

History: A Journey of Discovery

CAROL CORNWALL MADSEN

This past summer I had occasion to visit the DUP Museum in Salt Lake City. While there, I was struck by the hundreds of pioneer portraits assembled by those inveterate collectors of Utah history, the Daughters of Utah Pioneers. Most of the silent faces lining the walls of four floors of the museum stared sternly into space, barely a shadow of a smile softening their earnest expressions. The men appeared awkward in their tightly collared shirts and high buttoned suits. The women were hardly less so in their modestly adorned silk dresses, their hair almost uniformly parted in the middle and combed severely to the back into a braid or bun. Only occasionally did a wayward curl or soft wave individualize the otherwise uniform pattern of portraits.

As artifacts of the past and tangible evidence of lives once lived, these portraits hold intrinsic value to families and museum collectors alike. But as I came to one I recognized—that of my own progenitor, Joseph Cornwall—I thought how well those fixed and impassive expressions masked the panorama of human experience each one represented. The Irish potato famine of the 1840s drove my great-grandfather to Scotland, but once there he encountered some Mormon missionaries with a life-changing message. On the ship that

brought him to America he met his future wife, Charlotte, alone and very homesick. Their courtship began on that hazardous journey. Disaster waited, however, until he crossed the plains, where an accident crushed one of his legs, making him a permanent cripple. But joy followed his dismay when he reached the Zion of his dreams, married his beloved Charlotte, and, for the first time in his life, owned the land he worked. It has been said that a picture is worth a thousand words, but, in this instance, I think the 76 words I used to describe Joseph Cornwall were far more telling than his picture. As a historian I readily admit my bias toward the written word, and it is only when I put words with faces do portraits come alive to me.

It is the lives of ordinary people—like those represented in that gallery of faces—recorded in honest and compelling detail in their own writings, that are the stuff of history today. No longer is it concerned only with affairs of state—the economic, military, political, and diplomatic decisions made by men in power—

Carol Cornwall Madsen was a BYU professor of history and a research professor with the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute when this devotional address was given on 29 September 1998.

and based on the institutional documents those men created. Interest in the way all people lived in the past, their interactions with each other and the tasks and relationships that made up their everyday lives, has challenged the traditional emphasis on power structures and institutions as a focus of historical research. This interest developed from the rise of movements by the historically disfranchised to claim a place in American society and a page in the history books. The stories of women and racial and ethnic groups, in particular, have always been marginal, if not ignored, in the more traditional histories of our nation, but the entry of these groups into the field as scholars of their own histories has democratized the profession and “disrupt[ed] a familiar pattern of knowledge,” moving us to “a whole new order of understanding” (Douglas Birkhead, “A Field That’s Beyond Gender,” in *Common Carrier*, *Salt Lake Tribune*, Sunday, 18 June 1989, p. A-14).

New configurations of historical evidence and new interpretations are emerging as historians bring all elements of human existence within the scope of their inquiry. Many old assumptions are no longer valid, and we have come to acknowledge that the social politics we struggle with today have their genesis in the inequities of yesterday. More important, however, is that this broadened base of historical scholarship and the retrieval of neglected lives have returned history to people long dispossessed of their past—and living without a past, columnist George F. Will once wrote, “is a heavy burden.” “For individuals,” he said, “deprivation of a collective past is death of the spirit” (“Cracking the Ice,” *Newsweek*, 19 June 1989, p. 72).

In recent decades historians engaged in the recovery of women’s historical experiences, the field in which I work, have mined the rich veins of women’s records long dormant in archives across the nation. The discovery from these records of women’s participation in the major movements in American history—such

as industrialization, abolitionism, or progressivism—has altered traditional emphases and conclusions about these social forces and enlarged our knowledge of their impact on people and communities.

The century-long struggle of women to gain legal equity and political equality, to obtain opportunities for education and economic self-reliance, as well as their ubiquitous efforts to address social welfare and community needs are all stories formerly excluded but integral to what we call American history. Moreover, they are fascinating accounts that introduce a whole roster of intelligent, capable, articulate, and imaginative women into the pantheon of American heroes. We women today are their heirs, beneficiaries of their convictions and their courage to turn those convictions into reality. If one is left a legacy from an unknown source, there is usually a natural curiosity to know the identity of that source and to discover the connections that have linked them together. This kind of curiosity has driven the interest in women’s historians to connect with their own past and to write the missing pages of history. They are not like physicians dispassionately dissecting the corpse of history. They are both intellectually and emotionally connected to their task. As women, our lives have been shaped by our collective history. It has given us “a usable past,” a frame of reference in which we can better understand ourselves and our own personal histories.¹ To be deprived of that past is indeed a loss of an enriching and motivating spirit.

Recognition of the neglect of women in historical writing is not a contemporary phenomenon. More than a hundred years ago, Emmeline B. Wells, editor of the *Woman’s Exponent*, a Mormon women’s paper founded in 1872, noted, “History tells us very little about women; judging from its pages, one would suppose their lives were insignificant and their opinions worthless. . . . Volumes of unwritten history yet remain” (“Self-Made

Women,” *Woman’s Exponent* 9, no. 19 [1 March 1881], p. 148). Emmeline turned the *Woman’s Exponent*, which she edited for 37 of its 42 years, into a repository of Mormon women’s history. For all those years it was the public voice of LDS women. The biographies and compilations of women’s achievements printed in its pages are invaluable, but the letters, autobiographies, and commentaries on the volatile events of that period are priceless. They give us entrée into the little known but vivid world of our Latter-day Saint foremothers. The *Exponent* today serves as a major source of LDS women’s history, a growing field of inquiry that not only reflects the intense interest of Mormon women to know their own history but highlights the enormous collection of personal writings available to document that history.

My study of Emmeline B. Wells resulted from that interest and the availability of numerous resources relating to her life. Not only the editor and principal contributor to the *Woman’s Exponent*, she was also an avid letter writer and diarist. Forty-seven volumes of her diary reside in the archives here at BYU. These documents reveal her dedication to defending and uplifting the women of the Church. A political activist in the suffrage movement, delegate from the Church to national women’s conventions, organizer of literary clubs, friend and correspondent with most of the national women’s leaders of her time, personally acquainted with four United States presidents, and general president of the Relief Society (appointed at age 82 and serving 11 years), she left a long paper trail for me to follow. Through her voluminous writings and astute observations, she has navigated me through the circuitous currents of Mormon women’s history. One thread of her private life, however, remained elusive. What happened to James?

Emmeline joined the Church in 1842 in the rural Massachusetts village of New Salem. The next year she married James Harris. Both of them were just 15. In 1844 they traveled with

his parents to Nauvoo. Two months later the Prophet and his brother were assassinated, and soon after, the elder HARRISES, Elias and Lucy, left the Church. They urged James and Emmeline, with their newborn son, Eugene, to return with them to Massachusetts, but the young couple refused. When Emmeline and James also refused to allow James’ parents to take the baby with them, until the young parents were more settled, the HARRISES left Nauvoo alone, leaving bad feelings behind. The baby, unfortunately, died soon afterwards, and James, unable to find any satisfactory work in Nauvoo, took a boat to Saint Louis, promising to return for the bereaved Emmeline as soon as he found employment. Alone in Nauvoo, Emmeline found a place to stay with the Aaron Johnson family, waiting day after day for word from James.

“I hope soon, very soon, to see him and hear words of love and affection,” she wrote in her diary. But those words never came. Nor did James. Emmeline carried the heartache of his desertion throughout her life, and I assumed this chapter of her life was closed. Then, in one of those cases of pure serendipity, a diary came into my hands that had not been deposited in the archives. In it Emmeline recorded her return to New England 40 years after leaving it. Besides giving me details about her early life there, as she revisited the scenes of her girlhood, the diary picked up the thread of the James Harris mystery. While in New Salem, Emmeline visited her former mother-in-law, Lucy Harris, then Mrs. Blackinton. The visit was cordial if awkward, but it reconnected the two women and opened the door for another visit to the Blackinton home a few years later, after Lucy’s death. While there the second time, Emmeline came across a packet of letters. They were from James—addressed to her—written before his death at sea. His mother had never forwarded them. Emmeline drove directly to Lucy’s grave and, in the words of her sister and niece who were with her, the diminutive

Emmeline “raised her arms to heaven and called down a curse upon her mother-in-law that made us tremble—and no doubt caused the wicked one to writhe in her shroud” (quoted in a letter from Geneva Ramsey Kingkade to Carolyn Chouinard, 24 August 1970, copy in possession of author).

What am I to do with such a story? That was startling behavior, to say the least, for this earnest, devoted Latter-day Saint woman. Here was an incident that did not fit neatly into the pattern I thought I had discerned of Emmeline’s life. In all the tragedies, difficulties, and disappointments that wove themselves into that pattern, all of them signal opportunities for similar emotional outbursts, I wondered why this was the one that allowed it to emerge. The incongruity of her action was enormous. Perhaps the story was apocryphal, merely family legend, I reasoned—but in questioning its validity I realized I was exposing my own expectations and judging the incident by those standards.

Historians, unfortunately, cannot totally dismiss their own orientations or preconceptions. They see the past from the perspective of their own historical horizons. The challenge, as German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer has noted, is how to fuse their horizons, or world-views, with that of the era they are studying, thus minimizing, if not wholly erasing, the tension between the historian and the texts of the past. Gadamer wrote:

We are always affected . . . by what is nearest to us, and hence approach, under its influence, the testimony of the past. Hence it is constantly necessary to inhibit the overhasty assimilation of the past to our own expectations of meaning. Only then will we be able to listen to the past in a way that enables it to make its own meaning heard. [Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Historicity of Understanding,” in Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, ed., *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the*

Enlightenment to the Present (New York: Continuum, 1985), p. 272]

By listening intently and holding in check our own biases and orientations, we can become better writers and readers of history.

As mediators of the past and present, then, historians bear a heavy ethical responsibility to be honest with the past. They do not all hear the same meaning from the documents. But it is the effort to hear that meaning as clearly as they are able and to transmit it as honestly and effectively as possible that makes the study of history so consistently challenging and exciting.

The key to unlocking the vast wealth of human experience still waiting to be explored is the personal narrative—the diaries, letters, reminiscences, and stories of ordinary people. “In them,” as author and professor William Mulder once noted,

we find something of the daily living and dying of men and women both weak and valiant. Their story is not epic except as life and many days together give it sweep—it is the sweep of daily existence, the great movement that is the result of countless little movements. [William Mulder, “Mormonism and Literature,” in Richard H. Cracroft and Neal E. Lambert, eds., *A Believing People: Literature of the Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1974), pp. 208–11]

Pulitzer Prize winner Laurel Ulrich demonstrates in her book *A Midwife’s Tale* how a single diary can be the historical centerpiece in reconstructing a life, a community, and an era. Skillfully weaving together with other available sources the daily jottings from the diary of Martha Ballard, a common midwife in post-Revolutionary America, Professor Ulrich demonstrates her understanding of the social order of that period and transports the reader into another time, another place, another world. It is not the world of constitution

writing and diplomatic negotiating, but the world of those most vulnerable to those acts of state (see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* [New York: Vintage Books, 1991]).

Such life writings as Martha Ballard's tell us not only what people did—the rituals of their daily life—but they give us a glimpse into the attitudes, values, and traditions of their social universe. Although public records are passive and cold, personal writings are alive with action, mood, and emotion. Statistical records, for instance, tell us that the Nauvoo Temple was built of high quality limestone, measured 128 by 88 feet, had several floors, and cost more than a \$1 million. It was formally dedicated in May 1846, 5,600 Saints received their endowments there, and it burned in 1848. (See Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols. [New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992], s.v. "Nauvoo Temple," 3:1001–3.) But the spirit of that beloved building, its power and promises, are in the writings of the people who experienced it.

Sarah Phippen Jolly wrote of the hardship her family endured when her husband and sons were enlisted to give full time to its construction. "But," she added, "it was good. I don't complain. I had the privilege of going through the temple with my husband so I am paid for all of my trouble" (Sarah Phippen Jolly, "Reminiscences," LDS Church Archives).

Widow Elizabeth Kirby helps us realize how deep was the commitment to give one's all to its completion: "I gave my husband's watch," she wrote, "which I could hardly bear to part with, but I gave it to help build the . . . Temple and everything else I could possibly spare and the last few dollars that I had in the world, which altogether amounted to nearly \$50" (Elizabeth Terry Kirby Heward, "A Sketch," 13, LDS Church Archives).

And Sarah DeArmon Rich drew strength from its spiritual power as she left Nauvoo

with her young family in 1846. The temple blessings, she found,

caused us joy and comfort in the midst of all our sorrows, and enabled us to have faith in God, knowing He would guide us and sustain us in the unknown journey that lay before us. For if it had not been for the faith and knowledge that was bestowed upon us in that Temple by the influence and help of the spirit of the Lord, our journey would have been like one taking a leap in the dark; to start out on such a journey in the winter as it were, and in our state of poverty, it would seem like walking into the jaws of death. ["Reminiscences of Sarah DeArmon Pea Rich (1885–93), LDS Church Archives]

In reading these accounts, the spirit of the past, as George Will noted, can touch us, and if we are open to it we find our own temple experience enhanced by it.

It is from these private writings that we can come to understand the impact of large social forces and decisions on the lives of the people subject to them. The creator of a Broadway production depicting a history of blacks in America found his inspiration in the popular culture of his people, preserved not in written documents but in its oral traditions, rituals, and values. George C. Wolfe wrote:

If you actively unearth popular culture and look inside it, you can find all kinds of secrets and truths and rhythms of a time period. . . .

*I'm fascinated by bold movements, and how very large decisions made by people in power have an impact on the personal dynamics of human beings—the human complexities that come into play when history makes bold shifts. [George C. Wolfe, Playbill, *Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk*, 1998]*

Although historians use words, Wolfe used dance in a powerful and moving way to convey his understanding of his people through

time and their emotional and psychological responses to the forces that shaped their lives.

Mormon history also comes alive through the human responses to the large decisions and bold movements of that history. The decision to take the gospel to foreign lands less than a decade after the Church was organized, the westward movement to establish Zion in a safe place, and the religious, political, and economic accommodations made to preserve the institution of the Church, when the federal government almost destroyed it, were just some of the bold organizational shifts to which the Saints were subject. The human dimension of these transforming events emerges from the diaries and recollections of the men and women who experienced them. The decision to move west, for example, triggered tremendous spiritual, emotional, and physical struggles among the Saints.

When Louisa Barnes Pratt heard the announcement that Nauvoo was to be abandoned, this young mother of four daughters, whose missionary husband labored far away in Tahiti, was devastated. This was a major shift that few were expecting as they watched the temple—surely a sign of permanence, they thought—nearing completion. “[The news] fell on my ear like the funeral knell of all departed joys,” Louisa lamented.

What could I do I thought, with my little means, and my helpless family in launching out into the howling wilderness. I had no male relative to take charge of my affairs. . . . I was almost in despair when I reflected on the burden I had to bear, and my companion on the opposite side of the globe. [Reminiscences of Louisa Barnes Pratt (1879), LDS Church Archives]

But in a brighter moment she declared, “I will show them what I can do,” and *that* she did, safely conveying her children, her possessions, and herself all the way to Utah on her own (*ibid.*). She was an ordinary Mormon,

little known beyond her own circle, but her story, like those of so many other ordinary people, is compelling. Their responses to such uprootings not only show the human face of major institutional decisions in our Church history, but they are the human dimension of our collective past, the connective threads that bind us to our history. And as much as any of our doctrines, our history defines us as Latter-day Saints.

As traditional topics of history make room for the innovative studies of people’s lives, perhaps traditional notions of history as a boring, lifeless subject might also diminish. One historical adventurer who made that transition found the excursion into his own people’s history an exhilarating experience:

If you can leap past whatever psychological or historical obstacles that keep you from drinking from the incredibly nourishing and replenishing water of one’s history; you can do anything. . . . When you fully claim your history, you can soar. [Wolfe, Playbill, *Bring in ‘Da Noise*]

That kind of exhilaration I found in abundance last June when my husband and I guided a tour to the British Church history sites, culminating in the dedication of the Preston Temple. In our group were descendants of the original nine apostles who opened the British mission in the late 1830s, all eager to see the scenes of their ancestors’ missionary labors. But it was our British friends—members but descendants of neither the apostles nor the earliest converts—who laid special claim to that history. For them, the otherwise unexceptional—and usually rainy—town of Preston took on a luminous quality because it was the first town in England to hear the message of the restored gospel and served as the gateway for the gospel not only to England but also to Europe. The Preston ward, they were proud to say, “was the longest continuously meeting congregation in the Church,” and they

assured us they were doing all they could to keep that legacy alive.

We went to the Preston marketplace where the early missionaries agreed that the slogan “Truth Will Prevail” appearing on a political banner there was a good omen. Then, at the home on Wilfred Street, where the missionaries lodged, one of our friends who accompanied us recited the long struggle of Heber C. Kimball and his companions against a siege by evil spirits that occurred there the night before their first baptisms were to take place. Afterwards we walked through the beautiful Avenham Park to the River Ribble, where those nine baptisms did indeed occur, on Sunday, July 30, 1837. “The gospel found a home in England that Sunday morning,” declared our friend, “and we are the beneficiaries of the events of that day.”

The missionary labors of President Hinckley as a young elder in Preston only added to their appreciation of that city’s historical significance. The Preston Temple was the tangible link for them between the events of that Sunday morning in 1837 and June 1998. As one who frequently draws from our history when he speaks to the Saints, President Hinckley noted at the dedication that it was historically, as well as spiritually fitting that a temple should be built there. The power that knowledge of the past has on the present—enriching it, providing perspective, confirming identity, and deepening appreciation for one’s own heritage—was clearly manifest to me on that occasion. In claiming their history, these Saints truly soared.

Besides events of importance to our lives, history also introduces us to a host of people once living whose influence can be as direct and forceful as that of any of our contemporaries. Biographer Thomas Mallon suggested that “one cannot read a diary and feel unacquainted with its writer.” Life writings, he added, in a twist on the book of John, “are the flesh made word” (Thomas Mallon, *A Book of*

One’s Own: People and Their Diaries [New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1984], p. xvii).

In making the acquaintance of past lives through their words, however, the historian often encounters the imperfections, the inexplicable and unresolvable paradoxes that are so much a part of the human condition. Some historians are drawn to the underside of human actions and to institutional inconsistencies. Certainly historians must be responsive to the particulars of the story they are telling. But they are also responsible for the whole story, the broad pattern that emerges when all the evidence is considered. This lesson came to me in a powerful way when I wrote *Journey to Zion*. The many trail journals I read in preparing this volume were written at a time of unrelieved stress by men and women whose lives were dramatically uprooted by conversion and the call to gather. They recorded their disagreements, their frustrations, their disappointments, and their tragedies. But they also recorded their irrevocable faith. The cumulative effect of such testimony expressed in diary after diary simply overwhelmed me. In the midst of the most trying of circumstances they could write, like British convert Ellen Douglas, “I for one feel to rejoice and to praise my God that he ever sent the Elders of Israel to England and that he ever gave me a heart to believe them” (Ellen Briggs Douglas to Family, Nauvoo, Illinois, April 14, 1844, LDS Church Archives, reprinted in Carol Cornwall Madsen, *In Their Own Words: Women and the Story of Nauvoo* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1994], p. 118).

As the Saints struggled through the dark days at Winter Quarters, they could bear witness to nonbelieving relatives with the strength of Phoebe Chase’s testimony: “The Lord has blest us in obeying his command in gathering with the saints and helping on the work of the latter-day w[h]ich you think is not the work of the lord[,] but my children it is the work of the lord for no man ever could bring

about so great and marvelous a work” (Phebe Chase to her children, ca. 1840–42, in Charles Marsh Correspondence, photocopy, Nauvoo Restoration, Inc., LDS Church Archives). I cannot adequately describe the impact of those testimonies on my own. They made my spirit soar.

Like our books of scripture, they read like sacred texts and are a latter-day testament of God’s dealings with his covenant people. As Alma said of the sacred records in his keeping, it is “wisdom in God that these things should be preserved; for behold, they have enlarged the memory of this people . . . and brought them to the knowledge of their God unto the salvation of their souls” (Alma 37:8). It has been wisdom that these latter-day records have been preserved. We can claim them as our own sacred history.

In collapsing the academic distance between themselves and their subjects, historians allow the documents of the past to speak to their spirit as well as to their intellect, often creating a reciprocal bond between themselves and the text. I do not have to suspend belief when I read Elizabeth Ann Whitney’s account of the spiritual manifestation that led to her conversion. As a seeker for religious truth, she prayed with all the force of her soul, and one night she seemed to be surrounded by a luminous cloud from which came the words “Prepare to receive the word of the Lord, for it is coming!” She was not surprised when, within months, Parley P. Pratt brought her the message of the gospel, which she immediately witnessed as the truth she had been seeking (reported in Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormonism* [New York: Tullidge and Crandall, 1877], p. 42). The life of the spirit for Elizabeth Whitney and, indeed, for the other women I have studied, was the life they chose to live, and to understand them one must acknowledge this truth. Emmeline Wells’ feeling of kinship with the women who made up her Mormon world resonated clearly to me. They

were more than friends to her, she wrote, “because our faith and work were so in tune with our every day life” (quoted in Annie Wells Cannon, “Mothers in Israel,” *Relief Society Magazine* 3, no. 2 [February 1916], p. 68).

Whether history answers a desire to connect with something or someone beyond our own time and place, or satisfies our curiosity about times outside our own realm of experience, it gives us all a sense of belonging to the human family and shows us our place in the chain of human events. It helps us to know who we are. Indeed, the Latter-day Saint knowledge of our premortal existence underscores the purpose and importance of mortality and enables us to see the inextricable connection of past, present, and future.

It has been more than professional interest that has pulled me into history. Like many others, I have wanted to seek out my own roots, to come to know myself better by learning who I was. My curiosity about women’s little-known past has led to this search for origins, for a recovery of roots and an affirmation of my Latter-day Saint identity. I was quite unprepared for the rich and vibrant discovery that resulted from that search. I have come to know many women in our history, most of them unknown because they were outside the focus of the institutional lens. It has been tremendously satisfying to discover these past residents of our Mormon world and bring them back to life by retrieving their stories. I have learned much from the humor and intelligence of Hannah King, the single-mindedness of Eliza R. Snow, the generous spirit of Martha Cragun Cox, the resilience of Harriet Hanks, and so much more from so many others.

Like Emmeline Wells I am grateful that I have made friends of such women, both past and present, who are like kin to me because we share a faith and work that are so much a part of our everyday lives. My studies have provided historical and spiritual connections that have rooted my life in something solid and

enduring. I have discovered that our history can be an anchor in a transitory world and ballast for an uncertain tomorrow.

Note

1. The idea of “a usable past” and its relationship to one’s own history is mentioned first by Katherine Gill in “Why Women Have No Usable Past,” a review of Gerda Lerner’s

The Creation of Feminist Consciousness published in the *New York Times Book Review*, 2 May 1993, pp. 12–13. My reference to it and its application to one’s own personal history is from Carol Lee Flinders, *At the Root of This Longing: Reconciling a Spiritual Hunger and a Feminist Thirst* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), pp. 95, 97–98.