Looking for Liz

or

On Being Haunted by
Elizabeth Oakes Smith

Timothy H. Scherman

It was not a historian but a scientist (Louis Pasteur) who told us "chance favors the prepared mind," and he was speaking of "fields of observation," not historical research. Still, any honest historian will admit that without the element of chance, "preparation" can only take us to the doorstep of history—never across the threshold. More often good research—and almost always the will to historical knowledge—depends rather on things like our respect for good and evil, for the various anomalies of human character, on our own dreams, passions, aspirations and rivalries, and most of all, on the luck that puts us in the right place at the right time. This essay is an account—even a confession—of this truth as it applies to my now near eight-year relationship with the ghost of Elizabeth Oakes Smith, who, as chance would have it, lived her last years with her famous and sometimes infamous son Appleton (the subject another article in this issue) in Carteret County.

In its seeming randomness, this account can hardly be explained—only recounted. I first encountered this ghostly figure in the Boston Public Library as a graduate student writing a portion of a dissertation on Rufus Griswold, an editor and literary agent best known today for his inflammatory obituary of Edgar Allan Poe. As I sifted through the manuscript collection dedicated to Griswold I discovered that there was more to his career than his relation with Poe; in fact, he was one of the prominent arbiters of popular literary taste in the mid-nineteenth century. By the late 40s, it seems, inclusion or exclusion from one of his anthologies could make or break a writer's career, for lots of the letters in the library's Griswold collection trace the attempts of writers and agents to make their way into Griswold's good graces, whether by reasoned argument or subtle antebellum bribery. It was in just such a letter that I first saw the name "Elizabeth Oakes Smith."

It was an innocent enough meeting, despite the unseemly context. By "unseemly context" I mean to say something not only about nineteenth-century literary bribery but also about manuscript research. I am fascinated by manuscript archives perhaps for the same reason my wife is fascinated with soap operas. In both we are somehow licensed to pry into other people's private lives, only when we do this in the archives, the intrusion is somehow not imaginary. Here, in our hands, are not fictional creations but real people's private lives, lives attached to living relatives (why aren't these papers in some great-grandchild's attic?)—lives filled with real pain, love, desire, frustration—artifacts held and written on and folded and sealed by the living, now grabbed away and read and handled by complete strangers. Certainly if I knocked at Rufus Griswold's door in Brooklyn some spring day in 1847 I would be let in—I would present my card—I might even be given a personal interview. Yet what would have happened if I rose from my place...
on the chintz parlor settee, marched through the luxuriously papered hallway, and into Griswold's private office, and began rummaging through his correspondence? Clearly, I wouldn't have done it--no one in his right mind would. But by time and circumstance (and Pasteur's chance), I was doing it now. The letter is dated July 12, 1843, from Charles Hoffman, a poet and erstwhile collaborator with Griswold, and it reads in part:

...of all that I read the most impressive were the works of Mrs. E.O. Smith, whom I have only known from her [poem of the] "Sinless Child." She stands head and shoulders above most of the female talent in our City--the only question is whether her constitution be strong enough for the necessary mechanical labor of triumphant authorship.

By 1990 I had read plenty of nineteenth-century women's writing, for by then names like Emily Chubbuck, Grace Greenwood, E.D.E.N Southworth, Fanny Fern and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (See Note A) had reemerged within a revised American literary landscape taking more serious interest in women writers as the most prolific and successful authors of the mid-nineteenth century. But I'd never heard of any "Mrs. E.O. Smith." Intrigued by Hoffman's praise for her work, I began hunting down remains of this mysterious woman, having no idea of who she was, how long she'd lived, or what she'd written. The decision was cold--scholarly--not as much inquisitive as acquisitive. I had a theory, and if she helped me prove it, fine. If not, I wouldn't waste much time finding out.

I began my search when I returned to Illinois in the reference room at the Northwestern University Library, searching through the usual indexes and catalogs. The library owned no works by her, although there was a short biography in the stacks of both her and her husband Seba Smith, a New England humorist whose illustrated "Jack Downing" letters, I later discovered, actually gave birth to the figure we know today as "Uncle Sam" (Note B). Encouraged by my success in filling out Rufus Griswold's character in the manuscripts he'd left behind, I wondered if any of Mrs. Smith's manuscripts (for I still called her that) had been collected. I asked the reference librarian for the United States Catalog of Literary Manuscripts--again without too much hope of reward. In fact the name Elizabeth Oakes Smith was there, and next to her name were several abbreviations--UVA, NYPL, H, (University of Virginia, New York Public Library, and Harvard University Library, the index told me) and a few others. Still, good-sized collections like Griswold's at the Boston Public Library had been indicated by large numbers (meaning number of actual documents) adjacent to abbreviations. Next to Elizabeth's Oakes Smith's "UVA" I found only a "5" with an "f" next to it and sought out the reference librarian for an explanation.

"What does "5f" stand for? Does "f" indicate a folder of manuscripts?"

"No, feet," she responded. I thought she was joking.

"What do you mean "feet"--as in poetic feet?" Exasperated with my naiveté, the woman spread her arms as wide as they would go and repeated "feet--as in the manuscript collection takes up five feet of shelf space." I looked again at the catalog, and noticed "3f" next to the NYPL entry.

"How many pages of manuscript can you fit in 8 feet of shelfspace?" I asked the librarian.

"Thousands, maybe," she said, "but you can never really tell until you see the collection itself."

Before I left the library I skimmed over the biography of Seba Smith and Elizabeth Oakes Smith by Mary Alice Wyman, and found that indeed, this manuscript collection--and this woman (for at that moment, in my mind, they were much the same thing) were definitely worth looking into. The biography was written in the 20s, long before American literary criticism had shed its patriarchal prejudices against the sentimental writings of the group Nathaniel Hawthorne had called "that damned mob of scribbling women" in 1854, and thus Wyman's estimate of Elizabeth Oakes Smith's literary writings was largely dismissive. Even so, her sketchy biography gave me a sense of the expanse of Smith's literary career, which stretched across no less than eight decades (no wonder she left behind so much paper, I thought). But there was more. In the 1850s, Wyman told me, Smith by and large left the literary world behind to become a lecturer on the Lyceum circuit--in fact was the first woman to do so--and simultaneously began publishing tracts on Woman's Rights in the New York Tribune and other periodicals. In 1852 she'd tried to inaugurate a journal
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dedicated to women's political advancement and education—and the list went on. By the time I finished it I realized I was dealing with not just a writer but a woman, and a woman of letters, who was (in order of appearance) a Calvinist child with a literary gift, a poet, a fiction-writer, a journalist, a mother (six times), a novelist, a feminist lecturer, a magazine editor and a memoirist whose name was once a household word in most of the United States. The question was, how, then, could she also be so ineluctably forgotten not only by literature but by women's history? The latter case made me especially nervous—who was I, as a vaguely feminist male, to tell scholars of women's history about their own? But the seductive mystery she presented outweighed any sensitivities to the protocols of academic gender politics. With Smith's enormous resume in front of me in Wyman's text, it seemed to me this was no small oversight. Certainly there was a plot afoot. A skeleton in the closet. Or two skeletons. Perhaps the manuscripts would tell me. Walking home from the library I wrote in my mind the letter I would send to the director of graduate studies at Duke requesting a travel grant.

Like Northwestern's, other libraries in the area had little of Smith's work, so waiting to hear from Duke I started my own collection, ordering copies of manuscripts from libraries across the country. I started my own massive correspondence with manuscript custodians and librarians across the nation, those unsung saints of literary history, and in that search discovered that copies of the three "feet" of Smith's manuscript at the New York Public Library were actually purchasable for forty dollars plus shipping. I bought them. And I borrowed other books of correspondence, including Passages from the Correspondence of Rufus W. Griswold, available on Microfiche published by a company ironically calling itself "Lost Cause Press." And to everyone in the business I ran into—English professors, librarians, students, colleagues, old mentors, fiction writers, historians—I had the same question: ever hear of Elizabeth Oakes Smith? I got blank looks, shakes of the head, and not a few fake expressions of recognition. Very quickly I began to feel I was alone in this.

As the envelopes of manuscript copies arrived in my apartment mailbox (I'll admit it—none of them made it upstairs to my apartment unopened) I began piecing together parts of Smith's life and career. I was most interested in the envelopes arriving from the Pennsylvania Historical Society, which I found held much of her literary business correspondence of the 1840s, the time when Griswold, Hoffman and other editors (including Edgar Allan Poe) were turning her into a literary star. But since most collections were unindexed, it was like filling out a mail-order from a Sears catalog without pictures or product descriptions—just item numbers—and waiting to see what the UPS man would bring. By this time, though, I was just as fascinated by the irrelevant as I was by letters that proved my theory.

Two passages in particular in this first wave of research made me realize the necessity of making sense here. Both of them related to my theory of Smith's disappearance, but they also took me beyond theory, into sympathy, and from thence into a sense of something like the moral obligations of history. The first I ran into in a footnote to a letter about Smith in Passages from the Correspondence of Rufus W. Griswold, an obituary from the Patchogue, Long Island Advance printed November 24, 1893:

Mrs. Smith was a woman of aristocratic mien and a woman of surpassing talent not always directed to noble ends. She stopped at nothing in carrying out her plans. All was not lovely in the family circle and when the gallant Mr. Smith died here in 1868 his wife refused to come to his death bed. When she married him she objected to the name Smith and wanted him to change it but he refused to do so saying it was good enough for him. . . . When [her son's] schemes fell through and the family became impoverished they lived in the little "green house," but she never lost her queenly bearing, even though her throne was nothing but a soap box. . . . The schemes she carried out in separating her sons and their wives and cruelly taking the latter's children away would make rich material for a sensational novel. The history of the family, [in fact], would make a book of intense interest. Whatever their opinion of the character of the Madam

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everyone agrees that intellectually she was the most remarkable woman they ever knew, but after a varied life of 87 years this strange woman, who had many friends and whose intense affection for her sons was her chief virtue, was buried unattended by a single mourner.¹

No doubt the writer of Smith’s obituary had little respect for the phrase “speak only well of the dead” but there was much more here. While the accounts I had thus far read had described Smith as a kind of moderate feminist, at least in Patchogue her independence was obviously viewed as an affront to all mankind. Reading this I wondered, who, if anyone, responded to these charges in a balanced view. Perhaps no one ever had. Perhaps I needed to.

The second passage confirmed this view. The microfilm from the New York Public Library, as it ended up, was a manuscript autobiography of some six hundred pages written toward the end of her life. Contemplating the lives of women in the first pages of her work, Smith writes,

> We live in fragments—daughter, wife, mother, friend—no woman’s life is rounded unless she fills these relations. A woman is thought to have no business to live after forty five. child bearing being supposed to be the end and aim of her existence, and when that task is complete the books are closed and she sinks into nothingness.

> I have not lived in fragments. I am sure my identity has been built up fit for the resurrection. I see how piece by piece has been linked together to make a cubic whole. The crude reason of the child, the vague longing and aspirations of youth, and the sober centuries of mature life being a natural growth—the germ to the fruitage. Such as I am I must take hold of eternal life, and not be scattered by the elements.²

Unpublished in her lifetime, and later appearing in a heavily-edited edition (also by Wyman), the autobiography had not served the purpose Smith believed it would. Boxed and kept, but uncatalogued in libraries across the nation, what was left of her had quite literally been scattered by the elements. It was enough that the autobiography was entitled “A Human Life,” for every human life somehow deserves the dignity of wholeness, if not “eternal” memory, but in her identification of her life as a woman, here and later in the autobiography, of her struggles to unify the myriad roles that women of her time were simply not expected (that is, allowed) to play, I felt literally haunted. Who would complete this unfinished business? Now, I’m not a believer in the occult (as Smith herself evidently was), nor do I have any particular sense of destiny. In fact, I would describe my professional *modus operandi* as “muddling.” As I’ve said I also had and still do have reservations about my readiness, not only as a man from the 20th century but as a man to fully sympathize with and therefore to understand the life of a 19th-century woman. But perhaps in today’s fragmented world of dysfunctional families, collapsing nationalities and personal web-pages all of us—men and women—feel we need something unifying—and mine, in that moment of reading, became an obsession with the mystery of this ghostly figure. Perhaps she didn’t call me but I her. Perhaps we simply found each other.

* * *

In January of 1991 at last my travel grant came through from Duke, and with it I bought a plane ticket to Charlottesville and the “five feet” of Smith manuscript at the University of Virginia. Still an archives rookie, I allotted myself about as much time as it took to simply review the contents of the collection, and since I hadn’t yet entered the world of the lap-top computer, I was left to copy out in my own frantic chiropragy as much as I could of whatever manuscripts I found interesting (that is, nearly all of them) with No.2 lead pencil. In reading the autobiography I already knew the story of Smith’s earliest years. Born near North Yarmouth, Maine, on 12 August 1806, she demonstrated the usual preciosity of successful women writers of this period as a child, along with an unusually marked habit of introspection and martyrless selflessness inherited from her Puritan grandfather. As a teenager she planned to take in “scholars,” and thereby to earn money enough to board with a college professor at Bowdoin and “learn all the lessons the young men learn,” but her mother demurred, fearing that if her daughter were not married young she would remain a spinster all her life. Thus
instead of continuing her education, on March 6, 1823 she was not "married" but married off to Seba Smith the political satirist, who had nothing much in common with a wife half his age. As I later discovered, most of her novels and virtually all of her feminist writings make direct attacks on the marriage institution as it existed in her day, and in some sense she was always writing from her experience on the subject.

Still, as I discovered in the manuscripts I did have time to read at Virginia, at least early on Smith and her husband did enjoy a reasonably happy marriage. Several of the most fascinating documents in the collection are Smith's letters to her husband during the Panic of 1837. Caught up in the fever for land speculation in Maine, it seems Seba had mortgaged his (and thus his family's) entire "fortune" on a large part of a wilderness township called "No. 8"—around what is now Monson, Maine. In April he was surveying the area, and received a letter from his wife:

My dear Husband,

I regret very much the melancholy state of your mind, which your letter indicated. I trust it is nothing more than fatigue, and the influence of a rainy day on your sensitive nerves; still I shall feel anxious until another welcome letter assures me you are not sick. I know your extreme anxiety about your pecuniary matters, and that your disquietude is more on our account than your own. Do not let it be so--do not let those who are dear to each other be a source of uneasiness. We can bear poverty as well now as in times past--and I trust, better. Yesterday was a smashing time for the merchants. Cushman and Phillips, Tolford and Drinkwater, and Clark and Brown have all failed--others are expected. Judge Ware thinks this is but the commencement of disasters to the mercantile community and doubts if it will be essentially better for two years to come. So you see, my dear husband, we shall have plenty of company if we go down.

Appleton says give my love to Father, and ask him to bring me home a coin from some strange kind of wood or some minerals. The children are very good, obedient and pleasant. Sidney says give my love to Father, and I can't think of anything else—only I wish you would bring me a little Bear, or a great bear's foot....

Do take good care of your health. Keep your feet dry, and eat a plenty. Feel no anxiety about us—we do very well and are not at all afraid. My head aches violently. But rest will restore me I trust.

Your affectionate wife,
E.O. Smith,

Of course a lot can change over the course of a 45-year marriage, but in a clear confirmation of my doubts concerning the objectivity of the Patchogue obituary, Smith's relationship with her husband and children here has obviously nothing to do with the overbearing "queenly" figure the obituary imagined. Indeed, if Smith achieved that "queenly" bearing by the 1860s, this letter is all the more remarkable in suggesting exactly how far she had come from desperate economic straits in the town of Portland, population 15,000, in 1837. Far from overbearing, the Smith we see here is making bear soup.

Equally important of Smith's married life, as I discovered in the early letters, was the opportunity it afforded her to develop her professional writing talents. In the 20s and early 30s, Seba Smith edited a weekly newspaper, to which Elizabeth Oakes Smith contributed, and, on occasions of Seba's absence, she assumed the editor's chair. But again, neither the pretensions ascribed to her in her obituary, nor more auspicious interpretations seemingly justified by her
later feminism have much to do with the Elizabeth Oakes Smith of this period that only her letters provide:

Another day has passed, my dear husband, and I must confess with some degree of disappointment, for I had indulged a little hope that you would come this morning. I am ready, quite ready, to relinquish my Editorial chair the moment you arrive. . . . I hate to feel so much responsibility, superadded to so much ignorance, inexperience, etc., and the more grievous offence of wearing petticoats. A poor ignorant thing like me sitting in judgment upon the productions of men like the above. Do come home husband.*

Of course, to find such a letter is not to find Elizabeth Oakes Smith, but rather to complicate her character, and to acknowledge her development; “the grievous offense of wearing petticoats” gives us both a sense of her wit and her early resistance to male assumptions of her capabilities, but her deference to her husband also seems genuine. And what was the issue forcing Smith to “sit in judgment”? Who were the men (P.H. Greenleaf and a man named “Abbott”) whose writings she is to judge? Even if we understood the letter’s proper affect, its historical details lead in us into yet more details, the understanding of which might in turn change our regard for the letter’s affect. And so on.

After only a few days’ frantic leafing or muddling through the collection, I packed up my notes and left Charlottesville, very confident that I knew more than enough about Smith’s early life and professional career to finish my chapter on her for my dissertation but equally sure that I would return as soon as money and time allowed. I still knew very little about Smith’s life after the 1850s—especially her lecture career—and while I had no time to read them carefully I had seen the lectures themselves in Charlottesville. Penned not as “fine copies” but clearly used as working texts for her appearances, Smith’s lectures in the collection are by far the most haunting of her remains. For here are not only notes, additions, emendations, small pencilings indicating topics for ex tempore comments, but the tell-tale signs of the living woman who, standing before audiences of fifty, two hundred, or sometimes two thousand, turned pages with a thumb and forefinger wet with perspiration. In my mind I can picture the pile of faded papers entitled “The Dignity of Labor.” Burned with time and acid, the lower right hand corner of each page is eaten away.

Shuttling back and forth between Chicago and Durham once more both to defend my dissertation and to visit the Virginia collection again, in 1993 I entered a new stage of my search as I found an institutional base at Northeastern Illinois University. This meant not only that I could begin to make good on my debt to Smith’s ghost in teaching her work and life in my classes, but that in my classes I might find other souls equally haunted by her. Several students showed an interest, and paying them out of my own pocket I set them to work organizing the massive amount of material I’d culled over the years, transcribing, filing, entering facts into my growing database, complete with bibliographical and textual evidence, all for use in the full biographical work I plan to publish sometime. But somehow I grew tired of text. Recalling the browned edges of Smith’s lectures, I needed something more than the traces of a “life in letters”—if not evidence of Smith’s body, then evidence of other bodies, other places, shapes and scenes through which I could share her vision—or, at another level, I needed not more writing but speaking. I had to talk with others who shared if not my vision of Elizabeth Oakes Smith, at least the same sense of her haunting aura. Now if that is what I had written in my grant proposal, I doubt Northeastern would have given me a dime to do it, and thus I made much more of my methodology and the literary-historical tradition to which I was contributing than my researcher’s faith in Pasteur’s “chance,” and soon I was off again, looking for Liz in New York and the North Carolina coast.

At the onset of the Civil War, Smith and her family had retired to Patchogue, Long Island, then a small fishing village about half-way to Montauk. A few days before my arrival, I called the Patchogue Village Hall, announced my purpose, and asked if I could speak to the village historian when I came to town. We set up a meeting. I figured I’d go through whatever town archives they had stored, see the cemetery where Smith was buried, and head on to New York City in search of the addresses I’d found at the top of her letters of the 1840s. Looking at my itinerary
Looking for Liz

I see in fact I did have some specific questions in mind: EOS reputation here? Blue Point relatives? Evidence of the location of her home? Read them the obit? The village historian, Buck Logan, told me to meet him around nine o’clock at the Village Hall.

Driving my rented Mazda into town the day before, I thought I’d have a chance to look around. I was close, now. Would something show me the way to the right cemetery? I felt nothing. This was no longer the rural setting it might have been in 1860, but a typical Long Island burb—a few quaint taverns here and there, some older homes with widows’ walks, but then there’d be a Mobil station right next door. In letters from the 60s I’d seen references to a “trout pond” on Smith’s property, so I looked for inland water, and found it, but on the adjacent land there was nothing but a series of new and half-constructed condos.

Nothing, that is, prepared me for the following day. At this point it must be remembered I saw myself as pretty much alone in this—a kind of outsider, even a voyuer. What gave me the right to pry into this community’s memories, to judge their lack of memory? I’d read more of Smith than most, but what of it? What I’d forgotten was precisely why I’d come—to find others who shared a memory—and who was I to them (or some of them) but one who could share theirs? And for this, I should not have been surprised when I sat down with Buck Logan, switched on my tape recorder for our interview, and then heard him mention offhandedly that they’d prepared a press conference—“you know, the Long Island Advance, Newsday, Channel 12 I think’ll be there, and of course deh mayor,” Buck said, in his unmistakable Long Island accent. At this point I was wondering if it would be wise to read them the scurrilous obituary or not, but in fact they knew about it, and more. The Reverend Chapin, an amateur historian of the area, arrived. He remembered hearing a story of Smith being pelted with stones as she walked home one night after a temperance lecture, but when pressed he could not remember the source. Others told the same story, but no one could point for me its origin. While we were talking something recalled to me Smith’s diary of 1861. She was interrupting:

Oct 26,

What a mixed woof we weave in

life: To day I review old letters again. Dead—estranged—imbecile. Several letters from young Girls, which I have preserved with a foolish fondness because they called me Darling, Dearest, Sweetest, Most Beautiful, Most Splendid, Queen, Sibyl, Prophet, Saint! Ashes to ashes—these things do not much move me now; but when a woman is conscious of not being quite understood, of often standing in a false light to others, she is apt to treasure the recognition of the few who love or admire her.

Nov. 9 Saturday

A storm of rain, but more like May than November. Directed the usual dusting sweeping, etc. to be done for Saturday. The children bathed and snug in lavendered sheets—the house as sweet as a rose. Isotta, who has been in a more pliant vein for the last week helped the cook in making doughnuts. Fannie made sponge cake but failed—it proved to be tough. Memo: Cook books not to be trusted I will make one myself when I have the time.

Wrote a letter to Miss Mary Reid of Rochester Pa., and another to Mr. C.B. Stout.

I then donned my linen apron and went into the kitchen to make mince pies. In the midst of all our baking, and we were a bright merry group, Sidney walked in, having taken the early train. Contrary to my wont I gave a loud scream and threw my arms about his neck.

In the evening Mr. Hawkins and Dr. Chappel joined us in the Billiard room. I failed to make even a single point. We gave them pumpkin pie and mince too for hospitality and a glass of wine. It was nearly twelve when they bade us good night.
Nov 10 Sunday

I do not lose sight of our suffering country in this day of small things, but I am ashamed of my comforts while men are shedding their blood that we may be secure. I pray for them and there is little else I can do.¹

At an older age

Finally, the people I met in Patchogue seemed pleased but also quite embarrassed by my presence—certainly they thought they should have more to tell me, but they were also reminded by the periodic pilgrimages of those few who know about Smith and her career of what they had not done to remember “Our Liz,” as an article in the local paper had referred to Smith some years earlier.⁶ The author of that article had found Smith’s grave completely overgrown—a small locust growing directly in front of the stone. When our party arrived at the Lakeview Cemetery for the “press conference” (which finally only involved the Long Island Advance, although mayor Leavandosky was there too, as promised), I found the area around the Smith graves freshly hacked out of the underbrush, but others around them—as theirs had been only hours before—were completely invisible.

From the cemetery, we went to lunch at Peter’s, where finally, it seemed, the something uncanny I’d been expecting finally occurred. On the way out of the restaurant I was introduced offhandedly to the State Representative of the District, Bill Bianchi, and his aide Tom Kilimartin. He asked me about my work, and I gave him the short version—very short, as I didn’t imagine he had much time for literature. Yet then it happened. Immediately animated, he suggested a commemorative bill might be passed in the State Assembly in honor of the life and work of Elizabeth Oakes Smith—I could write it up, send it on to Tom, and yes—sounds great—I’ll be in touch, etc. A few months later, the Republican landslide swept Bill and Tom out of office, but when I contacted the new Assemblywoman, Debra Mazzereilli, about the bill, she picked up where Bill left off. After some delay the commemoration was made “law” on March 6, 1996. Of course, this was nothing like sharing a vision, but it may certainly come in handy in preserving as state landmarks those areas like the cemetery in Patchogue and the site of her home (now a vacant lot), as well as her two residences in Brooklyn and New York City that still bear material witness to her life.

Smith spent her last years in Carteret County, in the home of her eldest son Appleton. Like so many facets, so many details in Smith’s long life, the story of her son Appleton is worth a book in itself. As one can read from her diary, Elizabeth Oakes Smith was clearly a Unionist, but other records make it likely that Appleton made a small fortune in gun-running before and during the Civil War. In 1861 he was arrested for equipping a slave ship off the coast of Fire Island and later mysteriously allowed to escape from a Boston jail into exile. For decades Elizabeth Oakes Smith sought audiences with several Presidents of the United States, demanding proof of the charges and a pardon for Appleton. The first wave of the women’s movement dissipated and dispersed by the Civil War, her husband and all but two of her sons dead, one sent into exile, it is easy to see why a woman might want to disappear. In 1872 Appleton was at last pardoned by President Grant, and when he purchased a large plantation called “The Anchorage” west of Morehead City, his mother, now much less active in public affairs, joined him there in 1874. The more I learn of Appleton’s life, the more I wonder whether Elizabeth Oakes Smith, so dedicated to her sons, finally lost her own reputation on their account. Was it widely known outside of Patchogue that Elizabeth Oakes Smith was the mother of an indicted blackbirder? Was it implied by the more conservative literary establishment that the mere fact
that she had raised "such a son" resulted directly from her attempts to break the mold of domestic motherhood? Could a mob have stoned her house in the 1860s, not for her views but for those of her son? And I remembered her obituary.

The people I wanted to talk to in Carteret County were much closer to Appleton than Elizabeth Oakes Smith, but at the same time they were warmer folks, much more steeped in the aura of place than the historians in Patchogue had been—they were much closer to the Oaksmiths (Note C) in time, of course, since this was Smith's last residence, but they were also somehow closer to her in spirit—closer to her in death. Nona Lockhart was a descendant of the family that had eventually purchased the Oakesmith land. We sat and talked in her kitchen with the tape recorder on as she showed me her collection of papers on Smith, her children and grandchildren. We talked as two distant cousins might of their grandparents and great-grandparents, and Nona talked very fast, frenetically, as if we didn't have enough time to say everything. Of course we didn't. We drove out to the spot where Appleton, his second wife, and several of his children had been buried, marked only by an small-leaved English ivy that Nona assured me marked the place; since it did not grow wild, it had to have been planted by Appleton as a funeral decoration a century ago. Indeed, there were several depressions the size of small coffins there in the ground among the ivy, some more than a foot deep. It might have been the place. Not twenty feet away was a house under construction, part of a whole complex they were going to call "Oaksmith Terrace." "Ashes to ashes," Liz said to me.

A professional historian in his second career, Charles Pitts Jr. of Beaufort, like Nona, had been following the path of Appleton Oaksmith for decades. When we all sat down for iced tea in the Pitts' home, the tone that had begun at Nona's ended, only none of us were hurrying anymore. My tape recording of our talk sounds less like an interview than dinner table conversation at a family reunion. Yet conversation in the Pitts home might have daily concerned Appleton, whom Charles's wife Patricia referred to as their "adopted son." When the couple took a vacation, it was in search of Appleton's heritage. They had been to Portland, Maine, where an elderly archivist named Dorothy Healy at Westbrook college showed them where to find the grave of Appleton's older brother (Smith's second child) Rolvin. They went to Louisiana, and wandering in freak snowstorm found the grave where Appleton's first wife Isotta was buried. They'd collected manuscripts as I had—Charles's office was overflowing with papers, computer disks, folders, data—they'd flown to Washington state and Alaska, seeking out Oaksmith relatives, stories, photographs, mementos. At some point Nona and I took some of the photographs out on the veranda. The wind was blowing hard off the water, so Nona held the pictures down for me as I snapped rough copies. You can see her thumbs here on the edges of Smith's picture:

Elizabeth in her twenties (?)

When we returned, the conversation turned elsewhere. We knew there was no time to share information that was not the point. The point was being there, remembering. In that sense it was like a funeral—moment that brought people and history together in rite that Elizabeth Oakes Smith had been waiting for these hundred odd years, and which I feel compelled by chance, and by now so many ghosts—to remember for the future, here.
Looking for Liz

Notes


B. The origins of this figure are enormously complex, but for Smith’s relation to them among others, see Cameron Nickles, New England Humor: From the Revolutionary War to the Civil War (Knoxville: U Tennessee P, 1993) 150-51 and passim.

C. Contrary to the inflammatory Advance obituary quoted above, it appears Elizabeth Oakes Smith’s sons adopted the name “Oakesmith” not only to demonstrate respect for their mother but also to distinguish themselves from other “Smiths” in business directories.

References


2. Elizabeth Oakes Smith, A Human Life, ms., Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection, New York Public Library.

3. Elizabeth Oakes Smith to Seba Smith [April 1837], Elizabeth Oakes Smith Papers (#38-707), Manuscripts Division, Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library.

4. Elizabeth Oakes Smith to Seba Smith, November 15, 1833, Elizabeth Oakes Smith Papers (38-707), Manuscripts Division, Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library.


Elizabeth’s Grave in Patchogue on Long Island

Dr. Scherman teaches American literature at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago. His more comprehensive sketch of Elizabeth Oakes Smith’s life and writings is forthcoming volume of the Dictionary of Literary Biography, “American Women Prosewriters, 1800-1870.”

You can read more about Elizabeth Oakes Smith, view photographs of her at various stages of her life and of her homes in New York, as well as read some of her writings, on Dr. Scherman’s Web page: http://www.neiu.edu/~thscherm/eos/eos.htm.

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Shadows on a Hillside

and his family west of Morehead City in what had been used as an army barracks during the Civil War, (Appleton had named it “Hollywood”), Elizabeth found herself at age 68 far from the literary and intellectual world of New York, far from that exciting parade of Fort Hamilton and the gallant Lee. Her husband and two of her adult sons were dead; her home, the “Willows” on Long Island, had been sold; her furniture and personal possessions were lost at sea off the “outer banks” of North Carolina - could she still be the “brave Lion” of her dreams? And at Hollywood, as she sat, remembered and wrote, did she ever think that the elegant man, the military hero, now gone, had once walked nearby contemplating his dreams and his career upon the ramparts of Fort Macon?


“Journal of Elizabeth Oaksmith, March-April, 1865”, Oaksmith Collection, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, VA.

“10 Letters of Elizabeth Oaksmith”, Oaksmith Collection, Duke University Library, Durham, N. C.

Note: Living in the “wilderness” of Carteret County did not seem to isolate Elizabeth Oakes Smith too severely. She continued to write and to attend national meetings and conventions in support of women’s rights until she was in her eighties. She was recognized widely. For example, in 1886 she was named an honorary member of the Literary and Historical Society, based in Sioux City, Iowa. In answering their request for a recent photograph, she wrote in November 16, 1886, that she had “no Photograph taken of me in these late years – only one taken at forty five, which would hardly be of interest to you.” She further noted that there was “no gallery within 36 miles of us” (New Bern) and “that I shall have to defer sending for a time to come.”

Only two years ago, on March 4, 1996, the State of New York passed a legislative resolution (in Assembly No. 1424) honoring the life and works of Elizabeth Oaksmith. The resolution, drafted by Dr. Timothy H. Scherman, noted that her poetry and prose had been praised by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Lydia Huntley Sigourney, and other popular authors of her day. In the 1830s, according to the resolution, Elizabeth Oaksmith traveled widely in the United States giving lectures and “contributing hundreds of articles to The New York Tribune, The Weekly Budget, and Emerson’s United States Magazine and Putnam’s Monthly, while continuing to publish fiction.” The resolution particularly recognized her work in support of women’s rights, stating that she had attended the first National Women’s Rights Convention in Worcester, Massachusetts in October 1850: authored a series of articles under the title of “Woman and Her Needs” for the New York Tribune; was a charter member of the Sorosis Club, the first women’s club in New York; and addressed the Convention of Woman Suffragists in Washington, D.C. in 1879, when she was well into her 70s. The resolution honored the “the American poet, writer and lecturer”, who “Through a career spanning eight decades . . . did so strive for beauty, equality and justice, and in her work for the cause of women became a model of constructive dissent and progressive thinking so necessary to her age and ours.”

“In 1851, these articles were also published as a book entitled “Woman and Her Needs” by “Mrs. E. Oakser Smith, author of Sinless Child, Lost Angel, etc., etc.”

Editor

General Robert Edward Lee (1807-1870)

Robert E. Lee died on 22 October 1870. He is buried at Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia.

Elizabeth Oakes Prince Smith died on 15 November 1893. She is buried at Patchogue, Long Island, New York.

References

Douglas Southall Freeman, R. E. Lee: A Biography, New York, 1934-1935

M. A. Wyman, Two American Pioneers: Seba Smith and Elizabeth Oakes Smith, 1906.