

*Trials of Intimacy*, by Richard Wightman Fox

reviewed by [Margaret Bendroth](#) in the [June 21, 2000](#) issue

Richard Fox's *Trials of Intimacy* deals with the second-most famous sex scandal in American history. It is written with an eye trained on the past, not the present--a perspective that will frustrate readers seeking a morally instructive tale for our times, but delight those who enjoy a well-told story about another time.

The Beecher-Tilton scandal, combining religion, celebrity and sex, has never lacked for interpreters. In the 1870s, a stream of allegations, confessions and retractions from the parties involved supplied months, even years, of newspaper fodder for an eager public. The accused adulterer was Henry Ward Beecher, America's best-known preacher, brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe and the youngest son of the famous moral reformer Lyman Beecher. The woman in question was Elizabeth "Libby" Tilton, a parishioner in Beecher's Brooklyn congregation. The aggrieved husband was Theodore Tilton, a nationally famous abolitionist newspaper editor and, at one time, Beecher's close friend. The cast of minor characters rival a 20th-century soap opera: duplicitous friends, jealous co-workers, nosy neighbors and, of course, the sexy siren who first broke the story, the notorious "free love" advocate Victoria Woodhull.

Since the late 19th century, historians have had great fun with this story, most of it at Beecher's expense. The Victorian preacher's flowing locks and flowery metaphors made him a prime target for speedy evisceration, despite the lack of hard evidence for his sin and the fact that his civil trial resulted in a hung jury, not a conviction. Even Libby Tilton, apparently too weak to condemn either of the abusive men in her life, has not fared well either as victim or heroine. Indeed, Fox's story might suggest that in the end it was bad theology, not an unbridled libido, that brought Beecher down. The Brooklyn preacher's Romantic liberalism, with its emphasis on love as the fundamental religious truth, may have been inspirational from the pulpit, but in human relationships its antinomian subtext worked irretrievable damage.

But Fox is interested neither in issuing moral exonerations nor in determining whether or not Beecher and Mrs. Tilton were actually guilty of adultery, by whatever definition. That is a secret lost to history. To Fox, the value of the Beecher-Tilton story is the wealth of documentary evidence left behind--court testimony, personal

correspondence, newspaper accounts--and the chance to plumb the intricacies of a culture far different from our own. More interesting than the "did they or didn't they?" question are the manifold retractions and retellings of events surrounding the scandal, details that reveal the moral and social universe of the period. Fox therefore tells the story from back to front, beginning with the public documents that circulated around the 1878 civil trial, and then peeling away the successive layers of narrative. Each chapter moves closer to the supposed crime and further into the personal worlds of the Tiltons and their famous pastor.

Fox's concluding chapter takes on other historical treatments of the Beecher-Tilton story, in particular Barbara Goldsmith's recent biography of Beecher's nemesis, Victoria Woodhull, titled *Other Powers*. In Goldsmith's bestselling account, the scandal is an object lesson in Victorian hypocrisy. Indeed, her least sympathetic figure is Theodore Tilton, who bullies his wife into having an abortion as punishment for a suspicious pregnancy. Fox reminds us how thin the direct evidence is: if a jury in the 1870s was unable to convict Beecher, then today's historians should be appropriately hesitant about repeating 19th-century rumors. But, Fox continues, "What we do know gives us plenty to think about."

Fox is an accomplished cultural historian, sensitive to the nuances of middle-class Victorian language and iconography. In his hands the Beecher-Tilton story becomes a complex exploration of an emotional and spiritual terrain that is becoming increasingly alien. Nineteenth-century middle-class culture allowed startling intimacies between members of the same sex and openly aired emotions of shame, guilt and remorse--reminding us, as Fox puts it, of "other ways of being human."