

2014

## Oakes Smith Returns to Maine

Timothy Scherman

*Northeastern Illinois University*, [t-scherman@neiu.edu](mailto:t-scherman@neiu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://neiu-dc.neiu.edu/eng-pub>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Scherman, T. (2014, June). Oakes Smith Returns to Maine. Guest Lecture for the Gorman Lecture Series at the Yarmouth History Center, Yarmouth, ME.

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the English at NEIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of NEIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [h-owen3@neiu.edu](mailto:h-owen3@neiu.edu), [vincent@neiu.edu](mailto:vincent@neiu.edu), [l-wallis@neiu.edu](mailto:l-wallis@neiu.edu).

**Northeastern Illinois University**

---

**From the Selected Works of Timothy H. Scherman**

---

June 10, 2014

## Oakes Smith Returns to Maine

Timothy H. Scherman, *Northeastern Illinois University*



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/timothy-h-scherman/5/>

[SLIDE: Beginning with the End]

Washington, you have spoken before the Northern white people, the Negroes in the South, and to us country white people in the South; but in Atlanta, to-morrow, you will have before you the Northern whites, the Southern whites, and the Negroes all together. I am afraid that you have got yourself into a tight place.”

## OAKES SMITH RETURNS TO MAINE

### 1. Beginning with the End

So how to begin. Or begin again. Every ten or fifteen years, it seems, someone comes back to Portland, or Brooklyn, or Patchogue, or Beaufort to remind the people living there about the life and work of Elizabeth Oakes Smith, who lived and worked in these places at one time in the nineteenth-century, and became more well-known than few of us can now imagine. In 1957 it was Franklin Lincoln in the *Portland Herald*; in 1981 it was Ann Tarzia, in the *Patchogue Advance*; in 1997 it was Mary LaGasse in the *Bangor Daily News*, reporting on the work of Tina Roberts on Oakes Smith, and today, well, I’m doing it again, near the place where Oakes Smith was born almost 208 years ago. Someday, I hope soon, when Oakes Smith’s voice becomes part of what T.S. Eliot called “tradition,” these repeated beginnings will settle into a continued dialogue or discussion, but until that point, every re-introduction, every re-telling of the life of a writer, will be a new beginning, indeed a question of where to begin, again, to re-assert her voice, to re-inscribe her mark in history until it becomes fully legible once again.

[SLIDE of summer research]

Last summer I applied for a research grant and brought two graduate students to help me recover some of the details of Oakes Smith’s beginnings as a writer—her apprenticeship, if you will—in the pages of Portland journals of the 1820s and 30s, now preserved and available at the Maine Historical Society Library and at the Portland Free Public Library.

When the libraries closed, we used our time to see what was left of Oakes Smith's Cumberland County past. We walked in Eastern Cemetery just off Congress Street and found the gravestone of her second son Rolvin, who died as a young child in 1832. We took the ferry across the bay to Peaks Island, and since Amy Aldredge always works late, we came here to see old North Yarmouth and wandered up the hill to find the base of the old vane planted to commemorate the Meeting House Below the Ledge. As we worked and walked, what occurred to me was that Oakes Smith scholars rarely if ever begin at her beginnings, in the state of Maine. Most commonly, they begin at her end, in two senses: first, scholars today begin with her end, in the sense of her purpose at the height of her career—her activism on behalf of women's rights. We focus on her critique of the marriage institution in the 1850s in a widely circulated pamphlet entitled *Woman and Her Needs*, or her ground breaking novel, *Bertha and Lily*, which according to Nina Baym features the first positive delineation of single motherhood in American literature; we advertise her the first white woman to climb Mt. Katahdin, one of the first to adopt and defend the Bloomer costume, the first woman to speak professionally on the national Lyceum Circuit, and as a featured voice at National Women's Rights conventions from the 1850s well into the late 1870s. And what drives us seems to *transcend* the distance between her struggle and ours—the struggle for equality and equal representation, along with a sense, as she had, of *injustice*—of how wrong it is for the world to have forgotten such a brave and interesting woman, how wrong it was for conservative newspaper editors to mock and jeer at her attempts to improve the lot of women in American society, how wrong it was for her *own mother*, as we read in her autobiography, to ignore her daughter's dreams to advance her education and expand her opportunities, marrying her

off at the age of 16 to a “bald and bespectacled” man twice her age. Indeed, it was the *injustice of it all*, she explains in that late work, written mostly toward the end of her life and career, that brought her to the cause of women’s rights in the first place:

[SLIDE]

While I was thus engaged, one of the most toilsome of the sex, *I was greatly indignant at the abuse heaped upon a few resolute women, who were meeting together earnest in their discussions of the rights pertaining to women as a part of the body politic. I had no uncertain opinions upon these subjects, which had been the theme of discourse in my parlors for many years....*

I began (1849) a series of papers, which were readily accepted by Mr. Horace Greeley of the New York Tribune, entitled Woman and Her Needs. These articles attracted much attention;---remonstrance from friends, and my first abuse from the press.

But here we have reached the other sense of an “end” where scholars have begun Oakes Smith’s recovery, in her autobiography. Much of what scholars have written about Oakes Smith’s life has been based on Mary Alice Wyman’s *Selections from the Autobiography of Elizabeth Oakes Smith*, published in 1927. Like other scholars, when I first used this source to build my own account of Oakes Smith’s life, I was cautious about the notion of “Selections”—what had been included, and what had been cut out?

Accessing the complete manuscript of the work at the New York Public Library tantalized us into thinking we might discover more radical moments than Wyman had thought to include, but in the end, if it omits anything, Wyman’s *Selections* removes the over-riding tone of Oakes Smith’s nostalgia—her wistfulness and regret—pages that begin with reminiscence and end with self-pity. And most of all it lacks context. The context of

Oakes Smith's beginnings, in Maine. That is, even if Oakes Smith scholars have based much of their work on Wyman's work, it occurred to me, as my students and I came back to Maine, they were working out of a text written by a woman *looking back*, not only decades removed from the events described but removed by intervening years of bitterness and loss. The Civil War had displaced and derailed the woman's rights movement, certainly, but much more important, it had ended with her sons implicated in filibustering campaigns and the slave trade, one of them arrested and briefly jailed, exiled and only recently returned, but the stigma would haunt her and her family for the rest of her life and literally beyond. Thus even in its description of extraordinary events, celebrated in her time by others and experienced with joy, the autobiography is in my mind indelibly tinged by the conditions under which it was compiled; we must be careful not to read it as an ultimate—because latest—source of fact. This may seem obvious to many, but in the case of a writer such as Oakes Smith, where for some years the autobiography was one of the only major sources critics could rely, the practice of translating the tone and tenor of the autobiography across work in all periods of Oakes Smith's career has set us, even from the outset of her recovery, off course.

Reading an MA thesis from the 70s or 80s that I happened upon when I was first studying Oakes Smith as a graduate student myself, I found this problem displayed eloquently in her deciphering of Oakes Smith's admittedly difficult handwriting. Over half of the autobiography concerns Oakes Smith's forbears and her development as a precocious child in the atmosphere of a dominant Calvinist heritage; her marriage, which might seem to be the basis for the story I will address in a minute—"The Defeated Life"—is dwelt on in detail, in terms reminiscent of the strongest arguments of her

feminist tracts, which identify American society's acceptance of the tradition of child brides as the mark of all women's subordination, alienation and mispreparation for spiritual and intellectual life. She remembers it raining. She remembers not smiling. She remembers not realizing what she was in for. Pages 300 to 500 detail her roles as wife and mother in terms of a sense of self-abnegating duty learned precisely from those Puritan forbears she spends so much time with at the start of her work, and so for any good feminist, Oakes Smith's entrance into the feminist movement, finally, on page 544 would seem to be a banner moment.

[SLIDE of "danced"]

True many long endeared friends were vexed at me, and did not fail to remonstrate, and I was cruelly abused by the press, but I did not falter, and through all Mr George Ripley was ready with his approval, [549] and kindly genial notes, and words which I still preserve as a precious heritage. A judicious critic, he never commended a work the more for being written by a friend, but only from the stand point of art. Poetic tributes were not lacking, replete with a sweet enthusiasm. I was reaping the benefit of stepping outside of my Puritanic bondage. Brought up as I had been, I had so much to renounce, and so much to do, that I almost danced over my freedom.

But the M.A. scholar, after reading over 500 pages of Oakes Smith's heavy history, could not imagine Oakes Smith "dancing." The fact that long endearing friends were now "vexed" at Oakes Smith, that they "remonstrated" (and let's add the word "fail" to the phrase for tone—did not *fail* to remonstrate), drew this reader to interpret the word "benefit" sarcastically, and thus "reaping the benefits" became, in her mind, "getting her just desserts"—remonstrance from friends, and thus she read the word "danced" at the end of the paragraph as "domed," interpreting Oakes Smith's chirography metaphorically,

as if the remonstrance of her former friends and rejection of her ideas comes not only from outside but from inside. In this reading, which the heavy tone of the entire autobiography does little to refute, there is no escape for a woman writer: Oakes Smith domes over—or represses the idea of a departure from the oppression of the patriarchal tradition.

For those of you who have worked with manuscript well know, context is crucially important to understand when working with a writer who probably failed penmanship in school, so again I am not surprised at the graduate student's interpretation, given the context. I hope tonight to supply information for others reading Oakes Smith's manuscripts that would make that sort of error unlikely in the future, but I have had such trouble myself of course (indeed, even as we clarify some references and motivations in the writing, that trouble will never go away). The more I learn of Oakes Smith's life and work, however, the clearer her handwriting becomes, in my eyes, and the more sense I find I can make of local allusions. A good example from a series of letters from which I will quote more extensively in a moment is the question of an allusion to "No. 8," here:

SLIDE [quote the letter]

Now don't you think, thus, something might be done with the No. 8. I have half-mind to go to work, and prepare papers, get up a company, hire men, charter a vessel, sell stock, &c, so that when you return you will find yourself perfectly easy, rub your eyes, and behold you are a rich man. But seriously don't you think a summer's work might be done in this way?



To one reading Oakes Smith's writing for the first time, with little to go on besides Wyman's *Selections from the Autobiography* (that would be me in about 1991), "No 8" might look like an address—and it is one—but where? Was it a house number? The name of some other type of building—perhaps a short name for her husband's office? I allowed this mystery to rest until some years later I found a map of the District of Maine in 1795, [SLIDE] which allowed me to see not only what No 8. described, but also-- given an envelope [SLIDE] I found tipped into that group of letters at the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia--*which* "No 8" was referred to, and *why* there were allusions to slate roofing here. This was the land Seba Smith invested in, seemingly on credit, before the Panic of 1837, in which he would lose everything he had.

Speculated in the land grab and lost it all. What a jerk, right? We hear less about Oakes Smith's husband Seba Smith than about Oakes Smith herself today, but what we do hear isn't usually very nice. We hear about his failures in business, his indolence—the way he retired to write a book on mathematics while his wife was still slaving away at writing and reform. Lots of this comes from the autobiography. And worse, perhaps, for good history, was the backlash which came on Seba Smith's behalf, from the 1850s, in Whitman's old paper, *The Brooklyn Eagle*, well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Franklin Lincoln's article in the *Portland Herald*, for example, is brutal about the woman who upstaged her rightfully well-known and well-liked husband. But course Seba and Elizabeth's relationship was much more complex than either of these views allow; and at least later scholars like Caroline Woidat have allowed us to see Seba Smith's bankruptcy, in a sort

of backhanded way, to be the best thing that ever happened to Oakes Smith, forcing the family to move to New York City where she had a chance to shine.

Caroline Woidat's essay "Puritan Daughters and "Wild" Indians: Elizabeth Oakes Smith's Narratives of Domestic Captivity," published in the journal *Legacy* in 2001, addresses the autobiographic basis of Oakes Smith's second novel, *The Western Captive*. One of the best things written on Oakes Smith's work to date, it provides me an occasion to point out a fairly extraordinary third example of how context has created misreadings of Oakes Smith's difficult handwriting—this, even back in 1842—along with a demonstration of how the translation of Oakes Smith's autobiographical reflections into the basis for our readings of her work has become so natural—how we have become so used to *beginning with her ends* that we hardly notice the sleight of hand that enables us to glaze over whole decades whose details are missing from the record of her career.

[SLIDE of first *Western Captive* ad]

First, an actually amusing misinterpretation is found Oakes Smith's publishers' advertisement to the novel addressed in Woidat's article, *The Western Captive*, from 1842. Note the description that follows the title, which reads in part,



Now the *setting* of the novel is indeed the War of 1812, roughly, but the claim that the title explains the actual contents “sufficiently” ends up looking like an admission that the Park Benjamin, the editor of mammoth sheet *New World* that published the book, had not even read *beyond the title* when they accepted the manuscript and started advertising the it—most obviously because this is a correction of the advertisement appearing the previous week [SLIDE of Captain] in the same space, which seems to suffer, perhaps, from the printer’s inability to read Oakes Smith’s handwriting, and more important, both printer and publishers’ ignorance of the difference between a novel about Western war heroes, which they might expect to sell to an audience all out for Manifest Destiny, and the one Oakes Smith actually wrote, which is about a defiant young woman who refuses

to be “rescued” from an environment that gives her all the freedoms her domesticated sister (the real “Western Captive,” I would argue) can never bring herself to desire.

Caroline Woidat’s article deftly explains Oakes Smith’s and other women writers’ method of using captivity narrative not only to highlight their own captivity in a patriarchal social system but to lead their female readers to imagine the psychological and even bodily freedoms “captivity” in a different sort of culture might allow them, and it deserves reading in a separate context, but for my purposes this evening, it stands as a fine example of scholarship on Elizabeth Oakes Smith’s work which very “naturally” encourages the reader to understand the text in terms of the author’s life—what I have called “biographical criticism.” To make my point I’d like us to focus on this particular passage near the beginning of the essay where Woidat sets up a correspondence between the heroines of American captivity narratives and Oakes Smith’s early life and premature marriage.

[SLIDE of Woidat]

“Oakes Smith wistfully chronicles her rapid metamorphosis from girl to wife,” writes Woidat “I did not shirk my responsibilities...but set myself to learn like a perfect little drudge...learned to patch and mend and make, and transformed myself into an utterly different creature from what had been native to me” (Selections 45). Guided by the overriding sense of duty learned as a child, Oakes Smith dedicated herself to becoming a good housekeeper and mother. Her transformation recalls the Puritan spirit of [Mary] Rowlandson as she is forced to adapt to her Indian captors, bearing the drudgery of shouldering burdens on her back and foraging for meager food.

Being married to Seba Smith in 1823, Oakes Smith probably had it a little better than Rowlandson did in 1679, walking wounded for six weeks through the snow outside of Lancaster, Massachusetts foraging for ground nuts to survive, but in the context Woidat builds from Oakes Smith's latter-day tone and feminist argument, the comparison is probably more justified than I have made it seem.

The sleight-of-hand, however, comes next, as Woidat continues this way:

Rowlandson's experience ultimately reinforced her Christian worldview and acceptance of her own submissive role, but Oakes Smith's conversion to the role of traditional wife was short-lived. When her husband lost all his assets in land speculation, Oakes Smith's identity changed once again—this time to that of breadwinner as she industriously took up her pen to support her family. These circumstances allowed Oakes Smith to realize many of her girlhood ambitions and to escape, at least in part, the conventions established in her youth.

As I've indicated, this last point improves upon the conversion of "dancing" to "doming over" we saw earlier. Here at least we see Oakes Smith "realizing" some of her girlhood ambitions and "escaping" convention, "at least in part." It's a more complex view. Moreover, and sad to admit, I think we would all agree that in fact there was no real escape for women of Oakes Smith's day; the glass ceiling, though cracked, is still intact in our own day. But as I've indicated in the boxed area on this slide, as beautifully elided as the "missing" years of Oakes Smith's life are here in Woidat's prose, skipping from her marriage in 1823 to her departure from Maine on the way to New York in 1837,

we need not make Oakes Smith anymore “short-lived” than she actually was. What happened to this woman in those 13 years, and how did it help shape the rest of her career? When we discover those details—when we return her to Maine, and *it to her life* as we record it—we may begin to build a new beginning for our understanding of Oakes Smith’s work.

[SLIDE of new beginnings]

## 2. Toward New Beginnings: “The Defeated Life”

Oakes Smith’s work entitled “The Defeated Life” was published in a Gift Book called *The Mayflower*, by Saxton and Kelt in 1847. Oakes Smith also edited this volume, along with the following years’ edition, including several texts from her own pen.

Focusing on this story in particular allows us to “dig” where Woidat’s references to Oakes Smith’s life elided a number of, to me—and to you all, I should think, important years, and those were her years as a young married woman raising a family and working in the city of Portland. Incidentally, as I’ve indicated, this is also one of Oakes Smith’s most interesting literary productions in a formal sense—even qualifying, I would argue, as an “experimental” fiction that blends four different genres—historical sketch, short story and a woman’s personal diary, at times written in poetry—to achieve horrifying psychological effects in a female character more appropriate to a story written by her friend Edgar Allan Poe, in her own time and even foreshadowing the now endlessly anthologized tale of female imprisonment “The Yellow Wallpaper,” written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman nearly a half-century later in 1892.

Amy Aldredge was kind enough to post a link to “The Defeated Life” on the Yarmouth Historical Society page for the last couple of weeks, but for those unfamiliar

with it, a quick synopsis will suffice. It begins, as featured in this week's issue of *The Notes*, innocently enough, with a detailed but tonally nostalgic description of what we see ourselves just out there in the other room, and in the picture used in my own attempt at publicity for this event, "a weather-beaten vane, which a few inhabitants of the district have elevated upon a rude frame and soldered into the rock, in the pious hope of thus preserving this only relic of the "Meeting House below the ledge." "Rarely might be found a more attractive spot for the worship of a new people," Oakes Smith continues, "than the site of this old church, standing as it did, at the base of the ledge before named, upon a green esplanade, flanked upon every side by the forest, through the openings of which arose the "Block House," the place of refuge of the colonists in periods of peril, fast by the altar of God, with here and there the humble dwellings of the worshipers, each in fact a citadel, built for strength, and armed for defense. In front was a Bay, a most lovely expanse of water, with Island and Cove, sloping hill, and rude promontory, all wearing the aspect of newness and beauty, to awaken the freshest impulses of the heart."

Nostalgia, yes, but also critique. Torn down in 1830, seven years after Oakes Smith was married and moved to Portland, the building represents for her a different time "when worship was a great human need, to be sought through peril and death, and not as now a luxury, an appendage to respectability." One might even say, a time when the physical and affective links to the region's past could still be seen and walked through, as Oakes Smith recalls having done in the ruined Meeting House as a child; anyway-- something more than the history we have here, reduced to paper in an attractive Gift Book to display on parlor shelf. In retrospect, however, this first chapter seems like a feint; readers who flip pages could see that this was only the first chapter of several, and

thus they might have settled in for a rambling historical sketch, perhaps expecting a tour of the cemetery next, along with reminiscences of lives of the principal figures of the region buried next to the venerable pastor Tristram Gilman across the street.

[SLIDE of Gilman's grave]

Instead, Oakes Smith is careful to mention the long distances from which families needed to travel, precisely, to “Meet” at this place—distances that historically led 130 members, including both of Oakes Smith’s grand-fathers, to petition the Legislature to leave the Meeting House Below the Ledge in 1794 to form their own parish in North Yarmouth—and distances that will have symbolic purport as the story progresses. Turning from “history” she imagines a family making the long journey of a Sunday morning to the Old Meeting House: “There was Mr. Brewster, a short stout man, with a fresh good-natured face, whose ruffles and velvet gave him the appearance of an overgrown boy, and who bestrode his large sleek chestnut horse with the air of a clumsy master upon the nursery hobby. Behind him, stately, in lace and brocade, perched daintily upon a pillion, her fair but haughty head rising above him, sat Madam Brewster, her shapely figure almost courtly in its careless yet proud bearing.” They have seven sons, and a daughter, Lizzie. Using her second chapter to introduce characters and their relations, Oakes Smith begins to leave the form of the historical sketch entirely to write a story of some complexity: Mr. and Mrs. Brewster, whose contrasting personalities achieve a precarious balance of power that leaves Mrs. Brewster to make the decisions while the affable Mr. Brewster maintains the semblance of authority; Mrs. Brewster is awed in some way by Lizzie’s beauty and grace, “her pure spirituality; and it was this, which alarmed her clear worldly minded mother into a suspicion that she might not have that practical grasp of life which she



considered so essential to the dignity of the family.” So Mrs. Brewster, as both a practical matter, and it seems, to remove a rival for her position of respect in the community, marries her daughter off to a new character, Mr. Malcolm, a balding old bachelor seen in this conservative community as “a wonder of propriety, sense and acuteness. True” we are told, “he had never done one single thing in his whole life either good or bad, and his greenish blue eyes had something exceedingly disagreeable about them, yet he was so respectable, so rich, so regular at church, and so proper every way, that people could give no tangible reason for disliking him.” Cowed by her mother’s authority, Lizzie submits to the match, and on a cold, raining spring day, she murmurs her marriage vows, mounts Mr. Malcolm’s “old carriage,” and rides off into the distance, “pale, torpid, and like a doomed creature, to her new home.”

Having focused on the character of Lizzie and her marriage in Chapters three and four of “The Defeated Life,” here Oakes Smith’s story picks up speed. Ten years go by, and while Mr. and Mrs. Brewster continue in their bland way, we lose sight of our main character, and of course this is the point. “And where was Lizzie all this time, the pale, girlish bride sent from the shelter of home upon that night of storm and darkness?” asks our narrator. “Strange as it might seem,” the voice continues, “Mr. Malcolm nearly disappeared from church and places of public resort, and seemed more shy and taciturn than ever.” Lizzie herself, who for some years would come on the Sabbath and sit silently in Mr. Malcolm’s pew, “at length...disappears altogether,” and “it is rumored” that she “is in effect a prisoner in her own house.” [where, all this time, one might ask, is the good reverend Tristram Gilman?] Ten more years pass, until a day when a servant arrives at Mrs. Brewster’s door, summoning her to Mr. Malcolm’s home, where her daughter lies in

a near comatose state on the parlor sofa, and Mr. Malcolm, wasted to a mere shadow, is found seated in a large chair in the centre of the room, with his small *pinky blue eyes intently fixed* upon the form of Lizzie. In a climax of horror, we share with Mrs. Brewster the realization of her daughter's suffering, who has been for twenty years devoured by those eyes, a gaze that symbolizes her consumption as an imprisoned object of beauty now emptied of the soul that had once animated it as a young girl of intellectual and spiritual potential. As Malcolm's eyes, gazing, even still feed on her form, Lizzie's voice finally asserts itself in its last desperate utterance: "Take that man from my presence, and mother, if you hope for peace in your dying hour, let *me* die, without those hateful eyes upon my face. Oh God, for what I have lived!" The final chapter, in diary form, shares with the mother, and the reader, a terrible written record of a woman's mind in the process of conscious dissolution in the years that have passed since her marriage.

Reading "The Defeated Life," readers familiar with Oakes Smith's autobiography can hardly be blamed for identifying Oakes Smith with her character, Lizzie Brewster. If the name weren't enough of a tip-off (duh), Oakes Smith's description of her marriage in the autobiography—the season, the weather, the dress, even the hair-style—matches the story point for point. True, not much is said about Seba Smith's eyes in the autobiography, but like Malcolm, he was also "bald and bespectacled." [SLIDE: Dolly] A closer inspection that I can only suggest here shows that whole passages from "The Defeated Life" seem to have been brought into the autobiography, for example and [SLIDE of comparisons we can't tell!] Nor do the comparisons even end with the married pair. In the autobiography over ten pages are taken up with a description of the Meeting House Below the Ledge in very much the same reverential tone as we find in

“The Defeated Life,” including a poetic elegy to the building that runs for several manuscript pages. And yet if we read carefully, it is the historical references Oakes Smith makes here where one-to-one comparisons between her life and the story begin to break down.

I want to stop a moment and note that I realize I am on shaky ground here, asking for readers to find a separation between Oakes Smith’s life and work that Oakes Smith’s own mind-set at the moment of her recollection of her own life at the end of her career—specifically, in 1881 when she wrote this passage—does not seem to desire, perhaps can no longer perceive. With the evidence I’ve seen, however, I read the autobiography as a continuation of the *arguments* she had been making since the early 1850s about the impropriety and injustice of the marriage relation in the United States in her time—institutional drag even more frustrating for her as the Reconstruction era left women in a position little different than she had begun to work against in 1850. That is, she took women’s subjugation as a class *personally*, even if in fact she was never “Defeated” by it herself. I say this in part to point out that when we turn from description of the Meeting House Below the Ledge in the story to her description of it in the autobiography, we are still in recollection” mode, but we find Oakes Smith addressing not her time but her grandparents’ time. The setting of her vignette is “one hundred years ago (this 1881)” she writes, imagining herself on the “horse block” “before her grandfather’s house:” before which we see

“the Maidens in their long bodices framed upon whalebone and mercilessly indicating the proportions of full health and elegant beauty; arms cased in sleeves tight to the elbow, and terminating in a wilderness of ruffles, with gloves of silken net. A profusion of

petticoat, short in front and trailing behind; the feet in pointed shoes and high heels. It behooves maidens thus dressed to be decorous in mirth. Many is the time I have masqueraded in these brocades and costumes of the long ago, nor did I doubt [45] the truth of it when Grandma would say, "Ah! Elizabeth you are not so handsome as your mother was at your age."

This critical voice, which we might recognize in the withering comments of Madam Brewster, "proud dame in every sense of the word," matches a woman in Oakes Smith's life, alright, but that woman may be not Oakes Smith's mother, Sophia Blanchard, but more likely Hephzibah Drinkwater Blanchard, Oakes Smith's maternal grandmother, remembered in the autobiography as a "haughty intellectual woman" with a high hand and an equally bold stance with her husband in the 1780s and 90s. That is to say, as much as the prematurely married Lizzie seems to resemble Oakes Smith herself, Lizzie also resembles Oakes Smith's mother, who, born in 1787, was married off to David Prince at the age of 16, not to mention Oakes Smith's older sister Hephzibah, two years old than Elizabeth, who was married at about the same age to Richard Loring Cutter, born in 1795 and thus also many years her senior. Premature marriage isn't just personal, its institutional.

If reading the autobiography in the context of additional details about Oakes Smith's ancestors helps to complicate our understanding of "The Defeated Life," what helps us clarify the mysterious thirteen years left deftly blank in Caroline Woidat's autobiographically inspired account of Oakes Smith's life that informs her reading would be material evidence from those early years of her marriage in the city of Portland. Chasing down such evidence means a trip to Virginia, where in the Alderman Library there is folder of early letters written between Oakes Smith and her husband when he was

away in Boston in the fall of 1833, sending the pages of his first collection of his satirical Jack Downing letters through the press. The tone and content of these letters differ so markedly from that found in representations of Oakes Smith's marriage in both the autobiography and in the critical work using that work as a key frame of reference that they justify, in my mind, as a call for an entirely different approach to the recovery of Oakes Smith's life and work: one that builds arguments on the material basis of her growth as a writer; not one that begins, basically, with the fact that she has been forgotten—even in the last years of her life. What we see here is not a suffering child-bride beneath the thumb of an unworthy cradle-robber but a woman who takes on the role of both mother and partner in her husband's business enterprises; a husband who respects his wife's opinion and offers her, literally, a place to give voice to her thoughts in his various editorial roles in Portland—first at the *Eastern Argus* and later at the *Daily Courier*. And we two loving people.

The first letter of this series, written by Seba in Boston to his wife home in Portland, October 29, 1833, sets the tone for the whole, even reminding us that these are the words of a married couple whose relationship after ten years is more or less unrecognizable in “The Defeated Life” or any of Oakes Smith's fiction or autobiographic comments:

Dear Elizabeth, you can better imagine my feelings than I can describe them, therefore I shall not attempt it. For ten years that we have been permitted to walk hand in hand on the rough journey of life, we have never before been separated as long as twelve hours at any one time; and nothing but what seemed to be a strong necessity should have induced it now. I had for some years set my heart upon the idea of never being separated for twelve hours while we should live. It is what the world would call weakness, but for that I care not; you know I never felt much deference for the world, or its fashions.

But so it is—I must come to Boston and you could not come to Boston; therefore we are a hundred miles apart. I feel as though it were a thousand. The goose-quill has risen in value with me tonight a hundred per cent.

The second day, he continues

Again, my dear companion through the world's wide wilderness, I take up my pen at ten o'clock in the evening to bid you good night if nothing more. Having passed another day without seeing or speaking to you. . . with whom I have conversed every day for ten years, I feel that I cannot let a day pass, now that we are separated, without saying something on paper.

Each writes to the other every day, sharing not only business and domestic details but personal fears and misgivings. On October 31, Seba again “turn [his] pen in the direction where [his] thoughts have wandered much and often during the day and asks for news of the boys, but soon shares his worry about the book, as if with one he considers of equal judgment with regard to its success:

“I cant get over the notion that to most readers it will appear flat. The public expectation is considerably raised with regard to the book, and this I am afraid will operate against it.” In further letters, he asks her opinion of Grenville Mellen's offer to include some of his satirical verse in with the Downing tales, and after his illustrator completes the first sketch of the Major for proof (an image, as many of us know, which eventuated in our notion of “Uncle Sam”), several letters document their long discussion over what features fit. Oakes Smith's reply, which I will cite a some length, takes up this topic while giving us a characteristic sense of her voice in the early letters:

Monday Portland November 11<sup>th</sup> 1833

I know, my dear husband, you feel disappointed at not receiving any letter from me yesterday and I almost fear to tell you the reason, but I know affection is lynx-eyed, and if I do not tell you, you will imagine something more serious than it actually was. The terror to which I somewhat exposed myself, occasioned one of those turns of sickness, which I have before had, consequent upon any shock of the nerves, and yesterday, your mother who very kindly staid to take care of me, advised me to send for a physician, as I was in much distress from unequal incubations. He came and gave me powders &c. and to day I am nearly in my usual health . . . and writing to my earthly protection, friend, and husband. Now don't hurry home, and feel anxious about me, for I assure you I shall run no risque again, and indeed had I acted like the general run of good wives I should have said nothing about it, but I cannot endure insincerity from whatever motive. Now if you come home any sooner for this, my dear I shall feel sorry I have told you. The portrait of the Major I don't like. I have not shown it to any one lest it might cause disappointment. The look is not honest. Jack is shrewd but is he not honest? The eye is a little too much turned, the person too lean, and the countenance too sheepish; tell Johnstone there is no necessity to make him so mortal homely. I would have a man about the age of the first design, with a figure more rounded, an eye less oblique, the nose will do, but the chin retreats too much. The hands and regimentals are very good, so is the neck, lable [?] &c. The Major enjoys a laugh, therefore he ought not to be so thin. Don't let this one go in without revision, for I am afraid it will give others the same sensations of disappointment. Your mother, saw it when I opened the letter. I expressed no opinion till I had heard hers. She did not think it looked like the Major, thought he was a better looking man. I wish the lines were nicer—to make a better finished engraving. . . . The

children are very well, and pretty good. They once in a while have [run?] a part of the Major's motto, which I think they have caught from hearing us read it. ~~over~~. Alvin begins to call, dad da, most earnestly. He is all spirit. Manly has just come in. He don't like the Major. Thinks his hair looks too much like a Methodist minister. A man of the promptitude which characterizes the Major might have a more determined look. Manly wants me to remind you of the letter Y. again. They need it very much at the office. Mr. D. paid me ten dollars to day. I have paid Mr. Gale, and have \$12 left. Have you no more orders? Mrs. Carry called in this afternoon. She says J. Neal is publishing a series of letters in the N. York Inquirer. In one which he sent to his sister...and which Mrs. W had the reading of, he says Major Downing is the subject of conversation in all the steam boats Stages and Taverns along the road. And no one will believe, that the Major, and his pretty wife live <sup>a</sup> way down east in the State of Maine. Now I hope you wont suspect me of vanity for writing the above. You know I am free of it. However, if the paragraph should give you that impression, I will not try to reason you out of it. Do go all about the City and and [sic] see and learn all you can to tell me when you come home. I want to see you, but I want you to make the most of your visit. The 'Maniac' was written by Dr. M. I ventured to alter a few words that were repeated several times and to substitute other words and in one instance to change the phraseology where it was objectionable, and fear I may have offended him as he has not called at the office but once since, however it will be an easy matter to concilate him. ....

The close of this letter is just too adorable not to show you on the screen:

[SLIDE adorable]



The Steam Boat bell rings, and I can only say kiss Õ this place because I have kissed it for you.

After ten days, the tone of both writers remains frank and loving, but as a planned week or ten days turns into three weeks, Seba grows anxious that he has left his wife in a difficult spot. She may have a servant to help her, but she still needs to manage a household even while overseeing the paper, and the managing editor, Mr Davis, does not seem as enlightened as his partner. Noting changes she has made to countermand Davis's decision in the insertion of a political article, Seba remarks,

I am glad to <sup>perceive</sup> you managed prudently with regard to Mr. Davis' editorship. If he has a pride about it, it is best not to offend it but endeavor to guide it in the most useful manner. Important to note, Seba views Oakes Smith's deference to his partner as a practical, not an ideological matter.

But finally, they just miss each other. I could quote from these letters endlessly if I thought it would help establish new grounds for an understanding of Oakes Smith's life, but I'll conclude this section with an excerpt from one of my favorites, dated November 16:

It is of no use to be so very reasonable any longer, dear husband, I have thought of the good of the public, the necessity for your absence, and tried to feel contented and resigned at the length of time you must be gone, but now I have <sup>been</sup> so good a girl, so very self-denying, I mean to [treat?] my resolution, and begin to urge you to come home. Do come, dear husband, next Sabbath in the Steam boat if you have to go right back again. The time is so long and the house so gloomy unless you can come in and say, well

you do you get along? Besides I grow somewhat nervous about you. I sometimes fancy you sick, or that some accident has befallen you and then I become so anxious I must to my work to drive it off. I am putting my mouth into the prettiest pucker by the time you come, and I begin to hope another ten years or longer may elapse before it will be necessary for you to leave me again. I had no letter this morning and I fear some of mine I have sent by the Steam boat may not have reached you.

I have been so used to talking with you and telling you all I think and feel that my brain will run over if you don't come home and let me empty my budget.

[SLIDE of "another ten years"]

Katahdin

Returning to the period of the marriage depicted in "The Defeated Life," our first measure of its reflection of an autobiographical subtext involved a survey of those first "ten years" that passed between Lizzie's marriage and her near total exile from society under the roof—and the eye—of her creepy husband Malcolm. If a reading of Oakes Smith's early letters to and from her husband seriously complicates any notion of a direct correspondence between "Lizzie" and "Our Liz," the story's next invitation, to "add ten years more to the ten already passed, during which Lizzie had scarcely crossed the threshold," actually yields an even starker contrast. While Lizzie Brewster demonstrates precisely the isolation, objectification and psychic destruction of a woman's mind, it was Oakes Smith's success as an expressive subject that led, roughly ten years after the letters we've read from her life in Maine in the 1830s, to a literary reputation that would garner

her praise from more sophisticated literary critics like George Ripley and Edgar Allan Poe and popularity with a broad audience of men, women and children. Her poems collected and published in several editions in the mid-40s, she began to appear in literary anthologies—both those devoted to women writers and those including both sexes. She continued to write poems and stories, but her growing fame now allowed her to republish stories from her early days writing in the *Daily Courier* in literary miscellanies like *The Rover* (co-edited with her husband) for a New York market. After something more than those “ten more years” passed, in the summer of 1849, with her new novel, *The Salamander* already in its third printing, she decided to take an extended vacation Down East—which, itself an indication of her success—proved itself all the more when her *departure* made the news in Littell's *Living Age* and other New York journals. In previous summers, in fact, Oakes Smith had returned to Maine, visited family and friends, and began hiking, first near Moosehead Lake and eventually to Mt. Kinneo. [SLIDE of Moosehead article] This summer, her plan was to climb Mt. Katahdin. If she were successful she would be the first white woman to do so.

Guided by James M. Haines and accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. N. C. Mosman, Oakes Smith arrived at Hunt's cabin on the way to Katahdin on Monday, August 5, 1849. By Wednesday, they had reached the Lake, and by Friday, made a camp at Avalanche Brook, where they used birch bark as “stationery” to use writing to friends at home and to address a note to future climbers of their ascent. The weather turned cold and stormy on Saturday August 11, and thus while they did somewhat better than Thoreau on his climb recorded in *The Maine Woods*, the party seems only to have achieved the lowest summit before descending the mountain the way they had arrived. According to Rev. Marcus

Keep and another guide, who found Ms Mosman and Ms. Oakes Smith's "note" waiting for them the following week on Keep's own quest to bring his wife, then fiancée, up Katahdin as the first woman to succeed, the Oakes Smith party was first, but not highest. If it was a race, nobody won. [SLIDE of "race"]

Granted, by 1849, Oakes Smith was turning her attentions to the political, and as we saw at the outset, it was the indignation she felt at the abuse brought upon women at Seneca Falls among others that led her to begin to use the kind of literary fame that led to news coverage of her Katahdin climb to draw attention to the rights and capacities of women, and so there is a materially political dimension to physical demonstration of climbing a mountain. Whether she made it to what we now call Baxter peak or not, she publicized a woman's ability to use her body in the ways men could. In this sense, in fact, Marcus Keep was no Bobby Riggs to her Billy Jean King; in his writing he repeatedly emphasized his belief that only those who "had been to the academy a quarter or had been to Massachusetts once" would be shocked at the "indelicacy" of women climbing a mountain—as if they had lost their knowledge of a hayrake or the feet that could once splash round the farmyard." More important than any competition between men and women on this venture, which would seem to lead back to the autobiography's regretful and at times resentful tone, is for us to register Oakes Smith's ebullient, celebratory, emancipated tone in her writing of this experience.

How we overcame our womanly horror of snakes I know not, but so it was; and we would travel on as demurely in this rough untidy road as if we had never known the luxury of the green earth or the comfort of cleanly sidewalks. The truth is, and the truth must be told, we were not blest with the sight of a single huge or terrible animal, did not

come up to the dignity even of a snake; and in this dearth of adventure we made much ado when an owl flitted through the trees; but, when an eagle, that kingly suggestor of Freedom, grandeur and daring, sailed over our heads, dotting with his shadow some still, mountain cinctured lake, and soaring away over rock and fell and forest, disappeared amid the mist and shadows of Katahdin, I felt my blood stirred and a lofty exultation mingled with his stately image. ... The singing of a bird was oppressive, while the quivering cry of the loon, across the lake, and the sharp stream of birds of prey were in harmony with the savageness of nature.

The pace of her writing on her Katahdin trip is itself invigorating, providing a clear sense of the writer's joy and experience of a challenge far from the delicacies of the literary salons whose attendance counted, back in New York, as an "achievement." "It was a merry sight," Oakes Smith writes, on the way up Avalanche Brook, "to see us leaping from rock to rock, springing over these surging and roaring cataracts for three long miles; and truth to say, it grew to be no holiday task, for ancles will be ancles, in spite of resolution and careful "findings;" but when our spirits flagged, a look upward at the sportful Nymph above, or below where she disported amid the shadows and with frolicsome grace sang onward in a torrent of melody, so invigorated our hearts and sent new beauty into our souls, that we clapped our hands and sang, and called to the mountain echoes, as if we had become a part of this exulting jubilant Oh! one hour of life like this, is worth an eternity amid the dust and dulness of cities.

This is ten years after the first ten, and this is no "Defeated Life," folks. This is a woman dancing over her freedom, returning to her home in the State of Maine to celebrate it.

I hope in this longish discourse I've revealed something new of Elizabeth Oakes Smith and her relation to this place, but I fear many of you are—have been—even have been for quite some time—wondering when I will teach you some Maine history. Of course, letting you know about Oakes Smith's life and work is to reveal what I think is an important part of that history, but as I said at the very start, the problem is that scholars (myself included) have too often proceeded with our interpretations of Oakes Smith's later work without reference to the experiences and places and relations and persons that led to it. So I have to apologize that this paper has been mostly theoretical—an attempt to clear the ground of ahistorical understandings and ideologically loaded interpretations—but finally I have to ask for your help in achieving a clearer and more just sense of Oakes Smith's life and work. [SLIDE of Uncle Sam] Sad to say, I have been working with these texts for over twenty years, and I could not tell you, within a hundred yards, where Elizabeth Oakes Smith was born. I have looked, but I have very little definite idea where she lived, or went to church, as a young person, or precisely where she lived with Seba Smith in Portland, or was it Westbrook? Did she teach in a Sunday School for black children, and if so where? Certainly, as electronic archives make more information available for our use in our research, previously unavailable reference points are making it possible for us to put Oakes Smith and other women writers on the map in greater detail, but only a fraction of this material has been organized in a systematic way; the material grounds of a writer's emergence still stand, like the Old Meeting House for Oakes Smith in her time, as a reminder of our debt to the past and to what open questions deserve to be answered before we conclude anything (or rush to publish). Finally, and more generally, to respect women writers—indeed all writers—

we need to respect the distance between their writings and their lives. To see them as simply “copying” their experience in their literary work is at best to reduce their capability to that of simple mimesis and at worst to imagine a woman like Oakes Smith “selling” herself and her own misery in written form to make a living. Rather, we need to acknowledge Oakes Smith and other women writer’s complex rhetorical strategies and the difficulty of negotiating their way through a professional world of publishers, printers and readers untrained to credit a woman’s view of the world. Specifically for Oakes Smith’s century, we need to respect women writers’ ability not merely to argue, ideologically, for their own cause, but their ability to challenge their worlds’ assumptions about the past, about their relation to others (both men and women), and about themselves, and to create beauty and dignity in a world not of their own making.