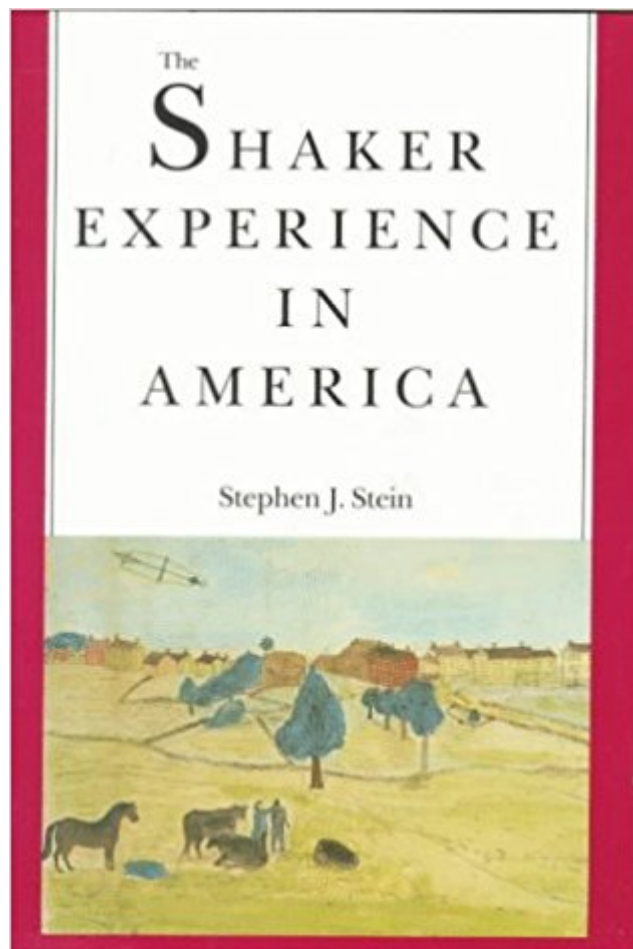




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The Shaker Experience In America: A History Of The United Society Of Believers



Synopsis

The Shakers, once a radical religious sect whose members were despised and harassed by their fellow Americans, have in recent years become celebrated--and sentimentalized--for their communal way of life, the simplicity of their worship, their belief in celibacy, pacifism, and equality of the sexes, and not least their superb furniture and handicrafts. This monumental book is the first general history of the Shakers from their origins in eighteenth-century England to the present day. Drawing on written and oral testimony by Shakers over the past two centuries, Stephen J. Stein offers a full and often revisionist account of the movement: their charismatic leaders, the early years in revolutionary New York and New England, the expansion into the West, the maturation and growth of the sect before the Civil War, the decline in their fortunes after the war, the painful adjustments to society Shakers had to make during the first half of the twentieth century, the renaissance of interest after 1950, and the "forbidden topic" within contemporary Shakerism--the conflict between the two remaining villages at Canterbury, New Hampshire, and Sabbathday Lake, Maine. Stein provides many new interpretations of the Shaker experience. He reassesses the role of founder Ann Lee, emphasizes the impact of the western Shaker settlements on the course of the society's history, and describes the variety of cultural enterprises that have obscured the religious and historical dimensions of the Shakers. Throughout Stein places the Shaker experience within the wider context of American life and shows how the movement has evolved to deal with changing times. Shattering the romantic myth that has been perpetuated about the quaint and peaceful Shakers, Stein portrays a group that is factious, practical, and fully human.

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Customer Reviews

Established near Albany, N.Y. in 1787 as a religious society, the early Shaker community, led by founder Ann Lee, lived in insular villages, embracing pacifism and celibacy, having visions and joining in ritual dancing (shaking). In this comprehensive academic history Stein, head of the department of religious studies at Indiana University, provides a revisionist account of Shaker expansion and decline, describing schisms between Shaker enclaves, doctrinal differences and the influence of several charismatic leaders. Although the Shakers' commitment to celibacy seemed to augur their eventual demise, Stein points out that the society at Sabbathday Lake, Maine, is still functioning; a body of contemporary supporters is determined that Shakerism will remain alive.

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The first book to cover all Shakerdom from the 1700s to the 1980s, this work of scholarship will also prove accessible to the nonspecialist. Stein (religious studies, Indiana Univ.) offers a revisionist account: he plays down the influence of Ann Lee, plays up the role of the Western communities, and declares that the Shakers were no more successful in meeting their ideals than many other communal groups. While he has mined all the appropriate manuscript and published sources, he gives greater credence to opinions in the "apostate" literature than to most Shaker writings and displays definite skepticism toward much of the secondary literature, notably Edward Deming Andrews's *The People Called Shakers* (1953). Unfortunately, the endnote style makes it difficult to verify some of the documentation for Stein's controversial claims. Still, given the inaccuracies and overemphasis on material culture of most popular books, Stein's coverage of post-1948 Shakerdom, and the debate that should follow publication of this title, it is an essential purchase for most public and academic libraries.- James H. Sweetland, SLIS, Univ. of

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I would say this has to be one of the best histories of the Shakers. Since I am a descendant of a Shaker, the history of the Shakers is somewhat personal. My 4th great grandparents were Shakers in New Lebanon, New York and he most likely met and knew Ann Lee. Shaker-ism has a sentimental or romantic side to it that most people only know about. Most people love Shaker furniture and see the Shakers as charming or quaint. But if you read this book you will see the harsh reality of the Shakers. They have a great history of teaching orphans, producing seeds, inventing machinery, and having large communal societies. But from reading this book I have learned that it was a very strict life. Once the children became young adults, many of them would leave. It was a

struggle for them to keep the children. This book aims to tell the story of the Shakers as it was. While their history may seem idealistic, in reality it has little that is appealing. I have visited Shaker village museums where they sell this book. I find that many of the people that work at these museums will tell you about this book. Unfortunately, they have not read this book. If you know the Bible, you will soon learn that the basic doctrines of Shakerism are not Christian. Don't take my word on that, you should read the book and see for yourself. Celibacy was one of her foundational doctrines. Her doctrine of celibacy came from her forced marriage and 4 miscarriages - clearly not from the Bible. At some point she came to resent her husband, men and sex. Ann Lee could neither read nor write. If she could have read, she would have read in the Bible that God had commanded Adam to "be fruitful and multiply". She taught that God was both male and female. And that the work of Jesus Christ (a man) needed to be completed by Ann Lee (a woman). Since she could not write, the Shakers did not originally have their doctrines in writing. The Bible was not a great source for Ann Lee's doctrines. Ann would call the teachings of Moses and Jesus - "the old way". She taught her doctrines were "the new" and the only way. I believe it was only after approximately 100 years did they begin to put into written form what they believed. I was raised on a dairy farm, I love to make Shaker furniture, and I am a descendant of a Shaker. So I found this book to be fascinating. It is easy for me to identify with them and imagine what it would be like for me to be a Shaker. The Shakers were not as happy as you might think. I read where one Shaker lady said that she was afraid that people would only see her as a Shaker chair. I believe she was saying, we only see the Shaker furniture and thus think we know about the Shakers. She was saying there is much more to know about the Shakers. But I suspect she would not like us to recall the realities of their lifestyle either. If you have any interest to learn about the Shakers, it is all here in this book.

Rich experience of the many Shaker communities . A valuable history of a misunderstood religious sect.

Great..

This book describes the Shaker life, but it did so in a way that seemed dry to me. I tried to read it for a college level course, but honestly did not make it all the way through. That is saying something, coming from a person who reads every book she starts from cover to cover, especially if it is an assignment!

I am an employee at a Shaker Village and this is THE source if you want an accurate, concise history of the Shakers.

As someone who drank the Edward Deming Andrews cool-aid practically from birth, I was delighted to find a detailed, well-sourced account of what we can know about the Shakers from Ann Lee to Frances Carr. So much warmer and human than a chair or box!

I had purchased the book as was taking part in a Road Scholar trip to Pleasant Hill in Kentucky, a restored Shaker Village. The book is extremely well documented but found I sometimes did read through great amounts of detail. But it is well worth reading to discover the more complicated history of the group which goes beyond furniture and songs.

Hang onto your bonnets...this book purports to be the true, un-romanticized history of the Shakers, which it is. It includes all the struggles, the in-fighting amongst the Shakers and between the various communities, the split between religious ideals and worldly dealing, their long and painful downfall in the hands of trust funds and lawyers, and includes the good, the bad, and the ugly. You won't find lyrical descriptions of their peaceful daily lives, beautiful craftsmanship or joyful personal worship. If you want that, go watch Ken Burns' documentary. I must say that this nitty-gritty, warts-and-all story is just as one-sided as a glamorous photo book of oval boxes, architecture and rhapsodic poetry about Shaker purity. We need to experience both sides, not one or the other.

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