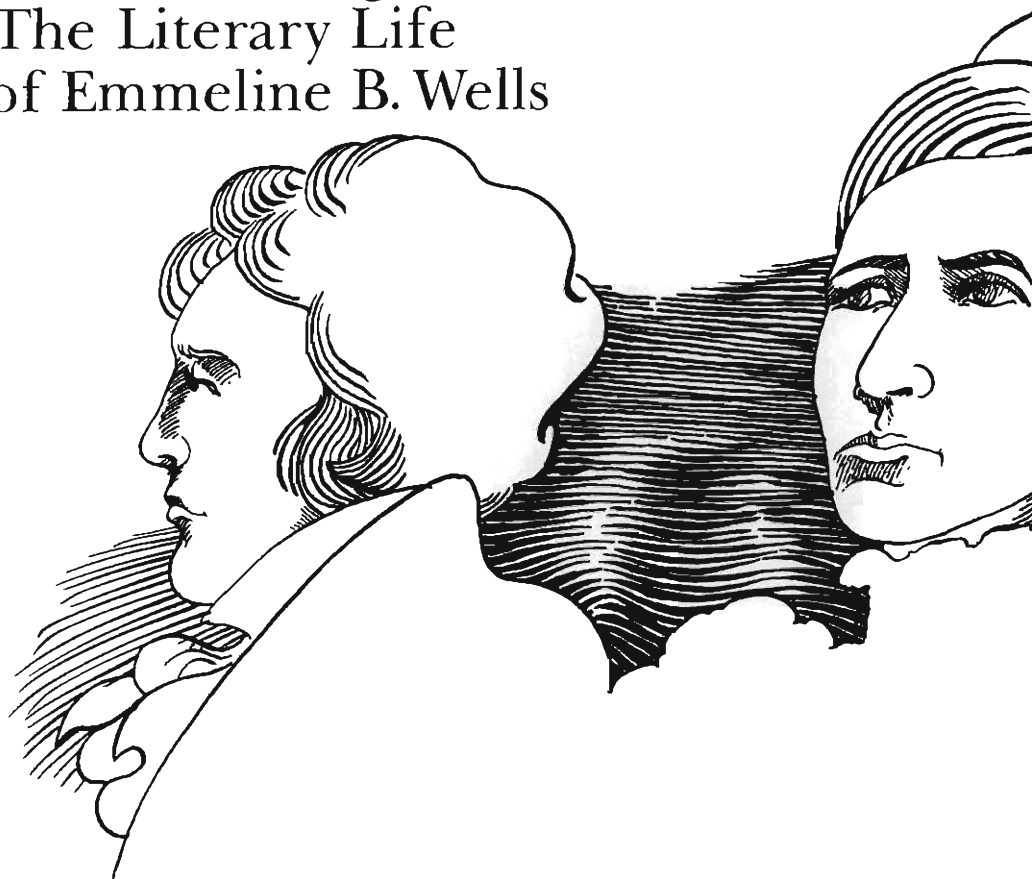


A Bluestocking in Zion: The Literary Life of Emmeline B. Wells

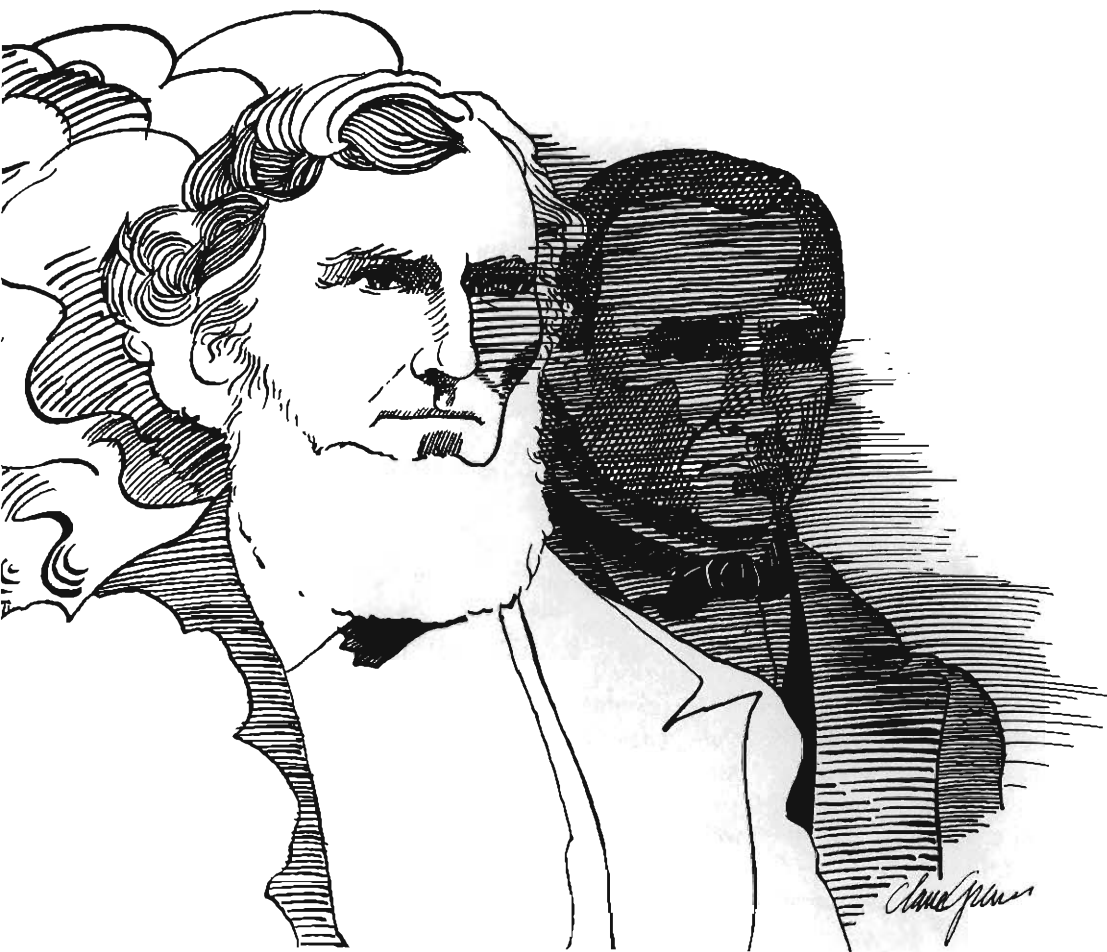


In the afternoon of 1 July 1895, Emmeline Wells and thirteen other Mormon literary lights and friends met in the parlor of Julia C. Howe's home in memory of a deceased colleague, poet Hannah King. They read first from Hannah's poetry, then from their own pencillings, eliciting much good conversation and exchange of ideas. The afternoon, which stretched on into evening, was so pleasing and stimulating to those assembled that the women made plans to meet again the following year.¹

One of many female literary and discussion groups popular in nineteenth-century Utah, this gathering was probably unaware of its eighteenth-century antecedent, the famed "Bluestocking Clubs," which flourished in London for nearly half a century. The same spirit which had earlier generated weekly

CAROL CORNWALL MADSEN is a research historian with the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History at Brigham Young University.

¹ "An Historic House (editorial)," *Woman's Exponent* 21 (15 Dec. 1892): 92 and "Editorial Notes," 24 (1 July 1895): 21.



gatherings of thinking women now animated a new generation to create a forum for those who only “dream” thoughts and have no opportunity to shape them or learn the thoughts of others.²

Publicly expressing ideas was not yet considered appropriate for women, an attitude Emmeline deplored: “I can see no good, sound, wholesome reason against woman’s writing upon any of the general topics of the day,” she wrote in 1875. “She may be a profound thinker,” she continued, “but if her ideas never assume any form, what will it avail?”³

In thus protesting, Emmeline was again echoing her eighteenth-century counterparts. Well-educated (usually by their own efforts) intellectual women inaugurated a pattern of informal “assemblies” at which literary London met

² Romania B. Pratt, “An Address to the Utah Women’s Press Club,” *Woman’s Exponent* 25 (15 and 31 Dec. 1897): 230.

³ Blanche Beechwood, “A Few Ideas on Writing,” *Woman’s Exponent* 3 (1 April 1875): 167.

for "learned conversation." Frequent guests included Samuel Johnson, Horace Walpole, Oliver Goldsmith, and Laurence Sterne.⁴ But Hannah More, historian of the group, recorded that at one meeting when no men attended "we all agreed that men were by no means so necessary as we had all been foolish enough to fancy."⁵ Bonded by their similar interests, intellects and ideas, they encouraged each other to write, assisted one another to publish, provided financial help, and gave each other friendship and emotional support, all functions employed by their nineteenth-century descendants.

The name *bluestocking* originated when a male guest once appeared in casual blue silk stockings rather than the more conventional black silk ones.⁶ The symbol well reflected the informal and democratic nature of their association. But in time, rather than designating learned and literary women and men, its meaning was disapprovingly narrowed to apply only to "pedantic women" who "stepped out of their sphere." Emmeline Wells, a bluestocking in the original and complimentary meaning, hypothesized in 1894 that the reason women writers frequently assumed male pseudonyms was that women writers were "called blue stockings and considered almost unfeminine, at any rate not fit for wives and mothers, and often thought or considered immoral. That excuse is not valid now."⁷

Nor was it then. The original bluestockings earned the respect of their literary peers by the quality of their intellectual and literary achievement. Even more important, they claimed such achievement as a right. Elizabeth Montagu, known as "Queen of the Blues," asserted: "We can think for ourselves, and also act for ourselves."⁸ Emmeline could not have put it more succinctly, yet ironically, this queen of Mormon bluestockings might never have developed her intellectual gifts had the circumstances of her life not issued such an urgent invitation.

Born 29 February 1828 in Petersham, Massachusetts, Emmeline Belos Woodward joined the Church at age fourteen, married at fifteen, and emigrated to Nauvoo in the spring of 1844 with her young husband, James Harvey Harris, and his parents. By October of that year, her newborn son had died, her parents-in-law had apostatized, and her husband had gone upriver to find work. He never returned. Sealed as a plural wife to the fifty-year-old Newell K. Whitney, presiding bishop of the Church, in February 1845, seventeen-year-old Emmeline still longed for her young husband and wrote in her diary:

Today I am alone and I have time for reflection. Memory brings the past before me in all its joy and light. Life seems like a dream. Am I awake? Would that it were a

⁴ Evelyn Gordon Bodek, "Salonières and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and Germinating Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 3 (Spring-Summer 1976): 193.

⁵ R. Brimley Johnson, ed., *Bluestocking Letters* (London: John Lane, 1926), pp. 4-5.

⁶ James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.* (London: George Routledge and Sons, n.d.), p. 416; see also Phyllis Stock, *Better Than Rubies, A History of Women's Education* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1978), pp. 102-3.

⁷ Emmeline B. Wells, "Pen Names," *Woman's Exponent* 23 (15 Sept. 1894): 190.

⁸ Quoted in Walter S. Scott, *The Bluestocking Ladies* (London, 1947), p. 198; see also Stock, *Better Than Rubies*, p. 104.

dream and that I could awake and find myself at the side of him my love. . . . Even now when he has left me to the mercy of a cold unfeeling world am I ready to receive him to my heart again whenever he returns and I want O how much I desire to have him come O James where art thou O that thou couldst hear my voice and thou shouldst return O come to her who gave and forsook all others for thee. . . . Is not my life a romance indeed it is a novel strange and marvellous.⁹

Certainly these words expressed the sincere emotions of a heartbroken young girl. Equally certainly they were colored by a childhood of fanciful dreaming, uninterrupted afternoons of reading, a spirited imagination, and a naturally romantic nature. Attending school in Old Furnace Village in South Hardwick, Massachusetts, young Emmeline stayed with a married sister. "I used to play in the garret alone," Emmeline remembered, "day after day when school hours were over and amuse myself, and often my sister would come and listen to my conversation with my scholars as I termed the beams in the wooden building."¹⁰ Soon the pleasure of dressing up in old clothes and tying bits of old lace and silk around her dolls gave way to curiosity about the bundles of old letters and newspapers stored in a corner. She read them all. "A light had dawned upon me in that out of the way place," she wrote nearly fifty years later. "I had found out that women sometimes put their thoughts upon paper, and I conceived the idea of making rhymes, or jingles." "You are getting strange notions into your head," her mother warned. Deiadama Woodward, according to Emmeline, was "strong-minded, and wanted her daughter to be a woman, and not a sentimental wishy-washy novel writer."¹¹ But the romance of the old garret, scented by spring lilacs and apple-blossoms and the magic of old letters and romantic serialized tales in the musty newspapers, never quite left her. Romantic images and themes would return again and again in her stories, poetry, and essays, interlaced with the strong-minded attitudes more acceptable to her mother which would eventually surface in the *Woman's Exponent*, the Mormon women's newspaper which Emmeline edited from 1877 to 1914, from age forty-nine to age eighty-six.

Emmeline kept her literary muses distinct. The alliterative pen name Blanche Beechwood, used from about 1872 to 1877, identified her spirited polemics on woman's rights. (Other contemporaries used such names as Fanny Fern, Jennie June, Maggie Marigold, Fanny Forrester and Grace Greenwood.) But her genteel romances and sentimental poems were usually signed Aunt Em. She was not unique in speaking with two voices; but unlike some other writers who employed this style, she did not use one voice to belittle the other. This "artistic schizophrenia," as one writer has characterized it,¹² allowed Emmeline to reflect the two often conflicting ideologies about women which flourished during the nineteenth century. Aunt Em's voice was traditional, her poetry

⁹ Emmeline B. Wells, *Diary*, 28 Feb. 1845, 6 June 1845, 20 Feb. 1845, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23 Jan. 1886.

¹¹ Aunt Em, "The Old Garrett," *Woman's Exponent* 17 (1 Oct. 1888): 67.

¹² See Ann D. Wood, "The 'Scribbling Women' and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote," *American Quarterly* 23 (Spring 1971): 18.

and stories fitting comfortably into her generation's genteel literary fiction. Blanche Beechwood, on the other hand, trumpeted the claims of the new woman, stepping out of her domestic cocoon to seek a place in the larger affairs of society. The literary dichotomy might have been just a stylistic device or it may have depicted a genuine conflict between the consistent expectations of Emmeline's traditional nature and the realities of her untraditional experience.

Whitney, old enough to be her father, had offered her security and prestige. His death in Salt Lake City, two months after the birth of their second daughter in 1850, left her once more on her own. Two years later, drawing on the resources offered by plural marriage, she suggested to Daniel H. Wells by letter that she come under his protection and care, reminding him of his long friendship with Whitney.¹³ Acting on the suggestion, he married Emmeline as his seventh wife in 1852. Over the next nine years, she bore three more daughters. Living separately from the rest of the Wells family undoubtedly put her at some disadvantage, although this arrangement was not necessarily unique in polygamous families. Even so, her expectations of marital companionship and security evidently exceeded either Daniel's ability or desire to accommodate, for a decade of diaries is filled with expressions of longing for attention and "a strong arm to lean upon." Her pain at missed appointments is keen: "This evening I fully expected my husband here but was again disappointed. . . . he is not in want of me for a companion or in any sense, he does not need me at all, there are plenty ready and willing to administer to every wish caprice or whim of his, indeed they anticipate them, they are near him always, while I am shut out of his life . . . It is impossible for me to make myself useful to him in any way while I am held at such a distance."¹⁴ The joy when he came, however, was almost indescribable: "My husband came, my heart gave one great bound towards him; O how enthusiastically I love him; truly and devotedly if he could only feel towards me in any degree as I do towards him how happy it would make me . . ." ¹⁵ Throughout her long life there always seemed to be an unfulfilled longing for a life and love perpetually beyond her grasp.

Meanwhile, in 1872, when Emmeline was forty-six, the *Woman's Exponent* was founded. Almost immediately Blanche Beechwood began contributing. Emmeline dropped the pseudonym after becoming editor in 1877 but continued Blanche's advocacy for women's rights in her editorials. Aunt Em's writings began to appear with regularity soon thereafter. For the next thirty-seven years the *Woman's Exponent* would be the setting for this interesting literary bifurcation.

Aunt Em was the little girl playing alone in the garret, now grown up and letting her fancy have full reign, within her tradition's restrictive code of literary propriety. This type of sentimental fiction had blossomed in eastern periodicals

¹³ Daniel H. Wells Papers, LDS Church Archives, as quoted in Patricia Rasmussen Eaton-Gadsby and Judith Rasmussen Dushku, "Emmeline B. Wells," in Vicky Burgess-Olson, *Sister Saints* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1978), p. 459.

¹⁴ Wells, Diary, 13 Sept. 1874.

¹⁵ Wells, Diary, 11 Oct. 1874.

about midcentury, but its American roots reached back to the teens and twenties when the periodic press began commercializing popular fiction. In the early 1820s, annuals or gift books containing sentimental stories, poetry, and domestic advice were so popular that entrepreneur Lewis A. Godey ventured on a monthly. *Godey's Lady's Book* was an immediate success and was promptly imitated. Within a few years women were not only chief subscribers to such periodicals but their major contributors. By 1840, Godey claimed: "We were the first to introduce the system of calling forth the slumbering talent of our country by offering an equivalent for the efforts of genius."¹⁶

That "slumbering talent" had deluged America with a surge of sentimental treacle that would engulf the reading public for decades. Mass literature had been feminized almost at birth. One literary historian aptly quipped that the Boston Brahmins had no sons, only daughters.¹⁷ By the 1850s, some of these domestic novels had gone through fourteen editions in two years, selling well over 100,000 copies. Ripples from this vast wave of feminine literary success reached Liverpool where Nathaniel Hawthorne carped to his publisher in 1855: "America is now wholly given over to a d - d mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash — and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed."¹⁸

His sour grapes underscored the fact that women had cornered the literary market in 1855 and would continue to dominate it for several more decades. This sentimentalization of nineteenth-century literature both reflected and affirmed the Victorian culture from which it sprang. Anthony Trollope, popular British writer of the Victorian mode, defined its moral absolutes: "The purpose of a novel is to instruct in morals while it amuses." It should teach "that truth prevails while falsehood fails; that a girl will be loved as she is pure, and sweet, and unselfish; that a man will be honoured as he is true, and honest, and brave of heart; that things meanly done are ugly and odious, and things nobly done beautiful and gracious."¹⁹ This genteel culture assigned women the guardianship of its moral values; thus, heroines dominate the literature with their virtue, their selflessness, their constancy, and most of all, their moral superiority. In these novels, frail but morally strong daughters redeem homes lost by profligate fathers, patient wives regenerate drunken husbands, and martyr maidens mortgage their own futures to shoulder family burdens. But virtue never goes unrewarded, and love and happiness are liberally bestowed on these hapless women — tied in greenback bundles.²⁰

¹⁶ Quoted in Fred Lewis Pattee, *The Development of the American Short Story* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1923), p. 72.

¹⁷ Fred Lewis Pattee, *The Feminine Fifties* (New York: Appleton-Century Company, 1940), pp. 25, 50.

¹⁸ Quoted in Pattee, *The Feminine Fifties*, p. 110.

¹⁹ Quoted in Walter L. Arnstein, *Britain Yesterday and Today, 1830 to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, 1976), p. 78.

²⁰ For a full discussion of this type of feminine literature, see Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction, A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978).

Aunt Em's stories are a localized imitation of the genre, incorporating many of its characteristics but generally lacking the imagination and narrative skill that vitalized the words of such best-selling authors as Susan Warner, E. D. E. N. Southworth, or Elizabeth Stuart Phelps.²¹

Aunt Em assured her readers that all her stories were based on facts; indeed, many contain autobiographical elements. In "Aunt Esther's Sweetheart," Esther, ten years a widow and "possessed of that indescribable charm which for want of a better term we call magnetic," had given up her youthful sweetheart to marry an older man who could provide her security. She regretted her marriage almost immediately yet remained faithful until his death a few years later. His will bequeathed his wealth to her on condition that she not marry her first love, Sydney Manning, by then in India. Aunt Esther had used the inheritance to care for an orphaned niece and nephew, now grown. Then, after fifteen years, Sydney, now wealthy and still faithful, returns to claim Esther but she has already embraced the gospel and hopes to join the Saints in the west. Will Sydney accept the truth to marry her? Unfortunately, no. Religion for him "is a consideration of the future, not the present." Now Esther must choose. But what is earthly happiness, she concludes, against the promise of eternal joy? Sydney "showers her with burning kisses, his hot tears falling upon her face," then leaves forever. He dies heartbroken in India. Esther goes west, refuses many offers of marriage and devotes her "time, her means, and her energies, all to doing good for others in the household of faith; and many there were," Aunt Em concluded "who received blessings at her hands."²²

Emmeline's own husband James had become a seaman, eventually landing in India where he died in 1859. During those years he had written frequently to Emmeline, sending the letters in care of his mother who did not forward them until many years after her son's death. Of all the strong emotions such a situation would evoke, satisfaction that James had not forgotten her and that his affections had remained constant seemed most important to Emmeline.

Lost letters and lost loves figure frequently in Aunt Em's stories. In "Some Old Love Letters" a little girl discovers in an old garret some undelivered love letters addressed to her aunt. The man who wrote them returns after an absence of many years and, not only renews the offer of marriage written in the letters to the woman who had never received them, but brings a new religion he has encountered in Kirtland, Ohio. He and his faithful sweetheart marry, join the Church, and move west, grateful that the newly found letters turn temporary disappointment into eternal happiness.²³

²¹ Early appraisals of this literary revolution can be found in Pattee, *The Feminine Fifties*, Helen Waite Papashvily, *All the Happy Endings* (New York: Harper, 1956) and Herbert Ross Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America, 1789-1860* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1940).

²² *Woman's Exponent* 28 (15 June 1899): 8-11 and 28 (1 July 1899): 20-22; reprinted in 41 (Aug. 1913): 65-67 and 41 (Nov. 1913): 73-74.

²³ *Woman's Exponent* 41 (Sept. 1912): 6-8.

One of Aunt Em's most interesting stories, "A Christmas Romance," takes place in London on Christmas Eve where an impoverished young widow, Geraldine Brandon, hastens to finish a painting for the wealthy Lady Maynard, an interesting variation on the usual image of the destitute widow with a needle, not a paintbrush, in hand. Buying some presents for her children with her last few shillings, she unexpectedly meets her brother-in-law just back from India where he fled, disappointed, when Geraldine married his brother. Now wealthy himself, he proposes, and the two are married by the parish priest, who had once loved Geraldine's mother. Full of contrived coincidence, the story nevertheless conveys a sense of mood and place, gives dimension to the characters and holds together with stronger literary threads than Aunt Em's other pieces.²⁴

Emmeline's attempt to collect and sell her stories in one volume was unsuccessful, even though she suggested that patronage amounted almost to a civic and religious duty: "Considering the many books of fiction bought by our people, it would be much better to encourage home talent and purchase those written by our own brethren or sisters, containing facts and good morals."²⁵

She had more success with her poetry. While her attempts at fiction came late in her career, she had begun early to compose verse. A handcopied hymnal of 1843 includes a poem on friendship, signed Emmeline B. Harris.²⁶ In 1855 she wrote shyly to her sister wife Hannah Wells in Fillmore: "I feel very much inclined to give you a specimen of my poetry but do not wish to submit it to the criticism of your *husband* [who was also Emmeline's]. It is all in my mind and has been for two or three days, perhaps I will write it down and let *you* see it when you come home."²⁷ She continued to write poetry but did not find a regular outlet for publication until the *Woman's Exponent* was founded.

Her style is governed by her view of the purposes and elements of poetry: "If there was no sentiment in the world, there would be no poetry, and much of the history of the heart as well of the people would be lost to mankind. We all like to know not only what transpired in the past, but the feelings, affections, and sentiments of those who took part in the affairs of the times in which they lived and flourished."²⁸ Her poetry is certainly a history of the heart — her heart. It is somber, serious, and reflective. Above all it is religious, continually focusing on the possibility of hope and joy in a future life promised to the faithful. She seldom depicts life as happy, but finds that friends, nature's beauties,

²⁴ *Woman's Exponent* 35 (Jan. 1907): 41–43, 47.

²⁵ *Woman's Exponent* 31 (1 and 15 Nov. 1902): 45.

²⁶ The handwritten hymnal has no name of owner or date affixed and so this date is only an approximation. The hymnal is in the LDS Church Archives.

²⁷ Emmeline B. Wells to Hannah F. Wells, 31 Dec. 1855, Emmeline B. Wells Papers, LDS Church Archives.

²⁸ "An Historical House (editorial)," *Woman's Exponent* 21 (15 Dec. 1892): 93.

and memories brighten an otherwise shadowed perspective. "My life has not been all calm and serene," she writes in "Sorrow and Sympathy,"

But storms and clouds were thick upon my way;
Yet here and there sometimes would intervene
Bright hours of sunshine in the darkest day.
And so I've traveled on, and sought to be
Some help to other wanderers like me.²⁹

Emmeline outlived three husbands, two daughters, a son, and several grandchildren as well as most of her contemporaries. Death was thus a constant in her life. Her poetic response to her daughter Emmie's death is typical:

O, fitting time to weep with April showers
That buds and blossoms may spring forth from tears,
And bursting into beauty fragrant flowers,
Twine with the cypress bough through coming years,
Emblems that we who mourn may find relief.
And joy immortal crown our night of grief.³⁰

A wreath of intertwined cypress and flowers, traditional emblems of death and new life, figured frequently in her poetry. The sea as metaphor was another favorite. Its association with James underscored its intriguing and mysterious qualities. For example, the closing verse of "Memory of the Sea" reads:

And the even constant beating
'Gainst the rocks that hemmed the sea,
Where the winds in fury meeting,
Dashed them backward ruthlessly,
So our human hopes are driven,
Recklessly tossed to and fro,
And our strongest ties are riven —
Rent asunder by a blow.
Ever heaves the restless ocean,
With its hidden mystery
Sleeping in its surging bosom
Until time shall cease to be.³¹

One interesting poem she entitled "The Wife to Her Husband." As a wife to three husbands, all of whom she loved well, she was likely addressing a composite of them. It begins:

It seems to me that should I die
And this poor body cold and lifeless lie,
And thou should'st touch my lips with thy warm breath,
The life-blood, quicken'd in each sep'rate vein,
Would wildly, madly rushing back again
Bring the glad spirit from the isle of death.

²⁹ Emmeline B. Wells, *Musings and Memories*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1915), p. 283.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Several more verses amplify this theme. The poem continues with a wife's supreme offer to her husband — her unqualified confidence:

I do believe my faith in thee,
Stronger than life, an anchor firm to be;
Planted in thine integrity and worth,
A perfect trust implicit and secure;
That will all trials and all grief endure,
And bless and comfort me while here on earth.³²

Whether the poem was meant to be autobiographical, Emmeline's analysis of the meaning of poetry allows the reader to see in it her own "feelings, affections, and sentiments." Three times for Emmeline such confidence was shattered — by desertion, by death, and by benign neglect. Yet each time, she found that in the end the faith was not misplaced. James, though absent, remained true. Whitney gave her five secure and happy years and a promise of eternal joy. And Daniel, who could not spread his conjugal attentions far enough, belatedly rediscovered the joy of the companionship he and Emmeline had once known in the early years of their marriage.

An even more obviously autobiographical poem is "Faith and Fidelity," its revelations tantalizing and frustrating. Where does poetry end and truth begin? In content somewhat like the popular confessionals and published personal writings of women popular in her time, it tells the story, in third person, of Emmeline's own experience after losing James and being left without family or close friends in Nauvoo. She is rescued by a noble stranger who comes by and listens to her tale of grief. Then

He took her in his arms, as her own father might,
This stranger patriarch, and comforted and blest
Her aching heart, and showed her greater truth and light,
Even where to seek a haven of sweet rest.

Without forgetting James, now an ocean and more away, she finds refuge with the stranger and travels with him to a new home in the west. There

She lives within a wall of human love;
A barrier so strong, stronger than she can know
Encircles her with strength as from above.
The patriarch who took her to his home and heart,
Had taught her sacred truths, reveal'd from heaven;
And now she comprehends their purposes in part
For the great mission unto woman given.

But then she is to suffer another wrenching tragedy. "The strong man dead, whose love had been so good" while beneath "the outward seeming lies the broken heart."³³

³² Ibid., pp. 266–67.

³³ Ibid., pp. 207–230.

Newell K. Whitney, the noble patriarch who rescued Emmeline from her teenage grief, remained throughout her life a fixed point of spiritual and emotional reference. He was "as good a man as ever lived," she wrote in her diary, "a father to all within his reach and more than father to me, I looked to him almost as if he had been a God; my youth — my inexperience of life and its realities caused me to trust most implicitly in one who had power and integrity always at his command."³⁴ Orphaned as well as deserted at seventeen, Emmeline made surrogate parents of Newell K. and his first wife Elizabeth Ann Whitney even while she was herself his wife. Despite her long years as a Wells, she was deeply bound to the Whitneys, and Orson F. Whitney, their grandson, filled the place of the son she had lost in Nauvoo.

Though this long autobiographical poem does not recount her subsequent marriage to Daniel H. Wells, it gives the only documentation, except for a notation in a family Bible, of her knowledge of James's death in India and the subsequent discovery of his letters.

Was it not wonderful, that after weary years
Of sad and sorrowful heartache and pain,
Longing to know the cause, and weeping floods of tears,
These letters should have come to light again?
The one who wrote them with affection, long since dead;
What satisfaction could they ever bring?
Sad memories wakened that she thought had fled,
But "Dead Sea apples" seemed the offering.
Garlands of cypress she may twine with roses fair,
To lay upon that grave so far away;
But O, what message will the sad memorial bear,
To him who sleepeth in far-off Bombay?³⁵

Emmeline's poetry, like her fiction, followed the genteel tradition. While sometimes markedly sentimental, only occasionally does it lapse into false sentiment. Unlike her fiction, her poetry conveys genuine feeling, the revelations of a woman's heart glimpsed beneath conventional proprieties of subject and form. She published her collected poetry under the title *Musings and Memories* in 1896, its popularity requiring a second edition in 1915.

Though her poems and stories were typical of her time and appreciated by her readers, a contemporary view will see Emmeline Wells's most solid public literary contribution in her journalism. While the sentimentalism of Aunt Em occasionally dominated some of her *Exponent* editorials, those informed by the intensity of Blanche Beechwood's strong views were spirited, logical, and convincing. There was no equivocation in her plea for equality of opportunity: "Let woman have the same opportunities for an education, observation and experience in public and private for a succession of years, and then see if she is not equally endowed with man and prepared to bear her part on all gen-

³⁴ Wells, Diary, 23 Sept. 1874.

³⁵ Wells, *Musings and Memories*, p. 230.

eral questions socially, politically, industrially and educationally as well as spiritually."³⁶

Nor did she equivocate in her views on marriage. "Why," she asked, "is it not possible for man and woman to love each other truly, and dwell together in harmony, each according to the other all the freedom of thought, feeling, and expression they would grant to one who was not bound to them by indissoluble ties?"³⁷ She challenged men to prove themselves "noble enough to share with their wives such laurels as either may be able to win in the battlefield of life, instead of arrogating to [themselves] the right to dictate . . . in all things, saying 'thus far shalt thou go and no farther.'"³⁸ Women should become contributing members of society as well as effective home managers. "No home can be really attractive without intelligence," she wrote, "[or] without a broader sympathy than that which confines itself to one's own family. Whatever efforts woman can make, whatever she may do that is not detrimental to home life, that she should be permitted to do without ridicule and without censure."³⁹

As a voting citizen since 1870, Emmeline early took an interest in the national suffrage movement and served as delegate to many of the national woman's suffrage association conventions. When the Edmunds-Tucker Act deprived Utah women of the vote in 1887, she was insistent that they regain it when Utah became a state. The unexpected debate over woman's suffrage which dominated Utah's constitutional convention for several days brought her fiery commentary:

It is pitiful to see how men opposed to woman suffrage try to make the women believe it is because they worship them so, and think them far too good, and one would really think to hear those eloquent orators talk that laws were all framed purposely to protect women in their rights, and men stood ready to defend them with their lives. . . . We can only say they have been bold and must answer to their own consciences . . . let us hope the practical experience that will come with the ballot may convince even them that good may follow and they and their children receive the benefit of what they could not discern in the future progress of the world.⁴⁰

Like her fiction and poetry, Emmeline's political rhetoric was imitative, but it was guided by an overriding commitment to the cause of women. "I desire to do all in my power," she wrote in 1878, "to help elevate the condition of my people, especially women."⁴¹

Yet this did not end her contribution. To her contemporaries she gave poetry that stirred their sentiments, stories that pleased their Victorian sensibilities, and essays that pricked their social consciences. But it was to another

³⁶ "Action or Indifference," *Woman's Exponent* 5 (1 Sept. 1876): 54.

³⁷ "Woman's Progression," *Woman's Exponent* 6 (15 Feb. 1878): 140.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ "Woman's Relation to Home," *Woman's Exponent* 8 (30 Aug. 1879): 52.

⁴⁰ "Woman's Suffrage," *Woman's Exponent* 23 (March 1895): 244.

⁴¹ Wells, *Diary*, 4 January 1878.

generation that she gave her most significant literary legacy — forty-eight diaries ranging from the teenage outpourings of a broken heart to unsparing critical commentary on the great and near-great of Utah's church-state.

She had a writer's sense of detail and mood. Forty years after leaving Massachusetts she returned to the cherished places of her childhood. A drive from Orange to New Salem with her sister and brother-in-law evoked sentient memories of people and places still important to her:

We set off . . . over Walnut Hill. William Pallas and I in an open carriage or tea cart with square fringed top and one stout horse. . . . We went almost around the North Pond where I had often been skating with my big brothers in winter and where in summer we had almost risked our lives to gather water-lilies or pond lilies we often called them. O how lovely and fragrant they were and the long stems were hollow and yards in length. The boys used to smoke them sometimes. We went past the old grave yard & where the hearse house was and we drove in and got out and walked around. I found the grave of my favorite playmate, he had died many years before. . . . We drove on . . . through the heart of the village to the dear old place where Hiram [her brother] was born and where the little juniper tree has grown like a great giant elm. Went round to the back and unfastened the latch and let ourselves in. We lingered lovingly around the desolate and deserted place, went into the little parlor & saw the quaint old fire place & tiny mantelpiece, and up stairs where we children slept. Leaving this spot dreary indeed in its lonely isolation . . . we passed over the charming little brook where Sister Delia says I got my inspiration, when I used to jump up early in the morning and run down there and bathe my face and hands. . . . It was frozen over now except a place large enough to dip a bucket in, and it reminded me of the day on the morning of the first of March 1842 when eight of us went down into the waters of baptism in that very brook, the ice having been cut for our benefit.⁴²

Reticence was not a quality she nurtured and the debates on woman's suffrage during Utah's constitutional convention in 1895 caused an indignant Emmeline to complain of suffrage opponent B. H. Roberts, who subsequently ran for Congress: "The idea that he should expect to be elected by women's votes after his anti-suffrage raid!" she exclaimed to her diary.⁴³ But she felt worse after he won. "I cannot understand," she lamented, "how the women of the State can be so unscrupulous as to vote for such a man!"⁴⁴ Time, however, erased their differences. Twelve years later, he was to honor her at a celebration of her eighty-second birthday with a tribute and a bouquet of white roses, her favorite. Her response by letter afterwards was tender and deeply respectful. His presentation she wrote was like "discovering a treasure — finding a beauty disguised in one, where we had only anticipated a quantum of reserve."⁴⁵

Her later years brought a reconciliation not only with the members of her family who had not joined the Church but with her husband Daniel. In 1888,

⁴² Ibid., 28 Dec. 1885.

⁴³ Ibid., 20 Sept. 1898.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 10 Nov. 1898.

⁴⁵ Emmeline B. Wells to B. H. Roberts, 20 March 1910, B. H. Roberts Papers, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah.

he became president of the Manti Temple and repeatedly invited her to visit him. Finally in March 1890 she did. Her words glow with the warmth of the reunion: "O the joy of being once more in his dear presence his room is so nice and we are so cozy by the large grate and such a comfortable fire in it. We are more like lovers than husband and wife for we are so far removed from each other there is always the embarrassment of lovers and yet we have been married more than thirty-seven years. How odd it seems I do not feel old neither does he. We are young to each other and that is well." ⁴⁶ Daniel was seventy-six. Emmeline was sixty-two. More visits followed. His death the next year was thus all the more poignant for their rediscovery, and she mourned over the "memories, only the coming and going and parting at the door. The joy when he came the sorrow when he went as though all the light died out of my life. Such intense love he has manifested towards me of late years. Such a remarkable change from the long ago — when I needed him so much more, how peculiarly these things come about." ⁴⁷

In 1912, when Emmeline was eighty-four, she received an honorary doctor of literature degree from Brigham Young University, only the second awarded in twenty-three years from that institution. The first recorded honorary degree given to a woman in the United States had been awarded thirty years earlier; fewer than a hundred women had been so honored when Emmeline joined their ranks.⁴⁸ In her acceptance speech she acknowledged the award not only as a personal tribute but also "as a matter of honor to my sex." She had always regretted "that great educational institutions had withheld this distinction from women" and she hoped that this honor to her "would have its influence in showing that Utah withheld nothing from the women of the state." ⁴⁹ It would be twenty-eight years before the University of Utah awarded its first honorary

⁴⁶ Wells, *Diary*, 13 March 1890.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 26 March 1891.

⁴⁸ This number is approximate since records have been kept only since 1882. It is based on a fifty-year compilation made in 1932 noting that at least 217 women were awarded honorary degrees during that period. See *Academic Degrees*, U.S. Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of Education, Bulletin 1960, No. 28, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., p. 40.

⁴⁹ "Emmeline B. Wells, Lit.D.," *Woman's Exponent* 41 (March 1912): 51. While Emmeline was the center of attention during the awarding of her degree, a special reception being held in her honor with church and state dignitaries invited, other women have not always received such deference. Poet Edna St. Vincent Millay discovered in 1937 when she was selected to receive an honorary doctor of letters degree from New York University that she was to be feted in the home of the chancellor's wife while the male recipients of the degree would be entertained by the Chancellor and several hundred of his friends at the Waldorf Astoria. Her response must have awakened the administration to the enormity of its insensitivity: "On an occasion on which I shall be present solely for reasons of scholarship, I am, solely for reasons of sex, to be excluded from the company and the conversation of my fellow doctors. . . . I register this objection not for myself personally, but for all women. I hope that in future years many women may know the pride, as I shall know it on the ninth of June, of receiving an honorary degree from your distinguished university. I beg of you . . . that I may be the last woman so honoured, to be required to swallow from the very cup of this honour, the gall of this humiliation." Allen Ross Macdougall, ed., *Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Harper Brothers, Publishers, 1952), p. 291.

degree to a woman and forty-four years before the Brigham Young University awarded its second to a woman.⁵⁰

It cannot be denied that Emmeline B. Wells was a woman whose gifts coincided with those honored by her society. The feminization of American letters meant that "housewives with a mission" could use fiction, poetry, and the periodic press as excellent "influences." They became, in effect, secular extensions of the clergy. This alliance of press and pulpit insured a mass dissemination of their shared middle-class Victorian values which celebrated virtue, denounced evil, and apotheosized domestic life. John Milton, according to one cleric, could not be given "true eminence" because he lacked "pure religious sentiment" which, as everyone knew, focused on "domestic life . . . in which now almost all our joys or sorrows are centered."⁵¹ Mormon or "home literature," popularized by Susa Young Gates, Nephi Anderson, Emmeline Wells and other Mormon writers, followed this prescription, reinforcing the social and religious values expressed at Mormon pulpits.

But Emmeline Wells added a western American voice to a larger literary movement, a female literary tradition which included, among others, such widely diverse writers as Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft and American authors Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett. Despite their differences, women writers were linked not only by their sex but by their common membership in a literary movement always apart from the literary mainstream. Bridging time and distance, they reached out to one another through their published writings, developing a literary network which one scholar has identified as an "intimate kinship." By this means Emmeline drew confidence as well as inspiration from such disparate authors as Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and studied the writings of George Sand and Harriet Beecher Stowe, two authors who acknowledged their literary kinship with one another, though never meeting.⁵²

Emmeline's contribution to this literary tradition was neither substantial nor enduring, but she assisted in transmitting it to another generation while adding, in her own time and place, to the growing swell of female literary voices. Bluestockings were here to stay.

⁵⁰ Between 1892 and 1982, the University of Utah awarded 173 honorary degrees, eighteen to women. Between 1887 and 1982 Brigham Young University awarded 121 honorary degrees, six to women.

⁵¹ As quoted in Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), p. 113.

⁵² Women's literary tradition is discussed in full by Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976).