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Emmeline B. Wells: An Intimate History

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Carol Cornwall Madsen. *Emmeline B. Wells:
An Intimate History.*

Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2017.

Reviewed by Cherry Silver

Carol Madsen's biography of Emmeline B. Wells published by the University of Utah Press in 2017 is aptly titled *An Intimate Biography*. Madsen depicts the private life of a scrappy thinker and doer, an editor, suffragist, club woman, and Relief Society leader. Emmeline Wells stood less than five feet tall and operated with limited financial resources as a single woman supporting herself during the last thirty years of her life, yet she exerted a major influence in her Intermountain West community because of her expansive intellect and compelling personality. She had a remarkable memory for people, literature, and facts. She seemed to know the community elites and ordinary folks alike. While editing the *Woman's Exponent* for thirty-five years, she kept her office open to local people and travelers, becoming an informal bureau of information. She maintained a heroic work schedule, writing late into the night after meeting people and press deadlines through the day. She balanced devotion with a healthy skepticism that life would ever be easy for her. She often felt ill or lonely, sorrowing over her losses privately in her diaries but declaring continual faith that she was guided by the Lord and was a woman of destiny. In the final decade of her long life, Emmeline was called to lead the Relief Society as its fifth general president and was the last women's leader to have known Joseph Smith in Nauvoo (3-6, 69-73, 446).

Since writing her master's thesis on the *Woman's Exponent* and doctoral dissertation, titled "Emmeline B. Wells: A Mormon Woman in Victorian America," Carol Cornwall Madsen has proved a singular force, spending forty years researching and analyzing Emmeline B. Wells and her era. A graduate of the University of Utah, Carol worked with the research team at the Church Historian's Office under Leonard

Arrington. She helped organize the Utah Women's History Association and the BYU Women's Conference. She is professor emerita from Brigham Young University, where she taught women's history, and a past research professor for the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History. She served a term as president of the Mormon History Association, president of the Utah Women's History Association, and vice-chair of the Board of Utah State History. She has written dozens of scholarly articles and is a frequent lecturer on Wells and her contemporaries.

In 2006, Carol Madsen published *An Advocate for Women*, the history of Wells's public life, through BYU Studies in cooperation with Deseret Book. That volume offers keen insights into women's rights issues and political outreach from 1870 to 1920. It reveals the dynamic interplay between church and state and Mormons and non-Mormons, highlights the cooperation between local activists and national leaders in the women's movement, and paints a portrait of courage for those bringing Utah's voice to the national stage. *An Intimate History* is the companion volume to the 2006 biography.

Emmeline Blanche Woodward Harris Whitney Wells was nearly fifty years old when she began editing and running organizations. Carol Madsen details Wells's early experiences, accounts for her creative ambitions and religious faith, and explains her multifaceted family life through all of her ninety-three years. Some of the notable observations from Madsen include the following:

From a child of obscure New England beginnings, she drew herself upward to become a woman of ambition, ability, and achievement. (xii)

She happily, consistently, and determinedly acknowledged that she was progressive in her thinking and actions. She favored equal rights for women and believed that when Joseph Smith "turned the key" to women through the organization of the Relief Society, he opened long-closed doors for them and the possibility of untold opportunities. For Emmeline, this symbolic gesture was a talisman for the future. (xii-xiii)

She was a bridge builder, reaching beyond Mormon borders to make connections with both local and national individuals not of her faith while never pretending to be anything but a loyal Mormon. (xiii)

Her long life could be seen as triumph against the reverses that might have felled her along the way. She never underplayed her losses or disappointments, but neither did she allow them to stifle her spirit or undermine her commitments. Only halfway through her long life, she had already found the strength that would take her all the way. "I have risen triumphant," she exclaimed to her diary. (xiv)

Emmeline Wells aspired to be a poet and did publish one volume in 1896, *Musings and Memories*. She is more widely identified as an editorialist who covered current events as “Aunt Em,” remembering with nostalgia her early New England life, and as “Blanche Beechwood,” speaking out for social reform (4, 134). She wrote her fictional autobiography, *Hepzibah*, published in installments in 1889 and 1890 (3). In addition, she gathered the biographies of contemporary Mormon women and wrote many herself for the *Juvenile Instructor* and *Young Woman’s Journal*, as well as for the *Woman’s Exponent*. “Emmeline frequently used Brigham Young’s directive to publish these histories as a selling point for her paper,” writes Madsen (289).

Aside from her public writings, Wells was an avid journal keeper, creating an extensive, invaluable record of her life and and community. As to her diaries, forty-seven of which survive, Madsen explains, “Her diary was almost her alter ego, the self she could not display to others. Only that silent companion could absorb the superfluity of emotions she so willingly unleashed. One might even read her diaries as the ‘romance’ she felt her life to be, with her exaggerated expressions, self-analysis, and lengthy soliloquies, while the world saw only an efficient and capable woman, up to every task put before her” (287).

While the details of Emmeline’s life and work are themselves engaging, Carol Madsen offers word pictures of the fantastical Emmeline—here as an elderly Relief Society leader:

In appearance, as well as personality, Emmeline could not be ignored. She presented an antiquated picture that became ever more singular and part of her charm as fashions changed after the turn of the century. No sycophant of fads, she maintained her nineteenth-century appearance until she died: long dresses topped by chiffon scarves and softly colored batiste furbelows, a pocket watch attached to a gold chain hanging from her neck, and a purse, or “satchel,” as she called it, which contained her diary, among other articles, always on her arm. But it was the essence of her presence that commanded attention, evoking an immediate impression that here was a woman whose intelligence and bearing belied the delicate image she presented at first meeting. (422)

Madsen also helpfully places her in context with contemporaries like Eliza R. Snow, twenty-five years her senior, with whom she traveled and met with on committees,

Yet she never felt personally close to Eliza. She admired and respected her for her many gifts and dedication to the church, but they differed in personality and in their views of the world outside the boundaries

of Mormondom. Whereas Eliza was insular in her feelings, seeing the world outside the church as a misguided and evil Babylon that Mormons had gratefully escaped, Emmeline looked outward, hoping to make friends beyond the Mormon circle, gleaned from them all that could broaden her own worldview and enhance her understanding of the world in which the church functioned. She was in every sense a bridge builder. (156)

Insights from rare documents enrich the telling of Emmeline's story. Carol Madsen interviewed great-grandchildren in Idaho, Utah, and other states. While traveling East to explore the roots of her subject, she made acquaintance with the descendants of neighbors and relatives in Massachusetts, where Emmeline grew up. Upon meeting Carolyn Chouinard in New Salem, for instance, Madsen obtained photos of the Woodward homestead in Petersham and the New Salem Academy, where Wells attended school. She herself photographed Moose Horn Creek, where Emmeline was baptized in 1842. This biography also features private letters relating to the migration and death of her mother, Diadama Hare Woodward, as the last Saints moved from Nauvoo to Iowa in the fall of 1846 (81–83).

Madsen explores events that are often questioned, such as why Emmeline agreed to be sealed to Newel K. Whitney only four months after her young husband James left her. What did she understand in early 1845 about plural marriage (55–57)? Seven years later as a young widow, she proposed marriage to Daniel H. Wells (105–8). Though some have speculated that he built her a separate house because there was antagonism among the sister wives, Madsen presents evidence that their relationship was amicable (110). She offers explanations but exercises restraint in exploring the tragedy around the Louie Wells–John Q. Cannon–Annie Wells triangle of 1886 and 1887 (255). She reasons through Emmeline's tricky relationship with Susa Young Gates, a strong personality in public and Church affairs, who envied Wells's managing of the *Woman's Exponent*. Susa traveled with Emmeline, consulted on projects, accepted a post on her general board, and wrote glowing tributes but often criticized her decisions and methods (285, 398, 468–71).

Readers will engage well with this detailed study of a major personality and her society. The chronology flows logically, the narrative is compelling, and the personalities are strongly drawn. Chapter endings provide teasers to draw us into the next set of Wells's adventures and challenges. With footnotes at the bottom of each page, it is easy to explore the scholarship underlying the narrative. The bibliography

is comprehensive, current, and conveniently divided into manuscript, periodical, and other sources. The indexing is thorough, and a genealogy list briefly explains relationships to ancestors, siblings, sister wives, and descendants. I have read closely and found only minor editing slips in identifying a photo or listing a granddaughter's death date, but the scholarly strength of the volume is reassuring.

Not just facts and events but inventive analysis and finely expressed characterization make this five-hundred-page biography a volume to esteem. Every chapter, every page invites the reader into the thinking and the social world of Emmeline and her contemporaries. Without adopting an assertive feminist polemic, the narrator champions women's lived experience. This era of female writers and defenders of the faith, of innovators and preservers of tradition, and of socially alert women in times of transition will undoubtedly be better understood and valued because of Carol Madsen's notable achievement.

Cherry B. Silver is an independent researcher in Mormon women's history who has been helping edit the Emmeline B. Wells diaries for publication. She has degrees in English and has taught in colleges in California, Washington, and Utah. She also served on the Relief Society general board during the Elaine L. Jack administration.