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Winter Quarters: The 1846-1848 Life Writings of Mary Haskin Parker Richards

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Reviewed by Becky Bartholomew, editor of Uintah Springs Press and author.

Whether documenting the first leg of the prairie trek, reporting the temporary life in the Missouri River settlements, or transmitting hearsay about the Battle of Nauvoo, Mary Richards’s 1846–48 journals are a superb source on one brief period of Mormon history. For example, the journals make tantalizing reference to a little-known religious reformation and to Winter Quarters’ overzealous police force. Seen through Mary’s eyes, the gradual formulation of plans for going further west was less hierarchy-centered and more communal than previously depicted. Then there are her intimate portraits of sundry Church leaders and her even more fascinating glimpses into the dynamics of the Richards tribe.

In addition, Mary gives picturesque reports on frontiering in general. Sky “very lowery” (86), one entry reads simply. Another night she could not sleep, the “Misskateos having taken possession of our tent” (87). She tells of being drenched out of her tent, smoked out of her cabin, and almost chased away from Sunday meeting by a dust storm. But neither her role as travel writer, Mormon scribe, nor frontier reporter is central to these documents. Mary’s real drama, and what makes her story so riveting, is her fate as a Mormon wife.

**An Overview of the Plot**

In 1846, Mary Haskins Parker, a twenty-year-old immigrant from Lancashire, England, married twenty-one-year-old Samuel W. Richards, the Massachusetts-born nephew of Apostle Willard Richards, in the Nauvoo Temple. Several months later Samuel escorted his bride across the Mississippi River, tenderly nursed her through a severe but brief illness, then left her with his parents as he turned east on a mission to Scotland.

Before parting, Samuel urged Mary to keep a journal. Probably he suspected there would be no mail service where she was
going, and diarizing might relieve her sense of isolation and anxiety for him. This idea is supported by the fact that Mary made her last entry about the time she learned his return steamship was only three days off.

The resulting record consists of a brief autobiography, six journals, and twelve-plus letters penned by a lonely bride, mostly to her bridegroom, during their two-year separation. They vent her disappointment at not getting letters from Samuel, her fears for his life and safety, and her yearning for a future together in a home of their own without plural marriage to mar their bliss. They also detail her sufferings from muscular dystrophy and malaria, with complications that included susceptibility to chills, fever, and pain in the bowels, lower back, and limbs.

The Plot as Women's History

Mary's writing is remarkable for its expressiveness, color, and breadth of observation. It shows her to have been an alert, composed, pious, and very congenial young woman who often received overnight invitations from other families and almost always was asked to stay longer. She was completely devoted to Samuel, with whom she had lived only four months. When she did not hear from him for six months, she only mildly chastised him, remaining steadfast in placing his well-being above her own. Samuel was a lucky young man.

Fortunately, Mary's perspective takes in more than her husband. She gives pithy renderings of Sunday sermons and delightfully nonjudgmental reports on household tensions elicited by her father-in-law's cranky improvidence and her mother-in-law's difficulties with plural marriage. There are even chaste allusions to sex and menstruation, only my second such find in twenty-two years of reading pioneer journals. And she joins a handful of diarists who shed light on early sisters' interpretations of the Word of Wisdom.

Unlike some of her peers, Mary does not depict the Winter Quarters experience as tragic. Despite her loneliness and regular mention of misfortunes, illnesses, and deaths, she dwells more on singing school and winter dances, prayer meetings and summer parties. She charts a weekly schedule (not grind) of cooking, cleaning,
washing, sewing, braiding, quilting, churning, gathering, and “cleaning a hog’s face and putting it to boil” (106). Interestingly, she notes, “I have chosen the straw business as my occupation” (133), with an air suggesting that women customarily assumed a cash-producing trade in addition to their domestic duties.

And she documents the visiting. Many afternoons Mary could not get her work done for the many guests—mostly sisters but brethren, too—who frequented her tent and later her cabin. Mary describes a tight-knit community where nearly everyone was directly or indirectly related and where their primary social outlet was “talking about the things of the Kingdom” (111).

Other than the visiting, a sense of gender is not strong in Mary’s writings. Usually when she goes a-calling, she goes to Brother So-and-So’s house. Mary does mention two women-only prayer meetings. One was in her behalf; in another, participants spoke in tongues and disappointingly “only got part of the interpretation” (188). These meetings could be evidence that a female subculture developed in the pioneer settlements. However, Mary makes a stronger case against such a subculture by her equal association with men and women and her habit of turning to Uncle Willard for emotional support.

In their way, these journals are as eloquent as the better-known writings of Jean Rio Baker Pearce, a mature matron with vastly greater experience and education. Both works are not mere history but are also literature.

Even closer comparison can be made to the diary of Catherine Mehling Woolley, Mary’s nearest neighbor in Winter Quarters. While Catherine’s journal pertains mostly to the Salt Lake Valley, both contain the same preeminence of physical detail (perhaps arising from the brides’ newfound pleasure in housekeeping) and youthful sturdiness in the face of family quarrels and minor adversities. Among the differences are that Catherine’s husband was present, depriving her writing of much of Mary’s pathos, and that Catherine is more particular, spelling out menus, recipes, even prices for household goods, while Mary (perhaps because she was childless and therefore freer to get about) captures a larger view of pioneer Mormon society.
The Drama Plays Out

Mary’s writings have a distinct, even feminine, character deriving from their definite focus on Samuel, with domestic and communal events as secondary and tertiary themes. Whether addressing Samuel directly or shaping an observation for him to read later, Mary wrote for her bridegroom; she did not intend to write for posterity, to leave a record of epochal events, or even to satisfy a need for personal expression. Her audience was her beloved, and she fashioned her message as a lover would.

Readers must discover for themselves whether Mary’s dream of a quiet married life was fulfilled by Samuel’s return. And readers will want to know, for Mary has laid the background of her story so commandingly it deserves an equally well-told ending. Maureen Carr Ward provides some clues—the roots of a full-length biography are found in her extensive introduction. Moreover, readers will want to learn more about Mormon history from the women’s point of view. For all their charm, these documents are somewhat disturbing. It isn’t easy to reconcile women’s history with religious tranquility. Mary’s Mormon experience was considerably different from her husband’s.

A final note of approval for Ward’s treatment of these documents: her bracketed text notations are helpful, neither overdone nor obtrusive. I question only the decision to not tidy up Mary’s punctuation. Clarity is the foremost concern, and Mary’s blotting-marks interfere unusually with her meaning; in any case, the manuscript is already radically altered because it is presented typed rather than handwritten. These issues may form a case against using a blanket protocol and for considering each document’s own merits and peculiarities.

In a foreword to this first volume of a new series, Life Writings of Frontier Women, series editor Maureen Ursenbach Beecher provides a valuable overview and rationale for the project. Both Beecher’s essay and Ward’s introduction leave the reader wanting more—a solid achievement.