

FROM THE COLLECTIONS

ELIZABETH OAKES SMITH: CRUSADING AUTHOR



Artist unknown, possibly Jared B. Flagg, American, 1820-1899, Portrait of Elizabeth Oakes Smith, oil on canvas; 77 x 65 cm. *Collection of the Maine Historical Society*

One of the most engaging portraits in the collections of the Maine Historical Society is that of the young writer-reformer Elizabeth Oakes Smith (1806-1893), wreathed in laurel. The painting is a tangible reminder of a confident woman from Maine who would grow up to contribute to the local and national literary scene before achieving even wider recognition as a crusader for women's rights. Long thought to have been painted for Smith's 1823 wedding by artist Jared Flagg, the attribution has recently been questioned in correspondence from Robert W. Torchia, a researcher at the National Gallery. It is impossible for the artist to have painted Smith in the 1820s, for he was just an infant. However, he could have painted the likeness decades later, working from a miniature or other image. Artist aside, the oil was the proud possession of Elizabeth Oakes Smith.

The fact that the Maine Historical Society bought the painting from a relative, Augusta Oakes Smith of Hollywood, North Carolina, in 1894 suggests the high esteem in which the writer was held in her native state. A native of Yarmouth, Elizabeth Prince grew up in a deeply religious family, which gave its name to Prince's Point on broad Cove, Casco Bay. On the death of her father, Elizabeth's family moved to Portland, where Elizabeth attended Rachel Neal's school. At sixteen the beautiful, talented young woman entered what seems to have been an arranged marriage with writer and *Eastern Argus* editor Seba Smith (1792-1868). Later she wrote that her husband was "nearly twice my age, wore spectacles, and was very bald."

Soon after the marriage, Seba bought his own newspaper and, in the 1830s, created the enormously popular down-east character, Major Jack Downing. The Major's rural antics swept the nation, with Smith's column appearing in newspapers throughout the land. Fame, however, was not matched by fortune, since the Major was widely pirated. During the time that Seba was earning literary praise, Elizabeth bore him five sons. Because she was particularly proud of her Oakes family heritage, she had her children's last name legally changed to Oaksmith. Always independent, she began to write on her own, contributing to Ann S. Stephens's *Portland Sketch Book* in 1836 and coming under the influence of Portland novelist and critic John Neal. In 1849, Elizabeth became the first woman known to climb Mt. Katahdin.

After the financial Panic of 1837, Seba lost his fortune and would spend the rest of his life trying to regain it. This entailed moves to South Carolina and New York. By the 1840s Elizabeth was contributing poetry and prose to national publications, and the financial burden of the family fell largely to her. Much admired by critics Edgar Allan Poe and N.P. Willis, and derided as one of those "scribbling women" by Hawthorne and others, she became a major player in the so-called "Feminine Fifties." Other Maine-related writers of the day included Ann Stephens and Fanny Fern. For her part, Smith produced four novels, including the best-seller, *Bald Eagle* (1867), and her stories of New York newsboys helped focus attention on urban poverty.

Her growing understanding of America's social ills brought her to the national lyceum circuit, where she lectured on women's suffrage. In 1851 Smith brought out the influential *Woman and Her Needs*, and followed her own advice by studying for the ministry. In 1877 she became pastor of the Independent Church at Canastota, New York. Although she died in North Carolina, the writer maintained lifelong ties with her native Maine.

Aside from the beautiful *Portrait of Elizabeth Oakes Smith*, the Maine Historical Society boasts a strong collection of books by and about the author. The manuscript holdings include letters from Smith to author John Neal, politician William Pitt Fessenden, and other leading figures. Manuscript Collection S-279 offers Smith papers, articles, and genealogical material, and Collection S-164 includes two typescript copies of her autobiography. In 1924 Mary Alice Wyman began the process of scholarly study by editing *Selections from the Autobiography of Elizabeth Oakes Smith* (Lewiston, Maine), followed by *Two American Pioneers: Seba and Elizabeth Oakes Smith* (New York) in 1927. As a writer, crusading activist, and social critic, Elizabeth Oakes Smith deserves renewed attention.

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