Public passions

by James M. Wall in the January 5, 2000 issue

Linda Tripp and Virginia Woodhull, living more than a century apart, were central figures in two public scandals involving high-profile figures. Tripp is facing a Maryland jury on charges she secretly taped her telephone conversations with Monica Lewinsky. Woodhull, a leading figure in 19th-century radical politics, accused celebrated preacher and antislavery leader Henry Ward Beecher of committing adultery with one of his parishioners, Elizabeth Tilton. Both women claimed they made their public accusations because they wanted to expose the "hypocrisy" of prominent leaders.

But the hypocrisy claims do not tell the full story. Woodhull, whose charges against Beecher were never proven in court, was an advocate of "free love" and a supporter of relaxed divorce laws. She accused Beecher of practicing "free love" with Elizabeth Tilton, while, she charged, he continued to preach in favor of family values. Tripp and Woodhull entered the public arena under vastly different circumstances. Woodhull was a close friend of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who shared leadership in the women's rights movement with Susan B. Anthony. Tripp, on the other hand, was an unknown public employee who may face a prison term now that a federal judge has ruled that the immunity granted to her by special prosecutor Kenneth Starr does not cover her case in Maryland.

Both Woodhull and Tripp claimed to have been motivated by high principles, but Tripp's involvement with Starr and with other politically conservative figures suggests a different motive. Woodhull, well known in the 19th century for practicing spiritualism, had grievances against Beecher, including her belief that Beecher's sisters, Catharine and Harriet (Beecher Stowe), were ridiculing her spiritualist beliefs.

Richard Wightman Fox's new book, *Trials of Intimacy*: *Love and Loss in the Beecher-Tilton Scandal*, examines the cultural and religious context that made the Beecher-Tilton story as big in its time as the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal has been more than a century later. The roles played by Tripp and Woodhull in the two cases indicate that

the public's fascination with the foibles of famous men makes them tempting targets of ideological opponents.

Fox, the author of *Reinhold Niebuhr*: *A Biography*, is a professor of history at the University of Southern California, and he understands the role religion played in American culture in the 19th century. He sees Beecher caught in a period of transition when secularity was beginning to unseat religion as the country's ruling ideology. The post–Civil War era was a time of extraordinary ferment, nowhere more so than in New York City. Beecher, pastor of New York's Brooklyn Plymouth Church, was the preeminent preacher of his generation.

One of the major causes of the day, women's right to vote, was strongly promoted by Stanton and Anthony. Stanton was a close friend not only of Woodhull but of Tilton and her husband Theodore, noted lecturer and author. Theodore Tilton and Stanton strongly advocated "free love" and relaxing the divorce laws. After Woodhull accused Beecher of an adulterous relationship with Elizabeth Tilton, the Tilton marriage ended. Subsequently, Theodore Tilton sued Henry Ward Beecher for alienation of affection and "criminal conversation" (adultery).

Elizabeth Tilton, a very private and deeply religious woman, had to endure public discussion of charges that she had been unfaithful to her husband. She denied ever having a physical relationship with her pastor. Instead, she sought to explain her closeness to Beecher as a spiritual connection. After the trial ended with a hung jury, Elizabeth Tilton confessed to "adultery." But as Fox points out, it was her belief that to feel a deep, intimate affection for any man other than her husband—to let him "into her heart"—was a sin of "adultery."

Fox concludes that the popular press of the 1870s, which displayed the same lack of theological sophistication that prevails in today's media, has been the source of most books and writings on the Beecher-Tilton trial. He notes, for example, that the *New York Times*, in an editorial written during the Clinton impeachment trial, referred to Beecher as a pastor who was found "not guilty" for acts of adultery which, according to the *Times*, he did commit. On both counts, the *Times* is wrong. Beecher's trial ended with a hung jury, and there is nothing in the record to prove that Tilton and Beecher were guilty of an act of physical adultery.

Secular historians are often careless when dealing with religious history. Fox writes: "Twentieth-century history textbooks . . . have usually assumed Beecher's guilt on

the adultery charge. When they have not, they exploit him for laughs. After recounting the sober story of Reconstruction, they often pause for light relief with Beecher and the Tiltons before getting back to business with the robber barons.” He cites one recent textbook which flatly reports on “Henry Ward Beecher’s ‘extramarital affairs.’”

After the trial Beecher continued to live with his wife, Eunice, and served with distinction as pastor of Brooklyn Plymouth Church until he died in 1887, at age 74, “heralded as a community hero.” Elizabeth Tilton died of a stroke at age 62, devoting the final years of her life to mission work with a group of Plymouth Brethren. Her faith sustained her through a period of brutal public exposure. In a letter she said: “God has given me a blessing today. He has enabled me to do something for him and that conscious privilege overflows my heart utterly. . . . Howe’er imperfect we may appear to each other, yet the dear Lord does not hesitate to use us.”