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Emmeline B. Wells. As a representative of the Relief Society, Wells was a member of the National and International Councils of Women. Photographer Charles W. Savage. Courtesy LDS Church Archives.
“The Power of Combination”: Emmeline B. Wells and the National and International Councils of Women

After overcoming antipolygamy sentiment in the National Council of Women, Wells achieved international notice as a leader of women’s causes and enjoyed the best of London society.

Carol Cornwall Madsen

At a celebration of her eighty-second birthday in 1910, Emmeline B. Wells was eulogized as a woman whose sphere of influence extended well beyond the community in which she lived. “She has traveled tens of thousands of miles to render service in defense of her church and sex,” the tribute read, “and [she] enjoys the respect—in many instances the intimate acquaintance and affection—of the leading women, not only of America, but of the world.” Emmeline Wells indeed moved well beyond the borders of Mormondom as she fulfilled her personal commitment to work for the betterment of women, especially Latter-day Saint women. A high point of that work was the 1899 Congress of Women in London, called by the International Council of Women, which Emmeline attended as an officer of the National Council of Women.

Such an auspicious achievement seemed unlikely when, as a fourteen-year-old provincial daughter of New England, Emmeline Wells converted to Mormonism. It was a decision, her friends warned, certain to eclipse her precocious talents and lead her into ignominious obscurity. They were wrong. Her attendance at the women’s congress in London crowned her successful and highly visible role as an honored advocate for women and as a bridge builder for the often maligned and misunderstood women of her faith. Though she went on to become the first Utah woman to receive an honorary degree from a university, the first to be invited to

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dedicate a public monument in Utah, and the fifth general president of the LDS Relief Society, the London conference represented to her not only the triumph of the spirit of united womanhood—a long-held personal idea—but also an unexpected adventure into the elegant world of European nobility and accomplished women.

This great female gathering embodied a fundamental principle of her advocacy for women. “Woman’s work in this day and age,” she wrote in 1875, at the beginning of her public career, “is not only an individual work, but a universal work; a work for all her suffering sisterhood.” For nearly thirty years, Emmeline Wells stretched the boundaries of her field of labor, envisioning a grand union of diverse women unitedly working for the elevation and liberation of women in all aspects of their lives. “We are engaged in a stupendous work,” she told the readers of the Woman’s Exponent, the newspaper she edited. “The seed we sow will assuredly spring up, blossom and bear fruit in the future; and having the same prize to obtain, the same goal to reach, aiming at the same great result, the regeneration of women.”

Creation of the Councils of Women

Wells’s odyssey into internationalism followed the development of a global outreach by suffrage leaders in late nineteenth-century America. The success of a worldwide association of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, organized by Frances Willard, prompted plans to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the first woman’s rights convention, held in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, by calling an international convocation of women. Of the seventy-seven organizations invited, fifty-three sent representatives from seven countries; nearly a hundred women addressed this 1888 conference.

At the meeting, organizers created both a national and international council of women as permanent organizations. Hoping to instill in the assembly “a realizing sense of the power of combination,” the Committee of Arrangements charged the international representatives to spread the “council idea” in their respective countries and organize national councils in preparation for the first meeting of the International Council of Women, planned for
London in 1893. Though "much is said of universal brotherhood," the committee reported, "more subtle and more binding is universal sisterhood."  

Emmeline Wells did not attend the 1888 celebration in Washington, D.C.; however, the Relief Society, the Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association (YLMIA), and the Primary, all member societies of the National Woman Suffrage Association, were represented by Utah women then living in the East.

Membership in the National Council

At the first meeting of the National Council of Women (NCW) in 1891 in Washington, D.C., the Relief Society and YLMIA applied for membership. The application was problematic, however. Though enfranchised for seventeen years, Mormon women had lost the vote in 1887, in large measure because of the fervent antipolygamy activism of many of the women's groups which had already joined the national council. Despite the fact that the Woodruff Manifesto had been issued the year before the meeting of the national council, polygamy would remain a thorny issue among national women's associations for at least two more decades.

Emmeline Wells, who attended the membership meeting with Jane Richards of the Relief Society and Carrie S. Thomas of the YLMIA, along with other Utah women, was apprehensive about the acceptance of their credentials. In a meeting with Wells, May Wright Sewall, the corresponding secretary, asked her to write a statement on the objectives and accomplishments of the Relief Society. Sewall then submitted the document to the membership committee for its consideration. "We were left in suspense," Emmeline noted, but not for long. "Miss [Susan B.] Anthony was the first to bring me the good news that we were admitted without a dissenting vote."  

For nearly twenty years, Emmeline Wells served as either a delegate or a proxy for Relief Society presidents Zina D. H. Young and Bathsheba W. Smith. She was also elected a patron by the council, which gave her all rights of membership except the vote. At the 1891 meeting, Emmeline, already well known to national suffrage leaders, was singled out as "one of the most interesting women
at the council."\textsuperscript{11} Always supportive of the suffrage movement, Emmeline found that the national council offered her a wider range of social issues and a broader forum from which to address them than she had in Utah.

Given the financial and moral support of Church leaders for these national affiliations, the Church’s decision to incorporate the Relief Society the following year was not unexpected. Incorporation would not only protect and regulate control of the Relief Society’s considerable financial holdings, but would also bring it into conformity with the national council, which had also incorporated as a public, nonprofit entity. Emmeline was instrumental in explaining and implementing the changes that incorporation entailed, including a written constitution, the addition of "national" to the society’s name, and reorganization with three vice-presidents and a board of twenty-three directors. Facing strong resistance from many Relief Society members, who felt the changes were contrary to the organizational pattern laid out by Joseph Smith in Nauvoo, Apostle Franklin D. Richards, who orchestrated incorporation, attempted to reassure them: "How can it be wrong, the right to take your place among the charitable institutions of the whole world? . . . This society is of consequence now, it has a standing among other great organizations of the world."\textsuperscript{12} His argument was persuasive, and a long though tenuous affiliation was thus launched.

\textbf{Columbian Exposition: A Showcase for Women}

The showcase of women’s cooperative enterprises and the springboard for launching the International Council of Women was the Columbian Exposition, which was held in Chicago in 1893. Though originally scheduled for London, the council’s first meeting was held in the United States because of the international outreach of the exposition and the opportunity it afforded to engage the interest and support of international women leaders.\textsuperscript{13} The focal point for the council was the week-long World’s Congress of Representative Women, where delegates from several countries presented papers on all aspects of “women’s work and progress.”\textsuperscript{14}

The idea for a congress of women came from members of the national council, who mounted a massive recruiting effort.
May Wright Sewall, corresponding secretary of the national council and vice-president of the international council, twice traveled to Europe to arouse interest, securing enthusiastic responses from women's leaders throughout Europe and Russia. She obtained the names of every national organization and extended invitations to attend the congress. At the time of the exposition, the only members of the international council besides the national council of the United States were fraternal representatives from nonfederated, independent women's organizations in other countries. The congress of women, council leaders hoped, would encourage organization of national councils in other countries.

While these hopes were swiftly realized and nine national councils affiliated with the International Council of Women (ICW) before the 1899 meeting in London, recruiting efforts before and after the Chicago exposition disclosed the problems of forming an international association. The cost, length of time, and difficulties of international travel, along with language barriers, deterred many otherwise interested women. Also formidable were the costs of sustaining both a national and international council in addition to a local organization. Nor did many women have legacies of their own or control of trusts or foundations to assist in establishing an endowment fund for the councils.

National politics also intruded in those countries which prohibited international alliances or women's political activism. Competitive states and provinces in countries such as Austria, Hungary, South Africa, and Australia complicated efforts to form a single national federation.

Some women's groups objected not only to the goals and personnel of the council, but also to the idea of formal alliance itself. These "violent [radical] feminists," as council secretary Teresa Wilson characterized them, "[in their effort at independence, shook off all convention]," being unwilling to collaborate with women whom they considered "aristocratic, orthodox, and 'devout doers of good works.'" Their assessment, actually, was not far off, since the movement clearly reflected the goals and values of middle-class social activists devoted to social betterment. The ideals and concerns of the Relief Society, however, meshed comfortably with many of the objectives of the councils, and its
highly effective network and long experience in fund raising relieved it of many of the financial impediments faced by some of the newer women’s groups.21

Despite the obstacles, the Chicago congress attracted representatives of 126 organizations from thirty-three countries. More than six hundred women participated at the congress, which drew thousands of visitors to its eighty-one sessions.22 Mormon women were enthusiastic supporters. Both the Relief Society and the YLMIA were invited to conduct their own sessions, and both received favorable notice. There was no small irony in the fact that some of the same leaders who had so recently patronized and even ridiculed LDS women as pawns of a religious hierarchy now gave them a platform from which to represent themselves to an international audience. For their part, LDS women were anxious to reconnect with the women’s world from which they had been separated for so many years.

For Emmeline Wells, the Chicago exposition and woman’s congress swelled her enthusiasm for expanding women’s networks and convinced her of the social power of female combination. The congress also gave her an opportunity to tout the literary skills of western women at one of the sessions and an unexpected invitation to preside at a general session, “an honor never before accorded to a Mormon woman,” she noted. “If one of our brethren had such a distinguished honor conferred upon them, it would have been heralded the country over and thought a great achievement,” she wryly added.23 At the many receptions, in small hotel-room gatherings, at private house parties, and at luncheon tables, Emmeline extended her web of contacts by meeting national and international women leaders, many of whom she would see again at the second woman’s congress six years later in London.24

The exposition mobilized women everywhere to public activism. In Utah it was instrumental in muting differences between Mormon and non-Mormon women as they worked together for the first time to make a creditable exhibit “from the women of Utah.”25 Emmeline was pleased to report to her Woman’s Exponent readers that “this work is bringing women into a nearness of contact that will increase confidence, and a more universal sisterhood will be established by the association and relation of this vast
The Woman's Building of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. In this building were exhibited the contributions of Utah women in literature, art, and silk handwork. (Illustration from C. Dean, The World's Fair City and Her Enterprising Sons [n.p.: United Publishing, 1892].)
army of workers.”26 The exposition spurred the cooperative effort of women’s associations throughout the country, and its theme of unity effectively blurred the differences in goals and methods of the diverse groups represented. The contagious appeal of “women’s solidarity” also obscured the absence of working-class and minority women in the grand chorus of unified sisterhood.27

For the women’s groups involved, however, especially those seeking validity for an international scope and agenda, the woman’s congress reinforced their faith in the power of union and their ability to transform society and effect social justice by the application of women’s values, methods, and objectives. Independent goals of constituent members could be subsumed in the transcendent realization of woman’s distinctive contribution to the “progress of civilization.” Through the Chicago exposition and the woman’s congress, women intended to capitalize on the solidarity that female association provided, to surmount the role of passive observer on the world scene, and to exploit the moral authority of women in order to implement their own social agendas and influence world affairs.28

Disagreement in the National Council

As prelude to the 1899 London congress, a meeting of the NCW held in Washington in January 1899 drew ten Utah women. What began as a routine meeting, however, became a power contest between the Mormon delegation and the other council members; again, polygamy was the point of dissension. Four of the LDS women attended as official delegates, the others as members of committees or as speakers only. The disagreement arose over passage of a resolution against the seating of newly elected Utah Congressman B. H. Roberts, a polygamist. The constituent organizations of the NCW which had campaigned against polygamy now pressured the council to add their resolution to the growing number issued by a host of other national women’s groups.

Unable to dismiss or table this resolution, Emmeline Wells and Ann Cannon, members of the Resolutions Committee, were successful in obtaining a second, more moderately worded resolution. The new resolution was endorsed by the majority of the
committee and thus was known as the majority resolution. The two resolutions split the council. Could it afford to offend two of its charter members, the Relief Society and YLMIA? Could it risk losing the support of its most prestigious members, especially the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, which supported the minority resolution?

The Mormon women faced a dilemma of their own. None had supported Roberts’s bid for office, since he had almost derailed woman suffrage in the constitutional convention four years earlier. Yet he was a fellow Mormon, and all of them supported his constitutional right to take his seat in Congress. The day-long debate heard voices on both sides of the issue, including those of six of the Mormon women. Emmeline was last. Still ringing in her ears was the private conversation she had had with council president May Wright Sewall. Urging Emmeline not to miss this “golden opportunity” to secure a place among the major “organization women” of the nation, she counseled her to vote with them. She used “all her power of persuasion to convince me it was the only course to pursue,” Emmeline confided to her diary. Whatever moral struggle she waged in deciding which course to follow, in the end she made a strong appeal for the majority resolution and the right of B. H. Roberts to represent the people of Utah in Congress.

The oratory of the LDS women, with the help of several influential, supportive council members, carried the majority resolution to victory. In a surprising voice of approval, the New York Journal noted that though the Mormon women clearly showed “the strain under which they suffered,” never once “did they lose the thread of any argument and when, from time to time, they rose, and in response to the demand of the presiding officer, went upon the stage to speak, their bearing plainly showed they had the courage of their own convictions.” While the confrontation did not isolate the Mormon members of the council, with Emmeline winning the post of assistant recording secretary immediately thereafter, it clearly polarized the association and forced the Mormons into a defensive posture, which later events only served to reinforce.
Participation in the London Congress of Women

Not until May of 1899, only a month before the congress was to convene in London, was Emmeline certain of attending. Always dependent on Church or Relief Society funds to subsidize her travels, she was seldom able to give much advance notice of her attendance, which was a constant embarrassment to her. Fortunately, after much discussion, the Relief Society board voted to raise six hundred dollars for her trip to London, three dollars from each ward. Any additional monies would assist Margaret A. Caine, who was to present a paper on sericulture at the meeting.35

Emmeline was the last of sixteen Utah women to arrive in England for the congress. Six of them were participants. As assistant recording secretary of the NCW, she attended the ICW meetings in the capacity of her office. Susa Young Gates and Margaret A. Caine were presenting papers at the congress; and Elizabeth C. McCune, Lucy B. Young (Susa’s mother), and Jean Clara Holbrook were patrons of the NCW and therefore entitled to attend the ICW meetings.34

The intermingling of socials and sessions, of entertainment and education, inadvertently denied the congress a clear-cut identity. Its objectives were noble enough. Vying for the participants’ favor, time, and attention were sixty-four sessions in which 268 papers on fifty subsections of six general topics were read in five different halls before a total audience of more than 2,500 people. The ICW meetings themselves brought two hundred delegates from twenty-four countries.35

For nine days, meetings of the ICW alternated with sessions of the congress; Emmeline dutifully attended both. She supported her two Mormon friends when they delivered their papers and perfunctorily noted that Susa Young Gates read hers on “The Scientific Treatment of Domestic Service” to “much applause” but that Margaret Caine “gave her address [on sericulture] and made a failure.”36

Emmeline declined an invitation to speak at a session chaired by May Wright Sewall, vice-president of the ICW,37 but anticipated participating in the session addressing the work and importance of
benevolent societies. Drawing a large crowd, the session was held in Convocation Hall in the Dean’s Yard of Westminster Abbey, “the most select and noted of all the places of meeting,” Susa Gates noted.38 The session was chaired by Beatrice Webb, widely known in both Great Britain and America as a socialist reformer.39 “There,” Emmeline recorded in her diary, “I had the opportunity to speak and to explain our Relief Society fully, its date of organization, its thorough practical work, its halls and buildings in this and other countries, [and] its practical work for those needing assistance.”40 “She was listened to with marked attention,” Susa Gates observed, “and the Chairman offered her an increase of the allotted time at the close of her remarks, which, however, was not accepted.”41

The plenary sessions on peace and woman suffrage introduced the Utah representatives to unfamiliar audience responses: cheering, hissing, and impatient clapping to silence lengthy speakers.42 Nothing short of a standing ovation, however, could reflect the respect and admiration the audience of three thousand showed for eighty-year-old Susan B. Anthony.43 Peace and woman suffrage were not negotiable issues for this assemblage of women, and no one symbolized the solidarity of the delegates on these questions more than Anthony.

The newspapers did not fail to notice that, even as this large gathering of women was making a claim for political equality, the British Parliament rejected a proposal permitting women to be elected as counselors or aldermen in the new borough councils.44 Nonetheless, Wells observed, the business meetings of the council demonstrated that women were not above adopting the political machinations commonly associated with male politics. While the officers recognized the formidable abilities and experience of ICW vice-president May Sewall, a logical successor to the presidency, she was not a unanimous choice to succeed the well-liked Countess of Aberdeen. Though Sewall was ultimately elected, an earlier closed-door session had revealed a competitive and aggressive spirit among the delegates and unpleasant wrangling over other candidates as well as Sewall. The whole procedure exposed Wells to the political realities of maintaining working relationships among highly nationalistic delegates in an international arena.45
Feted by London Society

Interspersed among the business and educational sessions, however, were some of London society's most lavish receptions, given by British nobility and ICW officers. In addition, various British clubs and societies sponsored more than forty teas, luncheons, and receptions for individual groups of delegates and participants.

Journalists could hardly ignore the inordinate number of European nobility in attendance nor slight the splendor of the grand soirées held in some of London's most elegant homes and finest establishments. Could discussions on “People's Kitchens,” “The Ethics of Amusements,” or “Sericulture in Utah” really generate as much reader interest as a description of the opening reception at Stafford House, where a thousand guests were ushered up the grand marble stairway, lighted at every step by huge candelabra, to the greetings of not one but three countesses and the Duchess of Sutherland herself? The newspapers filled their reports with details such as these: The Duchess, the mistress of Stafford House, was dressed in “a lovely gown of white crepe de lisse [chiné], adorned with bands of blue and silver passementerie [beaded trim], with diamonds in her hair and on her neck.” She stood by the Countess of Aberdeen, president of the British Council of Women, equally elegant in a complementary “black [brocade] satin richly trimmed with jet, with pearl and diamond ornaments.”

Even the Deseret News succumbed to the splendor of the socials, placing an Associated Press interview with Susan B. Anthony and the Countess of Aberdeen under the headline “London Society for the Week.” The brief dispatch did manage, however, to convey how important these two leaders were to the congress.

The social events excited and overwhelmed the women from Utah. Emmeline, already moved by the collective intelligence, political savvy, and confidence demonstrated at the congress, came to acknowledge the power of wealth and social position. The pageantry of nobility, a stunning packaging for the London meeting, introduced Emmeline to another arena of female status and influence. Her usual aplomb in unfamiliar social settings deserted her in the face of such studied opulence and the deference it commanded. The great houses, the marble-and-gold interiors, the magnificent...
View of Westminster Abbey from the Dean’s Yard. By special invitation, Emmeline Wells responded to a large session held in the Convocation Hall in the Dean’s Yard, the most prestigious of the meeting places for the Congress of Women. Wells’s comments on the Relief Society received “marked attention.” (Illustration by Herbert Railton. From W. J. Loftie, Westminster Abbey [New York: Macmillan, 1891].)
antiques and paintings, the elegant dinners and refreshments, the handsome clothing, and the exquisite jewels bedazzled them all. "It does seem remarkable," Emmeline admitted, "that we should have such an opportunity given to us—from very far away but we feel the Lord has done it."^48

The opening reception at Stafford House, with its splendid display of titled ladies—a duchess, three countesses, and a marchioness—and many women of lesser rank, overwhelmed the women from Utah. American author and lecturer Charlotte Perkins Stetson (Gilman), whose pathbreaking feminist treatise, *Women and Economics*, was the talk of the congress, arrived just after Emmeline and Susa Gates. Drawing near the grand stairway, she observed the two women "plainly dressed and looking timidly up at the array of tiaras on the landing." Undaunted by the regal panoply herself, she offered to accompany them, having met all of the titled ladies previously. Emmeline had met Gilman two years earlier at a suffrage convention and considered her "one of the brightest women of the nineteenth century" and one who "really seemed to take extra pains for some of our Utah party."^50

More receptions and socials followed, but none quite equaled that given by Lady Rothschild and her daughter-in-law Mrs. Leopold de Rothschild at Gunnersbury Park, their elegant residence and private park on the outskirts of London. The gathering was "the most magnificent . . . of all we have attended," declared Emmeline. "Everything was on the grandest scale imaginable."^51 The newspapers agreed, describing the event in alluring detail, as did Emmeline and Susa in their respective publications. Four bands, strolling magicians, trained dogs, and a circus ring with "lady performers" entertained the twelve hundred guests, who enjoyed delicacies of every kind served under the large colored tents that dotted the grounds. It was all "beyond description," Emmeline wrote, "in mind and brain and heart forever engrafted."^52

The *pièce de résistance* was the unexpected invitation to visit Windsor Castle, where Queen Victoria had agreed to greet the guests from the congress. As the eager visitors excitedly rushed through the large gates leading to the square immediately fronting the castle, the queen's carriage gradually emerged, slowly moving between the long lines of admiring women that bordered the drive
from the castle to the road beyond. Smiling, waving, and greeting the awestruck admirers, the queen left them to a marvelous repast of exquisite delicacies served in the elegant St. George’s Hall inside the castle. “It was a fitting close to the great International gathering of women,” Emmeline observed.53

Results of the Congress of Women

While the major London papers gave primary coverage to the closing days of Parliament, which coincided with the congress, such a gathering of women could not be entirely ignored. It particularly drew the attention of the numerous women’s and working-class newspapers, which covered the congress in detail. The Humanitarian, a monthly review of “sociological science,” gave its “Notes and Comments” column repeatedly to news of the congress, perhaps because of the personal interest of its editor, Victoria Woodhull Martin, a notorious figure in the American suffrage movement of some years earlier.54 “A quarter of a century ago it was hardly possible for a woman to be heard in public,” the Humanitarian noted, asserting that “the fact that such a Congress has been possible is an evidence of the ground gained by the woman’s movement . . . and a tribute to those early pioneers who suffered so much for the cause.”55

The Englishwoman’s Review characterized the congress as youthful, impatient, voluble, and perhaps too diverse and extensive to be as effective as it had hoped. As an organ for “social and industrial questions,” the Review focused on the political and legislative sessions.56 Most pressing for women from industrialized nations was the distinction between protective and restrictive legislation for women in the workplace. The Review praised the well-reasoned arguments of Alexandra Gripeenberg of Germany, who elicited the strongest response from the audience for her “extremely powerful paper”57 on the rights of working women.

Though industrial workers did not represent themselves at the congress, issues relating to their employment had long been on the agenda of social reformers. Class and gender intersected as middle- and upper-class women in many countries used their money and position in the cause of their working-class sisters.
Back in Utah, the Deseret News rehearsed the wide range of topics under discussion, recognizing that women were now engaged in debating questions in the realm of science, emigration, the professions, and "even politics with the same enthusiasm with which they would take up questions pertaining to education and social affairs"—issues more traditionally within woman's province. The News worried about "women with pronounced views," who were obviously not representative of "womanhood in general" and who, if given "too much latitude," might hinder rather than advance woman's cause. The paper seemed more comfortable with the sessions on peace, a topic of universal concern and accord, where women's influence as women and mothers, it optimistically affirmed, would solve "all the problems connected with that question."58

To those women for whom the congress represented years of effort to obtain a voice and a place in the work of the world, the meetings could hardly have been seen as anything short of a triumph. As for those who claimed it to be less than truly international, who derided the unevenness and contradictions in the presentations or the lack of a consistent principle underlying the congress, or who felt its scope of issues unwomanly or its claims to "universal sisterhood" ephemeral and idealistic, let them have their say, its leaders conceded. Detractors could not dispel the euphoria of the congress's planners or the enlarged vision of its participants.59

Nevertheless, the meetings of the council revealed some of the inner conflicts that eluded easy resolution. Questions of "national autonomy" and "racial independence" or national rivalries and prejudice prompted the council to focus on cooperative action through personal acquaintance on subcommittees among member groups and to implement a policy of restraint in exercising power over auxiliary members and their individual agendas.60 As a result of this open policy, representation in both the national and international councils from the United States ranged from moral reform groups and religious auxiliaries to the highly politicized woman suffrage association, all seeking the prestige of international association.

Such a diverse membership challenged unified goals and policies. Balancing the interests of each affiliate while seeking consensus on procedure and objectives strained the most ecumenical vision,
and avoiding political entanglements with the affiliates’ governments required the utmost diplomacy. As ICW officer May Wright Sewall discovered, adjudicating both personal and political differences among the affiliated groups “really forced the entire Executive, nay, the Council itself, to study large questions of the kind that engage statesmen.”

However sincere the hope of “universal sisterhood,” internationalism would not be easy.

Despite the inherent problems, national and international affiliation gave many women’s groups the benefits of association with larger, more highly organized, and more powerful organizations as well as contact with women of national and international stature. Objectives, methods, and procedures of their own organizations were focused and strengthened and their goals clarified through these national and international exchanges. Perspectives were sharpened, experience broadened, and knowledge extended beyond the narrow limits of state and national boundaries. Perhaps even more important was the psychological boost that international affiliation provided, as well as the sense of social power that came from collective action and support. Internationalism was a heady and unimagined experience for many of the international council’s affiliates, including the LDS Relief Society and its representatives. Their contact with the major women’s leaders of the century broadened their perspective of women’s work, enhanced the vision of their own organization’s possibilities, and introduced them to organizational methods of tremendous value.

Emmeline was sanguine about the results of the congress: “That greater love and charity will prevail among womankind cannot be doubted, when such a fraternal feeling is fostered and cherished as that which prevailed so largely during the entire sessions of the Council and Congress.” She was convinced that “ultimately a great federation of the sisterhood of the world will come to pass,” and the world would be the beneficiary.

Emmeline as Tourist

If the breadth and intensity of the congress stimulated and engaged Emmeline’s mind and professional interests, England touched her cultural and aesthetic sensitivities. Though surrounded by her
Mormon sisters and council colleagues, she distanced herself when possible in order to experience this grand excursion as a solitary and adventurous fulfillment of her own romantic fancy. Occasionally with a companion, but more often alone, she wandered the streets of London, feeling the heartbeat of the city where its distant past intersected with a teeming and vibrant present. Its architectural dignity; its historic monuments, which any schoolchild would recognize; the Dickensian squalor that still blighted some of its streets; and the quaint tea shops that offered stimulating conversation with newly made friends—all entranced her. She wandered among crowds of thousands one afternoon at the renowned Crystal Palace, viewed the long picture galleries and flower stands, and marveled at the display of fireworks, which were beyond anything she had ever seen. The bookshops in London and Cambridge delighted her with their endless number of volumes.

A high point of Emmeline’s London wanderings was her visit to Number One, Cheyne Walk in Chelsea, once the home of her favorite author, George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans). She was unable to see the famed garden at the back because of its high fencing, but the iron gate and brass knocker in the front yielded to her knocking. A maid answered, not allowing Emmeline entry, but throwing the door open far enough for a full view of the interior. Now she had seen the home of the brilliant British author. A long-held dream was realized. Then she was off to Stratford-upon-Avon, where she visited the Shakespeare sites. But she was most impressed by her visit with popular novelist Marie Corelli, who offered her coffee and macaroons and gave her a kiss, an autograph, and an hour’s visit.

Before Emmeline returned home, she visited Edinburgh and Glasgow and spent several days in Paris visiting Latter-day Saint missionaries and Church members and attending or organizing Relief Societies. After an exhilarating two months abroad, her European sojourn came to an end. This overseas excursion had been both a private and professional venture of extraordinary meaning and value. “What stirring events have transpired during the last few years,” she noted in her diary during the voyage home. “What further changes are yet to come, I know not.”
“The Power of Combination”


Aftermath

Many changes were indeed before Emmeline, including two noteworthy conclusions to her association with the NCW and ICW. In 1913, May Wright Sewall complimented Emmeline Wells as one who “had done much to create the good feelings now existing” toward LDS women and suggested that a bust of her be placed in a proposed hall of statues of the great women of the United States. “President Wells,” she said, “was the connection between the women of the Council and the women of [the] Church.” The hall of statues did not materialize, but the women of Utah honored her posthumously in 1928, on the centenary of her birth, with a bust placed in the rotunda of the Utah State Capitol. It was inscribed simply, “A Fine Soul Who Served Us.”
George Eliot’s house in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea. This drawing shows Eliot’s home as it appeared in 1885, five years after Eliot’s death and fourteen years before Emmeline Wells made her pilgrimage to it. Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) was Emmeline Wells’s favorite author. (Illustration from J. W. Cross, ed., *George Eliot’s Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals* [New York, Harper and Brothers, 1885].)
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In 1916, when Lord and Lady Aberdeen visited Utah, Emmeline served as their escort to the social and civic functions given in their honor. Lady Aberdeen, who served as president of the International Council of Women for thirty-six of its first fifty years, concluded her visit by noting that “it is seldom that one has the honor of being introduced twice in one day by a queen, but that honor has come to me today. For in my brief visit here I have quickly observed that ‘Aunt Em’ is the Queen of Utah.”67 That Salt Lake City was included in the itinerary of such distinguished travelers reflects the impact Emmeline Wells and her cohorts made on national and international leaders.

However, prompted primarily by the persistent denigration of the Church by antipolygamists, Church and auxiliary leaders had previously begun a reassessment of the value of national and international affiliation. Though the decade following the Woodruff Manifesto in 1890 opened a period of conciliation and cooperation between Mormon and non-Mormon women, especially in Utah, residual grievances against polygamy continued to smolder and sometimes ignited into heated opposition from the women’s groups that had always had reservations about the Mormon affiliation. The female crusade against B. H. Roberts in 1899, the acrimony of NCW and ICW members toward President Joseph F. Smith and the LDS Church during the Smoot hearings in 1904, the barring of LDS women from the National Congress of Mothers, and the continued petitioning of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs and the NCW for a constitutional amendment against polygamy eroded the trust and optimism of earlier years. While some Church members saw an educational advantage to retaining membership in national associations, others questioned its ultimate value.

In answer to a 1913 letter from the Relief Society requesting counsel in the matter, the First Presidency of the Church advised the Relief Society “to remain as it is for the present, at least,” explaining that the First Presidency “did not want to interfere in its corporate life.” Nevertheless, the letter described national affiliation as “a passing incident in the life of the Society, an incident which may be terminated at any time without affecting in any way the Society itself.” Its conclusion reflected the preeminence
Church leaders at that time gave the Relief Society in relation to other women’s groups:

The Society must be regarded as paramount in importance to everything else now connected with it, or which may hereafter be connected with it; and its meetings must be conducted in the spirit of a religious organization, as though no affiliation at all with the National organization had been entered into.68

By the next year, the First Presidency was even more explicit. “You are the head and not the tail,” President Smith announced at a Relief Society anniversary celebration. “I want it distinctly emphasized that the Relief Societies of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints cannot afford to yield their prerogative to stand at the head of any other self-made, self-constituted female or male organization in the world.”69 The Relief Society was not to adjust its programs, its policies, or its focus to serve the interests of its national affiliations. While the LDS women’s organizations maintained their membership in both councils and contributed to the policy making and leadership of both, President Smith had made it clear that their integrity was never to be compromised by national or international affiliation.70 Always optimistic that women would allow gender loyalty and a commitment to common goals to transcend social or religious differences, Emmeline recognized the awkward position in which both the Church and the Relief Society had been placed. The laudatory words of Franklin D. Richards in 1892, at the time of incorporation, seemed less significant two decades later.

In creating coalitions of diverse membership and varied social goals, the international women’s movements hoped to utilize their numerical strength and visibility to take an influential role in international concerns. In the absence of formal political power, these movements were serious attempts to claim the power of a unified sisterhood significant enough to make a difference in world affairs.

The exposure of local women’s groups, like the Relief Society, to national and international coalitions and the prestige of affiliation both energized and educated local associations in effecting their own individual agendas. LDS women, long isolated geographically and ideologically from the center of national women’s movements,
enthusiastically joined the surge of collective, organized female effort that dominated women’s public experience in turn-of-the-century America.

Most affected by these connections were the women who, like Wells, served as links between their own associations and their national affiliates. Wells’s experience with internationalism underscored a heightened awareness of the power of female combination, which she brought to her tenure as general president of the Relief Society. At age eighty-two, when she was appointed to the position, she had had a lifetime of experience in women’s organized social activism. Paradoxically, the greatest success of women’s social activism was not global, but local. While national and international affiliation certainly added scope, visibility, and prestige to women’s public work, the real measure of its effectiveness was found in its local achievements. To this end Emmeline Wells gave the final eleven years of her life, both a symbol and an advocate of the spirit of united womanhood.

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NOTES

2 Emmeline B. Wells, Diary, January 7, 1878, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. For additional information on Wells’s work for women, see Carol Cornwall Madsen, “Emmeline B. Wells: ‘Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?’” BYU Studies 22 (Spring 1982): 161-78.
3 “Woman’s Work,” Woman’s Exponent 4 (November 15, 1875): 94.
4 She is using the term regeneration to mean the recognition of woman as man’s equal by overcoming the subjugated status that resulted from the disobedience of Eve. For additional meanings, see “Bear Ye One Another’s Burdens,” Woman’s Exponent 2 (March 1, 1874): 146.
6 Marie-Hélène LeFaucheux and others, Women in a Changing World: The Dynamic Story of the International Council of Women since 1888 (London:

7 Robbins, *History and Minutes of the National Council of Women*, 4-7, 18. Emily Tanner Richards, wife of LDS Church attorney Franklin S. Richards, was one of them.

8 Robbins, *History and Minutes of the National Council of Women*, 3.

9 Representing the three women's organizations of the LDS Church in Utah, all of which affiliated with the National Woman Suffrage Association, were Emily Richards and Margaret N. Caine, who with their husbands, Franklin S. Richards, Church attorney, and John T. Caine, Congressional delegate from Utah, lived in Washington, and Luella C. Young and Janet Young Easton, whose husbands worked in New York. Only the Relief Society and Young Women affiliated with the NCW. See Susa Young Gates, “The Recent Triennial in Washington,” *Young Woman's Journal* 10 (May 1899): 195.

10 Wells, Diary, February 21, 1891. See also “A Glimpse of Washington, the Woman's National Council,” *Woman's Exponent* 19 (March 1, 1891): 132.

11 *Woman’s Tribune*, February 28, 1891. The *Woman’s Tribune*, edited by Clara Bewick Colby, was a suffrage newspaper published in both Nebraska and Washington, D.C.

12 National Woman's Relief Society Record, October 10, 1892, and October 4, 1893, Archives Division, Church Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives).

13 See Fifth Resolution of the National Council of Women as reported in “National Council of Women,” *Woman's Exponent* 19 (May 15, 1891): 170.


18 LeFaucheux and others, *Women in a Changing World*, 21. Sweden's delegates, for instance, abstained from all votes since they were “not free to discuss political questions.”


21 Minutes of the Executive Committee of the National Council of Women, Chicago, May 22, 1893, indicate that “two hundred dollars besides their regular dues came from our two members in Utah [Relief Society and YLMIA], sent most promptly as soon as the appeal went out.” See Robbins, *History and Minutes of the National Council of Women of the United States*, 88.

Wells, Diary, May 20, 1893.

Among the number she mentions in various diary entries were Bertha Honoré Palmer, president of the Board of Lady Managers of the Fair; Ellen M. Henrotin, president of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs; Isabella Beecher Hooker of the famous Beecher clan; and Julia Ward Howe. Several Europeans were among the number as well.

“Women and the World’s Fair,” Woman’s Exponent 21 (December 1, 1892): 84.

“Women and the World’s Fair,” 84.

Gayle Gullett examines some of the inconsistencies and schisms in this show of solidarity. The claim of universality, she writes, stemmed from the assumption of these middle- and upper-class reformers that they represented the interests of less advantaged women (working class and minorities), who were often the objects of their humanitarian efforts. “The Political Use of Public Space: The Women’s Movement and Women’s Participation at the Chicago Columbian Exposition, 1893” (Paper delivered at the Berkshire Conference on Women’s History, June 1987), copy in possession of the author.


Wells, Diary, February 11, 1899.


Special Meeting of the Board of Directors, May 17, 1899, Relief Society Record, 269–70.

The others were Priscilla Jennings and her daughter May Farlowe and granddaughter Lucille Jennings, Carrie Thomas and daughter Kate, Josephine Booth, Amanda Knight and daughter Inez, Lydia Alder, and Emma Lucy Gates, Susa Young Gates’s daughter. Susa Young Gates, “International Council of Women,” Young Woman’s Journal 10 (October 1899): 437.

Wells, Diary, July 3, 1899; June 28, 1899.

Wells, Diary, June 30, 1899. Wells was somewhat irritated with Sewall for not having invited her earlier to speak on a subject of her own choosing and also noted that, despite Sewall’s dedication to the work, she was not a favorite among the women of the national and international councils.


Beatrice and Sidney Webb had visited America, including Salt Lake City, the previous year, a visit which Beatrice recorded. Beatrice was particularly interested in meeting Utah state senator Martha Hughes Cannon and noted in her journal Cannon’s election victory over both her husband, Angus, and Emmeline Wells, who had opposed her. She was, therefore, acquainted at least with Emmeline’s name and with Mormonism before the London meeting. See David A. Shannon, ed., Beatrice Webb’s American Diary, 1889 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), 126–36.


Wells, Diary, June 29, July 4, 1899.

“The International Congress of Women,” 36; see also “Reception at Stafford House,” Daily Chronicle, reprinted in the Woman’s Exponent 28 (August 1, 1899): 35.

Deseret News, July 8, 1899, 1.

Wells, Diary, June 28, 1899.


Wells, Diary, July 4, 1899; and “Home Again,” 45.

Wells, Diary, July 4, 1899; “Home Again,” 45; and Gates, “International Council of Women,” 446.


Her liberal and often shocking proposals in the name of women’s liberation, especially her advocacy of free love, quickly became a detriment to the suffrage cause in the United States. See Geoffrey Blodgett, “Victoria Claflin Woodhull” in
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57 Englishwoman's Review 30 (July 15, 1899): 158. "Women cannot ask for equal rights," the baroness argued, "and at the same time claim indulgence on the score of sex. Grown-up women ought to have the right to protect themselves." At that time, protective legislation was a heatedly debated issue for working women and spawned two decades later an opposing movement in the United States, centered on an equal rights amendment which would eliminate any distinction between men and women workers.


60 Sewall, International Council of Women, xvii; and Constitution of National and International Councils, Preamble, Article II, as reprinted in the Woman's Exponent 16 (May 1, 1888): 183.

61 Sewall, International Council of Women, xviii, xix.

62 "Home Again," 46.

63 Susa Gates assumed leadership of the Utah contingent, having "plenty of difficulty in piloting the large party from meeting to meeting, reception to reception, sightseeing from one end of London to the other, and all the associated difficulties of pleasing women who each seemed to want something different from the other." See Gates, "Biography of Lucy B. Young," 198.

64 Marie Corelli was a popular romantic novelist at the end of the nineteenth century. She had burst upon the British literary scene with Romance of Two Worlds in 1886, thereafter writing a series of romantic novels to gain public acclaim. Emmeline stayed in the inn at Stratford where Corelli wrote The Sorrows of Satan (1896), Emmeline's favorite Corelli novel. See Wells, Diary, July 18, 1899.

65 Wells, Diary, August 8, 1899.

66 Relief Society Minutes, April 17, 1913, LDS Church Archives.

67 Salt Lake Tribune, January 9, 1916, 10.

68 Relief Society Minutes, October 3, 1913.

69 Relief Society Minutes, March 17, 1914.

70 His endorsement can be considered magnanimous considering the personal abuse he experienced from representatives of many of the women's groups with which the Relief Society was associated and the calumny heaped on him as leader of a church that was publicly maligned as late as 1914 for its former practice of plural marriage. Subsequent Church leaders encouraged activity in the councils, not so much for the good they would do the Relief Society as for the good the Relief Society could do for the councils and for women generally. Relief Society president Belle Spafford's presidency of the NCW and leadership in the ICW between 1945 and 1970 represented the climax of Mormon membership in these organizations. At present the Relief Society is no longer a member.