

Desire and Duty at Oneida: Tirzah Miller's Intimate Memoir

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"I sometimes wish I could be obscure...and less under the scrutiny of Mr. Noyes' almost omniscient eye; but when...he reaches out for me, and hunts me up, my heart goes out toward him with that passionate devotion." The speaker is twenty-nine-year-old Tirzah Miller, a member of the Oneida Community, which flourished in central New York for nearly thirty years in the mid-nineteenth century. The man she's referring to in the April 23, 1873, entry of her memoir is John Humphrey Noyes, leader and founder of the religious commune and her maternal uncle.

Fogarty, a leading authority on American communes, has written books on the subject for the past twenty years. In an earlier work, he examined the lives of two ordinary members of Oneida, a community that believed in Perfectionism. This religious doctrine "said that man could reach a state of perfection in this life without waiting for the next."

Chief among their many controversial practices was "complex marriage," whereby "every man was the husband of every woman, and every woman was the wife of every man." In his introduction, Fogarty explains the background of the Oneida Community in which Tirzah lived almost her entire life. (The memoir starts in 1867 when she's twenty-four years old; it concludes in 1879 when she's thirty-six.)

She was a principal figure in the community's activities due to her very close relationship with Noyes. It's a position she accepts ambivalently, as this December 22, 1874, entry reads: "I said I thought he dealt more severely with me than with others. We had quite an argument about it. 'It seems to me,' he said, 'that you take the liberty to judge, and to think for yourself...' That Tirzah was a significant member of the community is evident since she was the only woman to have three children in the Oneida's "stirpiculture" experiment, a precursor to eugenics. The community's fifty-eight offspring born between 1868-1879 were through this method. She was also torn between the outside world's "marriage spirit"—being in love and marrying only one person—and the group's "loving spirit"—where exclusivity to one person was prohibited. "Is he a crazy enthusiast, who is just experimenting on human beings?" Tirzah asks herself in late 1878.

This insider's glimpse of a community now more recognized for its silverware legacy came about when the Oneida Community Archives were opened in 1993.

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