



“A Lady Should Study, Not to Shine, But to Act”: The Education of Mary Catherine Winchester

Mary Catherine Winchester’s unpublished autobiography is the account of a woman who wanted to break out of the rural agricultural world she grew up in, to educate herself out of it, so to speak.

By Deborah P. Clifford

In August 1842, when Mary Catherine Severance had just turned twenty-one, she left home in Middlebury, Vermont, to spend a term at Castleton Seminary, thirty miles to the south. Catherine, as she was familiarly known, was driven part of the way by a cousin who had recently taken up farming. “I am thinking of getting me a housekeeper,” the young man told her as they sat together in his wagon, “and you are just the one I would like.” In reply Catherine laughed and said, “Oh, no, I cannot think of house-keeping. I am going to study for a long time, if possible, and then I must work and pay for it.” In this account, found in her unpublished memoirs, Winchester explains

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DEBORAH PICKMAN CLIFFORD (1933–2008) was a historian and biographer specializing in the study of nineteenth-century women. A frequent contributor to *Vermont History*, she was also the author of book-length biographies of Julia Ward Howe, Lydia Maria Child, and Abby Maria Hemenway. She was co-author with her husband, Nicholas R. Clifford, of “*The Troubled Roar of the Waters*”: *Vermont in Flood and Recovery, 1927–1931*, which won the Vermont Historical Society’s Richard O. Hathaway award in 2008. Her book of brief biographies of Vermont women, *More than Petticoats: Remarkable Vermont Women*, was published posthumously in 2009.

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that she “had other visions just then than housekeeping.” Besides, her cousin’s description of his farm and the work on it held little appeal. “I knew too well by experience what farm life was and I was not hankering for it.”¹

Mary Catherine Severance Winchester, born in the college town of Middlebury on August 21, 1821, was the eldest in a farm family of nine children, and, until three younger sisters were born in the 1830s, the only daughter.

When Winchester was in her eighties, her son Benjamin persuaded his mother to write an account of her life, so that his children could understand how different their grandmother’s childhood had been from their own and learn of the hardships endured by children of that earlier time. The “Recollections” she produced gave Benjamin Winchester much more than he bargained for. Running to more than four hundred pages in typescript, they tell us not only about the hardships his mother had known as a child, but also detail the household chores performed by Catherine and her mother, particularly the textile work they engaged in to earn extra money. There are lengthy sections too on Catherine’s marriage and widowhood. But Mary Catherine Winchester’s unpublished autobiography is also the account of a woman who wanted to break out of the rural agricultural world she grew up in, to educate herself out of it, so to speak.

However Winchester’s son Benjamin may have originally framed his request to his mother, she apparently took the opportunity presented to write something close to a complete autobiography, and her “Recollections” have the strengths and weaknesses of such a work. For in setting down her life, not only did she have to rely on her memory of distant events—a memory that a perusal of school and college catalogues of the time reveals as pretty spry with respect to names and dates—but she also, consciously or unconsciously, shaped the story itself. This gave her life a form and coherence that may well have been more evident in retrospect than it was during the years she was actually describing. Still, while the manuscript must be read with these limitations in mind, it nonetheless provides a fascinating and detailed picture of a nineteenth-century Vermont woman’s education.

Another reason these “Recollections” are of particular interest is that, while Catherine Winchester was hardly alone in wanting to escape the drudgery of life on the farm, she uses education (and local education at that) as a way of advancing herself. Rather than becoming a Lowell mill girl, or seeking her fortune in the West, as so many of her contemporaries did, she stays in Vermont, and uses its resources to climb up in the world.

Finally, Mary Catherine Severance Winchester was clearly an unusual young woman for her time, especially in her ambition and dedication to her studies. As Catherine Kelly has pointed out, most female seminary and academy students saw little connection between the self-cultivation that characterized their school years and their future domestic existence as wives and mothers.²

Like the members of many northern New England families, Catherine's parents, Ebenezer and Corcina Severance, who struggled to make a living on a succession of marginal farms, cannot be fit into any clear social class. Poor but respectable, they mingled comfortably with their more well-to-do neighbors. Ebenezer Severance was a member of a large close-knit family who had emigrated from Northfield, Massachusetts, to Middlebury in the 1790s. When Catherine was a child, her grandfather, Samuel Severance, and his two brothers, Enos and Moses, occupied adjoining farms some three miles from the village center on the road then leading to East Middlebury.

After Ebenezer, the second of eleven children, married Corcina Jones in 1817, the couple occupied rooms in his father's house, but a growing family of his own led him to build a small dwelling nearby. Winchester remembered those years living near her grandparents as happy ones, recalling evenings around the fire when there was much talk of religion and wrangling over doctrine and beliefs, but also stories told by the older family members about Indians and the Revolutionary War.³

Corcina Jones Severance, Catherine's mother, who had grown up twenty miles or so south of Middlebury in Hubbardton, had also enjoyed little schooling. But she loved learning for its own sake. Her father, Asahel Jones, had prepared for college with the intention of becoming a Baptist preacher. But the death of his own father, a cabinet maker, had put an end to such personal ambitions, and Asahel was forced to take over running the family business.

"Everyone in my father's family was early taught to work," Catherine remembered. As the eldest daughter in a large family she could not recall when she did not have home duties to perform. As early as age three she was already sewing up the sleeves of her father's fine shirts. By the time she was eleven she had learned to spin, and described herself as her mother's principal helper. One of Catherine's chores as a child was to fetch water for cooking and drinking from a brook some distance from the house, carrying it home in two pails that hung from a neck yoke across her shoulders. The family washing was done in the same stream. Catherine would make a fire to heat the water, and then, standing in the sun on fine days, she washed until her arms would blister and

peel. In winter one of her brothers melted snow to provide water for the laundry.⁴

As Catherine explains in her memoirs, her father might have escaped many hardships “had he not been so tender-hearted.” When friends and neighbors asked the affable Ebenezer to sign his name to their promissory notes, he found it hard, if not impossible, to refuse. His daughter could recall at least three instances when he “lost heavily” by other people’s debts. In the spring of 1833, for example, the family moved into the Harvey Yale place, a small house that her father had been obliged to take over in partial payment for Yale’s debts. Within a year, however, the family was back in their own house.⁵

Both Ebenezer and Corcina Severance took education seriously. Catherine describes her father, who had received little schooling himself, as “ever anxious to give his children the best opportunity possible for mental improvement.” She also remembered how, on cold winter evenings, her mother would recite whole pages of *Alexander’s Grammar*, which she had memorized while she worked.⁶

Catherine Kelly has pointed out that in many rural northern New England households of the time, family claims overruled individual ambitions, and work on the farm or in the factory took precedence over going to school, for sons as well as daughters. Catherine’s maternal grandfather, for example, had relinquished his dream of becoming a Baptist minister. And, as she admits in her memoirs, in the Severance family much more was said about “hard and almost constant work—than about study of any kind.” Echoing the testimony of generations of rural women, she described washing “bent over a tub as my mother and grandmother had done.” Under such conditions, she found it a hard struggle to find the time and energy to pursue her education. But pursue it she did.⁷

Catherine Severance’s education began when, at the age of three, she attended the summer term in her local district school. Mandated for each town by the state constitution, these Vermont common schools were controlled by the district in which they were located. A school committee hired the teacher, and costs, including firewood, were met by a “tax upon the scholar.” This meant that families were charged according to the number of children they sent to school per term.⁸ In most of these rural schools the summer term ran from May to September and was attended chiefly by small children whose parents wanted them out from underfoot during the busy agricultural season. As the years passed, however, Catherine was needed more for work at home, and her attendance at school was often interrupted.

In March 1834, when Catherine was twelve, Corcina Severance gave

birth to her seventh child. This meant that during her mother's confinement, Catherine did all the household work. That summer Corcina's younger sister, Cynthia, was in charge of the local school. She boarded with the Severances and helped out when she wasn't teaching. Cynthia Jones was reputedly an excellent teacher and when Corcina was able to be up and about a bit, Catherine was allowed to go to school every other day. Even on these alternate days, however, before setting off on the mile-long walk to school, she stayed home to help her mother with the cheesemaking. The work was hard, she remembered, and she didn't feel much like studying "after all I had done."⁹ Catherine doesn't tell us what she studied with her aunt, but it was the last year she attended school in summer. After this her formal education consisted of occasional winter terms in district school, and several terms in local seminaries.

Catherine Winchester was fortunate to have grown up in a college town, where education, including female education, had been taken seriously from the start. As she notes in her memoirs, the presence of a college always gives an intellectual air to a town, and "incites many to obtain a liberal education who would not otherwise be inclined that way."¹⁰ Though Middlebury College would not admit women students until 1883, in 1800, the year of its founding, plans were already underway to establish a female academy. Emma Willard, a native of Berlin, Connecticut, was among the early teachers in this school, founded in 1801, and it was while she lived in Middlebury that her innovative *Plan for Improving Female Education* (1819) was written, calling for providing women with an advanced curriculum similar to that found in contemporary men's colleges. Such an education, Willard claimed, while training some to be teachers, would better prepare women for responsible motherhood.

When Emma Willard first came to teach in Middlebury in 1807 it was one of the fastest-growing communities in the state and would soon be hailed by President Timothy Dwight of Yale as "one of the most prosperous and virtuous towns in New England." Mills and factories lined both sides of the Otter Creek, and large handsome houses were springing up around the village green. Upon her arrival Emma Willard wrote home of finding herself in "a very high state of cultivation—much more than any other place I was ever in." "The beaux here" she told her parents, "are, the greater part of them, men of collegiate education. . . . Among the older ladies, there are some whose manners and conversation would dignify duchesses."¹¹

Emma Willard had long since moved from Middlebury to Troy, New York, when Catherine Severance first experienced the joys of higher learning. This enthusiasm was born during the winter terms in her local

district school, where Middlebury College students often served as her instructors.¹² She had fond memories of several of these teachers. One of them was Daniel Knapen, class of 1839, who boarded with the Severance family while he was teaching. He brought his Virgil with him and sometimes on the long winter evenings he would translate it aloud. “Oh, I did long to read it myself,” Catherine recalled in her autobiography, “and was happy in later years to be able to read and teach it”—in Latin.¹³ As she tells it, listening to Knapen read Virgil had been a major catalyst prompting her to further her schooling.

Kinne Prescott was another favorite teacher. He was a good mathematician, and, impressed by Catherine’s facility with the subject, urged her to take more advanced courses at the local seminary. Catherine confessed in her “Recollections” that she had long wished to spend a term at the Middlebury Female Seminary, which had an excellent reputation. Sometime in 1838, before she turned seventeen, Catherine obtained her parents’ permission to attend the seminary, which had continued Emma Willard’s plan for providing women with a classical and scientific curriculum.¹⁴ While she doesn’t tell us how Corcina Severance felt about losing her “principal helper” for more than ten weeks, Catherine does say that her father, who was too poor to give his daughter any financial help, did arrange for her to live with the family of Dr. Zachaus Bass, the Severance family physician, and work for them in payment for board and tuition.

At least one member of Catherine’s family was outspoken in his disapproval of her educational ambitions. Her Severance grandfather, upon hearing that she was anxious to study higher mathematics, Latin, and Greek, questioned their usefulness to a woman. “What good will they do you?” he asked Catherine. “My girls never studied these things and they got along all right.”¹⁵

Catherine went ahead with her plans despite her grandfather’s disapproval, going about her preparations, as she later recalled, with “great joy” and the “hope of being able to realize my long-cherished wish and the advantages which would result therefrom.”¹⁶

What advantages these were exactly she does not say, and they were doubtless clearer in hindsight than at the time. But there seems little question that, from an early age, Catherine Severance yearned to escape the drudgery of farm life. She was also aware early on that alternatives to such a life existed for women, particularly educated women. In her “Recollections,” Catherine tells of how, when still a child, she had read aloud to her mother a book on the life of the early Baptist missionary, Ann Hazeltine Judson. Beginning in 1813, this Massachusetts native and academy graduate had served with her husband Adoniram Judson

in Burma. "My eyes were often filled with tears," Catherine remembered, "as I read of her great hardships and severe trials as a missionary in a foreign land."¹⁷ For much of the nineteenth century Ann Judson served for many American women as a potent symbol of feminine courage and piety.

Also at this time, American women educators were beginning to promote missionary work, both in foreign lands and the new western territories, along with teaching, as desirable evangelical callings for their female students. Mary Lyon, who founded Mt. Holyoke Seminary in 1837, claimed that one of her principal objectives as an educator was "to cultivate the missionary spirit" among her pupils, "that they should live for God, and do something as teachers, or in such other ways as Providence may direct." In other words there was work for women to do in "the cause of benevolence."¹⁸

Patricia Hill has pointed out that Mount Holyoke accomplished for women what the denominational colleges of the time were doing for young men in training them for the ministry. Not only did many Mount Holyoke graduates become teachers but a good number became the wives of young men heading for the foreign mission fields. In her memoirs, Winchester includes a lengthy sketch of Mary Lyon, in which she equates this great educator's early struggles as a farmer's daughter to obtain an advanced education with her own.¹⁹

In preparation for attending the Middlebury Female Seminary, Catherine needed new clothes, and to earn the necessary money, she left home for the first time and went to work as a weaver for a family in New Haven, eight miles north of Middlebury. She doesn't tell us their last name, but she describes the household as large and the job as a lengthy one. Catherine sat for long hours at the loom, weaving as much as twelve yards of cloth a day. While she did so, she couldn't help noticing that the eldest son in the family seemed "to have nothing in particular to do." An explanation for this odd behavior was provided by the young man's father, who declared that "Hiram has risen up like a giant and declared himself independent."²⁰

What Catherine made of behavior that would certainly not have been tolerated in the Severance family, she does not say. Yet in her own way, she too was asserting her independence by spending as much time as she could in furthering her education.

Catherine was sixteen when she enrolled for the spring term at the Middlebury Female Seminary. At the time the school occupied a large three-story building on the corner of Seminary and Washington Streets, not far from the village center. Its catalogue for the academic year ending in August 1838 lists Catherine Severance from Middlebury as one

of the 141 students. Also attending that same year was thirteen-year-old Julia Ripley of Rutland, who later achieved national recognition as the poet Julia Dorr. Dorr later remembered the seminary's principal, Nancy Swift, as a "most inspiring teacher," who taught her pupils reverence "for all things high and holy." Dorr also recalled how, at the end of the school day, Miss Swift, dressed in golden brown or pale yellow, would stand on a platform near the door of the schoolroom and curtsy to each of her pupils as they filed past. "Could any girl help behaving well?" Dorr later wondered.²¹

Tuition charges were \$3.50 per quarter, with Latin and French costing \$2.00 extra each.²² Catherine recalled taking three courses that winter: "Grammar, Parker's exercises in composition, and Philosophy." Though she later admitted that the Middlebury Female Seminary had lived up to its reputation for being a "good school" with many "fine teachers," for Catherine this first term was not a success. Dr. Bass's wife had burdened her with so much housework that she found little time or energy to spare for her studies.²³

Dr. Zachaus Bass was a widely respected and congenial member of the Middlebury community. Devoted to his profession, he always had an encouraging word for his patients.²⁴ While Catherine found Dr. Bass "all that I had expected," she described his wife, Susan, as tight-fisted and "bound to get all that was possible out of her help." Catherine soon discovered that in addition to keeping the house clean, she was also responsible for all the laundry in a household of nine people, and was not allowed to leave for school in the morning until all the washing was hung on the line. The moment she returned from school, sewing was placed in her hands. Thus she never had time to study her lessons.

When Catherine returned home at the end of the term, she told her father about the difficulty she was having finding time for study, and he in turn spoke to Dr. Bass, who agreed that during the spring term, Catherine would concentrate on her lessons and pay for her room and board by weaving for the family when the term ended. He added, however, that Catherine might occasionally "be asked to do a few little things just for her health." But "the few little things" turned out to be almost as much work as before, particularly when the Bass's daughter came for an extended visit with her husband and four children. When the term finally ended Catherine had few regrets that she could now return home.²⁵

Home by this time was no longer the farmhouse near her Severance grandparents. Sometime in 1838 Ebenezer Severance had been appointed overseer of the Middlebury Poor Farm, a position he readily assumed since it provided his family with a measure of financial stability. Located some five miles south of the village on the main road to

Rutland, the house became home for the Severance family, which by this time included nine children, together with half a dozen or so impoverished, mostly elderly inmates who had to be fed and in some cases cared for. This added responsibility greatly increased the burdens of housekeeping, already heavy enough when the Severance family had lived on its own.

Catherine, however, had not been in her new home for long before she left to teach the summer session in a district school in Ripton, a small community in the hills east of Middlebury. A bright and ambitious scholar, this sixteen-year-old was naturally anxious to acquit herself well as a teacher. But only five weeks into the term she broke down with what she described as a “nervous disease.” The challenge of teaching for the first time combined with the increased burden of housework at the Poor Farm, had all proved overwhelming and she had to be taken home.²⁶

The family doctor, presumably Zachaus Bass, ordered her not to work and for most of the next year Catherine lived quietly with her Severance grandparents—more peaceful surroundings in which to recuperate than the Poor Farm. The least excitement, she later remembered, “or anything coming suddenly would set me all in a tremble. A heavy thunderstorm accompanied by vivid lightning would so affect me that sometimes it would take two to keep me in my chair.”²⁷

The exact nature of this nervous disorder will never be known, but the symptoms bear a marked similarity to the nineteenth-century illness known as hysteria, which Nancy Walker has described as a “form of self-definition for women,” an outward expression of the tension they felt “between their desire for autonomy and independence and the reality of their subordinate roles.” Since victims of this disease were usually treated as invalids and relieved of their normal day-to-day duties, by succumbing to hysteria, Catherine, consciously or unconsciously, had found a way to opt out of her family’s unremitting domestic demands. Although she makes no such admission in her memoir, Catherine was, in effect, telling her parents that for her, if not for them, school work was a priority, and if the demands placed on her were not eased, she would become a permanent invalid and of no use around the house at all.²⁸

By the summer of 1839 Catherine was considered well enough to make an extended stay in Eaton, New York, the home of several of her father’s sisters. One of these sisters, Aunt Azubia and her husband, William Rockwell, had been visiting their relatives in Middlebury and offered to take Catherine back home with them to live for a year.

The long journey, which Catherine helped pay for by exchanging her pet lamb for a loan of cash from her father, began with a rough ride to

Whitehall, New York, in Ebenezer Severance's two-horse "pleasure wagon," driven by Darius, Catherine's youngest brother. There they boarded a canal steamer to Utica, followed by a thirty-mile coach ride from Utica to Eaton.

While in Whitehall, a town on the southern tip of Lake Champlain, the travelers called on a number of cousins, including one young woman, Alantha Severance, who was living on her own in a single room and studying music and painting. She supported herself by teaching penmanship. Catherine herself would later study painting and teach it. What she doesn't say in her memoirs is whether this example of female artistic ambition and independence put ideas in her head.²⁹

Settled with her aunt and uncle in Eaton, Catherine enjoyed a very different life from the one she was used to back home on the farm. Instead of hours spent at the washtub or making cheese, she writes of attending "pleasant parties," taking rides, and going to concerts with her young cousins and their friends.

One singular advantage of staying with the Rockwells was the presence of an academy next door. "My aunt thought it would be a great opportunity for me, provided I could stand it, to study," so Catherine took two courses there, botany and writing. Added to this were music lessons. To pay for it all, Catherine employed her now considerable skills as a seamstress, helping out with her aunt's tailoring business.

All this activity, which she greatly enjoyed, did not help Catherine make a complete recovery and for a time during this visit with the Rockwells, she spent a week living in the home of a local doctor hoping he could cure her of her "nervous disorder." He treated her with what she describes as a costly Chinese root medicine—probably ginseng—while at the same time making her take lots of rest and exercise. In her "Recollections" Catherine claims her health was very much improved by this regime, and at the end of the year she returned home eager to resume her studies.³⁰

This time Catherine's parents put no obstacles in the way of her pursuit of an education. In the winter of 1841, she enrolled at the age of nineteen for a second term at the Middlebury Female Seminary. On this occasion there was no question of combining household labor with schoolwork. Instead, she and two friends, Kate McCottwe and Eliza Evarts, hired rooms in Middlebury village where they prepared their own meals, helped by a weekly supply of baked goods provided by their families. Catherine's classes at the seminary were in astronomy, history, and geometry, and with few household chores to distract her, she had plenty of time to devote to her studies. How she paid the tuition—now \$4.50 a term—plus living expenses, she does not say. But Catherine had

already earned good money with her skilled needlework, and this doubtless helped to settle her debts.

This was Catherine's last term at the Middlebury Female Seminary, but unfortunately her memoirs provide no information about her classes or teachers, beyond listing the courses she took. In contrast, she tells us far more about what she learned the following year when she, along with seven of her younger brothers and sisters, enrolled for the winter term at the local Munger Street district school. By this time the Severance family had left the poor farm and returned to their old home. By Catherine's account the school had the benefit of an "excellent teacher," named David Bushnell. The son of Jedediah Bushnell, pastor of the Cornwall Congregational Church, David was a student at Castleton Seminary preparing to enter Middlebury College. Catherine's studies that winter of 1842 were chemistry, algebra, and geometry. Another young woman, May Smith, "a good scholar," took chemistry with her, but the other two subjects she studied on her own. "I could go so far and so fast as I pleased," she remembered.³¹

If it sounds strange to the modern reader that a young woman of twenty, who had already spent two terms in a female seminary, would consider returning to her district school to study advanced subjects, Catherine gives no indication that such a course was out of the ordinary. On the contrary, her account takes such an arrangement happily for granted.

In sum, like other memoirs of the time, Winchester's "Recollections" reveal much about the fluidity of women's education and its haphazard nature. As Catherine's contemporary, the Rutland poet Julia Ripley Dorr, phrased it, "We went to school whenever it 'came to hand,' whenever it was quite convenient." Dorr came from a family that was well-off, so that economic resources were not the issue in her case; but in farm families like the Winchesters, the haphazard nature of education affected sons as well as daughters.³²

One reason Catherine Winchester writes so enthusiastically about her district school studies, compared to those she pursued at the seminary, might be that in the former her teachers encouraged her to advance in a subject as far as she was willing to go. Another was surely the attention she received from scholarly young men like Bushnell, who were patently delighted to have such an eager and able pupil in their classroom. As Catherine observes in her "Recollections," this prospective Middlebury student not only took a keen interest in her studies but "seemed happy for his own sake to be reviewing these advanced subjects."³³

Bushnell also spoke highly of Castleton Seminary and encouraged Catherine to spend a term there to continue her study of mathematics.

This co-educational boarding school offered academy-level education to young men and women from Rutland and the surrounding counties. A great attraction for Catherine was Castleton Seminary's loan program which accepted ten "young ladies" a year "for the whole or the part of the academic course." They were required to pay \$12 at the close of each term and pay back the remainder at a later time.³⁴ Taking her young teacher's advice, Catherine applied for and obtained one of these loans. In late August 1842, she left home to spend a term at Castleton Seminary.

The school had suffered hard times in the 1830s, until the Reverend Edward Hallock was chosen as principal in 1838, and for the first five years or so of his leadership it thrived. According to several of his old students, Hallock "gathered in the sons and daughters of farmers and mechanics from all the neighboring counties," and refined the manners of "awkward and diffident farmers' boys." "How quickly," one of these alumni noted, "the boys lost their verdancy," and the girls became "young ladies."³⁵

Catherine Winchester's recollections of Castleton Seminary suggest that this school, for women at least, was pedagogically more conservative than the Middlebury Female Seminary. On her arrival at the school, Mr. Hallock, whose powers of persuasion were legendary, discouraged her from continuing her mathematical studies. "You have too much mathematics now in your head," Catherine remembered him saying. Instead, against her better judgment, he advised her to take French—an ornamental subject for which students carried an extra charge. While Winchester wrote of finding the academic experience at Castleton "somewhat disappointing," she also admitted that "there are other things to be considered in a person's education than book-learning."³⁶

As she had approached the school the day of her arrival, Castleton Seminary looked very imposing from a distance. But "once inside," she later remembered, "much of the splendor and glitter departed," and "the rooms were very plainly furnished." Furthermore, Catherine soon discovered that she'd arrived too early. Classes wouldn't start for a week, and her room wasn't ready. Eventually a room was found for her to use, but she never forgot that first sleepless night on a hard, cold bed with few coverings, or the lonely and unhappy days that followed. At the end of that first week the term finally opened, the other pupils began arriving, her room was prepared, and classes began. Then "it was not quite so bad," she rather reluctantly admitted.³⁷

The "Recollections" don't tell us what courses she took, but a glance at the school catalogue for that year, 1842–1843, shows Catherine Severance of Middlebury listed as a member of the "Ladies' Middle Class."

Whether the “ladies” took the same courses as the “gentlemen” is nowhere made clear. Nor do we know what Catherine studied apart from French and music. All she tells us is that the French teacher was incompetent, and the practicing rooms for music inadequate. This, despite the fact that for both these courses she incurred an extra charge. The catalogue also notes the existence of a Young Ladies Society in the school with its own library. Its members, we are told, “devote some portion of their time to needle-work . . . for some benevolent object.” If Catherine joined this organization, she makes no mention of it.³⁸

From the start Catherine remembered seeing herself as different from the other Castleton students, although she too had come from much the same rural background as many of them. She mentions her shabby Sunday attire as one mark of that difference, also her eagerness to learn. While she rose every morning early to study, the two students across the hall, May Phelps and Emma Houghton, would lie in bed until the last breakfast bell. These young women, Winchester writes, “did not have to plan how they could best improve every moment of their time to their great advantage. One of them often said to me, ‘I wish that I did not always have to go to school.’” Here Catherine seems to be setting herself apart from, and perhaps above, those of her classmates who showed little comprehension of why they should study.³⁹

It is hard to imagine that Catherine, who had spent two terms at the prestigious Middlebury Female Seminary and a year in Eaton—where she moved easily in its social world—was any less cultivated than her fellow female students. What really set her apart in a school where social refinement seemed to take precedence over academics (at least for the girls), were her scholarly ambitions. But Catherine Severance Winchester was, as her “Recollections” reveal, a very gregarious individual at heart, and in the end what she valued most about her term at Castleton was the social experience. “I found there many cultured ladies,” she wrote, “who became warm friends, to say nothing of the many fine gentlemen.” One of these was to be her future husband, Warren Winchester.⁴⁰

Warren Weaver Winchester was a member of the senior class at Castleton the year Catherine was a student there. Born in 1824 in Madrid, New York, he was preparing to enter Middlebury College the following year. The seminary catalogue for 1842–43 also lists him as one of three teaching assistants. How much Catherine and Warren saw of one another she does not say. She does, however, tell her readers that, when Warren came to Middlebury College as a freshman, his reputation as an excellent teacher accompanied him from Castleton.

By this time the Severance family were living once more in their old

neighborhood where Ebenezer had purchased the Hagar place. When Catherine was offered a chance to teach the summer term at the Munger Street school, some three miles from their new home, her father urged her to take it, despite the meager pay of 75 cents per week. Catherine owed Mr. Hallock \$40 for tuition and board at Castleton and a better paid position might not turn up.

Despite the low salary, Catherine not only enjoyed her teaching, she also introduced some innovations. Parents were encouraged to visit the school often. Soon, she remembered, “there was hardly a week when we did not have 6 to eight mothers attentively listening to their children’s lessons.” As a result, the students worked hard. She also concluded the term with a public examination and “speaking of pieces.” The house was packed, and, by her account, “the students acquitted themselves nobly and their parents seemed well pleased.”⁴¹ When the term was over Catherine took home a commission to weave a carpet. She also spun twenty runs of yarn for her aunt. Payments for these tasks combined with her teacher’s salary and some additional help from her father enabled her to pay off her debt to Mr. Hallock.

Sometime after Warren Winchester arrived at Middlebury College that fall, he turned up unannounced at Catherine’s doorstep, looking for a teaching job. Word had reached him that she had taught the summer term at the Munger Street school. Could he be hired for the winter term, he wondered? Catherine, aware of Warren’s excellent reputation as a teacher, had little trouble getting him appointed. At the same time “feeling sure that we were to have a first-rate teacher,” she “determined to make the most of the opportunity,” and became herself a pupil in the same school where only a few months earlier she’d been the teacher.⁴²

In order to attend school that winter and help her mother at home, Catherine would rise early in the morning to do the family washing and cook breakfast, all by candlelight. Only when these chores were finished would she leave to walk the three miles to school, where she mainly studied algebra and geometry. She remembered being the only pupil who took these subjects. When a fault-finding neighbor, Harvey Yale, objected to having such advanced instruction in a district school,” Warren spent an evening with Yale defending the practice. As Warren rose to leave, Yale assured him he’d make a good lawyer.⁴³

“He was certainly a born teacher,” Catherine later wrote, recalling her future husband’s success in the classroom. Warren Winchester was equally proud of his star pupil and would invite his college friends to hear her say her lessons. Years later Warren told her how surprised these young men had been to learn that “a pupil in a country school could recite so well.”⁴⁴

This was Catherine's last term in school, but by no means the end of her education. During the remainder of Warren's years at Middlebury he acted as her tutor. When, in his junior year, he was appointed the college librarian, he kept her supplied with good books. She also attended talks he gave on noted authors, including Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shakespeare. "All of this," she later recalled, "afforded me the greatest opportunity of my life for study."⁴⁵

Meanwhile, the Severance family had moved yet again. This time it was to a farm on the Weybridge Road, only a mile from Middlebury, close enough to the college so Warren could walk out for their weekly tutorial sessions, first in Latin, and later Greek.

While Catherine's romantic feelings for Warren Winchester seem directly influenced by his respect for her intellect, she says nothing in her "Recollections" about desiring intellectual equality with men. It is clear, however, from her admiration for women educators like Mary Lyon, that she too believed that women could use their minds as effectively as men and valued giving her sex the best possible education.⁴⁶

Looking back nostalgically at this earlier time, Catherine Winchester cannot help rhapsodizing about her relationship with her late husband. "He loaned me books, talked, sang, and walked with me, fashioned my tastes, made clearer my reverence for nature and for God, and in a few years transformed me." "It was one of those cases," she later recalled somewhat ingenuously, "where a teacher selects a pupil who may have some ability—yet is unconscious and timid till the master teaches her accuracy and enthusiasm and she is made to think herself worth while and begins to long to accomplish something worth living for." Warren, she concluded, "showed himself worthy of my love and of my greatest admiration." Sometime in the summer of 1844, the two became engaged.⁴⁷

Mary Catherine Severance and Warren Winchester were married in June 1848, the year after his graduation from Middlebury. There followed a year of teaching for both of them at Castleton Seminary. Then Warren enrolled in the Andover Theological School to train for the ministry, and the couple left Vermont. For the remainder of his life, except for an interlude as a chaplain in Washington, D.C., during the Civil War, Warren served as the Congregational minister in a number of New England towns. Early in her marriage, Catherine continued teaching, but once their children began coming, she stopped working outside the home. Eleven children were eventually born to the couple. Six of these were stillborn or died in infancy. Of the remaining five, only one, Benjamin, survived to adulthood.⁴⁸

Despite the devastating loss of so many children, Catherine and Warren Winchester's marriage was, by her account, a happy one. In Warren

she had found a man who both nurtured her love of learning and gave her in her role as a minister's wife a sense of mission and purpose. She had succeeded, in Emma Willard's words, in arriving at a life of "distinguished usefulness."⁴⁹

Catherine's marriage was also in many respects a conventional one that reflected the nineteenth-century gendered division of labor. Like other middle-class women of her day, she was chiefly responsible for the household work and childrearing, which in her case included home-schooling her children. Echoing the ideas of republican motherhood which called on women to school their families in the virtues demanded by the new nation, she insisted in her memoirs that "nothing is of so much importance as the training [mothers] give their children in their early years."⁵⁰

But while Catherine strongly supported the role of woman as helpmeet and mother, she also held to the progressive view that educated women had a role in civil society. When her domestic cares did not overwhelm her, she ran prayer meetings and taught Sunday school in Warren's parish. She even wrote occasional sermons for her husband. In the post-Civil War years, when the Winchesters were living in Bridport, Vermont, Catherine was an active member of the local Women's Christian Temperance Union chapter. She gave occasional lectures, and served for a time as the chapter's president.⁵¹

Warren Winchester died in 1889 and his widow spent the remainder of her long life with her only remaining child, Benjamin, and his family. Much of the last half of Catherine Winchester's autobiography describes a two-year stay in Europe with Ben while he studied in Germany. She mentions having a dress made in Paris, thus marking the distance she had come from her rural Vermont childhood. Catherine lived to a good old age, dying in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1931 at the age of ninety-one.

As mentioned earlier, in her "Recollections" Catherine Winchester included several sketches of nineteenth-century American women whom she admired. Mary Lyon, the founder of Mount Holyoke, was one. Another was Emily Chubbuck Judson, who, like Lyon, had grown up in rural poverty but managed nonetheless to acquire a decent education and had gone on to do good in the world. She made a name for herself, first as a writer of stories about young girls who left the farm to work as domestics, milliners, and mill workers. The unlucky heroines returned home to live and die on the farm, but the more fortunate found husbands who were factory owners, or better still, missionaries. Chubbuck herself became a missionary when she married the renowned Reverend Adoniram Judson. His first two wives, including Catherine Winchester's childhood heroine, Ann Hazeltine Judson, had died, and in 1846 he took



Photograph of Mary Catherine Winchester late in life. Courtesy of Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vt. catalog # 1992-36.2

Emily Chubbuck as his third wife and carried her off to Burma, where she survived him.⁵²

In common with the lucky heroines in Emily Chubbuck Judson's stories, Catherine Winchester had escaped a potential life of rural drudgery for a more refined and socially useful existence as a minister's wife. However, unlike these heroines of Chubbuck's stories, who had found husbands by leaving the farm to work in the city, Catherine had found Warren in the course of obtaining a good education. Writing from the perspective of old age, Winchester called her efforts to acquire advanced schooling a success and declared that she had "come to believe that if one really desires to get an education, there will be some way found to accomplish it."⁵³

Certainly, that's the way it sounds from reading Winchester's "Recollections," which tell us how one ambitious northern New England farmer's daughter succeeded in making the best of the educational opportunities available to her, and obtained a schooling that matched that acquired by the graduates of Middlebury College. But the reader wonders if it was really as easy as Winchester says it was. Early in the memoir she does admit that her grandfather saw no reason why women needed to study higher mathematics, but he is the only family member Winchester mentions who disapproved of her educational ambitions. Surely there were others. Was her mother, for all her love of learning, really so happy to lose her principal helper around the house when she had eight younger children to care for? Winchester has us believe that once her breakdown occurred and her parents understood her deep craving for a higher education, it was all smooth sailing as she took up one educational opportunity after another, until she finally met and married Warren Winchester, the best teacher of all. Catherine writes as though from that time on she had been in complete control of the course her education took. Is this really the way it was? Or is this her view of it from the perspective of old age?

Another question raised by the "Recollections" is, how representative was Catherine Winchester's educational experience? There is little question that plenty of other women at that time educated themselves out of the rural agricultural world. Abby Hemenway of Ludlow, the editor of the *Vermont Historical Gazetteer*, is one local example. Winchester herself provides us with several other nationally prominent ones, including Mary Lyon and Emily Chubbuck Judson.

But surely the most surprising finding in these "Recollections" is Winchester's singling out for special praise, not her instructors at the Middlebury Female Seminary, as one might expect, but the undergraduates and college-bound boys who taught her in district school. As Margaret

Nelson has pointed out, having college men as teachers was one benefit to be gained from living in a college town.⁵⁴ One wonders if other young women living in the vicinity of the several colleges scattered throughout the region were able, like Catherine Winchester, to study advanced subjects such as chemistry and geometry in their district schools.⁵⁵

Finally, Catherine Winchester wrote her memoirs during the first decade of the twentieth century, by which time a woman's education had evolved far beyond what she had known as a girl. Did she perhaps superimpose, to some degree at least, a later generation's justification for educating women over her own youthful ambitions?

In sum, Mary Catherine Severance Winchester's "Recollections" is a fascinating document, unusually detailed in its discussion of one nineteenth-century American woman's education. But more study of such individual accounts is needed if we are truly to understand the educational experiences of antebellum northern New England rural women.

NOTES

¹Mary Catherine Winchester, "Recollections of a Long Life: An Autobiography," 84. The original copy of this unpublished manuscript remains in the Winchester family and is not available to researchers, but the Shelburne Museum archives, in Shelburne, Vermont, and the Henry Sheldon Museum in Middlebury, Vermont, have typewritten copies of most, but not all, of the original manuscript. Underlined words are as they appear in the typescript. The quotation in the title of this article is from "Female Education" by Catherine Beecher (1827).

²Catherine E. Kelly, *In the New England Fashion: Reshaping Women's Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), 84–85.

³Winchester, "Recollections," 62–63.

⁴*Ibid.*, 62.

⁵*Ibid.*, 23, 13.

⁶*Ibid.*, 5, 14. Winchester is probably referring here to Caleb Alexander, *A Grammatical System of the English Language: Comprehending a plain and familiar scheme of teaching young gentlemen and ladies the art of speaking correctly in their native tongue* (Rutland, Vt., 1819).

⁷Kelly, *In the New England Fashion*, 61. See Kelly also for a discussion of how provincial communities resist the standard criteria for middle-class formation, 15. In Winchester's case it is important to note that one brother, four brothers-in-law, and several cousins attended Middlebury College. See Winchester, "Recollections," 38.

⁸Margaret K. Nelson, "Vermont Female Schoolteachers in the Nineteenth Century," *Vermont History* 49 (Winter 1981): 7.

⁹Winchester, "Recollections," 65.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 36.

¹¹Glenn, M. Andres, *A Walking History of Middlebury* (Middlebury, Vt., 1975), 3; Alma Lutz, *Emma Willard: Pioneer Educator of American Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 13–14.

¹²District schools, intended to ensure a rudimentary education for all Vermonters, had been mandated by the 1777 state constitution. By 1846 there were more than 2,000 of these independent school districts in Vermont. Most employed a single teacher who supervised pupils at all grade levels. Middlebury College arranged its calendar so that students had time off in the middle of winter to teach a term in one of the nearby district schools. See Nelson, "Vermont Female Schoolteachers," 14.

¹³Winchester, "Recollections," 48.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 50. As Mary Kelley has recently pointed out, beginning in the early decades of the nineteenth century female seminaries and academies were increasingly emphasizing "a strictly academic course of study. . . . The authorizing value for a woman's education . . . now came exclusively from a curriculum modeled on the requirements at male colleges." in *Learning to Stand & Speak: Women, Education, and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 71.

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¹⁵ Winchester, "Recollections," 95.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁸ Quoted in Patricia R. Hill, *The World Their Household: The American Woman's Foreign Mission Movement and Cultural Transformation, 1870-1920* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), 42. See Kelley, *Learning to Stand & Speak*, 73.

¹⁹ Hill, *The World Their Household*, 42. For an account of Mary Lyon, see Winchester, "Recollections," 94.

²⁰ Winchester, "Recollections," 44.

²¹ *Catalogue of the Trustees, Instructors and Students of Middlebury Female Seminary, For the Year Ending Aug. 10, 1838* (Middlebury, Vt.: Office of People's Press, 1838); Robert G. Steele, *With Pen or Sword: Lives and Times of the Remarkable Rutland Ripleys* (New York: Vantage Press, 1979), 15-16. For a history of the Middlebury Female Seminary, see Henry Perry Smith, et al., *History of Addison County, Vermont* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1886), 350-351; Thomas Merrill, *Semecentennial Sermon Containing a History of Middlebury, Vermont* (Middlebury, 1841), 84-85. A closing examination for the Middlebury Female Seminary's 1837 winter term, signed by one of the trustees, is the only surviving account of the school's mission. "The public may rest assured that the instructions of the various branches of learning, and the moral and religious influences exerted by the principal over her pupils are of the *best character*." See *The (Middlebury) People's Press*, 21 February 1837, 3.

²² For tuition charges see *Catalogue of the Trustees, Instructors, and Students of Middlebury Female Seminary, For the Year Ending August 9, 1839*.

²³ Winchester, "Recollections," 50.

²⁴ For a sketch of Dr. Zachaus Bass, see H.P. Smith, *History of Addison County*, 166-167.

²⁵ Winchester, "Recollections," 52.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁸ Nancy Walker, "'Wider Than the Sky': Public Presence and the Private Self in Dickinson, James and Woolf," in Shari Berstock, ed., *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 289; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America," in Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, ed., *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 207-208.

²⁹ Winchester, "Recollections," 73-74.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

³² Robert G. Steele, *With Pen or Sword*, 19.

³³ Winchester, "Recollections," 82.

³⁴ *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Castleton Seminary. July 20, 1843* (Rutland, Vt.: H. T. White, 1843).

³⁵ *Report of the Proceedings Commemorating the One-Hundredth Anniversary of a Chartered School Known at Different Times as the Rutland County Grammar School, Castleton Seminary and the State Normal School in Castleton, Vermont, 1787-1887* (Rutland: The Tuttle Company, 1888), 27, 41.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 27; Winchester "Recollections," 89, 92.

³⁷ Winchester, "Recollections," 85-86.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 87. *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of Castleton Seminary. July 20, 1843*.

³⁹ Winchester, "Recollections," 87; Kelly, *In the New England Fashion*, 84.

⁴⁰ Winchester, "Recollections," 92. Catherine Kelly underscores the socializing value of the academy or seminary experience in providing girls, especially daughters of farmers who had grown up largely isolated from their peers, "with an institutional setting in which to develop friendships." See *In the New England Fashion*, 70.

⁴¹ Winchester, "Recollections," 93.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴⁶ For other accounts of romance between a pupil and her tutor, see Lucia McMahon, "'We Would Share Equally': Gender, Education, and Romance in the Journal of Rachel Van Dyke," in Lucia McMahon and Deborah Schriver, eds., *To Read My Heart: The Journal of Rachel Van Dyke, 1810-1811* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). See also Kelly, *In the New England Fashion*, 86-87.

⁴⁷ Winchester, "Recollections," 102.

⁴⁸It was during their years in Washington, D.C., where for the duration of the Civil War Warren served as an army chaplain, that the Winchesters suffered the devastating loss of three of their four living children to diphtheria. A fourth later died of spinal meningitis. Benjamin, the only child to survive to adulthood, was born in 1868.

⁴⁹Quoted in Kelley, *Learning to Stand & Speak*, 33.

⁵⁰Winchester, "Temperance address" given in Bridport, Vermont. See "Recollections," 361. Dianne M. Hallman, "Agnes Maule Machar on the Higher Education of Women," *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 13, 2(2001): 173–174.

⁵¹As Lisa Pichnarcik has noted, "A woman's community involvement and pursuit of occupations other than wife and mother enabled her to utilize and express her knowledge outside the home," where "she could help organize groups that had societal influences, like temperance and charitable societies." See Lisa Roberge Pichnarcik, "'On the Threshold of Improvement': Women's Education at the Litchfield Female and Morris Academies," *Connecticut History* 37:2 (1996–1997): 147. Catherine Winchester also echoes Anne Firor Scott's description of well-educated women as "agents of cultural diffusion," spreading the word that women should be educated, and "setting an example by their interest in study and learning," Scott, "The Ever-Widening Circle: The Diffusion of Feminist Values from the Troy Female Seminary, 1822–1872," *History of Education Quarterly* 19 (Spring 1979): 9.

⁵²For information on Emily Chubbuck Judson, see *Notable American Women: A Biographical Dictionary* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).

⁵³Winchester, "Recollections," 94.

⁵⁴Nelson, "Female Schoolteachers in the Nineteenth Century," 14.

⁵⁵Catherine Kelly makes no mention of advanced subjects being taught in district school and writes that "however uneven the training offered by . . . antebellum academies it superseded that which was available in the village common schools." Kelly, *In the New England Fashion*, 74.