



7-1-2020

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Recommended Citation

Ulrich, Laurel (2020) "Why Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 59 : Iss. 3 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol59/iss3/14>

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Why Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

Although it is a bit disconcerting to admit it, I am most widely known today not for my books, but for a single sentence. You've probably seen it: *Well-behaved women seldom make history*. I don't get royalties when somebody prints my words on mugs, T-shirts, bumper stickers, greeting cards, or any of the other paraphernalia sold in gift shops or on the internet, but I sometimes get thank-you notes or snapshots of fans carrying hand-lettered signs in marches. One of my favorite examples of the latter shows a bright pink poster in a crowd near Wellington Arch in London. On the right, a traffic light registers yellow for caution. Above the fray, the winged goddess of victory appears in silhouette, holding aloft a wreath of laurel.

I don't know why so many people find my words appealing. Perhaps it is the ambiguity of the term *well-behaved*. Without a fixed definition, it evokes whatever anxiety a woman might feel about behavioral codes that constrain her power to act. The slogan works because it simultaneously acknowledges and defends misbehavior as a necessary consequence of making history. Yes, well-behaved women can make history. But when they do, they often lose their reputation for being well-behaved. I am thinking of the words of Anne Bradstreet, colonial New England's first published poet. In *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*, she wrote,

I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
Who says my hand a needle better fits, . . .
For such despite they cast on Female wits:

If what I do prove well, it won't advance,
They'l say it's stoln or else it was by chance.¹

Sadly, some of those “carping tongues” belonged to other women. Bradstreet was fortunate in having male supporters who carried her poems to London and arranged for their publication in 1650.

Here, I am defining good behavior as playing by the rules, even the unspoken rules, in a person's own community. In most circumstances, that is a wise thing to do: children should be taught to obey “don't walk” signs; drivers should stay on the right side of the road, except in countries where the right side is on the left. Rules hold families and communities together. They keep us safe. But some rules hurt people; others lose their relevance. The first people to figure that out often make history. They refuse to move to the back of the bus. They stop wearing button-up shoes and corsets. They write new laws. Some of them become famous. Most are ordinary people, like us. They make small changes. They push forward into the dark not knowing quite where they are going. Intentionally or not, they make a difference.

As a historian, I am grateful for those who have been willing to share their journeys with others. Sometime in the early 1980s, I participated as an advisor to a wonderful oral history project created by a group of women in Warner, New Hampshire. A committee in their town had just published a history that pretty much ignored women. You may have seen town histories like that—they typically include lists of the earliest taxpayers, town officers, physicians, millowners and the like, with photographs of landmark buildings and rosters of men who served in various wars. The women in Warner were dismayed that anybody thought that kind of history was complete. Most had grown up in the town, and they knew that it had been held together by women: housewives and mothers, public school teachers, nurses, telephone operators, 4-H leaders, and generous souls who took in foster children or cooked the huge meals served at town fundraising events.

The oral history group decided to fill in the gap by interviewing some of these women. That was more difficult than they expected. Because they couldn't interview all of them, they had to make choices, and doing that meant figuring out which stories mattered. They knew that focusing

1. See Anne Bradstreet, *The Works of Anne Bradstreet in Prose and Verse*, ed. John Harvard Ellis (Charlestown, [Mass.]: Abram E. Cutter, 1867), 99, https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Works_of_Anne_Bradstreet_in_Prose_an/25frNwTkO6gC.

on women who had some sort of public presence reinforced the very pattern they were trying to break. So, they decided to begin with the oldest women. That too created problems: Some resisted because they didn't think they had anything to say. Did keeping a house and raising children qualify as history? Others feared that the younger women who wanted to interview them might misinterpret their lives. In this conservative hill town, some people feared the influence of feminism, or "women's lib" as they called it. Combining hard work with deep respect for the concerns and values of their target group, the Warner Women's Oral History Project managed not only to create an irreplaceable cache of interviews now safely transcribed and deposited in archives but also to mount a prize-winning theatrical project based on those interviews that toured the region for more than twenty years.

I related to the women who created this project because at a crucial moment in my own life, I had been involved in a collaborative effort to fill in the gaps in my own people's history. As a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I had heard plenty of faith-promoting stories about pioneer women, but I had difficulty connecting their challenges with my own. If anything, their apparent heroism made me feel diminished, unequal to the challenges of my own time and place. Working with other women to produce a more complete and less idealized history of early Mormon women reaffirmed my commitment to my faith and reduced my anxiety about combining my responsibilities as a wife and mother with my aspirations as a writer.

When I wrote my now-famous sentence, I was living with my husband and children in a small university town in New Hampshire and was enrolled in a research seminar on colonial American history. When the notoriously demanding professor who was conducting the seminar told us we should not think of ourselves as students but as historians and that we should not put pen to paper without thinking of publication, I took him seriously. At first, I had trouble finding a topic; I spent hours going through a list of early publications available on microcard, photo-reproductions that required a magnifying reader only available in the library. I finally found fifty or so documents that appeared to give some sort of attention to women. Some were funeral sermons with short biographies at the end; others were prescriptions for good behavior or celebrations of scriptural heroines.

To me, this material was pure gold. At the time, most historians who were interested in women were focused on the nineteenth century, and the few who cared about the colonial period concentrated on

witch-hunting or the trial of the Puritan dissenter Anne Hutchinson. Not surprisingly, their portrayal of early New England was pretty grim. By teasing out little-known details from those tedious sermons, I was able to offer an account of Puritan piety that was much more complex and at least potentially hospitable to women. By spring, I had completed a draft that my professor thought might be publishable. Over the next few months, I managed to finish a series of revisions that satisfied the editor of the scholarly journal *American Quarterly*.

My essay appeared in the spring 1976 issue with the title “Vertuous Women Found’: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668–1735.” Here is the opening paragraph:

Cotton Mather called them “the hidden ones.” They never preached or sat in a deacon’s bench. Nor did they vote or attend Harvard. Neither, because they were virtuous women, did they question God or the magistrates. They prayed secretly, read the Bible through at least once a year, and went to hear the minister preach even when it snowed. Hoping for an eternal crown, they never asked to be remembered on earth. And they haven’t been. Well-behaved women seldom make history.²

My goal was neither to celebrate nor to lament their piety but to give them a history.

“Vertuous Women Found” was my first published scholarly essay. Writing it motivated me to frame a dissertation topic that would allow me to dig beneath the images promoted in sermon literature to understand more about the realities that shaped women’s lives. I narrowed the geographic scope of my project in order to take advantage of archives no more than an hour’s distance from my own home so that I could accomplish my research while my children were in school. That decision precluded my spending much time in major libraries in Boston or Cambridge, but it forced me to take full advantage of local records and little-known historical sites near where I lived. Although I found virtually nothing in women’s own handwriting, I was able to use court records, captivity narratives, wills, household inventories, gravestones, embroideries, and the poetry of Anne Bradstreet, as well as scattered references to wives and children in men’s letters and diaries, to tease out a surprising number of details about these women’s lives.

2. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Vertuous Women Found’: New England Ministerial Literature, 1668–1735,” *American Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 20.

In 1982, I published a revised version of my dissertation as *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750*. By then I had a part-time job in an interdisciplinary humanities program at UNH. I was determined to continue my research. Tracking down a document that I thought might lead to a new project, I arranged to take an overnight trip to the Maine State Archives, two hours away from my home. When I failed to find anything useful there, I walked across the hall to the Maine State Library, where I was astonished to discover the twenty-seven-year-long, detailed daily diary of an eighteenth-century Maine midwife, Martha Moore Ballard. Some had valued it only for its genealogical information. The few scholars who had seen it relied on an expurgated transcription published in a local town history, and they pronounced it full of trivia and of little use. Because I had become a kind of expert on “trivia,” I recognized its value.

Martha Ballard made history by performing a methodical and seemingly ordinary act—writing a few words in her diary every day. But nobody makes history alone; if her daughters, granddaughters, and great-granddaughters had not preserved her words, they would have been lost. Even then it took two feminist movements to give her words life. The first sent her great-granddaughter Mary Hobart to medical school in the 1870s. She was the one who eventually deposited the diaries in the Maine State Library. The second feminist movement took me to that library in 1981 looking for documents that might give early American women a history. History is often a game of toss between present and past: over time, documents easily dismissed as family relics acquire public significance in ways no one could have imagined, and, conversely, lives that seemed immensely powerful in one era may disappear in time.

The publication of *A Midwife's Tale* changed my life. It was not just the Pulitzer Prize. Months before the book received any awards, a young filmmaker, after reading a review in the *New York Times*, visited me about making a documentary film. To me, the public reception was astonishing. While writing it, I found it difficult to imagine anyone actually caring about my obsessive unpacking of the diary. I didn't understand that the success of the book wasn't really about me or even about her—it was a mark of a deeper concern in American society with issues of birth, death, and healthcare and of a growing interest in fundamental human relationships that shape all our lives. The success of the book also reflected the growing sophistication of women's studies as a field and a more widely shared commitment to equity in the awarding of

prizes, fellowships, and academic positions. If the book had appeared years earlier or later, it may not have had the same impact.

The awarding of the Pulitzer Prize in 1991 was indeed history-making. Only three prizes for history had been given to women in the Pulitzer's then seventy-five-year history, and none for a book by a woman about a woman. I think many people thought it was about time, but when the National Endowment for the Humanities gave a million-dollar grant to PBS for making the film, there was a fuss in Congress. There was even a bit of a flap at BYU in 1993 when the board of trustees rejected me as the keynote speaker for a women's conference, even though I had been royally welcomed when I gave a lecture on campus the year before. There was also celebration in some quarters and disdain in others when I accepted a professorship at Harvard University in 1995. One internet troll complained that the history department's famous course on the American Revolution was about to be replaced by a course on quilts!

Through all this, my now-famous sentence sat quietly in the folds of *American Quarterly*. Then, in 1996, it leapt onto the internet. That happened because an enterprising journalist who somehow stumbled upon my article decided to use its best sentence as the epigraph for her own short survey of women's history. She must have been working from memory because she changed the word "seldom" to "rarely." Shortly thereafter another writer dropped that version of the sentence into a book of quotations by women. I knew nothing about any of this until I got an email from a young woman living in Portland, Oregon, who wanted permission to print my sentence on T-shirts. For a few minutes, I couldn't even remember where I had written it. After shuffling through a few other works, I finally remembered my first scholarly article. There it was, just as I had written it twenty years before. I didn't see any harm in letting an earnest young woman use it for her project. All I asked was that she send me a T-shirt.

Nobody could have been more surprised than I when my throwaway sentence caught fire. It often went its own way, without any reference to me. But my name appeared often enough that I began to get fan mail; the Sweet Potato Queens of Jackson, Mississippi, invited me to join them in their annual parade.

Friends and former students passed on anecdotes and "sightings." A reporter for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* took pleasure in pointing out that I was a practicing Mormon and to all appearances pretty well behaved. At the time, I was busy navigating my life at Harvard while finishing *The Age of Homespun*, a book that built on years of work

based on museum collections. I was pretty exhausted by the time that was published, and I decided it would be a good respite do something lighter.

Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History was published in 2007. It wasn't a best seller, but it did accomplish one thing: fewer people now attributed my sentence to Eleanor Roosevelt or Marilyn Monroe. In the introduction, I told the story much as I have told it here. My purpose wasn't to argue for the original meaning of the sentence. I admitted that while I liked some of the uses of the slogan more than others, I wouldn't call it back even if I could. I applauded the fact "that so many people—students, teachers, quilters, nurses, newspaper columnists, old ladies in nursing homes, and mayors of western towns—think they have the right to make history."³ Today I would add to that list women astronauts, software engineers, and presidential candidates.

The book itself looped back and forth across the centuries, showing how people reused old stories in new ways as they attempted to come to terms with changes around them. I explored woman warrior stories from the ancient Amazons to Wonder Woman, linked Virginia Woolf's "Anon" with painted houses in Botswana, and connected the cow that kicked over Mrs. O'Leary's bucket to a red heifer in an illuminated manuscript. I ended with a brief survey of the emergence of women's history in the 1970s, when women like me looked to the past for a better understanding of the world they lived in.

I still get emails asking for permission to use the slogan. I appreciate it when people ask, but in truth, nobody actually needs permission. My runaway sentence has long since entered the public domain. So feel free to attach any meaning you want to its five words, recognizing that you, not I, are responsible for any trouble it may cause.

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's most recent book is *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870* (New York: Knopf, 2017), which won the Evans Biography Award. After she retired from Harvard in 2018, she and her husband, Gael Ulrich, moved to Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania.

3. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), xxxiii.