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

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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 Shakeresses (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’s largest and most complex account of what she saw as Shakerism’s flaws. [see also De
Wolfe’s *Shaking the Faith*, below]
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.
The first apostate account that established the format the genre would take.
Additional Nineteenth-Century Works:
A good basic and early overview of the Shakers from a world’s author.
Hinds visited several communal groups to gather information for his “brief sketches.”
Engaging look at Mount Lebanon at mid-century.
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:**
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).
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.
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.
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.
Richly illustrated collection and analysis of Shaker pictorial and mapping tradition. An important resource for understanding how the Shakers saw and depicted themselves.
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).
Detailed examination of the eighteenth-century religious origins and historical context of the rise of Shakerism.
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.
Sets the rise of Shakerism in the religious and social context of a rapidly changing New England in the late eighteenth century.
Authoritative, annotated collection and analysis of the Shaker music tradition.
Collection of Shaker images from mid-nineteenth century onward. Valuable visual representations of Shaker life, material culture, and architecture.


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.


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](http://www.nypl.org)

Also available on microfilm.

Faith and Edward Andrews Shaker Collection, Winterthur Museum & Library [www.winterthur.org](http://www.winterthur.org)

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

Shaker Collection, Library of Congress [www.loc.gov](http://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](http://www.shakermuseumandlibrary.org)

Records of the Mount Lebanon community among other material.

Kentucky University [www.uky.edu](http://www.uky.edu)

Western Shaker materials.