

Ministering Angels: Single Women in Mormon Society

Lavina Fielding Anderson

SINGLE WOMEN IN MORMON SOCIETY have not fared very differently than those in society at large. When they have been objects of pity in Cincinnati, they have also been objects of pity in Cedar City. When they have been glamorous and "liberated" career women in New York, they have also been, on a somewhat smaller scale, glamorous and liberated career women in Salt Lake City. As the Raynes-Parsons essay indicates, their theological and cultural position in the Church has changed very little between two centuries. What has changed has been the larger economic opportunities that have made singleness a less terrifying option than marriage at any price.

I would like to discuss the social experience of historical Latter-day Saint single women in the context of five questions: (1) Does she have an acceptable reason for being single? (2) Can she provide for her own economic security? (3) What place does she occupy in her family of origin? (4) Can she contribute to her community in a way that she will be rewarded for? (5) What was the emotional life of a single woman in past generations?

The answer to the first question, her reasons for remaining single, is difficult to ferret out, for the automatic presumption is that a woman was never single by choice. Instead she was a victim — primarily the victim of man's selfishness, occasionally of her own "ugliness," or of her lack of sufficient social standing to win a "self-respecting" man for a husband (girls who had "lost their virtue" were presumed to be in this category), or of some other defect such as feeble-mindedness, although that was not an absolutely insuperable bar to marriage either. The notion that a woman might choose to remain single when she had the option of marrying is not one that was seriously discussed in the nineteenth century. It was theologically dangerous, socially irresponsible, and usually economically impossible.

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However, the reality is that single women did exist; and Mormonism's distinctive system of plural marriage offered the option of being married in letter but single in fact. It is not completely farfetched to think of Eliza R. Snow, with her two husbands, as being a single woman. The cases of Rhoda Richards and Vienna Jacques are even more instructive. Both were sealed to Joseph Smith during his lifetime, but there is no evidence that either considered herself a connubial wife. On the contrary, Rhoda, the sister of Willard, Phineas, and Levi Richards, explained in a brief autobiographical sketch: "In my young days I buried my first and only love, and true to that affiance, I have passed companionless through life; but am sure of having my proper place and standing in the resurrection, having been sealed to the prophet Joseph . . . by his own request." Her editor, Tullidge, comments admiringly, "A very beautiful incident is this . . . memory of her early love, for whose sake she kept sacred her maiden life."¹ Since she was ninety-three at the time she dictated this reminiscence, one might conclude that she considered herself in no haste to join either her dead lover or the man she had been sealed to for eternity.

Vienna Jacques, a native of Massachusetts, came to Kirtland in 1833 at the age of forty-five where a revelation received by Joseph Smith that same year directed her to consecrate her property — about \$1400 — to the Church. She had never married and it is not clear how she acquired so substantial a sum except "by patient toil and strict economy." Joseph Smith in September of that same year wrote to her, telling her that "I have often felt a whispering . . . thou shouldst remember her in all thy prayers and also by letter." The Doctrine and Covenants instructed her to go to Missouri to "receive an inheritance from the hand of the bishop; that she may settle down in peace." She was married to Joseph in about 1843 or 1844 when she was in her middle fifties according to an affidavit drawn up for her signature but remaining unsigned in the Smith Affidavit Book. She drove her own team across the plains and died at the age of ninety-six in Salt Lake City's Twelfth Ward.²

Bernice Grant Casper relates a modern parallel. Her aunt, Lola Smith of Centerville, was engaged to marry Vernon Cecil Layton in 1920. Both were called on missions at the same time but their wedding plans were far advanced — the basement of the home they planned to move into after their wedding was dug — and she decided to stay and work. He went to the California mission and developed a kidney infection. When it became apparent that his condition was terminal, she went to his bedside, and in response to his pleadings during one of his lucid periods, promised to be sealed to him. He died on 12 February 1921 between that promise and her next visit. Two weeks later, on 23 February, she was sealed to him with her father standing as his

¹ Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (New York: Tullidge & Crandall, 1877), p. 422.

² Ibid., p. 441; Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), p. 336; Danel W. Bachman, "A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage before the Death of Joseph Smith" (Master's thesis, Purdue University, 1975), pp. 112, 335; Dean Jessee, "A Priceless Treasure," *Church News*, 2 Aug. 1980.

proxy. She was a few months short of her twenty-fifth birthday. She kept her cedar chest with cut embroidery and crocheted work intact until she died almost sixty years later.

She continued to live in the family home after her brothers and sisters married. Her father died within a year and she lived with her mother for some years. She was very popular, had friends, dated, traveled, sang with a professional group from Centerville, served three times as president of the YWMIA, entertained often and well, and died at the age of eighty-three of a gall bladder attack which she disregarded while she attended a party. Her niece remembers her as "smiling all the time, so clean it hurt with a lovely personality, tasteful and elegant in her clothes, small, and exquisitely refined." Bernice also remembers meeting her aunt in the company of attentive males but her assumption — that her aunt was at least once engaged — differs from the memory of other members of the family. Lola always wore her engagement ring, kept in touch with her fiance's family, and unfailingly went to his grave in Kaysville on Decoration Day. Bernice also remembers that she seldom spoke of her dead fiance but conveyed the idea that she "cherished the thought that she would be with him" and only occasionally "became a little wistful. She said once," her niece recalls, "If only I could have just held a baby, my own baby, in my arms."

The family was proud of her, and the nieces growing up saw her as glamorous, romantic, and beautiful. They also acquired some reservations about her anomalous marriage. "How could you tell a dying man no?" Bernice queries. "And only two weeks after his death she would have been grieving and mourning his loss. Was that a time for a decision?"³

Whatever position these women may occupy in the next life, however, they were, for all practical purposes, single in this life, making the same kinds of decisions as other single women. After about 1880, the pool of single women seems to have increased simultaneously with gradual elimination of polygamy and the expansion of economic opportunities, apparently the overwhelmingly determining factor in the quality of their lives.

Lola Smith was an executive secretary to two state superintendents of school.

Ida Mabel Wilcox set up a portrait photography studio on Salt Lake's Main Street in 1918 when she was twenty-two and remained in business until her death in 1947.⁴

Two sisters, both of whom served on the first general board of the YWMIA, began gainful careers early. Agnes Campbell became a clerk at ZCMI and Joan, the eldest daughter, began working with her father in the Church Historian's office in her early teens. Her father died when she was sixteen and she continued that profession until she was twenty-six, then became a cashier at ZCMI. While she was still young, she was made engrossing clerk

³ Conversation with Bernice Grant Casper, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2 April 1982.

⁴ "Salt Lake Photographer Succumbs at 53," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 13 Dec. 1947, p. 25.

in the Territorial legislature and was, while holding that position, nominated as a notary public, "the first woman in the Territory to be so honored." The governor regretfully had to refuse to confirm the appointment because she was underage. The two sisters built a "modest, pretty home" on Capitol Hill where they settled with their mother. After about twelve years at ZCMI, Agnes began working fulltime for the YWMIA, first as assistant secretary to the board, then as business manager for the *Young Woman's Journal*.⁵

Margaret Ann Freece, the daughter of "a financially impoverished polygamy family," died a "wealthy woman" in Salina. She became a licensed physician in 1897. Her father had been excommunicated several years before her birth and she does not seem to have been a practicing Mormon but contributed to her community in an enviable number of ways including serving on the school board for nine years, providing scholarships for graduating seniors, and founding a progressive club to promote conservation, cultural, and other civic projects. Locally, she had the reputation of preferring to "boil a rock to get the grease out of it rather than buy a soup bone," but her thriftiness seems to have been coupled with genuine competence. She was involved financially in the coal mining industry, was a director of a bank, an officer and the largest stockholder in a grain and milling company, and was one of the early directors of the first bank of Salina. She married at age fifty-four a man who died two years later.⁶

Dr. Freece is, however, the only woman I have come across in this study who was actually wealthy. Far and away the greatest number of single women who were self-sustaining were schoolteachers. For example, of sixty-five single women called to the General Board of the YWMIA between 1948 and 1972 twenty-eight were teachers. Twenty were secretaries.⁷ My mother-in-law, Ruby Johnson Anderson, commented forcefully about two of her teachers: "Ruth Rees and Otilie Finster made it possible for me to earn my living all my life with what they taught me in their classes and I can't say the same thing about any other classes that I took." Ruth Rees was the home economics teacher and Otilie Finster was the typing teacher. Both were single, and both taught at South High from 1932 until at least the early 1940s. Ruth wrote and sold a cookbook and, with her roommate, another single or possibly widowed woman, designed a dual-occupancy home that contained an "ideal kitchen." She also caused a sensation by "dropping dead of a heart attack in her classroom one

⁵ Susa Young Gates, *History of the Young Ladies Mutual Improvement Association of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from November 1869 to June 1910* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret News, 1911), pp. 196-97.

⁶ Vicky Burgess-Olson, "Margaret Ann Freece," *Sister Saints*, ed. Vicky Burgess-Olson (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 1978), pp. 402-11.

⁷ Occupational information was not available for all of the single women. YWMIA Scrapbook, 1848-1961; Historical Department Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives; and interview with Helen D. Lingwall, former YWMIA secretary, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2 April 1982.

day,"⁸ sparing herself the problem of a lingering, lonely death that other single women had to face or make arrangements to avoid.

Teaching school had, of course, been an acceptable occupation for women ever since the development of graded schools in the 1820s; they had become widely accepted by the 1870s. These small classrooms of age-grouped pupils demanded more teachers, and women, who had been thought incapable of handling the discipline problems of the one-room school and advanced age groups, were seen as appropriate for the younger classes, especially since they would accept salaries one-third or one-half those of men. "By 1860 women teachers outnumbered men in some states, and . . . by 1900 over seventy percent of teachers were women. By 1925, the rate had climbed to 83 percent."⁹ Thus, no woman could be accused of doing something unwomanly by becoming a teacher and many women with access to education did so. Certainly many of Utah's best-known Mormon single women were teachers: Alice Louise Reynolds of BYU, Ida and Mary Cook who pioneered the graded school system in Utah, and Maud May Babcock who introduced and popularized physical culture, as it was known then.

Women who did not have independent means or some kind of trade, however, were sometimes in desperate straits. Virginia Blair, born in 1890, worked at a variety of jobs including baby-sitting, freelance writing, and selling greeting cards. She never had much financial independence and was forced to live with her unmarried brother Millington — an arrangement uncongenial to both of them — until World War II enabled her to find employment in an aircraft plant in Burbank, California. After the war, however, she again became economically dependent. Her financial dependence was not just inconvenient and humiliating: she actually went without food and medical attention because of her poverty. And she certainly had strong feelings about her dependence. She and her mother both lived with Millington for a time and she frequently complains that he delighted in coming home, disrupting their quiet enjoyment of a radio program, and leaving the kitchen a mess. She calls their relationship, "Hell on earth."¹⁰

Another single woman, Eunice Harris, was in nearly the same situation. Born in 1890, she and her mother both became dependent on her brother Clint in Lehi and, in 1930 when Eunice was visiting in Monroe, she received a remarkably candid letter from her mother asking when she was planning to return. "I know things are not as pleasant here as they might be, if it was my house hold it would be different in many ways, it is not so agreeable for me either. I have to watch myself all the time ore I would be in trouble, as Clint

⁸ Conversation with Ruby Johnson Anderson of Pasadena, California, in Salt Lake City, Utah, 5 April 1982.

⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Random House/Vintage Books, 1962), pp. 316-17.

¹⁰ See Register and Papers of Virginia Blair, Philip Blair Family Collection, Marriott Library Special Collections, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah.

feels that he is under no obligations to keep me & I guess he is right. Many times I would have gone on the spur of the moment had I had a place to go, but as I am dependant on him I have to take whatever comes & make the best of it, & you will have to do the same thing.”¹¹

Flora Belnap's fragmentary reminiscence about the winter of 1948–49 when she would have been in her mid-sixties, records a bitter complaint that despite terrible cold, six-foot drifts, and the necessity of thawing out her pipes “several times a day,” . . . not once did Olive [her sister] call over the telephone to find if I were even alive.” Two years later, another sister invited her to spend Thanksgiving with her family. Flora refused and “really prayed someone else would invite me” and, on Thanksgiving morning, a friend did.¹² Thus, many single women seem to have been marginal members of their families of origin.

However, many of these fragmentary households no doubt lived together in peace and harmony. Stephen Webb Alley, whose brother, interestingly enough, never married, fathered three daughters and two sons. Kate, a teacher, and Ellen, whose occupation is not known, never married; and the third daughter, Edna, was over fifty when she married. Kate and Ellen seem to have lived in their family house on Eighth East throughout their lives, and, for Kate at least, with a schoolteacher's income, it must have been by choice.

Those without families present seem to have been in an even more marginal situation. When Jane Beeching died in 1926 at the age of seventy-one, the only survivor was a sister in England. Jane had joined the Church in England and befriended the missionaries there “for many years” before emigrating in 1901 at the age of forty-six. She was known for temple work and her activity in her Relief Society, according to her obituary. One wonders, however, about her Relief Society involvement since she moved three times — to hotels and boarding houses — in the seven months covered by one little diary that survives.¹³

It is not clear how she lived. When she bought a hairbrush and lost it in the same day, she notes it in her diary, possibly because of the annoyance although possibly also because of the expense. She records receiving “a Cheque from England” and a bishop's giving her two months' rent. Eunice Harris also moved frequently from hotel to rooming house when she was in Salt Lake and not living with her brother in Lehi. Flora was well enough off to afford a modest house of her own in Salt Lake City after she moved from Ogden.

These three women, Flora, Eunice, and Jane, also represent a little-recognized class of Mormon single women, now occupied most often by widows — the full-time genealogist and temple worker. The greater availability — and indeed necessity — of education has meant that the so-called “old maid” or “spinster aunt” has been replaced by the “career woman” even

¹¹ Winka Larson Harris to Eunice Harris, 29 July 1930, LDS Church Archives.

¹² Flora Belnap, “Autobiographical Sketch,” LDS Church Archives.

¹³ Jane Beeching, Diary, 1915–1917, LDS Church Archives; Obituary, *Deseret News*, 1 Sept. 1926, 2 Sept. 1926.

if the career has been more accepted than chosen and is more endured than embraced. Being actively involved in genealogy and temple work, however, was a conspicuous signal to the community at large that the single woman in question had a firm connection to the spiritual and social life of the Church, that she had important work to do for which she could justly expect recognition, and that people could understand what she did. It is perhaps ironic that none of them, with their commitment to genealogy, seem to have gotten along well with their siblings or left adequate personal histories despite their interest in researching their ancestors. Jane may have kept a diary consistently but only one volume survives. Flora made several attempts to write a personal history but they are unfinished. Eunice would be only a name on her father's family group sheet if a suitcase full of genealogical papers, half-done beadwork, vials of pills, and some pictures of her and her sister's family in El Paso were not shoved into a storage room in the old seminary building on Third West in Provo after her death in 1960.¹⁴

Although a case could be made that such women occupied a backwater in the mainstream of Mormon group life, still they were accepted and "respectable," although we should note this interesting sequence of entries from Jane Beeching's diary:

"We went to the Temple about [Sister Teney Wilson's] records and Bro Simmon Insulted me.

"Waited in vain to get into Temple. Great Crowd of Marriages.

"Went to Temple. Locked Out.

"Went to Temple & did Sealings. Emma Lucy Gates married." ¹⁵

It is also interesting that the quickest place to find single women in a preliminary search was on the Church's general boards, and the same could not be said of single men. Florence Smith Jacobsen, president of the YWMIA from 1961 to 1972 explained that single women were actually viewed as desirable *because* of their lack of family involvement. After she had initially set up her board, her advisors told her that they "would prefer that we did not present the names of women with young children — meaning children under the age of twelve; but that if we did, they could not go on any overnight trips. That's why we drew heavily on older women and single women." Since the policy was not retroactive, board members who were still adding to their families, were not released; and, when it became apparent that "they managed overnight assignments just beautifully," the policy was relaxed on occasion, in practice. Since her own three children had grown up thawing out prefrozen casseroles and recognizing Mutual night by the tuna-fish-gravy suppers, Florence was not inclined to be sympathetic with the policy in the first place: "Because of the way the policy came about, I suspect that some incident had occurred and that there had been a typical overreaction to it: because one child drowns you fill in the swimming pool."

¹⁴ Conversation with Donald Barney of Provo, Utah, 22 April 1982.

¹⁵ Jane Beeching, Diary, 21 Jan. 1916, 7 June 1916, 29 June 1916, 30 June 1916.

Florence adds, "Another reason we picked single women was because they were so well qualified. They were professional women. We needed women who could meet the public, stand up in front of an audience and project, and who could understand the program and the directions we gave them. Those single women or our board had made a mark on their own and were women of accomplishment before they were ever called."¹⁶

Out of the 116 women called to the General Board during her term of office, 38 percent were single women. Her immediate predecessor, Bertha S. Reeder, called a board of seventy-seven, of which thirty-eight — or fifty percent were single. This is in addition to eight women who were either widowed or married and childless.

There may be an unconscious echo in this percentage. In 1891 when Elmina S. Taylor, first general YWMIA president, established "aids" (the first members of the General Board) she did it because the labor of traveling to stake conferences was overburdening her. Of the first four women she called, two, Agnes Campbell and Sarah Eddington, were single.

Obviously, being single did not cut women off from the administrative life of the Church as represented by the women's auxiliaries. Occasional references to stake and ward YWMIA presidents as "Miss" indicate that it was no bar to local service either, and Flora Belnap records being totally overcome by "fear & humility" at being called to be first a counselor in a stake Primary presidency and then the president when all of the other officers were "old enough to be my mother."¹⁷

It is rather more difficult, however, to sort out the emotional life of these women who saw their friends and sisters marrying and having children, indisputably the grand mission of a Mormon woman's life. Did they have feelings of sexual frustration as normal urges and affections were denied an outlet? Did they feel a social stigma attached to their singleness? As menopause announced the irrevocable denial of maternity, did it simply confirm a fact that they had already come to terms with years before or did it confront them with a postponed crisis to work through? And without the built-in support system of a husband, children, and grandchildren — especially for those women whose relationships with their siblings was problematic — where did they go for emotional sustenance?

Needless to say, I have found no open discussion of these matters in any of the documents that I have examined. The reticence on sexual matters that governed previous generations would strongly discourage such disclosures. It may, in many cases, have even prevented the recognition of such feelings and these women might feel justly affronted at the charge that they were sexually repressed. Bernice's Aunt Lola could openly express a longing to hold her own baby in her arms where she would have been severely censured had she said openly that she wished to hold a man of her own in her arms. It is, therefore,

¹⁶ Conversation with Florence Smith Jacobsen, Salt Lake City, Utah, 22 Jan. 1982.

¹⁷ Autobiographical Sketch in Fourth Ward Amusement Company Account Book, p. 121, Church Archives.

in the expressions regarding maternity that we can look for such hidden feelings although we have no way of knowing if the woman speaking actually expressed her own feelings or repeated a conventional platitude.

For instance, we find unmarried members of the General Board addressing conferences or other Board members on the "necessity of getting the young mothers to come out to the meetings" as a way of curtailing "the spread of immorality" and also lecturing on why temple marriages are more beneficial than others. Sarah Eddington, deputy county recorder for forty-eight years who, interestingly, had a sister who also never married, asserts the reason to be: "Joseph Smith says that when a seal is put upon the father and mother it secures their posterity so that they cannot be lost, but will be saved by virtue of the covenant of their father and mother. How dare we think of bequeathing to our children less than we have received? Brigham Young said any young man who understood what he was doing would travel from here to England and any young girl would die unmarried rather than be united in the wrong way."¹⁸ Not only were single women in authoritative positions extended the right to speak authoritatively about marriage and child-rearing — matters on which they had no personal experience — but single women could be seen as noble martyrs, preferring virgin death to an "incorrect" marriage. Elsie Talmage Brandley, a married YWMIA board member recalls her own emotional response to a short story about a woman who refused to marry outside the temple. She "wept bitterly when a heroine vowed, 'I'll be an old maid for the Gospel's sake' and promised, 'I know how you feel, Phyllis. I'll be an old maid for the Gospel's sake, too.'"¹⁹

Even though reticence about sexual matters may have disguised sexual feelings to some extent, it is probably not realistic to argue that single women then experienced no tensions between biological urgings and social restraints. It is undeniable, however, that those social restraints were powerful and punishing in their censure. On 21 May 1887, the *Deseret News* contains a brief notice of a trial for adultery of a married man and an unmarried woman, both of whom had been excommunicated "some time ago." The unidentified newspaper reporter freely remarks that testimony "showed the conduct of the defendant and Miss Winegar to have been of the most disgusting character."²⁰ The same edition of the paper also reports the funeral of Louie Wells Cannon, whose story is surely one of the most sorrowful tragedies of nineteenth-century Mormon life. She had died of long-drawn out and agonizing complications in giving birth to the stillborn son of John Q. Cannon, the husband of her sister Annie, no doubt becoming a graphic example of the consequences of unchastity. John was the son of George Q. Cannon, then first counselor in the First Presidency, and Louie was the daughter of Emmeline B. Wells, future general president of the Relief Society, and of Daniel H. Wells, second coun-

¹⁸ Sarah Eddington, *Young Women's Journal*, 5 (May 1895): 395; 6 (Dec. 1894): 386.

¹⁹ Elsie Talmage Brandley, *Young Woman's Journal*, 40 (Oct. 1929): 685.

²⁰ *Deseret News*, 21 May 1887, p. 5.

selor in the First Presidency. John Q., age twenty-nine, was second counselor in the presiding bishopric. Louie, age twenty-four, was on the YWMIA General Board. He confessed his fault first to his brother on 4 September 1886. In a dramatic sequence, he appeared in stake conference the following afternoon with his uncle, Angus M. Cannon, the stake president. They interrupted the man who was speaking, John Q., in tears and agony, confessed his fault and "laid down his priesthood," and his uncle put the motion of excommunication to the congregation, who also "in tears" voted unanimously to cut him off from the Church. Annie divorced John four days later and he married Louie the day after that. John was arrested and charged with polygamy within a month, a procedure that mocked the family's grief but probably also provided an opportunity for the Mormon community to rally to the couple under what seems to have been gratuitous persecution since family members were required to provide proof of immorality rather than polygamy. Ironically, there seems to have been reason why they should not have been married instead of having an affair since this was well before the 1890 Manifesto. A year after Louie's death, on 6 May 1888, John was rebaptized, and a week later he and Annie were remarried, first in the endowment house by Annie and Louie's father and then by a justice of the peace. Annie stood proxy as Louie was sealed to John.²¹ John and Annie later added eight children to the three they already had.

After such painful realities of adultery, it is somewhat alarming to find Kate Thomas, a later member of the YWMIA General Board, penning a memorial poem to the recently dead Osborne Widtsoe in the persona of his wife, Rose Harmer Widtsoe:

Only one more gone with the constant going
Some may think idly since 'tis not their woe, . . .
Not for me! God of love, I want my lover!
Ever and evermore I want my lover!"²²

Furthermore, the poems addressed to women and the numerous "love poems" in which she assumes a male persona has led one historian to conclude that "her writing is full of unrequited love for men, and later, an almost sensual passion for women."²³

Kate was born in Salt Lake in 1871 and, a writer and dramatist from childhood, wrote prolifically for the *Young Woman's Journal* starting about the turn of the century when she would have been in her early thirties. Editor

²¹ *Deseret News*, 6 Sept. 1886, p. 2, 16 May 1887, p. 5, 21 May 1887, pp. 3, 5; Journal History, 7 Oct. 1886, pp. 2-3; 9 Oct. 1886, p. 3; 11 Dec. 1886, pp. 2-4, LDS Church Archives; Abraham H. Cannon Diary, 4 Sept. 1886, 5 Sept. 1886, 6 May 1888, 13 May 1888; microfilm of holograph, LDS Church Archives; original at Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; Emmeline B. Wells Diary, 1 Jan. 1887, 16 May 1887, Harold B. Lee Library.

²² "The Wife Speaks," *Young Woman's Journal*, 31 (May 1920): 243.

²³ Sterne McMullen, Register of the Kate Thomas Collection, Utah State Historical Society, n.p.

Ann M. Cannon reports that "more than once she wrote an article overnight to fill a particular need,"²⁴ and in her fiction she seems to have actually preferred using a male point of view. It is thus somewhat disorienting for a reader to begin a story clearly bylined "Kate Thomas" and which explains in the first paragraph, "I was madly in love with my big-bodied English chum, Ashford," to realize a paragraph later that "I" is a boy named Tom.²⁵ Although her preference for the male persona may speak sinister volumes about the self-perceived limitations of women in an earlier generation, it is an exceedingly common convention and does not speak sinister volumes about her sexual orientation. It is thus difficult to agree with that historian's conclusion. Kate Thomas's prose and poetry would repay study as a compendium of romantic conventions (what, for instance, do you do with speech in a Church magazine by the heroine: "Oh, if there were a man strong enough to win you whether you would or not! To storm you and take you! I despise a man that cannot make a woman love him!"²⁶), but her unpublished poetry may reveal more about her internal state. There are indeed poems expressing love and friendship to women, love-longing to men, and the imagined agonies of a mother whose child has died. The emotion is certainly intense but at least some of the subjects cannot have been autobiographical, thus enjoining caution in so interpreting other poems that might be autobiographical. It should also be noted that she was hardly unique: Sarah Russell, a general board member writing under the penname of "Hope," contributed dozens of similar poems to the *Journal's* pages between 1880 and 1910 and Virginia Blair confided many productions of the same genre to her diary a generation later.

One poem, however, apparently written between 1897 and 1902 when Kate would have been in her late twenties or early thirties tempts such a reading:

I dreamed you loved me — that you kissed my mouth
 With that rare look of splendor in your eyes,
 Then hand in hand we faced the purple west
 That held less glory than our hearts enclosed.

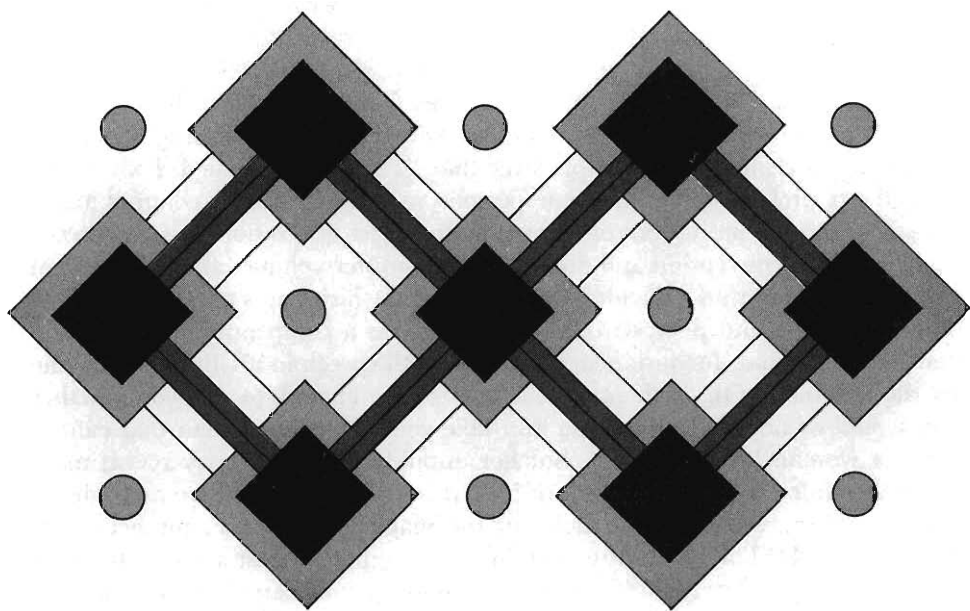
Her lover, clearly male and not female in this poem, tells her that "our sun shall have no setting. Thou and I/Shall be together through eternity" as gods. Exquisite music and clear voices sing:

Blessed are they that find their heavenborn mate.
 These twain were great and are great and shall be
 When earth is earth no more. They must be great
 Who live to God.

²⁴ *Young Woman's Journal* 40 (Oct. 1929): 681.

²⁵ "A Romance of Bedruthen Steps," *Young Woman's Journal* 27 (July 1916): 471.

²⁶ "The Reconciliation of Dick and Dorothy," *Young Woman's Journal* 14 (Dec. 1903): 548-53.



She wakens from the dream and laments:

O Love! The paths we tread may never meet.
 We may not learn that we are heaven-joined.
 It may be but the phantom of a brain
 Grown sick with longing for the ne'er-to-be
 But all my soul ascends in gratitude
 That I may claim the memory of a dream.²⁷

A Freudian could no doubt explain this poem satisfactorily by murmuring about repression, fantasies, and sublimation. I think it may be more realistic to see the poem as hybrid — perhaps based on an erotic dream or even an actual kiss but swiftly translated into the acceptable Latter-day Saint convention of eternal marriage continuing beyond the grave — or even perhaps starting there.

It is also important, I feel, to acknowledge the reality that a woman's friendships in preceding generations may have been much richer and more satisfying than some of those established in our mobile and sex-centered society. Although some scholars have attempted to see evidence of sexual liaisons in such longterm and intense friendships — and probably with cause in some cases — I found no evidence of such relationships in any of the Mormon single women I studied. Certainly their Mormon culture would have censured and punished homosexual unions as surely and swiftly as it censured and punished extralegal heterosexual relationships.

²⁷ "Untitled Poem" in Record Book of Manuscript Poems, Kate Thomas Papers, Utah Historical Society.

A final question remains to be asked in any analysis of the emotional life of single Mormon women. Since the assumption was that no Mormon woman would remain single by choice, is there any evidence that some did? And to what extent did society's view of single women color their views of themselves?

Again, direct evidence does not exist. However, it is interesting that single women then as now were assumed to be drawn to children to fulfill their "instinctive" mothering needs, a view which found a contemporary echo as recently as the 1981 women's fireside when Shirley W. Thomas, first counselor in the Relief Society General Presidency, talked about "mothering roles" in a context of single women and urged all women, regardless of marital status, to "learn to use the principles that relate to motherhood."²⁸ Thus Ann M. Cannon of the general board receives this somewhat left-handed compliment: "Travel, literary work and a successful public life (she was a county deputy recorder) have not weaned Sister Cannon from simple home pleasures. She showers her love on children, particularly on the dear little ones who live in the home with her" — presumably her younger brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews.²⁹

In 1931, May Anderson, the never-married second general president of the Primary, received a letter from Fred W. Schwendiman of the *Deseret News* thanking her for her "extraordinary kindness." Obviously seeking to pay her an ultimate compliment, he continued, "Such faith and confidence as you have shown is usually only found in the heart of a mother towards her son and I want to tell you that next to my two wonderful mothers and my dear wife and companion, you have won a place in my heart never to be changed."³⁰ Twelve years later, Lowell Bennion, then of the University of Utah Institute, wrote her a similar graceful compliment: "I recalled all the people I knew who had 'multiplied and replenished the earth' with little regard . . . to life's purposes and . . . then I thought of you and the intelligent loving devotion you had given to the creative life of the souls of other people's children." He calls it a "genuinely divine role."³¹

With the possible exception of this last quotation, it is possible to see these quotations as compensatory and consoling, "making up" for an irretrievable loss. Few would argue that the experiences of marriage and motherhood are not inherently valuable and such is not the intention of this paper. The difficulty lies in the conclusion that a woman lacking such experiences is a lessened and lesser person.

Stena Scorup, an educator in Salina, Utah, who also became its mayor, seems to have accepted such an evaluation of herself even though her experiences contradicted it. She called herself "a homely, humble school teacher" but obviously enjoyed the banquets, dances, toasts, and speeches — in other

²⁸ Shirley W. Thomas, "An Opportunity for Continual Learning," *Ensign* 12 (Nov. 1982): 102.

²⁹ *Young Woman's Journal*, 16 (June 1905): 264.

³⁰ Fred W. Schwendiman to May Anderson, 9 Jan. 1931, LDS Church Archives.

³¹ Lowell Bennion to May Anderson, 12 May 1943, LDS Church Archives.

words, receiving attention from men. She devoted herself to providing high-quality education to her students and anxious care to her numerous nieces and nephews, but also enjoyed her mission and travel that took her away from such responsibilities. And she seems never to have resolved the tension between Mormon doctrine on the importance of marriage and her own personal state. In a personal sketch written in the third person, she laments that she "is doomed to continue a servant to others through eternity" but "thinks it won't matter much anyway." Her biographer, Vicky Burgess-Olsen, points out the ambiguity in this phrasing: does *it* refer "to her life? to eternity? to being doomed?" In another place, Stena said, "I am the one member of our family who will never go to heaven" because of her singleness. At the close of her life, she advised her "nieces and nephews and . . . all the previous and younger generation . . . : Do not follow my example. Get married and make a home of your very own and have as many children as you can educate as they should be. Do not get so lost in your profession and work or allow home responsibilities however urgent and necessary, deprive you of having a family and making a real home of your own for them."³²

It is difficult to tell if any of the single women we have examined in this paper deliberately chose singleness. On at least one level, Stena certainly did, but it was not a level she could acknowledge openly and perhaps could not even admit existed. The powerful conventions that "consoled" single women for their singleness and permitted them entry to Mormon society also required that they be ultimately defined by what they lacked, not by what they possessed or what they could do. There is no question that conformity to this convention — universal as nearly as I can determine — rewarding them with a recognized and valid place. But one wonders about the cost in self-imposed limitations, in self-evaluations that always had to qualify achievement with the reminder, "But I'm not married," and by a loss of talent and energy to a society that defined in negatives rather than positives.

³² Burgess-Olsen, "Stena Scorup," in *Sister Saints*, pp. 297–99.