readily available to the contemporary reader, through modern scholarly editions, modern reprints, or web-accessible versions. Still, this new collection offers the reader an unprecedented array of anti-Shaker writings. And nearly as valuable as the texts themselves are the editorial additions by Goodwillie, who provides an excellent collection of scholarly headnotes to introduce and contextualize each of the thirty-nine entries. Goodwillie's general introduction stands as an important scholarly contribution in its own right, as it masterfully interprets the historical backdrop against which the anti-Shaker literary genre developed. It should stand together with several of the individual anti-Shaker texts as indispensable "must-reads" for any student of Shaker history and culture.

Unfortunately, however, this three-volume collection is not aimed at the average reader of Shaker history. Although a handsome and impeccably produced set, its cost will present a barrier to most potential readers. Even serious scholars may find the set difficult to access in a practical sense, as budgetary constraints may limit its acquisition by libraries. Also, many of the texts are quite difficult to penetrate, as they are theologically dense, impossibly long and labyrinthine in contrast to the fairly simple grievances

that they contain, and flat-out difficult for the contemporary reader to follow. Even the editor seems aware of the daunting task facing the reader when he remarks on one particular text that “its brevity makes it a manageable read” (3:43) while another is “dense to the point of incomprehensibility” (2:203). Still, the opportunity to encounter anti-Shaker texts that have lain for so long in complete obscurity is indeed exciting. For the serious scholar of the Shakers or of early American religion, who wishes to deeply engage rare works across the full genre of anti-Shaker narrative, this collection is an impressive and important piece of work.

Listening to the Insiders’ Voices

From the opening text by Valentine Rathbun in the first volume, a strong theme running throughout this set is how people reacted to Shakerism during the very early period of its establishment in a region. Whether the focus was New York and Massachusetts in the 1780s or Kentucky and Ohio in the early 1800s, anti-Shaker writers exhibited a similar array of objections: shock over the glossolalia, dancing, and other bodily contortions exhibited during worship; abolition of marital relations and denial of natural affections, leading to renunciation of cherished biblical principles governing family relations; apparent idolatry of Ann Lee as a female manifestation of the Christ Spirit; alleged covert connections to the British and to Native American tribes at a time of continued political unrest; and imposition of spiritual authoritarianism upon followers tantamount to the “popish” practices of Roman Catholicism.

Especially in the earliest period when Ann Lee was still living, her teachings were still evolving, and worship practices were still in flux, people exposed to the unregulated excesses of Shakerism might well have had reason to be justifiably concerned. Carried away in throes of spiritual travail, some early Shaker followers were apparently moved to harm themselves out of a desire to redress their own sinful natures, or they might physically abuse one another for similar reasons. Multiple observers testified to seeing people commit appalling acts of sadistic degradation against their own aged parents or other family members, in shocking contempt of the biblical injunction to honor one’s parents. Many writers expressed concern for the physical health and survival of Shaker followers, because they deprived themselves of food and sleep and forced

themselves to endure prolonged physical exertions. Several anti-Shaker writers identify a particularly weird practice apparently common among early Shaker followers—namely, a compulsion to run in the direction of one’s outstretched hand or finger, while in the grip of spiritual excitement. And a theme repeated by many former Shaker followers in that earliest period was that Shaker followers, both men and women, sometimes threw off their clothes in the frenzied intensity of worship. While bizarre, the purpose of nude displays, if they happened, may have been desire for self-humiliation as a form of spiritual mortification, or the impulse to prove one’s freedom from carnality and return to childlike innocence. But whatever the reason, nakedness during religious worship obviously flouted the common standards of propriety and modesty, thus becoming a trump card in early apostate writing, signaling the utter depravity of the Shakers.

In a period when religion loomed large in daily life, Shaker practices and beliefs generated discomfiture in many, but sheer outrage in some. Early apostates and anti-Shakers were scandalized at witnessing the Shakers appearing to overturn and repudiate social mores of the time—children honoring parents, parents cherishing children, the reverencing of marital relations, spiritual obedience to ordained clergy, and secular obedience to political authorities and civil law. Ann Lee was alleged to have said that the Shakers were the people who would “turn the world upside down.” Several early converts—including 1782 apostate Valentine Rathbun and 1805 Ohio convert and lifelong faithful Shaker Richard McNemar—were known to use this exact phrasing when describing their early exposure to Shaker ideas.¹ So it is no wonder that a common reaction to the Shakers would have been complete condemnation of what appeared to be bizarre excesses.

Another common theme in early anti-Shaker writing was that the Shakers were anti-American. Ann Lee and her followers had arrived from England on the eve of the American Revolution, yet refused to take up arms in the cause of American liberty. Later, they disavowed all political associations, refused to swear oaths or bear arms, and rejected such common social proprieties as use of honorific titles for civil authorities and office-holders. Yet within their own confines, the Shakers appeared to demand strict obedience from followers and converts to the spiritual and temporal authority of elders and eldresses. Many detractors believed that the exercise of authority within Shakerism, including the perceived near-idolatry of Ann Lee and her appointed successors, was tantamount to the

“popishness” of the Old World and had no place on free American soil.

Still other anti-Shaker writers were driven by theological objections. From the time of the Shakers’ first public preaching, listeners were shocked by their beliefs and doctrines. Neither during Ann Lee’s lifetime nor for many years after her death did Shakers commit their evolving theology to print.² As Goodwillie points out, Shakers early on “ceded the power of the press” to their detractors, and the earliest publicized accounts of Shaker theology and beliefs come from apostates and anti-Shaker writers in the early 1780s. It was not until 1790 that a formal expression of Shaker theology, written not by detractors but by Shaker leaders themselves, was widely available. But by then the damage was done. Periodically over the next thirty-five years, critique of Shaker theology would be a dominant theme in anti-Shaker writing. Indeed, further elaboration by the Shakers in subsequent theological publications only provoked anti-Shaker writers more. During a period of twenty-five years after the 1808 publication of *Testimony of Christ’s Second Appearing*, the Shakers’ massive 600-page theological tome, several anti-Shaker writers produced dense theological critiques and refutations of Shaker doctrine, even while some grudgingly admired the Shakers’ ability to produce such a monumental piece of original theological expression. Some go out of their way to acknowledge the Shakers’ right to religious freedom, but nonetheless claim a compulsion to reveal the extent of Shaker theological delusion.

One finds an interesting geographical and chronological correlation in the anti-Shaker writings that focus on theological objections. Looking at the eastern writers represented in this collection, the anti-Shaker writings focused on theological objections come almost exclusively from the 1780s, the earliest period of Shaker evangelism. Nearly all of the remaining ones come from western writers, date from between 1811 and the mid-1820s, and exhibit references to the *Testimony* or other Shaker publications circulating in the western states. And all come from writers who are themselves clergy or at least very actively involved in organized denominations. It appears that after the initial scandal of radical Shaker theology in the eastern region, the substance of Shaker beliefs ceased to matter to most outsiders and did not play a major role in why insiders chose to leave the Shakers. In the West, where Shaker expansion took place over a twenty-year period from 1805, and always at the direct expense of frontier denominations that were themselves attempting to grow, theological differences mattered deeply to those church leaders who continued to see the Shakers as a threat. Of the

accounts in this collection, the last one to focus on theological objections is from 1826, from a Methodist minister who was aggrieved to see so many fellow Methodists in his neighborhood persuaded to convert to Shakerism.

It appears that theological objections to the Shakers were most potent at times when the Shakers were actively proselytizing and expanding in the East and West. Otherwise, the theology of the Shakers was not in itself all that provocative to anti-Shaker writers. Moreover, accounts that focus on theology are the least accessible to today's reader, and probably were similarly daunting to readers of the period. Consequently, they may have been far less influential than the more colorful accounts offering firsthand experiences and sensational observations. During the period of the Early Republic, when nearly all these anti-Shaker writings were produced, many Americans were genuinely committed to religious freedom, because so many could recall the struggle to obtain it. What the Shakers believed perhaps truly did not matter to many observers of the Shakers. However, the outward manifestations of those beliefs—alleged fanaticism, lewdness, abuse, the various sorts of misconduct to which the Shakers were led, all purportedly with spiritual justification—mattered a great deal more.

This points to another strong theme running through a significant number of apostate and anti-Shaker narratives: personal misconduct among the Shakers. The fanatical practices allegedly observed during the lifetime of Ann Lee and the earliest generation of 1780s, when Shakerism was at its most frenetic and unregulated, have already been discussed. Perhaps because such accounts were repeated and re-circulated for decades, later apostates and anti-Shaker writers were more likely to accuse Shakers of a range of improprieties. More importantly, readers were more likely to believe such accounts. By the 1810s and 1820s, anti-Shaker writings did not level new claims of naked dancing, but they did accuse the Shakers of a dizzying range of inappropriate and decidedly un-Christian behaviors. Not surprisingly, drunkenness was one popular theme. The earliest Shaker apostates had claimed to witness Ann Lee, William Lee, and other Shaker leaders in the throes of inebriation. The persistent circulation of those earlier accounts made it all the more plausible to believe the allegations made by later writers that abuse of alcohol continued to be rampant among the Shakers. In this set, the most powerful of such accounts come from several of the western writers, whose work alleges that western Shaker leaders kept personal supplies of liquor and lived in debauchery. Several accounts portray Shaker elders as hypocrites, living in luxury while

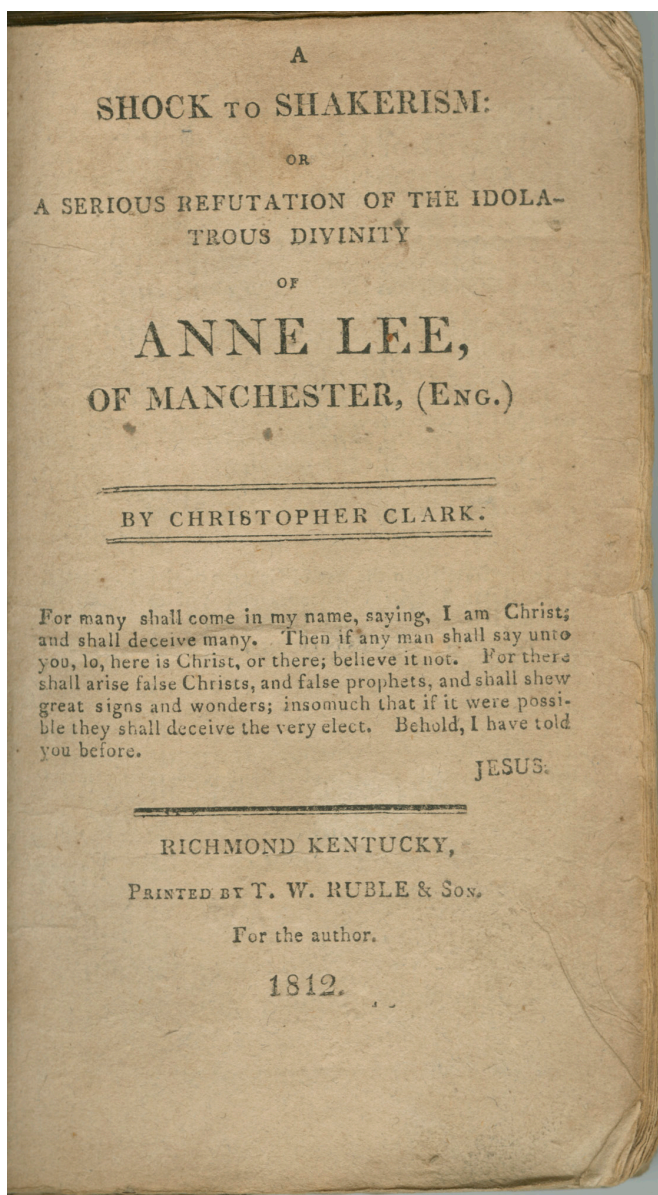


Figure 3. Title page of Christopher Clark's *A Shock to Shakerism*. In this work he objects to the Shakers' hierarchical structure and likens it to "popery." He also strenuously objects to celibacy, which he says is as much a threat to society as whoredom.

common Believers struggled in meager conditions. Harsh treatment of children is another common theme: cruel corporal punishment, insufficient education, over-exertion. Financial misconduct is also frequently alleged, with Shaker elders portrayed as gleefully hoarding Believers' property and reaping profits from the uncompensated labor of the common worker.

One of the most enduring grievances brought against the Shakers was the manner in which authority was exercised. Of the accounts presented, objections to despotic authoritarianism run through a multitude of the texts, ranging across most of the seventy-year period covered in this collection. Many of the writers who object to the Shakers' alleged authoritarianism contend that it flies in the face of the hard-won American values of liberty and freedom of conscience. Also, many writers compare the Shaker eldership's demand for strict obedience to the papal authority of the Roman Catholic Church, and by doing so they accuse the Shakers of idolatrous practices tantamount to Catholicism.

One writer who is particularly effective in portraying the Shakers as anti-American authoritarian despots was James Smith. Smith was a retired army colonel renowned for his patriotic service during both the French and Indian War and the American Revolution. Retired and living with his son's family in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, he witnessed the arrival of the Shaker missionaries in 1805 and was horrified when his son abandoned the family to join a Shaker community in Ohio. Smith pointedly claims that the blind spiritual and temporal obedience demanded by Shaker elders of their followers violates those followers' "rights of conscience," to which they are entitled as American citizens. He even goes so far as to compare Shakers to slaves, a potent charge in a region where slavery was both present and controversial. By calling them "voluntary slaves," Smith is saying that the Shakers were willing to utterly debase themselves. Smith may have been aware that the recently published Shaker theological tome, *Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing* (1808), written at Turtle Creek, Ohio, by Benjamin Seth Youngs, opened a discussion of the Shaker understanding of "rights of conscience," as established by George Washington.³ And it is perhaps not a coincidence that at about the same time as Smith's first anti-Shaker publication, Shaker poet Issachar Bates, who was one of the principle Shaker missionaries in the region and well known to Smith, penned a hymn titled "Rights of Conscience," which further elaborated on the theme of how the Shakers practiced true rights of conscience while other Americans remained bound up in politics and sectarian creeds.

Smith's writings rank as among the most important anti-Shaker texts of the period, in that they portray not only one man's personal grievances but also address the friction between Shakers and mainstream Americans in the highly charged patriotic atmosphere of the Early Republic.

But many of the accounts in this collection are in fact motivated by highly personal grievances. Many people simply could not accept Shaker life, either for themselves or for their loved ones, and they were motivated to publicize their experiences out of a sense of loss, betrayal, and injustice. Several of the writers believe themselves to have been deeply wronged by the Shakers. Reading the accounts in which the writers are clearly burdened with personal loss, one is reminded that there are truly at least two sides to every story and that stress and trauma prevent anyone from keeping an unbiased perspective. In fact, any Shaker scholar who has spent time reading journals and correspondence from any Shaker community can affirm that most large families that joined the Shakers had members who failed to adjust to Shaker life and who felt traumatized at what had befallen themselves and their families. Some of these reluctant converts departed, while others remained. Sadly, there are abundant examples of Shaker life inflicting genuine misery on people, with the result being apostasies, elopements, insanity, and suicides. Some of the most prominent Shaker convert families, both East and West, were not immune from personal trauma. In the earliest generation of Shaker converts, Seth Youngs died by cutting his own throat, even while most members of his large family prospered as Shakers.⁴ Both Issachar Bates and Richard McNemar were disappointed by apostate sons, even though others of their children remained faithful.⁵ Some children of the first Ohio convert Malcolm Worley apostatized and later accused the Shakers of driving their father mad. At both Union Village and Pleasant Hill, members of large prominent early convert families committed suicide.⁶

The sad fact is that while Shaker conversion was the ticket for some into a rich and productive life of spiritual fulfillment, for others it led to spiritual anxieties and anguished separation from loved ones. As Goodwillie notes, the cases of Eunice Chapman and Mary Dyer have been fully and effectively explored by scholars. Modern readers cannot help but sympathize with these women who felt abandoned by their husbands, deprived of their children, and manipulated by the Shakers, all at a time when women were generally devalued and disadvantaged in society. The case of James Smith is particularly poignant. As an elderly

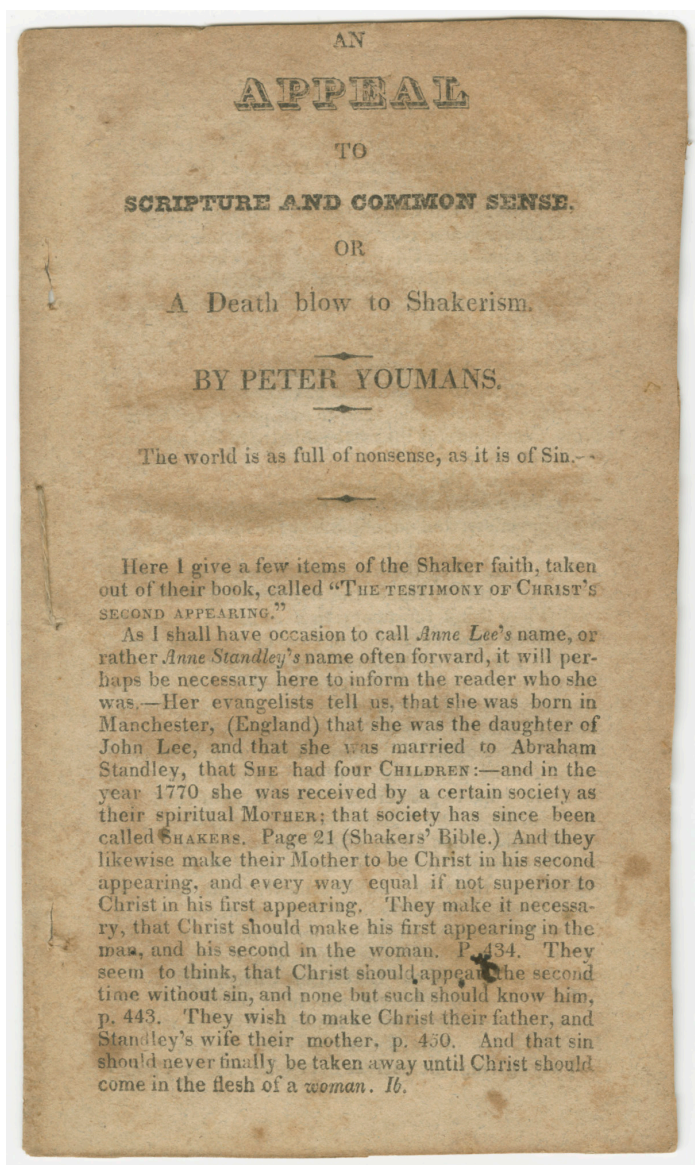


Figure 4. Peter Youmans was a Methodist figure reacting to the widespread Shaker conversion of Methodists around southern Butler County, Ohio. His narrative, *An Appeal to Scripture and Common Sense* (title page pictured above) includes a nicely constructed side-by-side comparison of Ann Lee and Jesus, as well as a summary distillation of the *Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing*.

man in his seventies living at a time well before today's modern social safety nets, Smith was dependent upon his son for security in his old age. Having raised a righteous son who seemed intent on obeying the biblical injunction to honor his aged father by providing him a secure home, Smith believed his remaining years would be stress-free. He was horrified when his son's Shaker conversion destroyed his household, leaving the elder Smith and his daughter-in-law bereft of support. Probably anyone who has reached middle age and has begun to wonder if one's assets are sufficient for a financially secure future can sympathize with Smith's distress. While the accusations made by the deeply aggrieved writers such as Smith, Dyer, and Chapman can seem harsh and unjustified, the reader must take into account the genuine anxieties that those writers probably suffered.

Throughout this three-volume collection, the reader encounters hidden gems—lively passages conveying fresh information about previously unknown or little understood circumstances. Even the most sophisticated scholar of the Shakers will find surprising new insights. Though inflammatory on some points, many of the apostates and anti-Shaker writers are dispassionately neutral in their remarks about Shaker premises, modes of dress and speech, habits of eating and housework, patterns of sitting or standing or moving in worship. Many of these anti-Shaker writings illuminate mundane details of life in specific Shaker villages to an extent rarely seen in Shaker manuscripts. For instance, from Absolem Blackburn's account, we learn the configuration of the meeting house interior at Union Village, the placement and design of the stairwells, and the exact position and purpose of the interior window from the upper stairwell into the worship interior. Considering that this meeting house is no longer standing and no interior images of it are known to survive, this is valuable information indeed. Also from Blackburn, we learn of the complex symmetrical layout of the gardens at West Union, Indiana, in the early 1820s, including the arrangement of colorful flower beds and paved walkways. Moreover, Blackburn identifies a feature of West Union's gardens that I have never heard of in any Shaker garden—namely, the presence of “pleasant summer houses, arbours, &c, which are delightful to people of taste and fancy” (2:249). As far as I am aware, features intended primarily for recreational and aesthetic enjoyment were virtually unknown in Shaker villages of the early 1820s. It is possible that these features at West Union may have been a consequence of the Shakers' regular exposure to the Rappites of New Harmony, Indiana, where Believers were encouraged

to stroll in the flower and shrubbery gardens adorned with ornamental pavilions. The history of the West Union, Indiana, Shaker community continues to be one of the most enigmatic episodes in Shaker studies. For sheer volume of detail on West Union alone, and circumstances affecting its fortunes, this set is remarkable. In addition to Blackburn's account, others such as that of John Woods also impart some important insights on the relatively obscure West Union.

Several of the earliest reports from the 1780s portray the Shakers engaged in the very peculiar practice of "running after the hand." This is first reported in 1782 by Valentine Rathbun: "Sometimes their hand will stretch out, and after it they run, – through woods – cross lots – over fences, swamps, or whatever" (1:12). Other apostates report similar practices, noting that the Shakers "walk about with extended arms" (1:128). An anonymous account by a satirical anti-Shaker writer begins the remark that it is unlikely that anyone will be "so fortunate as to meet a Shaker when he is not running after his own finger" (1:43), which suggests that, like dancing, the practice was so common as to become a basis for mockery. Yet no references to such a practice are known in Shaker accounts of worship, nor is the rationale for it well understood. And although apparently commonplace early on, the practice apparently did not persist beyond the 1780s.

Shaker apostates and anti-Shaker observers impart other rich details of Shaker life and worship. For instance, Absolem Blackburn provides rich description of the diet and clothing of Ohio and Indiana Shakers, down to the type of wood shavings used in the men's woven brimmed hats and the cloth material of women's shoes. Several apostates provide useful details of later worship settings in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s. We hear, for instance, of how worship was managed in the 1820s—who sat on the floor and when, who sat on benches, who stood, where the elders stood in relation to singers (2:249-50). We hear the words of specific songs and detailed descriptions of the specific hand and arm gestures that accompanied the songs, line by line (3:200).⁷ In several cases, the words match tunes that are known to Shaker music scholars and have already been identified as popular songs. Two apostates identify "Come Life Shaker Life" as being sung in the 1840s (3:122, 202), a popular song that originated with Issachar Bates in 1836. And an apostate also identifies an earlier Bates song, "Shaker Slave," being sung at Harvard in the 1840s (3:218).⁸

Admittedly, the scope and complexity of this three-volume set makes

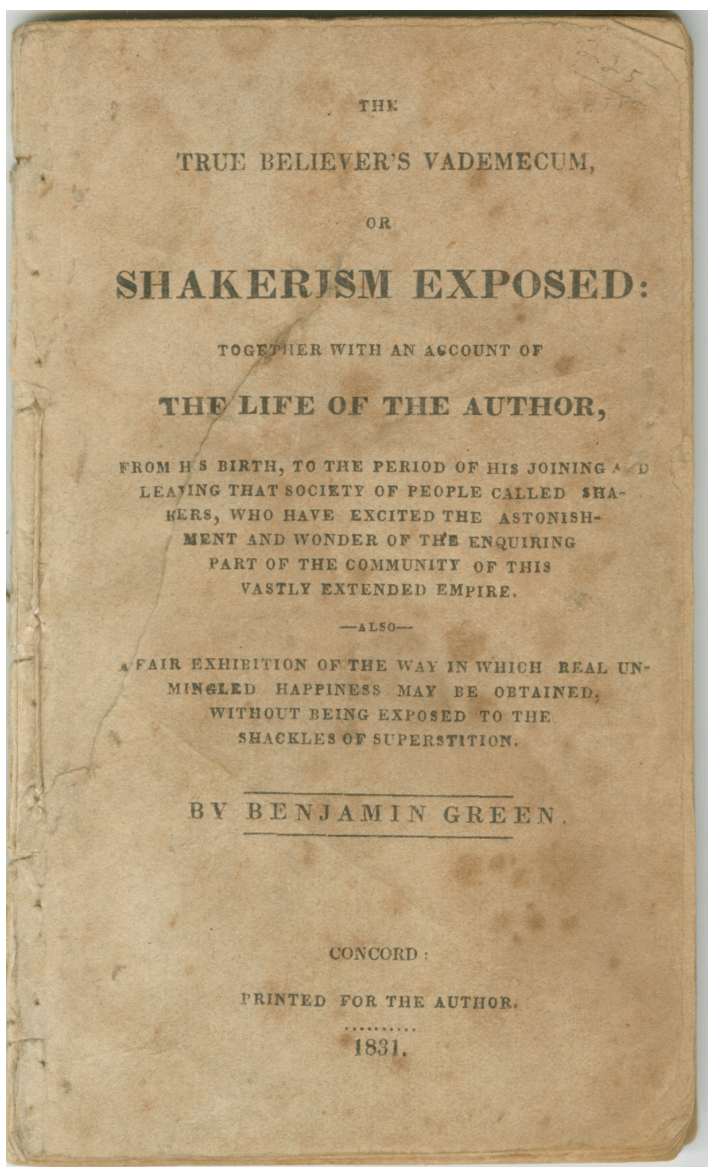


Figure 5. Title page of Benjamin Green's *Shakerism Exposed*. His account includes no theological condemnations or sensationalized charges, but is a mild criticism of pettiness and other un-Christian behaviors. On a personal level, Green seemed particularly resentful of the expectation at Canterbury for women and men to work together cooperatively.

it quite difficult for readers to easily locate and isolate the more engaging, lively, and colorful details. The summaries in Goodwillie's headnotes do a fair job of characterizing what the reader will find in each entry. But many of the entries are quite long, and on their own could stand as booklets or pamphlets in their own right. Thus, much of the rich detail contained in these accounts is likely to remain buried and elusive to researchers.

Consequences of the Insider's Voice

Shaker defectors have likely been more numerous than we know. Not all went out and published scandalous diatribes. But many were likely quite active in dissuading others from becoming Shakers. In my own biographical research on work on Shaker preacher Issachar Bates, I discovered his reference to a Shaker apostate, "one Job Picket," strenuously warning him to avoid any entanglement with the Shakers.⁹ That was around the mid-1790s, in Bates's community of Hartford, New York, over seventy miles from the nearest Shaker settlement, and Picket had claimed to have lived among the Shakers for seven years. I never succeeded in discovering anything more about Job Picket or his circumstances, except that there were indeed Shaker converts named Picket in the region. Looking further at Bates's experience, he writes of hearing the confession of more than 1200 adult persons during the first several years of the western Shaker enterprise. Since Bates was one of several leaders, men and women, who were empowered to hear confessions of converts, we can safely assume that at least triple that number of people made confessions in that time. Even assuming a high degree of mortality from disease in early western settlements, we are still left with a far greater number of people confessing their sins and professing to convert than actually remained as Shakers for the long term. Thus, we are brought back to the point previously raised—that Shaker conversion offered satisfaction only for some, while many others were simply not suited to the demands that Shaker life imposed. Analyzing these volumes prompts one to reflect on how little we know about the multitudes of people who were with the Shakers for a time, before leaving for a multitude of personal reasons. This could present a fruitful new avenue of scholarship.

Despite seventy years of unrelenting published assaults from apostates and disaffected individuals harboring a range of grievances against them,

the Shakers survived. But collectively the damage appears to have been not inconsequential. One can never prove a negative, of course. But as a scholar of early Shakerism, pre-1840, I see that the public was assaulted by some extremely potent anti-Shaker writing at a time when the Shakers were trying desperately to grow and to retain members. Having spent time studying this set of apostate and anti-Shaker narratives, I have come to believe the damage to the Shakers from such writings was very real indeed. Readers have long been able to access anti-Shaker writings. But the relative difficulty of doing so, and the sporadic appearance of references to anti-Shaker writings have made it appear to the modern scholar of Shakerism that anti-Shaker writing was itself a sporadic and inconsequential enterprise. The opportunity to examine and study this set, as a critical mass, is quite powerful. The set impresses upon the reader that the genre of anti-Shaker writing was not so inconsequential after all. This forces the reader to grapple with the challenge from outside persecution that the Shakers have always faced and to conclude that the tactical response from the Shaker leadership, particularly at times when the movement was vulnerable, might well have been more effective.

In the collection's Preface, editor Christian Goodwillie remarks, "Admirers of the ... Shakers, might object to the collection of this critical mass of information originally intended to discredit and damage the sect." This comment points to an interesting feature of Shaker studies, namely, that objective scholarship of Shaker history can sometimes be at odds with the Shaker "heritage" enterprise. Shaker heritage is carefully nurtured and preserved today through the efforts of individuals and institutions alike, all over the United States. Shaker-made objects are valued as among America's most iconic examples of artistic material culture. A Shaker song, "Simple Gifts," ranks as one of America's most recognizable folk songs. Not only have the Shakers tenaciously survived slanderous assaults over their long history, Shaker culture is now enshrined as a celebrated American treasure. Though seen as quaintly anachronistic by many, the few practicing Shakers are beloved figures who draw sustenance from the work of a wider circle of admiring supporters. Bringing together a set of texts that offer the reader a concentrated dose of reminders of just how persecuted and reviled the Shakers once were—to say nothing of the shocking behaviors of which they have been accused—is understandably troubling. For one thing, the collective value contained in the Shaker heritage enterprise—ranging from collectors' marketing of treasured

Shaker antiques to the operation of Shaker museums and historic sites to the publication of books and music recordings to the reproduction of Shaker aesthetics by interior designers—all rests on affectionate esteem for the Shakers themselves, past and present. And beyond that, the notion of deliberately drawing attention to negative aspects of the past history of a devout and admirable group that now quite simply *cannot* be regarded as anything other than a positive force in the world could come across as a bit uncivil.

But the Shakers have always been and remain a somewhat closed circle, vulnerable to efforts of former insiders to reveal their private practices. In that, they share characteristics with many other groups and institutions. The ongoing Snowden drama is a stark reminder of the power of the insider to wreak havoc on the group or institution with which he or she was once affiliated. The U.S. intelligence community and the Obama administration continue to grapple with the challenge of mitigating the damage. The Shakers of the nineteenth century could perhaps have shared some suggestions. As frustrated as today's intelligence officials must be over how to counter Snowden's barrage, Shaker ministry elders of the past must have felt similar aggravation when faced with the salvos from Valentin Rathbun, Mary Dyer, James Smith, Eunice Chapman, John Whitbey, John Woods, and others.

Most of us prefer to think of the Shakers as a charmingly spiritual and otherworldly sect that graced the American landscape with beauty, integrity, devotion, and energetic creativity. And although the Shakers certainly *were* all that, the Shaker heritage enterprise runs the risk of mythologizing the past. We must recognize the value of looking to the candid voices of the critic and the apostate insider, even while we must also recognize that reminding today's readers that beneath the "myth" of Shaker heritage lay a tumultuous complex reality is indeed a risky business.

Notes

1. For Rathbun's remark that his "mind was turned wholly up-side down," see *Writings of Shaker Apostates and Anti-Shakers*, 1782-1820, 1:17; for a discussion of Richard McNemar's remark in 1805 that the new Shaker teachings "appeared to turn things upside down," see Carol Medlicott, *Issachar Bates: A Shaker's Journey* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2013), 89.
2. Goodwillie remarks that ongoing research by David Newell suggests that the Shakers' earliest printed theological work, the *Concise Statement* of 1790, may have been printed in an undated edition in 1785, but with very limited circulation (1:113).
3. For a discussion of Shakers and patriotism in this period, see Jane Crosthwaite, "'The Mighty Hand of Overruling Providence': The Shaker Claim to America," *American Communal Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (April 2012): 93-111.
4. See Glendyne Wergland, *One Shaker Life: Isaac Newton Youngs, 1793-1865* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 20.
5. See Medlicott, *Issachar Bates: A Shaker's Journey*, 200; and John Patterson MacLean, *A Sketch of the Life and Labors of Richard McNemar* (Franklin, Ohio: The Franklin Chronicle, 1905), 24.
6. Polly Hooser of the Pleasant Hill Hoosers hanged herself in 1815, according to records shared by Larrie Curry, curator, Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill. The suicide of Hannah Valentine, also by hanging, is recorded in multiple manuscripts of 1837, such as the journal of Joanna Kitchel, an eastern Shaker visitor to Union Village, WRHS V B 238.
7. The song reported in vol. 3, p. 200, by an anonymous apostate writer who was a Harvard Shaker sister begins "Hark! hark!! my holy, holy, Vicalun seelun voo." I have located its tune recorded by Enfield, Connecticut, Shaker music scribe Russel Haskell in his monumental compilation of Shaker music, WLCM 2131. S4E5, p. 386.
8. The background of the very popular song "Shaker Slave" is discussed in Carol Medlicott, *"Partake a Little Morsel": Popular Shaker Hymns of the Nineteenth Century* (Clinton, NY: Richard W. Couper Press, 2011), 80-81.
9. See *Issachar Bates: A Shaker's Journey* (2013), 50.