4-1-1996

In Their Own Words: Women and the Story of Nauvoo
by Carol Cornwall Madsen

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Recommended Citation
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A valuable addition to the slowly growing body of published firsthand accounts by early Latter-day Saints, this volume presents a selection of diary extracts, letters, and “reminiscences” or memoirs authored by Mormon women. Given the large volume of extant materials, the editor has limited the scope of these texts to the Nauvoo period in the early 1840s. Madsen has chosen twenty-four representative authors, both women of renown, such as Emmeline Wells, Eliza R. Snow, and Bathsheba Smith, and those who remain essentially unknown.

In retaining the original grammar and spelling in these readings, the editor allows readers insight into the widely varied backgrounds and educational levels of the women represented; the intensity of their experience and emotion is recorded in language ranging from highly polished nineteenth-century prose to the halting expressions of the barely literate. The nature of the writing reminds readers of two very important facts: that Nauvoo was on the frontier and that education beyond minimal reading and writing had not yet become a reality for any but the most privileged. In particular, book learning was not considered to be a necessity for women, whose roles rarely extended beyond the private domain of the home and family. One wonders how many more stories of women in Nauvoo have remained unarticulated and unheard because those who lived the experiences lacked the skills to record them. In this context, Madsen is perhaps overly apologetic concerning the spelling and grammatical deficiencies of some of the writers. A short historical explanation of the educational conventions of the time might have been useful in alleviating this discomfort.

The book is arranged in a format that is easily accessible to general readers, beginning with a lively, informative introduction that establishes a historical context for the readings and the segments of life that they detail. Instead of a monologic summary by a
nonengaged historian, however, this introduction provides a rich mosaic crafted from the words of women whose writings are otherwise not included in the volume, thus expanding the scope of the book beyond just the twenty-four authors from whom lengthier excerpts are drawn.

The rest of the book is divided into three sections: “Diaries,” “Letters,” and “Reminiscences,” each of which is introduced by a short section that discusses the significance and value of women’s diaries, letters, and memoirs as literary genres and provides readers with some basis for an interpretation of the excerpts. In addition, each selection is preceded by a short, informative biography of the woman writer, which locates her in time and place and explains the circumstances surrounding the events in the selection.

All of the introductory materials in the book are skillfully constructed so as to illuminate the “historical limitations of personal discourse” (x). Madsen’s writing reflects a grounding in autobiographical theory; though she presents no formal theoretical discussion, she quietly and subtly breaks down unfounded assumptions and misunderstandings of women’s personal discourse, thus bringing readers to the level of theoretical awareness necessary for a deeper understanding of the works. For those interested in further study, the notes to the individual sections supply information concerning scholarly studies of women’s narrative.

As they sketch the historical conditions surrounding the settling of Nauvoo, the prevailing political and religious climate, and the many challenges and privations encountered by the people, all introductions and explanatory materials offered by the editor speak from squarely within the Latter-day Saint belief system and point of view. However, the text and its accompanying notes offer sufficient explanation to make the volume accessible to people of other beliefs. Notes also explain historical references, customs, or terminology that might not be readily understandable to readers in our century.

In her introductory materials, Madsen also clarifies the basis on which she has selected the women whose works would appear in this volume—for example, she has included only women who were deeply involved in the Latter-day Saint cause and who were supportive of Joseph Smith and, at his death, Brigham Young.
As she notes, "Those who followed other paths have different stories to tell" (x), stories that move far beyond the scope and intent of this work. The result is a focused volume that centers upon faith as a driving, determining force in the lives of the women who are speaking (29). In spite of this unifying center, however, as the preface points out, the excerpts clearly illustrate the individuality of and wide diversity between the women represented here.

In an admirable way, this compilation remains true to the project of letting the women speak of their concerns and interests "in their own words." As will quickly be noticed by those involved in the comparative study of male- and female-authored works in the centuries prior to our own, men, perhaps because of their generally broader educational opportunities and their activity in the public sphere, have tended in their writing to be more involved with abstract ideas, the political aspects of human society, and professional concerns. Women, however, perhaps because of their relatively restricted realm of experience within the private or home sphere and because of their more limited educational level, have been more concerned with the practicalities of life, with concrete daily experiences, and with the priority of interpersonal relationship. This reality is clearly reflected in the selections presented in this volume. As the editor points out in her preface, "Friends, community, and Church were the binding force of [these women's] Nauvoo experience" (ix). Those who read these excerpts gain an understanding, not of idealized, larger-than-life Saints and heroines, but rather, of very real human beings who in many cases have become extraordinary through their faith and tenacity in performing the ordinary. In these pages, readers encounter women's frustrations, sorrows, and light-heartedness coupled with solid wisdom and insight.

Where most traditional histories of the LDS Church focus on the actions of the men who were the missionaries and the leaders of the restored Church, these texts reflect the challenges and privations of the families left behind: the cramped quarters and leaky roofs, the insufficient housing and provisions. The words of these writers reveal clearly the strategies for survival through networks of social contact, systems of trade and bartering, and the traditional female visiting that women developed to strengthen and assist each
other in the absence of the traditional male provider, gone as a result of disease, violence, or mission calls. As Madsen notes, “Family and friends often blended into a single ‘kinship’ network, binding women together in ties of mutual support and companionship” (17). Readers are also greeted with the positive side of life in this vital religious community, with its “camaraderie and social exchange” (12). The excerpts reflect in kaleidoscopic array the excitement of social events in the city, the ways women filled their emotional needs, the kinship developed among plural wives, the spiritual gatherings, women’s groups and alliances for welfare and compassionate service, temple work and worship, and the founding of the Relief Society. Among the accounts of growing persecution and violence, the deaths of Joseph and Hyrum Smith loom as a defining tragedy and a rallying point. Clearly, for these women, all experience is illuminated and enlivened by passionate religious commitment and faith—sometimes as a source of endurance, sometimes almost as a litany intoned to drown out encroaching chaos and the violent disruption of life by mob action.

The one point that leaves readers dissatisfied with this book is the fact that the readings are only excerpts. In their brevity, each selection is a flash, a clearly defined moment in the author’s life; each is enough to convey a glimpse into the personality and heart of the author and a view of the circumstances and events that were significant to her; but the provoking and enlightening tidbits leave readers longing for more. This frustration is of course common to all surveys or anthologies. The editor has compensated by supplying notes and bibliographic materials so that interested readers can seek the originals for further reading. Hopefully, in subsequent publications the complete text of these valuable materials will be made available in an easily accessible form.

Madsen’s project in the compilation of these writings is a successful one. The book is significant for male readers in that it reveals the “other half” of the history of this period, the female experience that is generally excluded from traditional history books. But Madsen intends the work most particularly for a female audience, suggesting that perhaps the nineteenth-century authors “understood that women oftentimes hear their own voices in the voices of other women, and hoped they would be heard across
the generations” (xii). The volume’s “disclosure of these women’s lives, as they perceived them to be, brings woman’s experiences in from the edges of history and enables us to bridge the silence that has separated us, as women, from our past” (xi).

Madsen offers us this volume with the hope that we, reading more than a century later, can still “feel their deep sense of shared faith and loving community as these women speak to us from out of their own writings” (30).