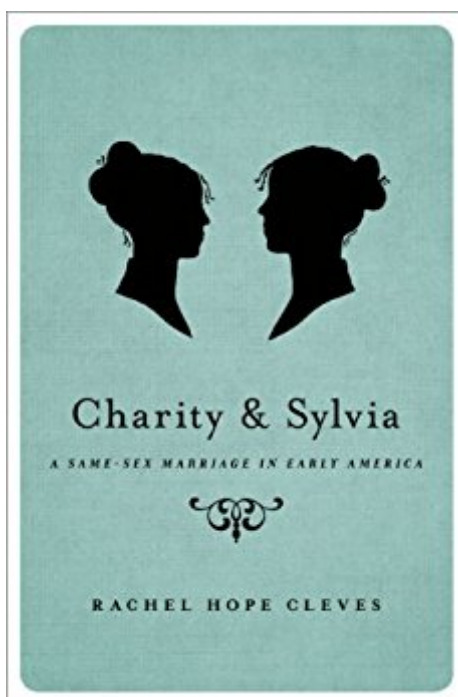


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Charity And Sylvia: A Same-Sex Marriage In Early America



Synopsis

Conventional wisdom holds that same-sex marriage is a purely modern innovation, a concept born of an overtly modern lifestyle that was unheard of in nineteenth century America. But as Rachel Hope Cleves demonstrates in this eye-opening book, same-sex marriage is hardly new. Born in 1777, Charity Bryant was raised in Massachusetts. A brilliant and strong-willed woman with a clear attraction for her own sex, Charity found herself banished from her family home at age twenty. She spent the next decade of her life traveling throughout Massachusetts, working as a teacher, making intimate female friends, and becoming the subject of gossip wherever she lived. At age twenty-nine, still defiantly single, Charity visited friends in Weybridge, Vermont. There she met a pious and studious young woman named Sylvia Drake. The two soon became so inseparable that Charity decided to rent rooms in Weybridge. In 1809, they moved into their own home together, and over the years, came to be recognized, essentially, as a married couple. Revered by their community, Charity and Sylvia operated a tailor shop employing many local women, served as guiding lights within their church, and participated in raising their many nieces and nephews. Charity and Sylvia is the intimate history of their extraordinary forty-four year union. Drawing on an array of original documents including diaries, letters, and poetry, Cleves traces their lives in sharp detail. Providing an illuminating glimpse into a relationship that turns conventional notions of same-sex marriage on their head, and reveals early America to be a place both more diverse and more accommodating than modern society might imagine, Charity and Sylvia is a significant contribution to our limited knowledge of LGBT history in early America.

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Customer Reviews

Excellent study of same-sex couples in post-revolutionary New England. One of my early thoughts is how often research on one subject or time period leads to valuable historical information about the same period. I had never considered the definition of male friendship described for Charityâ™s brother, or the apparent frequency of suicides during the depression era following the revolutionary war; neither of these seems to have been a part of my collegiate history studies. Neither were same-sex marriages in early America. Ms. Cleveâ™s carefully researched, documented, and annotated story of Charity and Sylvia recognizes that same-sex relationships were considered most sinful, but also shows those relationships were not unique to a select few. By selecting a couple well-known to their community and descendants, Ms. Cleves leads us not only through their lives, but also draws us inexorably into the lives of many early New England settlers in the severe depression that followed the revolutionary war. Her resources include detailed documentation in their own hands as well as records of the time from the contemporaries now held in the local historical collection. Both sons and daughters translated the rebellion against the English King with challenges against the constraints of their restrictive culture. Increasingly, young men broke their apprenticeships to run their own lives. Young women rejected enslavement to husbands and a lifetime of hard work and breeding, pursuing employment as teachers, seamstresses, and similar occupations. It is no wonder that both young men and young women sought out unconventional personal relationships as well.

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