1738-1815

REBECCA DICKINSON

Independence for a New England Woman

MARLA R. MILLER

LIVES OF AMERICAN WOMEN

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Rebecca Dickinson

Independence for a New England Woman

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LIVES OF AMERICAN WOMEN
Carol Berkin, Series Editor

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SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Rebecca Dickinson, an eighteenth-century New England artisan, does not appear in the grand accounts of the movement for American independence. She did not rise in the Massachusetts assembly to demand the repeal of the Stamp Act; she did not command a regiment of soldiers at Valley Forge or Yorktown. Yet in her own life, she too waged a long struggle for independence and did battle with both the internalized and external pressures to marry and raise a family. Dickinson's experiences reveal much about the turbulent era in which our nation was born; her life serves as a window onto the role played by ordinary women and men in the political protests that led to a revolution, the importance of craft labor in a preindustrial world, the endurance of the spiritual in the age of Enlightenment and, perhaps most important, the complex legacy of a rhetoric of independence in the lives of Americans.

Dickinson was born in 1738 in the rural society of Massachusetts, where the arc of a woman's life carried her from youth to marriage and motherhood. But her path diverged from the expected; although she struggled with the centrifugal force of social expectations, she chose to remain single—and thus independent. Her needlework skills allowed her to support herself and to play a useful role in her community. This economic independence and the positive relationships she sustained with her clients shielded her against the negative associations her culture attached to the term "old maid."

Dickinson recognized both the perils and the rewards of her independence. Over the course of her long life she engaged in an internal

dialogue with herself, captured in her diary, as she sought to understand how she came to choose an unmarried life and the mixture of satisfactions and regrets it entailed. If the men who signed the Declaration of Independence realized that their decision carried with it both opportunities and dangers, so too did Rebecca Dickinson recognize that a life of female independence was fraught with both risk and the promise of personal rewards. In her diary she confronted the reality of her decision bluntly: "Two is better than one," she wrote, "for if one fall the other can lift him up. But I must act my part alone."

Marla Miller's beautiful rendering of Dickinson's life paints a portrait of the early struggles of women to make a place for themselves outside the established boundaries of marriage and family. The Dickinson that Miller portrays for us was not, by nature, a rebel; she did not carry on an open war against the norms of her society. Rather, in her piety, her loyalty to friends and extended family, and her pride in meaningful work, she adhered to the traditional values of her New England roots. In her own quiet way, however, Rebecca Dickinson was forging a new path for women, one that the next generation would follow all the way to Seneca Falls.

In examining and narrating the lives of women both famous and obscure, Westview's Lives of American Women series populates our national past more fully and richly. Each story told is not simply the story of an individual, but of the era in which she lived, the events in which she participated, and the experiences she shared with her contemporaries. Some of these women will be familiar to the reader; others may not appear at all in the history books that focus on the powerful, the brilliant, or the privileged. But each of these women is worth knowing. In their personal odysseys, American history comes alive.

Carol Berkin

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Reading an Eighteenth-Century Diary

Rebecca Dickinson's is a powerful voice. Recollections of her personality that survive in local memory tell us that in her day—that is, the last half of the eighteenth century and early years of the nineteenth—Dickinson was a lively, opinionated, and smart woman, as well as a shrewd social observer. It is easy to imagine her as the sort of person whose remarks about others made people gasp and laugh at the same time. Sometimes her tongue ran away with her so that even she was taken aback by the things she had said to her neighbors between church services. She could also be kind, and even sentimental. But that is not the picture of her that survives in the crowded lines of her diary. Instead, the five hundred entries preserved in her journal are drenched in sadness, even self-pity. Page after page records hours of doubt, fear, melancholy, and despair. That gap—between the actual woman who lived and the record she left behind—is significant. Unlike the vast majority of women in early New England, Rebecca Dickinson (also sometimes spelled "Rebekah" and "Rebeca") never married, and that one fact became the central subject of her weekly musings. Small hints scattered throughout that text suggest that Dickinson truly cherished her life alone, unencumbered as it was by many of the challenges of family life. That she found it so much more difficult to give voice to her joy than her pain is part of the lesson her diary holds for us.[1]

In 1892, when a local historian named Margaret Miller submitted excerpts from Dickinson's manuscript to the *New England Magazine*, editors rejected the text as "too dolefully dolesome, too awfully theological

and metaphysical" for their pages.[2] But it is precisely the dolefully dolesome, the ceaselessly searching, sorrowful quality of this text, that makes it so compelling. At first meeting Rebecca Dickinson is a sour companion. A "bullock unaccustomed to the yoke" of singlehood, she used her diary as a place to record feelings of shame, vulnerability, and frustration, even thoughts of suicide. She would refer, now and then, to a "bitter stroke" that "mowed down" her "earthly hopes," hinting that it was some romantic catastrophe that had caused her single state. But more often she worried that it was the result of her weak faith, God working to save her soul by depriving her of earthly distractions like a husband or children. Whatever the causes of her singlehood (and as we will see, they were multiple and complex), Dickinson feared she had been "cast out from the people" for her "odd ways." But if Dickinson's singlehood dismayed some of her neighbors (as it may or may not have—though she believed so, no letters or diaries survive to confirm it), others recalled her with affection long past her death. "To old people who remember her," Margaret Miller wrote, "or knew her by hearsay she was a 'Saint on Earth,' a 'marvel of piety.'" Others described her as the "most industrious woman that ever lived." Samuel Partridge, a lifelong resident of Hatfield, knew Dickinson from his boyhood as a "very intelligent woman" whose "sayings were frequently repeated, she being regarded as a sort of oracle." One resident referred to her as "Aunt Bek, it being the habit in those days to call single women who were loved by that community title, and Aunt Bek was well-liked by all."[3]

The disconnect between Dickinson's sorrow-filled account of her own life and that offered by others, between her private and public identities, is at least in part an artifact of the source itself. A diary can seem like the best, truest document a historian could wish for—the closest thing to the mind of our subject. But diaries can be misleading: few of us would want to be remembered only for the things we wrote down in our most private moments, whether they were hours of worry, despair, or joy. Even hundreds of pages of a person's most intimate confessions to herself cannot tell us the whole story of her life or her character; on the contrary, they can trick us into mistaking a fraction for the whole. The challenge of this remarkable source is to read past the gloom that overtakes some of her pages, to see the larger life behind them.

Rebecca Dickinson first began keeping her own diary during the event-filled years of the American Revolution. Decades later she would write that she began writing for her "own amusement" after she reached age thirty (that is, about 1768), in the "happy days" of her "young years" when her "mind was stored with poetry" (August 2, 1789). Was it the growing political tension that prompted those early writings, or some romantic drama? Whatever the cause, they undoubtedly contained a rich portrait of life in a prosperous eighteenth-century farming village. Given Dickinson's connections with prominent families both in support of and opposed to the revolution, her diary surely offered insight into the struggle for political independence as it played out on New England's western frontier. Among other things, in those pages she recorded an account of Reverend Joseph Lyman's "first coming," including the Patriot minister's initial sermons, entries that would surely illuminate the town's drift toward rebellion.

But we can never know what those entries captured, because in her forties Rebecca Dickinson began destroying them. Casting off the temporal for the eternal, she resolved to bring new purpose to her journals: "They were but poorly written and I would be glad to look them over if I were to live in the world [that is, if she cared about such petty, earthly things]. But they are gone and I wish that the others were more correct and less of this world with them—for what profit is there in the thoughts of many scenes that are passed and gone? It served to amuse the mind, but nothing like the affairs of eternity" (February 10, 1788). She would muse that in those lively years, her "mind . . . wrote too freely on some of the objects of time" (June [21?], 1789; August 2, 1789)—objects almost surely concerning Hatfield's response to the revolution and the actions of its Tories and Patriots, topics that would very much interest readers today. We can only speculate about our loss.

By the time she put pen to the paper that now survives, the purpose of the exercise had changed. Dickinson's diary had become a source of companionship, a place to confide her innermost thoughts and to focus on her faith. Spiritual journals like Dickinson's were quite common; religious tradition in New England had long urged the faithful to record their spiritual journeys. Diary keeping was a secular tradition as well, as women

used this narrative form to keep track of any number of domestic concerns. Across the river from Dickinson, in the town of Hadley, Massachusetts, her client and friend Elizabeth Porter Phelps called her own private record her "memorandum book"; though it noted the biblical text from which the minister's weekly sermons were drawn, it was principally a log of work done on her farm, visits made and received, and the general routines of life in her large, prosperous family. But for Dickinson, as a devotional exercise the journal offered an opportunity to monitor the state of her soul, to record "God's special mercies." Because she wrote the majority of her entries before, between, and after services at Hatfield's Congregational church, it is not surprising to discover that her diary sometimes reads like a sermon. Consciously and unconsciously, she borrowed so liberally from religious texts of all kinds that it sometimes becomes nearly impossible to tell where quotation and paraphrase leave off and her own words begin. Long passages from Watts's *Psalms of David* weave throughout the text, still floating through her mind from the day's services or carefully copied from her own edition of the small, leather-bound book. Days when she could not balance the demands of work and home and her desire to write in her journal caused real disappointment: "This little family who are but three [herself, her mother, and her nephew] . . . has hindered me from writing. . . . [T]here is some work which takes up my mind from my beloved pen" (August 1, 1790). Indeed, the very existence of her journal Dickinson attributed to the absence of home and family that might have interfered with her ability to write. "My solitary life, my lonely life," she wrote, was a "great advantage to my pen which has written some thoughts which I could never recollect" (August 2, 1789).

Some spiritual journals were meant in part for the edification of others—children who would benefit from their parents' reflections, or community members who might emulate a neighbor's piety. But there is no evidence that Dickinson had this aim in mind. In fact, she kept her diary under lock and key (although she wasn't always alone when writing; sometimes she wrote in her journal while talking to others, though the distraction could produce "nonsense"; November 23, 1787). Dickinson's age in the year that she abandoned her secular diary and committed to this spiritual account—having probably passed beyond menopause—suggests that neither daughters nor sons were her imag-

ined audience. Perhaps she already had a sense that her nephews and nieces would inherit whatever legacy she would someday have to bequeath, but the journal makes no reference to any expectations of that kind, or indeed of any other. So far as we know today, Dickinson penned her entries for herself and herself alone.

But that is not to say she couldn't envision herself as an author with something to contribute to readers. Once, after suffering through four weeks of illness, Dickinson tried to raise her "drooping spirits" by reminding herself (in a reference to Matthew 6:34a) to "take no thought for the morrow[:] let the morrow take thought for the things of itself. [S]ufficient for the day is the [evil] thereof." "I wish to see a book written on the subject," she mused, "but the time is too short for me to write my many thoughts" (April 8, 1790). Time, not ability or merit, was the obstacle that Dickinson believed prevented her from sharing her considerable expertise on living with uncertainty.

In her diary Dickinson could confide her darkest thoughts without fear of criticism. It became, in essence, a best friend willing to listen at any hour and to the same complaints no matter how often made. As students of journal keeping have explained, the cathartic function of personal writing skews our picture of any diarist, because only some aspects of the writer's character get preserved in the text. Journals almost by definition represent a certain division of self, a simultaneity of author and audience, as the diarist is both the writer and the reader. Dickinson herself seems to have recognized that paradox. She "awaked lonesome" one Sunday morning to the disquieting realization that perhaps loneliness itself was "all the relation that I had." Her solitude loomed so large that it seemed to exist independently and yet, strangely, was her closest companion. "The soul and the body are closely joined," she continued, "and are the nearest relatives of any two in this life" (July 13, 1787). In writing, then, Dickinson found an intimacy life had denied her. Her journal in many ways records a conversation, or correspondence, from body to soul, from soul to body.

But if journals can be read as a sort of interior communication, we as readers can nevertheless know only part of the exchange. Dickinson's journal, because she turned to it largely in hours of despair, offers us one perspective on her life. Patient reading, however, yields glimpses of

another. Though the majority of passages capture her most painful moments, as she herself observed, "those dark hours don't come every day" (August 20, 1787). Brighter hours are captured, too. Murmurs of choice and satisfaction thread through the melancholy of the text, hinting that the diarist found attractions in her life alone—attractions she could barely admit as she struggled to reconcile the competing depictions of singlehood provided by her religion, her community, popular culture, and her own observations and experience.

Dickinson's diary is preserved today partly because it was appreciated by Margaret Miller. But other local historians took notice, too, not just of Rebecca Dickinson, but of her sisters as well, providing hints not only about the eighteenth-century past, but about how events and interests in the intervening centuries have shaped the ways we encounter that world today. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century Hatfield resident Lucretia Partridge remembered Rebecca Dickinson as a "woman of unusual force and originality of character."[4] Partridge had also known Rebecca's sister Irene, the recollection of whom prompted her to note that "all three" Dickinson girls—Rebecca, Miriam, and Irene (Lucretia had forgotten the other sisters, Martha and Anne, perhaps because they had moved out of town)—"had marked traits of character."[5] Miriam Billings, in particular, was a "picturesque figure." Partridge described her walking to church in winter, "wrapped in a long crimson broadcloth cloak trimmed with ermine, carrying a footstove, and moving at a pace which most people would find it hard to keep step with; energy and determination written all over her tall thin form." Billings was remembered as a hardworking mother and wife who knew how to card and spin (though she hired someone to do her household's weaving), and who went every year to the family's dairy farm to oversee the making of the cheese. Yet she was also an avid reader; Partridge reported that few women of that day had "so full and intelligent knowledge of history as she possessed." Even late in life, when Miriam was confined to her bed, she would be found "sitting and talking with great emphasis, knitting all the time with such energy that one could hear the clicking of her needles all over the room." Plainly Rebecca Dickinson was one among a family of strong and memorable women, and, as we shall see, her sisters' stories weave constantly through her own.

Indeed, looking in on Rebecca's sisters helps flesh out not only her story, but also that of women in eighteenth-century New England more generally, because they conformed to social norms in ways that Rebecca did not. Miriam in the family tavern; Martha at the northern edge of empire; Anne as she struggled with an absentee husband; and Irene, who died too young: these and the other Hatfield women help place Dickinson's experience in context. Other sources help fill in her tale as well. Oral history written down in the nineteenth century fills in part of the picture, as do artifacts made and preserved in the town. In addition to the passages from her diary, newspapers, church records, court records, and sermons convey the tone of the times, while suggesting the many ways different kinds of sources contribute to historical understanding.

"I am apt to be greatly puzzled to find myself here alone," Dickinson wrote, "but I know the matter is a secret to me" (June [?], 1789). Unraveling that secret consumed the better part of her journals through these tumultuous years. "My story," wrote Dickinson, "frightens half the women of the town" (June 21, 1789). As such, it reveals the public and private consequences of an act one woman in eighteenth-century New England failed to commit. As Dickinson was well aware, her life threw into bold relief the anxieties and apprehensions of her female neighbors. Her departure from the norms of her day, as a woman who never married and never raised a family, who relied only on her own skill for her livelihood, reveals the contours of life for women across revolutionary New England. As they watched and wondered at her single existence, they confronted the significance of marriage in their own lives. Her journal thus provides a window onto two worlds: that of women like Rebecca Dickinson and of other women frightened by them.

How, one might ask, does an everyday person from early America come to the attention of historians and their readers? Rebecca Dickinson would now be entirely forgotten, along with thousands of everyday men and women who lived through the revolution, if it were not for the fact that she kept a diary, and that diary survived. Rebecca Dickinson's journals—227 pages containing around five hundred entries written between 1787 and 1802—preserve the difficult "journey of life" of a woman struggling to "act her part alone" in an era of tremendous social,

political, and cultural upheaval. Discovered nearly eighty years after her death, tucked in the garret of the western Massachusetts home in which she died, this extraordinary document affords a rare glimpse into the rhythms of daily life in early America, the common concerns shared by women across New England and beyond, from medical beliefs and practices ("The corpse of the wife of Joshua Dickinson was taken up in order for the cure of her granddaughter after she had lain in her grave three years"; August 3, 1788), to the composition of the New England family (four "being the number so many pitch upon as being a proper number"; March 17, 1788), to some of the rarer delights that graced early American life ("There are two foreigners here . . . from Italy with shows and music—an organ—which was so charming it drew tears from my eyes"; April [26], 1795).

My effort to understand the world of Rebecca Dickinson began more than twenty years ago, just after I completed my junior year in college. I was a student at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, a history major with a particular interest—encouraged by two extraordinary professors, Charles Lloyd Cohen and Sargent Bush Jr.—in early American history and culture. To pursue those interests, in the summer of 1987 I jumped in my Pontiac Sunbird and headed off to spend ten glorious weeks attending the Summer Fellowship Program at Historic Deerfield, a museum of early American history and art in western Massachusetts.

The program aims to introduce undergraduates to the world of museums and historic sites and helps them contemplate graduate school. A requirement was (and remains) the completion of a research paper, and I chose to write about the special roles and responsibilities of ministers' wives. Among the many sources I consulted that summer was the diary—or, rather, photocopies of the diary—of Rebecca Dickinson, which I examined in search of insight into the lives of Hatfield, Massachusetts, Reverend Joseph Lyman and his wife, Hannah Huntington Lyman. At the end of that summer, then Director of Academic Programs Kevin M. Sweeney (more recently professor of history at Amherst College, and another historian whose deep knowledge of and respect for the past inspired me then, and continues to inspire me now) asked me whether I thought the diary, which at that time was still in family hands,

could support a larger study. I barely knew what was in it, but the opportunity to be the first person to really study any eighteenth-century diary was thrilling, and certainly irresistible. I jumped at the chance.

And so, upon my return home, eager to learn Dickinson's story, I began work on a senior thesis under Professor Cohen. I became deeply immersed in the diary, absorbing Dickinson's language and voice as I transcribed her words. I spent countless hours identifying the people and events mentioned and explored the diary's main themes in a long introduction that contemplated Dickinson's faith and her response to singlehood. The experience was challenging, but also exhilarating, like finding a portal to the past. Today I still advise undergraduates not to think of a topic and then go in search of documents, but rather to find a fascinating primary source and write about whatever it has to tell them.

After graduation I headed south to pursue graduate training at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, thinking a change of scenery might lead me toward southern women's history, but I couldn't shake the pull of the New England landscape or the draw of Dickinson's compelling voice. I completed a thesis on Dickinson's singlehood en route to a master's degree in history. As I worked to understand her emotional and intellectual responses to her life alone, I also had to come to grips with more mundane matters, including how she earned her living. Those questions led me to study her work in the clothing trades and to pose a series of questions about gender and artisanry in early America, research that found fruition in a doctoral dissertation, several articles, and eventually a book, *The Needle's Eye: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution*.

Years later, when I returned to Dickinson's diary with the aim of developing this biography, I had just completed work on a book about another early American craftswoman—Betsy Ross, the legendary maker of the nation's first flag—a figure far more famous today than Rebecca Dickinson, but about whom in many ways we know far less. Ross, like Dickinson, was an artisan (an upholsterer) who had to navigate much of the drama of the revolution without the help of a husband (though in Ross's case it was as a young widow, then the wife of a privateer who was captured at sea, and again as a widow); that project helped put Dickinson's experience in a new light. This retelling of Dickinson's story

continues to emphasize her experience as a never-married woman in early New England, but in the larger context of revolutionary America. The independence referred to in the book's title is meant to cue both Dickinson's experience as a woman who witnessed the dissolving of her colony's imperial bonds and emergence within an independent nation, and the ways in which Dickinson both created and experienced a place in the world as a woman independent of—and also bereft of, as she herself sometimes felt—the ties of a husband and children.

Revisiting Rebecca Dickinson now, twenty-five years after I first encountered her, reminds me of those first moments when I began to see how the voices of women long gone can continue to resonate today. To my present readers, I hope these pages teach you something about the American past. And I also hope you find subjects that engage your own curiosity, passions, and affections for as long and as keenly as these have engaged mine.

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This project has been something of a homecoming, a return to my first interests as a budding scholar, and I remain grateful to all of the mentors, colleagues, and friends who have supported this work over these many years.

It has been with great pleasure that I return once more to narrate Dickinson's story, drawing on the 1998 article and 2006 book, but also including both old material never before published and new research into the years preceding the September 1787 afternoon that she began the surviving portion of her journal—research that I had not yet had any opportunity to undertake, but had long wished to. I am grateful first to Carol Berkin for giving me this chance to return to Dickinson's fascinating world, and also to Priscilla McGeehon, Annie Lenth, and Sharon Langworthy for their thoughtful work shepherding the book through the editorial process.

And it is with much delight, too, that I thank here the same people acknowledged in those earlier works. For their thoughtful comments, careful criticism, and ongoing interest in Rebecca Dickinson over the several years during which I was immersed in her life and diary while a

graduate student in North Carolina, I wish to thank Judith M. Bennett, Charles L. Cohen, R. Donald Higginbotham, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Anne Digan Lanning, Laura Jane Moore, John K. Nelson, Kevin M. Sweeney, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, and Harry Watson. An essay on Dickinson's sense of herself as a woman alone drawn from those projects won the Walter Muir Whitehill prize in colonial history and was published in the *New England Quarterly* in 1998; some of the prose that follows here appeared first in that journal's hospitable pages. The editor of the *New England Quarterly*, Linda Smith Rhoads, helped tremendously with the preparation of that essay, and I thank her here once more for her early interest and enthusiasm as well as permission to draw on that prose for the book now at hand. (Those acknowledgments also note that research for the project was funded by two Elizabeth Fuller Fellowships from Historic Deerfield, Inc., an Esther Butt research grant from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and several grants from the History Department and the Graduate School of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, support that I am pleased to recognize once again here.) By the same token, I thank Clark Dougan of the University of Massachusetts Press for granting permission to use passages from my *The Needle's Eye*.

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