



4-1-2000

Out of the Black Patch: The Autobiography of Effie Marquess Carmack, Folk Musician, Artist, and Writer Noel A. Carmack and Karen Lynn Davidson

Brian D. Reeves

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Recommended Citation

Reeves, Brian D. (2000) "*Out of the Black Patch: The Autobiography of Effie Marquess Carmack, Folk Musician, Artist, and Writer* Noel A. Carmack and Karen Lynn Davidson," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 39 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol39/iss2/9>

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NOEL A. CARMACK and KAREN LYNN DAVIDSON, eds. *Out of the Black Patch: The Autobiography of Effie Marquess Carmack, Folk Musician, Artist, and Writer*. Volume 4 in the Life Writings of Frontier Women series, ed. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher. Logan: Utah State University Press, 1999. xviii; 398 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95.

Reviewed by Brian D. Reeves

Folklorist Eric A. Eliason recently asked, “Will written personal narratives become the literary genre through which Mormons most contribute to world literature, as some have suggested?”¹ If all Latter-day Saint autobiographers possessed Effie Carmack’s gift for storytelling, the answer might be yes. Beyond her autobiography’s value as a personal narrative, the editors suggest that “Effie Carmack’s preservation, and celebration, of folkways may be her most significant contribution” (1).

Effie Marquess Carmack (1885–1974) began composing her autobiography in the mid-1940s and finished in 1973, shortly before her death. She wrote, “I wanted to leave something of value to my children and grandchildren, and great-grandchildren—and this seemed better than riches, of which I have none anyway” (344–45). Reading her prose is almost like hearing her stories by the fireside.

Effie’s story spans her early life on a tobacco farm near Hopkinsville in Christian County, Kentucky; her family’s conversion to the LDS Church in 1898, when she was twelve; and her efforts to raise a family, primarily in Kentucky and Arizona. Her writings are insightful on several topics: plant life and tobacco farming in Kentucky, women’s roles, Mormonism in the South, bereavement, and aspects of folklife including games, music, architecture, art, traditions, and medicine.

In addition to her writing talents, Effie was a gifted painter and musician. Her love of visual detail and song are evident in this word picture:

We used to all sit out in the old porch, as we called it. There was usually a pallet on the floor, an old soft comfort, where Autie, the baby had played and slept during the day. Mammy would get two long limber twigs, bend them over the pallet, stick the ends in under the sides, and stretch a thin plant-bed canvas over him while he slept, to keep the flies away.

In the evening this pallet was pulled to the edge of the porch, and we would lounge on it and the doorstep. Lelia or Sadie would get the guitar and sing old songs. The sad ones always made me cry—“Oh Yes, I’ll Take You Home Kathleen”—“The Years Roll Slowly By, Lorena”—“Ronald and I”—“The Dying Cowboy.”

The boys were good singers. John would add his bass, and Elmo his tenor. Elmo would have been a good radio singer, high and low. Sometimes Pappy would get his old fiddle out and play softly some sweet old harmony.

Some of us would be washing our feet in the washpan out by the doorstep, and drying them on an old meal sack towel. Whippoorwills would be calling. Bats would be diving for insects, and the crickets would be chirping loudly in every corner.

The memory of those peaceful evenings together, after a long hard day's work is very sweet in my mind. (51–52)

Too often there is a chasm between modern historiography and memory. As Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, chair for Jewish studies at Columbia University, observed about Jewish culture, “The divorce of history from literature has been as calamitous for Jewish as for general historical writing, not only because it widens the breach between the historian and the layman, but because it affects the very image of the past that results. Those who are alienated from the past cannot be drawn to it by explanation alone; they require evocation as well.”² Effie's writing explains or describes the past *and* evokes feelings about it. Consider her memory of the first Mormon sermon that she ever heard, one given in 1887:

I had no idea what my parents or brothers and sisters were thinking of it, but I was so thrilled that I could hardly contain my feelings. I was sitting about halfway back, with a group of my schoolmates, who kept trying to whisper to me, but I had no time for foolishness that night. Something great and wonderful had come, something we had dreamed of and waited for for years. I'm sure it was the spirit of it, and not the letter, that whispered to my spirit, and filled me with such joy. (170)

The editors—Noel A. Carmack, Effie's great-grandson, and Karen Lynn Davidson—have done an admirable job of providing context for Effie's narrative. In a few instances, they point out errors in the narrative, including Effie's mistaken belief that her grandfather had once wrestled, and beaten, Abraham Lincoln. The book is amply illustrated with photographs of her family and several of her paintings. The bibliography and footnotes reflect extensive research and are a valuable resource in and of themselves. The volume also includes maps; a chart showing four generations of Effie's family, beginning with her grandparents; a list of her “song and rhyme repertoire”; and an index.

A minor drawback to the book is the formatting of some of the contextual information. There is a stark contrast, particularly at the beginning of the account, between Effie's warm narrative style and the rather clinical footnote descriptions of several plants. Such notes might have fit better in a glossary at the back of the volume.

It is always difficult to keep track of who is who in extended families, and Effie named a lot of people in her autobiography. The editors' biographical footnotes provide useful information, such as complete names and life dates, but the notes also tend to disrupt the flow of the narrative. I would

have benefitted more from a biographical register in an appendix, which would bring together all of the names and describe how each person was related, by blood or association, to Effie.

These small criticisms reflect stylistic preferences more than substantive problems and should not deter anyone from reading Effie Carmack's remarkable story. She insightfully reflected on her vicissitudes as a mother: the joy of seeing a small son brought back to life after a doctor pronounced him dead; the challenge of making ends meet when her husband's financial priorities were horses and family, in that order; the heartbreak of holding a four-year-old son in her arms as his life ebbed away after a tragic fire; the worry of having a daughter marry too soon and to the wrong man; and the satisfaction of watching her children make good in their lives. Her idyllic recollections of her childhood are nearly as captivating as the stories of her adult life. Persons with a passion for Latter-day Saint personal narratives, folklife, or any number of the topics mentioned above, should find reading *Out of the Black Patch* to be time well invested.

Brian D. Reeves (brian_reeves@byu.edu) is University Archivist for Special Collections in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. He received his M.A. in history at Brigham Young University in 1987.

1. Eric A. Eliason, "Toward the Folkloristic Study of Latter-day Saint Conversion Narratives," *BYU Studies* 38, no. 1 (1999): 146.
2. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 100.