Is It Wrong?

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/awe

Part of the Women's Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
(2019) "Is It Wrong?," AWE (A Woman's Experience): Vol. 6, Article 4. Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/awe/vol6/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in AWE (A Woman's Experience) by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has always placed a high value on education. Beginning in 1875, the Church began establishing private schools, or “Academies,” to counter the growing secularization of public education in the United States. Brigham Young Academy in Provo, Utah was the first and by far the largest of these and is one of few that still survives. Karl G. Maeser, the first president of “the B.Y.A.,” as it was called, later became head of all Church schools, making the study of this school vital to understanding LDS education during this era. Historians of the Latter-day Saint movement have, accordingly, long recognized the central importance of BYA; however, most existing scholarship prioritizes the dynamics of institutional expansion over the texture of individual lives. To help remedy this deficit, this paper examines how gender affected the experience and outcomes of BYA students between 1876 and 1892, roughly the term of Maeser’s presidency.

By reconstructing the lived experience of these early students, as well as those of the faculty members who taught them, through letters, journals, and memoirs I hope to understand how they were conceived of—and conceived of themselves—as educational subjects during the later polygamy period. I examine two principal areas: how men and women viewed their own education and how they reported being groomed—in what was very much a patronage-based culture—by senior faculty and Church leaders for future careers and graduate opportunities. Overall, the record suggests that, while promising male students were guided into a variety of professional and educational outlets following graduation, female students had to navigate obstacles unknown to their male counterparts, including expectations that marriage and childbearing remained a woman’s primary duty.

“The noblest of earth’s sons”: Fraternity and/as Destiny

A collective record left by a group of eight male students reveals the great expectations many boys had for their formal education. It also illustrates the ways men relied on male networks and a patriarchal Western tradition for empowerment and inspiration. They had formed fast friendships and even a group identity during their time as students: bound together by their humble roots and their common belief in the transformative power of education, they formed a secret society, which they called the Octagon. The group, possibly modeled after the infamous secret society of the “Twelve Apostles” at Cambridge University in England, originated during their student days, but their
Only surviving record dates from after their graduation in 1893. Called the Pedagogical History, this record began as a project to collect the intellectual autobiographies of the eight members. However, over time, it became a circular where the men could give updates on their lives before passing the book on. Although the pace of circulation slowed significantly as the decades wore on, the book provides a fascinating window into the way male BYA students saw themselves and their role in the world.

In the initial entries, each man describes a rural upbringing, stressing his limited access to educational material—the better to compare it with later accomplishments, perhaps. Some prided themselves on the small progress they had been able to make as young boys despite the constrictions imposed by their environment. P. C. Evans recalled favoring reading over hard farm labor, much to the chagrin of his father. Evans himself, though he owned his “reputation for bodily laziness” as a weakness, seems rather proud as he describes his languorously intellectual disposition. George Brimhall, a future president of BYU, remembers teaching himself though biographies of world history’s “grand characters, Ecclesiastical Military, Political and Pioneers”—what he otherwise calls “the noblest of earth’s sons.” He clearly felt his group of friends were following in the footsteps of these earlier role model. Indeed, these men’s attempts to record their own lives were undoubtedly influenced by these earlier readings. Each member of the Octagon took on a pseudonym from the annals of European intellectual history, further underlining their expectation of future intellectual greatness (Henry Peterson was “Luther,” Weston Vernon “Pascal”). Unlike their female counterparts, male students were taught from an early age that, though they came from humble beginnings, they could become active agents on the world-historical stage through their education.

This strong belief in their own power to shape events is reflected in the men’s somewhat inflated (and sometimes tongue-in-cheek) ideas of purpose. Clinton D. Ray calls the group “the much-esteemed ‘Octagon,'” reflecting a notion of future prestige probably more appropriate to students at Cambridge than in the Great Basin. Later in life, the group were keen to emphasize their continued intellectualism and achievement. Weston Vernon, with earnest pride, described his mastery of Greek and Latin at a graduate program in Chicago and his appointment as a professor of Ancient Languages at the Brigham Young College in Logan. But it was Brimhall who, characteristically, reached the loftiest heights on the subject. In a crescendo of rhetorical flourishes chock-full of classical allusions (which Vernon surely appreciated), he concludes that “Education shall eliminate evil” from the Earth. Then, in a jab at the market-oriented American culture of the day and in the vein of his own Mormon and Western rhetorical traditions, Brimhall proclaims that “not money but manhood [will be] our tapeline.” To Brimhall and his fellows, education held the power to mold the ideal (Mormon) man, one who was equipped to enter the world of work and to further the cause of truth.

Brimhall’s blend of secular, Progressive-era rhetoric on education and masculinity with Mormon moralism, combined with his critique of materialism, is emblematic of his cohort’s ambivalent, and imperfectly theorized, engagement with the broader American culture and the pedagogical tradition they had come to idolize. They certainly viewed their pursuit of education as religiously sanctioned, even mandated. Clinton D. Ray, for example, refers to BYA as “the grand old ‘Temple of Learning.’” Yet such religiously inflected rhetoric surfaces infrequently. Secular models are generally dominant, as when J. C. Swenson describes the aura of authority around his first grade school teacher: “His bald head and huge pipe are important, but the Kingly attitude as he sat in the end of
the room, one hand holding a book, the other a hickory whip-stalk (symbols of classical culture and excellent discipline) were too striking to soon be forgotten.” Nowhere in this vivid portrait of an imperious, Prussian-style schoolmaster are the “gentleness and meekness, and love unfeigned” with which a well-known revelation of Joseph Smith’s characterizes priestly authority. The teacher is instead showcased using contemporary methods of discipline to pass on the eternal flame of Greco-Roman civilization to a new generation of schoolboys. The “huge pipe”—hardly a marker of Mormon propriety, even in these days before the Word of Wisdom was strictly enforced—and the bald head together suggest a peculiar type of masculine maturity, a decades-in-the-making mastery of the contemplative lifestyle to which each member of the Octagon aspired.

When these men did perceive conflicts between their education and their LDS worldview, their perceived conflicts never related to the more constricted role of women outside of Utah and the West, where fewer women attended school and suffrage victories came later. Henry Peterson, fired in 1911 for teaching evolution at his beloved alma mater, rails bitterly in the text to his friends against the narrow-mindedness of Church authorities, who, he insisted, would eventually be forced to accept the scientific reality of the origin of species. He justifies the religiosity of his decision by quoting a journalist who interviewed him about the firing: “Your people say, [the journalist told Peterson] ‘As god once was, man now is, and as god is, man may become.’ This is the very essence of human evolution!” In a lighter vein, Evans admits to his interest in the Victorian agnostic thinker—and intrepid evolutionist—Herbert Spencer with the disclaimer that he had probably been working out “some heretic tendencies” of his. Nevertheless, these men do not once comment on the exclusion of women from most of the graduate programs to which they sought admission. This is curious given that such a policy ran directly counter to both the model of coeducational schooling with which had been raised as well as to Church leaders’ generally encouraging rhetoric about women and education. Indeed, the exclusively masculine cast of their career narratives suggests such exclusion did not bother them.

The arrival at Brigham Young Academy features universally as an awakening of epic proportions in the Octagon’s Pedagogical History. Although those who received the circular later were undoubtedly influenced by the narrative choices of those who had gone before (which may explain the structural similarities of their entries), there is no question that each member of the Octagon sincerely placed enormous value on their experience under the tutelage of Principal Maeser and the other Academy teachers. Partially on behalf of the entire group, Swenson exults, “To Dr. K. G. Maeser more than anyone do I owe a debt of gratitude for the high moral & spiritual influence that came to us from him.” Peterson described being chosen by “Prof[essor] Benjamin Cluff,” assistant principal to Maeser and later his successor, to enroll in a new, four-year pedagogy degree at the school. Encouragement and grooming from male figures occurred earlier in life as well (though few of those mentors were described as colorfully as Swenson’s pipe-smoking grammar school teacher). P. C. Evans characterized his uncle David as an involved director of his educational development, while John Collier Robison singled out a teacher at the Millard Stake Academy, where he had attended before transferring to Provo, as a critical influence.

In addition to describing generational progress in highly gendered terms, the Pedagogical History describes its few female characters as shadows, when at all. Although the men briefly mention marriages in broader accounts focused on career
pursuits (interspersed liberally with reminisces of the good old days), each “Miss” is indistinguishable from the other. Like the slightly later LDS figure J. Reuben Clark, it appears these men embraced the emerging model of society matron and housewife that was prevalent among the educated classes with which they associated professionally. A great example of the way women are marginalized in the Octagon’s record comes from J. W. Booth’s brief discussion of his siblings. Of his four elder sisters, he praises them for nobly “fill[ing] the cup of women’s sphere,” especially as they “vie[d] to shape their younger brother’s life,” before they drop out of the narrative. In his educational autobiography, Clinton D. Ray notes the importance of “a lady teacher whom I dearly loved” who taught in his local primary school, but her function as potential intellectual role model is clouded by the deferential and maternal overtones of her portrayal. Overall, the Pedagogical History demonstrates the importance of fraternity for male students, as well as the influence of “worldly” role models of professional and educational success. Both dynamics tended to push women to the margins of male experience and self-representation.

**Breaking Barriers: Alice Louise Reynolds**

The Octagon’s failure to mention any female BYA students in their record (much less invite one into their circle—or polygon, rather) stands in marked contrast to the gender inclusivity of Alice Louise Reynolds’ autobiography. Toward the beginning of her account, she fondly lists the names of fourteen fellow students, lauding their positive influence on herself and the world. The list is notable for including nearly as many female students as men; Reynolds conscientiously provides the married names of female students in parentheses. (These included Amy Brown (Lyman), future Relief Society General President.) Throughout her long career, Reynolds admired the male professionals she interacted with, even as she kept a special eye out for professionals of her own sex.

Reynolds was highly conscious of her unique status as a professional woman at the time, and she carefully marked the gender milestones of her life. In the autobiography, Reynolds never accounts for her special interest in women or their status. However, the section about her childhood and adolescence may provide some insight. For example, as a young girl, Reynolds’ grade school teacher abandoned her profession three months into the term after getting married. (Reynolds herself never married, for unknown reasons.) Following in the footsteps of previous generations of LDS women leaders, Reynolds became deeply involved in the struggle for women’s suffrage. In her autobiography, she proudly records her attendance at a meeting of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs. While there, she spoke out against charges that the women of Utah were “degraded” and were not allowed to use their vote as they saw fit. She insisted on her political autonomy (“I told them I was a Democrat ... [and] that everybody knew it”). In 1911, Reynolds became the first woman to deliver the Founder’s Day Address at BYU. She became the first full professor at BYU in the same year.

Mentorship and patronage from both male and female role models were immensely important to Reynolds’ career. Later, she records that one of her many male role models and inspirations, J. M. Tanner, “was greatly enriched through his missionary experience, study, and travel,” perhaps influencing her own extensive travels later on in life. She pursued her first course in the Eastern States (at the University of Michigan) on the recommendation of Benjamin Cluff. Overall, her record reveals that women could find
professional success and cultivation within the patronage-heavy environment of early church education, but they had to work within what was largely a man’s world.

“As long as I am in the Academy I am safe”: Susa Young Gates and the Struggle for Female Autonomy

The experience of Susa Young Gates, daughter to Brigham Young and his twenty-second wife, Lucy Bigelow, provides a window to the barriers—both ideological and material—that even privileged LDS women could encounter in their quest for educational opportunity and self-improvement if they were perceived to be actively violating traditional gender roles. Gates took some classes at the University of Deseret in Salt Lake City as a teenager, but her education was interrupted by her marriage to Dr. Alma Dunford at sixteen. When the marriage ended in divorce five years later, Gates enrolled in her father’s namesake academy at the encouragement of Church apostle Erastus Snow. While she ultimately stayed in Provo for less than six months in 1879, she fiercely valued the privilege of studying there and later saw it as a formative period of her life. As editor and founder of the Young Woman’s Journal, she commissioned a commemorative issue on the Academy’s early history the year of Maeser’s retirement (1892). In that issue, she recounted her role in founding the Music Department and praised Maeser for producing a generation of powerful, spiritually grounded Latter-day Saints. While a student, however, Susa had to defend her presence in Provo to her mother, who wanted her to come home and remarry. Her impassioned letters leave a far more interesting and troubled account of her student days than her tranquil adult recollections suggest.

Although there are no extant copies of Lucy’s letters to her daughter, it is clear from Gates’ replies that Lucy was concerned about her daughter’s academic and literary aspirations. She sought to divert her from them by constantly reminding her of the web of feminine obligations she still had, even as a divorcée. Much of these letters’ contents focused on Lucy’s anxieties over her daughter’s remarriage prospects. In one letter, Susa complained bitterly that her mother had lumped her together with another of her sisters as “being untrue to men.” “You do not seem to understand me or my purposes,” Susa wrote. “Is it wrong to want to build up God’s kingdom?” She vigorously defended both her educational pursuits and her lack of interest in remarrying.

Intriguingly, she even claimed patriarchal sanction for these perceived transgressions of womanly duties, asserting that both her deceased father and her Heavenly Father would approve. Lucy was going through a period of ill health at the time and frequently pressured Susa to return to St. George to care for her. While Susa responded with tenderness and concern, she always refused the entreaties, repeatedly reiterating her rationale for attending BYA in the process. On April 6, while in Salt Lake City to attend General Conference, she wrote, “I cannot sacrifice all my cheerful labor, [and] happy prospects in my dear Academy unless I feel I can do you a lasting good [by coming home].” On April 18, in the same letter in which she rejects the notion that she has been untrue to men, Gates tries to explain to her mother how much her work at the school means to her, especially compared with the drudgery of domestic labor: “my sphere of usefulness is being enlarged [here], and how much happier am I than as though forced to go through a daily routine of work distasteful to me.”

Gates also believed that her life in Provo was compatible with fulfilling her most important feminine responsibilities, such as nourishing her sisters and the two daughters
she had with her first husband. She assured Lucy more than once, for example, that she intended to bring her oldest daughter to Provo and care for her there, as well as enroll her in the Academy’s Kindergarten School. While she was ultimately unable to attain custody of Leah, Susa did host her sister Rhoda in Provo for a time, where she taught her piano and singing as part of her responsibilities over the Music Department. Afterward, she urged her mother to send Rhoda back to BYA, for “it is the best place on earth for her I feel assured.”

In the letters, Gates cleverly turns LDS doctrine and rhetoric to her own ends, justifying her assumption of traditionally masculine roles. In order to do this, she first dispenses with any responsibility to fulfill feminine roles. In the face of the prevalent Latter-day Saint doctrine (clearly held by her mother) that women had to be sealed in marriage to a man in order to guarantee Latter-day Saints’ highest possible postmortal reward, Gates proclaimed that she would happily be sealed posthumously to a righteous dead man—“some one [sic] who has proved his integrity and passed away”—effectively enabling her to stay single for the rest of her life. As there was precedent for this sort of practice—and Gates, as Brigham Young’s daughter, was more likely to be aware of it than others—it is unlikely that she was joking, although that possibility cannot be entirely discounted. Ultimately, Susa married Jacob Gates in 1880 and remained married to him for the rest of his life.

Gates justified her career goals in two primary ways: by invoking gender-neutral language on the eternal importance of education from Joseph Smith’s revelations and by insisting that academic work brought her personal fulfillment.

Gates justified her career goals by, on the one hand, employing gender-neutral language on the eternal importance of education from Joseph Smith’s revelations and, on the other hand, by invoking the personal fulfillment her work brought her. “Now mother, you surely don’t wish me to break up all my plans and life, and once more be turned adrift without aim or object. I am contented and busy here. I feel that I am doing some good, and receiving much instruction. All that we learn in this world counts us so much in the world to come.” Both motivations stand in contrast to the way Gates justified her sister Rhoda’s incentive to learn music: so that “she [would] make a smart [i.e., attractive] woman with culture.” Such reasoning aligns more closely with contemporary rationales for women’s education: to cultivate polished matrons and attract their mates, rather than to produce professionals. Although Susa went on to reconcile herself to the patriarchal structure of the Church, her letters from this time reveal a strong young woman fighting to make use of her talents in spite of opposition.

Conclusion

In 1929, Reynolds wrote an editorial for the Relief Society Magazine on the progress of female education in the United States: “Today the majority of colleges in the United States confer degrees on women, and even so conservative an institution as Yale admits women to its graduate school.” She encouraged her readers to look forward to a future “big with promise.” There are many layers of irony to Reynolds’ celebratory attitude. As a Westerner and a Latter-day Saint of her generation, Reynolds had received a coeducational secondary education long before such had become the norm in the Eastern States. As an adult professional, she had completed enrichment courses at many of the country’s premier universities and noted the number of female professors and the way female students were treated in all of these settings. The West had made more progress
more quickly than the rest of the nation, she felt. Yet her male colleagues, in undergoing their own adjustment to the norms of Eastern universities, seem not to have noticed or cared. Because of this, the bright future for professional LDS women that Reynolds envisioned took decades to realize.

This paper contributes to the existing literature that examines why in his book *American Universities and the Making of Modern Mormonism*, Thomas W. Simpson asserts that women's educational achievement in Utah dropped off after about 1900. He believes this is because the end of the polygamy era removed pressure for the church to promote women's agency and achievement for propaganda purposes. This study, while not comprehensive, suggests some additional reasons for the phenomenon of the disappearing LDS woman professional. Perhaps the generation of male leaders that encouraged female education “failed to reproduce themselves,” in Lola Van Wagenen’s phrase, because their sons, for the most part, uncritically absorbed patriarchal norms and expectations from their textbooks and the broader academic milieu. Professional women, meanwhile, had always needed to navigate patriarchal expectations for their lives and bodies in pursuing alternative goals, but found themselves less able to do so as female mentors were few and male mentors became increasingly uninterested in cultivating protégés of the opposite sex. Nevertheless, this study can serve as a reminder that, even as the church’s institutional support for women fluctuated over time, individual women always retained some agency to navigate competing religious and gender expectations.

---

Ian is a history major with plans to pursue a PhD in political theory. He grew up all over the Mountain West, but only ever felt at home in big cities at sea level. Over his time at BYU, he has enjoyed pursuing creative writing projects, learning from other feminists, serving in leadership capacities in societies across from campus, from Phi Alpha Theta to the Honors Student Leadership Council. He is passionate about equity and access to higher education, and thinks region and social class are two of the most under-appreciated forms of diversity in the U.S. today. He would like to thank Dr. Rachel Cope, Audrey Saxton, and the editors of AWE for their advice and inspiration on this paper.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Gates, Susa Young. Letters. BYU Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library.
Reynolds, Alice Louise. Autobiography. BYU Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library.
(Various). “Pedagogical history of the Brigham Young University class of 1893.”

Secondary Sources

Bennion, Milton Lynn. Mormonism and Education. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Salt Lake City, 1939.