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Trials of Intimacy: Love and Loss in the Beecher-Tilton Scandal. By RICHARD WIGHTMAN FOX. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Pp. 376. \$30.00 (cloth).

In trying to understand the 1870s, it has been hard to get out from under the 1920s, a time when journalists and writers took on many of the earlier period's most colorful figures and scandals as part of the project of freeing themselves from the "Puritan" shackles of America's past. There seems to have been a natural affinity between the two eras. Both experienced political corruption; both focused on cultural and moral solutions. In the modernist mood, Paxton Hibben researched and wrote *Henry Ward Beecher: An American Portrait* (New York: George H. Doran, 1927), a fat biography of one of the late-nineteenth-century's most famous personalities. It was then still possible to interview Beecher's younger contemporaries and the family members of those who had played important roles in his life, and they provided testimony on the scandal that shaped the pastor's final years. Currently the 1870s are being replayed—perhaps because of our own political and moral quandaries—and there is renewed interest in some of their central characters and conflicts.

The book under review is a prime example of what an imaginative and astute historian can do to breathe new life into old stories. In the 1870s, the American newspaper-reading public, especially that in New York City, was riveted by a sexual scandal that seemed at the time to threaten all Christendom. Henry Ward Beecher, minister of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn and a national celebrity, was accused of adultery with Elizabeth Tilton, first by the free lover and women's rights reformer Victoria Woodhull and then by the writer and reformer Theodore Tilton, Elizabeth's husband. A spellbinding orator, the minister had the largest congregation in the country at the time—on Sunday "Beecher boats" plying the waters between Manhattan and Brooklyn brought New Yorkers by the hundreds to fill church seats. Gossip about Beecher's extramarital affairs had surfaced before, perhaps merely an accompaniment to his charismatic appeal. This time the rumor had a special resonance. Elizabeth Tilton had grown up in Beecher's church, and Beecher officiated when she spoke her marriage vows to Theodore Tilton. The latter was Beecher's protégé and champion, his shadow and amanuensis. Beecher often visited in the Tilton home, and he had read to Elizabeth drafts of his novel *Norwood*. To charge that Beecher and Elizabeth Tilton had engaged in sexual relations was to threaten the Beecher business enterprise of church, periodicals, and books, all of which hinged on his moral reputation. In leveling that charge, Theodore Tilton published the letters that he and his wife had written to each other throughout their marriage, making

their intimate life public knowledge.

In constructing this new study, the author has done a remarkable job. He brings to the task intellectual and literary gifts of a high order. At one level, Fox is engaged less in a telling of the story than in an inquiry into the primary sources generated by the scandal. As he works through the texts, he tells how each came to be set down. He is the intellectual historian as archaeologist, excavating source material, peeling back from the top layer to the next substratum of sources. To do this, he reverses the chronology. He tells the story backward, at least partially so. He sets a series of critical benchmarks and, beginning with the last accounts at the turn of the twentieth century, he works himself back to early stories of the 1860s and ultimately to the letters that told them. Within each section, however, the story moves forward in chronological fashion.

This narrative strategy is both the strength and the weakness of the book. As the author moves successively through the primary sources, we gain at every step greater power to encounter the words of the three principals—husband, wife, and pastor. At the end of the book, as we read the letters of Theodore and Elizabeth Tilton, they resonate in a new way. The author engages us in the questions that his subjects ask: What is love? Who does it include? What is sin? How do changing attitudes and changing times reshape the understanding of sin? Is the sin against God or a human being? What Fox evokes is the intellectual, religious, and cultural world of his subjects. He helps us to see the universe as they did.

The reader gains a clear understanding of Theodore Tilton and Henry Beecher. The most powerful section of the book details and defines the two men's friendship, a vivid demonstration of the age's commitment to intimacy. Elizabeth Tilton remains more elusive. She was for both lovers a vehicle to God. We experience her less as an individual than as the subject of male aspiration. The cause of her relative obscurity may well lie in part in the sources, for the author made every effort to learn about her—as about all else in this complex story. The structure of the book may also bear some of the blame. The chronological re-sorting, the peeling of the onion, means that the male friendship that precedes in time the extramarital intimacy between Beecher and Elizabeth Tilton lies closer to the core.

Telling the story backward alters the perception of the sexual relationship between Beecher and Elizabeth Tilton. In addition to Hibben's, there have been two important retellings of the scandal in the twentieth century: Robert Shaplen, *Free Love and Heavenly Sinners* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), a narration designed for a popular audience, and Altina L. Waller, *Reverend Beecher and Mrs. Tilton* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), for students and scholars. The presumption of these three accounts is that Beecher and Elizabeth Tilton had engaged in sexual intercourse and that all the words and actions of the minister that

followed were efforts at subterfuge and cover-up.

Fox attempts to destabilize this. He writes that we cannot know what the two did in private, and since we cannot, we should not assume that their intimacy included coitus. He states that he set out to do something different: not to write about the nature of their relationship but to dwell on and analyze the stories that surrounded it. This is in keeping with contemporary academic discussions of narrativity and the instability of texts. It makes beginning with the ending and working backward a reasonable strategy. To a reader unfamiliar with the story, this account poses problems, for it requires keeping straight a great many details. Fox addresses this at the outset: "I know that recounting my story largely in reverse order poses problems of comprehension, but I think it saves the reader from a bigger trap—that of suspecting that there is a straightforward story to be told in the first place" (p. 6).

Despite my familiarity with the sequence of events, I found the narrative strategy disconcerting and distracting. But my deeper real objections lie at a different level. Telling the story backward affects how we perceive its elements. Fox's narrative puts early in the telling Elizabeth Tilton's posttrial confession that she had sexual relations with Beecher. The reader at this point has no way of making a clear judgment, so the author's argument questioning its truthfulness seems plausible. Moving, however, from the other direction, from the time of intimacy with Beecher to her confession puts her words in a quite different light, making them much harder to deny. Perhaps I am incorrigibly committed to a misguided form of historical realism, but I want to know what actually happened before I can understand the constructions that overlay the event. To begin with Elizabeth Tilton's confession and then dispute it alters the meaning of many of the other words because it makes the sexual relationship a question when it may not have been a question at all, unsettling a story that perhaps should be settled. Stories are important, but whether they are true or false makes a difference, which is to say that, at least to this historian, sex matters *both* as cultural construct and practice.

Finally, the chronological reverse allows the story to shift in certain problematic ways. What begins as a sexual scandal moves into an inquiry into American religious culture and ultimately becomes a story of male friendship. It thereby moves from what has often been regarded among historians as "frivolous" to what is normally seen as "significant." Although taking risks with form, the book plays it safe with its ultimate content. And in so doing, some of the scandal's potential implications for understanding both the history of American women and the history of sexuality are muted. Taking American religious culture as its primary question and ultimately arguing that the struggle is between two men, *Trials of Intimacy* muffles elements of the sexual story of the Beecher-

Tilton scandal. While much may be gained for intellectual and religious history, those historians with a special interest in women and sexuality will find that a good deal is also lost.

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Men Like That: A Southern Queer History. By JOHN HOWARD. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Pp. xxiii + 395. \$27.50 (cloth).

Given the currency of views that connect the Deep South with the Bible Belt and gays with a preference for city life far away from Southern evangelism, you might be inclined to assume that a history of male homosexuality in Mississippi would have nowhere to go. John Howard's *Men Like That* will convince you otherwise. Relying on oral history as well as extensive rereading of cultural materials such as gay pulp fiction and Bobbie Gentry's 1967 country-music hit, "Ode to Billy Joe," Howard demonstrates that same-sex desire found expression in post-World War II Mississippi. In the process, his analysis broadens the framework of queer history by cutting it loose from both its traditional urban context and focus on those who identified as gay, turning instead to the less visible but equally relevant rural and small-town experience of all men who desired sex with other men. The final result is a book that has much to add to the history of sexuality and the history of the South.

Howard contends that "southern indirection"—a reluctance to speak explicitly about topics that might distress polite company—created a space for young boys and mature men to pursue opportunities for homosex. Thus, when Mississippians ignored men who transgressed sexual boundaries or referred to them obliquely as "men like that," their silence often (inadvertently) allowed such men and boys to follow their desires, much as the absence of medical discourse on the "problem" of homosexuality functioned to permit a wider range of sexual behavior before the nineteenth century. Howard's narrators remembered that while growing up in Mississippi in the 1940s and '50s, they were never a part of an organized homosexual community, but found plenty of places where queer desire could be met. The play of adolescent boys at the local waterhole regularly turned to sexual experimentation, and in private homes cousins and friends literally claimed closets for assignations while parents feigned innocence.

In "reconceiving silence," Howard surmises that silence was not necessarily repressive (p. 31)—which is not to say that boys and young men