

A Diminished Thing?

Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society. By Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1992).

Reviewed by Cheryl May, adjunct associate professor of political science, University of Utah.

THE PUBLICATION OF *WOMEN OF Covenant*, during the Relief Society sesquicentennial year, gives us the first comprehensive history of a remarkable women's organization. This account is part of the equally remarkable history of the LDS church over the same period. The 430-page work, thickened with another hundred pages of notes, is painstakingly researched, as one would expect of the respected historians who wrote it. It provides a valuable resource for anyone interested in the history and heritage of Mormon women. It is enlivened by hundreds of individual, human stories of women at every level of Relief Society work as they strove to meet the challenges of their callings, as well as by many a felicitous phrase.

Women of Covenant displays the strengths and weaknesses of an "authorized history." The authors seem to have been given access to virtually all of the rich store of records, diaries, pictures, and accounts accumulated over a century and a half by a record-keeping church, and enjoyed other benefits bestowed by a cooperative Relief Society and priesthood leadership. The price paid was a certain loss of independence.

Since all three authors count themselves among the faithful, one might assume considerable consensus between them and the brethren who reviewed the manuscript. But one suspects that the text would have been different in some places if the authors had employed traditional methods of historical analysis, rather than directions from the official readers, in deciding how to deal with controversial issues.

What would appear to be one example of the censor's hand is the fact that while the reasons for releasing most general Relief Society presidents are discussed, no reason is given for President Amy Brown Lyman's release. Since the family and church crisis attending the release were of major magnitude, it seems likely that it was not mentioned because a reader thought it best to avoid discussion of the only twentieth-century excommunication of an apostle—Amy's husband Richard.

This is not to say that *Women of Covenant* glosses over all of the problems and conflicts that punctuated the history of the Relief Society, or always portrays the actors in the drama in a positive light. For example, in simple but powerful prose, the book describes the circumstances of Emmeline B. Wells's release from the Relief Society presidency. Due to her failing health, she had moved into the home of her daughter Annie. A few days after she attended the Relief Society board meeting on 23 March 1921, this self-named "last branch on the tree" of the Nauvoo

Relief Society generation received a visit from church president Heber J. Grant. Grant announced that he was releasing her from her calling: "She was astonished and hurt, knowing that Joseph Smith had declared that 'like the first Presidency of the church,' the Relief Society presidency was 'to continue in office during good behavior, or so long as they shall continue to fill the office with dignity'" (222). The account goes on to mention that none of Emmeline's predecessors had been released in spite of age and ill health, and concludes, "Already ill, and wounded by this final change, Emmeline failed rapidly. She died April 25, 1921" (223). The authors' view of President Grant's insensitivity in dealing such an unnecessary blow to a sister who had given five decades of extraordinary service to the women of the church is not explicitly spelled out. It is nevertheless unmistakable.

Reading through the remarkable chronicle of Relief Society achievement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I am reminded of the surprise and elation of a group of LDS women living in the Boston area when we found copies of the *Woman's Exponent* in Harvard's Widener Library in the late 1960s. For those, including myself, who had thought that Relief Society was mainly a place where women listened to lessons, quilted, and prepared for bazaars, the activities described in the *Exponent* were a revelation. "Ordinary" Mormon housewives had built hundreds of co-op stores and Relief Society halls; had saved thousands of bushels of wheat after the brethren failed in the effort; had spun silk, organized mass rallies, and were national leaders in the women's suffrage crusade. They had sponsored churchwide programs to improve maternal and child health, and sponsored high quality publications and education

programs. This was on top of their daily, one-on-one acts of compassionate service.

Most of these activities would have been considered by the surrounding Victorian world to be beyond women's capacities and against their essential natures. But as this volume makes clear these women were inspired by their testimonies of the Mormon gospel to which they had converted, and by the mandate given to the original Relief Society by Joseph Smith. The prophet made clear that the society was not to be just another "women's benevolent society," with a standard constitution and by-laws. Instead, it was the agency through which the daughters of God were to prepare for their eternal future as heavenly queens and priestesses. This vision, combined with the support of priesthood leaders who desperately needed their talents and energies to meet the challenges of the desert kingdom, unleashed an unparalleled half-century of Relief Society achievement.

The second half of the book, reviewing the period from 1922 to the present, continues to chronicle impressive Relief Society achievements. But the idea so often repeated by Eliza R. Snow that Relief Society enabled Mormon women to extend their capacity for service to a "wider sphere" clearly loses ground. The reasons for the society's loss of financial autonomy, loss of its publications, loss of direction over welfare and social service work, loss of its direct access to upper priesthood councils often make sense. A worldwide church demands clear and simplified organization and unity among all of its components.

In the concluding chapter, the authors point to the fact that though many opportunities for leadership development have been taken away from

the Relief Society sisters, the opportunity to perform charitable acts under the guidance of divine inspiration remains—a somewhat ironic interpretation, perhaps, of the organization's "Charity Never Faileth" theme. The power of compassionate service is no trifling thing, and *Women of Covenant* reviews many inspiring examples of Relief Society women at the general and local level exercising ingenuity, initiative, and often sacrifice as well in the exercise of this great gift.

We comprehend the reasons for the great changes in the power and scope of Relief Society concern in recent years, and might even agree with Emmeline B. Wells's conclusion at the end of her life that "Nothing has been irretrievably lost." Still, in comparing the magnificent past with the present prospects of the Relief Society, I am reminded of Robert Frost's poem about flowers at the end of the summer that closes with a reference to "what to do with a diminished thing."

A History of Two Stories

Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society. By Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1992).

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THERE IS A MOMENT IN *WOMEN OF COVENANT* I find absolutely haunting. It comes at the end of chapter 6—or, put another way, at the beginning of the twentieth century—at a moment when Emmeline B. Wells, perhaps the best-known of all the Relief Society's long line of presidents, worried over whether anyone would remember her lifetime of work as a Mormon, a feminist, and a leader of women's organizations. In this rather discouraged moment, Wells tried her best to turn fear into hope. She wrote: "History may not have preserved it all, there may be no tangible record of what has been gained, but sometime we shall know that nothing has been irretrievably lost" (223).

Like generations of women before

her, Mormon and non-Mormon, Emmeline Wells realized that despite her many accomplishments her history was a precarious one. Whether her life story would be preserved depended on a leap of faith—her faith that women of future generations could and would remember and honor her. The academic field we now know as the history of women, a field that burst onto the scene in the 1970s, came into being through many similar acts of faith, as women of our own time set out to honor women of earlier days, some long forgotten, others whose life stories had been covered over by layer on layer of stereotype and misunderstanding. In *Women of Covenant: The Story of Relief Society*, Jill Mulvay Derr, Janath Russell Cannon, and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher honor the legacy of women like Emmeline B. Wells, leaders they see as a part of their tradition of Mormonism.

I am not Mormon, but I too find something inspiring about Emmeline Wells, because Wells was the leader of the Relief Society who was most con-