

The Private War of Mrs. Packard

By Barbara Sapinsley / Reviewed by Dr. James Beck

Every time discouragement sets in because of the slow progress of egalitarian ideas, we ought to be able to reach over our shoulders and pull from the shelf a book such as Sapinsley's. The story of Mrs. Packard (1816-1897), set in the American midwest, should remind all of us how much has been accomplished by our forebears.

Elizabeth Packard's struggles are well-known in the history of American psychiatry. She was committed by her Presbyterian pastor husband to the Illinois State Asylum for the Insane in Jacksonville. There she lived for three and one half years (1860-1863) before being released, because Illinois officials could no longer maintain that she was insane. She travelled back to the Packard manse by herself. While walking home from the train station, she chatted with a young lad who later turned out to be her own son. He had grown so in her years away that she did not recognize him.

What did the Rev. Theophilus Packard have against his wife? "She disputed him on Calvinist theory, refusing to believe that her babes were born damned or that women had no right to hold and express their own opinions" (p. 5). Elizabeth made the mistake of participating in adult Sunday school class discussions. Fellow church members did not seem to mind her thoughtful challenges to established doctrines, but her husband was not at all pleased. Theophilus was an oldline Calvinist who could hold to some progressive ideas, such as the need for the abolition of slavery, but who could not tolerate any freedom of expression for his wife.

Matters did not improve around the Packard manse after Elizabeth was released from the asylum. Soon she found herself locked into her room with the one window to the outside nailed shut. She managed to smuggle out a note to a passerby who alerted the local judge as to her imprisonment. A trial followed at which Theophilus was informed he did not have the right to imprison his wife in her own home. The Packards remained separated for the remainder of their lives. Elizabeth refused to consider a divorce.

She began to write of her dreadful experiences. She supported herself with her earnings and was to become a widely known advocate for the insane. She lobbied in many legislatures for improved treatment and protection for those consigned to warehouses for the mentally ill.

The stakes were high for Elizabeth Packard, who raised her voice to question theological positions. The stakes are still high when women ask for the opportunity to participate in biblical and theological discussion. But, thanks to Mrs. Packard, women are much less frequently shipped off to asylums for doing so.

Mrs. Packard later wrote, "A spiritual woman is a living temple of the Holy Ghost." At her trial, Dr. Duncanson located this belief in a neglected 16th century doctrine expounded by Socinus of Italy. "I did not agree with her on many things," Duncanson testified, "but I do not call people insane because they differ with me." The Private War of Mrs. Packard. New York: Paragon House, 1991. Great American Trials.