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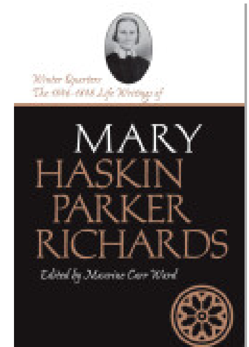
FOREWORD



Published by

Ward, Maurine.
Winter Quarters.
1 ed. Utah State University Press, 1996.
Project MUSE. https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9316.

For additional information about this book
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[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-19 00:36 GMT)

FOREWORD

Maureen Ursenbach Beecher

The life experiences of frontier women inform a new history that over the past two decades has begun to appear. The search for documents to tell that story has led to the discovery of many splendid diaries, autobiographies, and letters, which, until recently, had remained stashed away in attics and closets, little valued and less consulted. Even now, those documents that are in archives and repositories, available to researchers if not to general readers, are usually handwritten, difficult to read, time consuming, and, as one researcher termed them, low grade ore for his historical mill.

Until recently, the documents of men have formed the basis of our history of the western movement, men's activities having been credited with the making of the modern West. Many multivolume diaries, including from Mormondom, for example, those of John D. Lee, Hosea Stout, Charlie Walker, Charles Ora Card, and Wilford Woodruff, have appeared in the last two decades, supporting the view that the stuff of western history, as of history generally, is the public, political, commercial world, the sole province of men.

But life consists of cabbages as well as kings; what was happening in the kitchen, the parlor, the bedroom, and the birthing room affected civilization as much as–I venture to say more than–what was happening to the field and forest or being decided in the council chamber and the exchange house. Heartening indeed is the breadth afforded to the writing of the past by the introduction of social history and the related inquiries of ethnic, demographic, and women's studies. Supporting that enlightened broadening has been the appearance in the recent past of some few volumes of women's life writings. These, to be sure, are not the hefty tomes of the John D. Lee journals, nor the nine volumes of the Wilford Woodruff diaries, but are as valuable for their contribution: Annie Clark Tanner, Mary Jane Mount Tanner, Martha Spence Haywood, the two Ellens–McGary and Clawson–and most recently Ida Hunt Udall and Catherine Cottam Romney are among the life writers. As a notable continuation of this enrichment process, Utah State University Press offers this volume, the first of a new series, Life Writings of Frontier Women.

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This larger expanse of historical concern is mirrored in related disciplines: literature, anthropology, sociology, and political science, all are asking more pointedly female questions of their material and finding female-related source materials that answer some questions and raise many more new ones. And all are realizing how their findings inform knowledge of human endeavour. In order that scholars in all the disciplines might use these texts with confidence, the transcriber–editors of each manuscript have observed the most rigid standards of documentary editing. Beginning with the accepted authority in the field, Mary-Jo Kline's *Guide to Documentary Editing* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) and with Dr. Kline's personal assistance, the editors evolved a series of guidelines to guarantee that in transcribing handwritten texts, we not sacrifice fidelity to the writers' originals. As much as possible, each typescript reflects both the process of its creation and the author's product as it exists.

In addition, each volume editor has provided commentary, documentation, maps, and photographs to help the reader or researcher to understand the circumstances surrounding the writer's narrative. People named or alluded to in the text are, wherever possible, identified in notes or appendices. The author's omissions and deletions are explained where possible, and supplementary documents are provided where they may enhance the reading.

For all the editors' diligence, however, there will remain in each text puzzling spaces, silences, which even the most diligent researcher cannot fill. The questions raised may be troubling to some readers, intriguing to others; the reality is they exist, and scholarly integrity forbids reader or editor overstepping the available evidence.

As useful as women's texts are as sources of data for other disciplines, it is their significance as literary works in their own right that motivates this present series. Whether we consider them a genre of their own or a subgenre of autobiography or a stepchild not quite accepted in the literary family, the unrefined and artless life writings of ordinary women are compelling reading for their own sakes. They have an appeal as honest as the smell of baking bread, as cleansing and nurturing as a rainstorm, as full of beauty and surprise as the aurora borealis. Never quite compete, always concealing something, they are as gripping as a mystery story, as engaging as a play unfolding on an intimate stage. So powerful is the format that novelists have mimicked the personal forms in order to add credibility to their fabrications.

But these are no conscious fabrications; their truth is as profound as the souls of their authors. Even the distortions of demonstrable factuality that call the texts into question are subjective truths that rise from the complexity of their writers' lives. Like mirrors, the written pages of a woman's life cannot reflect that life in its fullness. As a mirror cannot reflect the third dimension of reality, so these texts cannot display the writers' lives from all points of

view. But the images they do present are true, genuine, and born of the writer's need to express herself, to create herself, to perpetuate herself.

The diaries, letters, and autobiographies of frontier women in this series are as interconnected as the struts in a geodesic dome. Each is its own entity, but each takes on its full meaning only in connection with the others of its like. One piece at a time, and then a triangle at a time, this series begins to put in place the parts of the whole. The present volume, for example, sees the Winter Quarters portion of the Mormon migration west through the words of Mary Haskin Parker Richards. Despite the austere living conditions of the Latter-day Saints there, and their tenuous hold on life, Mary is optimistic, outgoing, cheerful, and helpful. Her closest companion through that 1846-48 period is her sister-in-law Jane Snyder Richards. Jane did not keep a diary but in later years wrote an autobiography recounting, from a much altered perspective, the times the sisters-in-law shared. Written for readers at large with intent to invoke pity toward the Saints and tolerance of their religious practices, her sketch is bleak and sparse, recreating only the pitiable moments.

At the time that Jane wrote her reminiscences, she was part of the inner circle of Mormon women leaders, the hub of which was Eliza Roxcy Snow, whose name enters Jane's writing. And into Eliza Snow's life writing come the names of their contemporaries from the Ohio roots of Mormonism and on, until the zenith of Mormon women's organizational effectiveness, the 1870s and 1880s. Through Emmeline B. Wells, whose diaries are laced with references to both Eliza Snow and Jane Richards, we become aware of the national web of women–Susan B. Anthony and her eastern associates–linked in the struggle for suffrage and divided by the battle for and against the Mormon practice of polygyny. As their eastern contemporaries misunderstood the Mormons' aberrant marriage patterns, so also have later historians misrepresented them, presuming the few later statements of women leaders to exemplify the whole of women's lives on the Mormon frontier. Not so. Only in sensitive study of complete and contemporary records such as this one of Mary Haskin Parker Richards can we gain insight, one by one, into women's intimate experiences and emotions.

Such intertextuality as exists in the documents in preparation for this series compounds the value of each text and provides the impetus for the series. Because of the Mormons' long tradition of life writing, and the richness of the manuscripts available, we begin with their women's stories. But as documents become available, we hope to include texts by the Jennie Froiseths, the Corinne Allens, and the Elizabeth Cohens whose lives on the western frontier were more closely tied to those of their east coast sisters than to those of their Utah neighbors. For all their differences of belief and practice, their similarities of place and time, role and background bound these women in one female world.

For one woman's story is every woman's story, and every woman's story is each woman's story. The life experiences common to women, the universals of menarche, marrying, birthing, nurturing, working, building and maintaining domestic units, menopause, and maturing, form the warp on which each woman weaves her own pattern. Not all women's fabrics have all the strands, nor are the threads exclusive to women; nevertheless-there is enough commonality in women's lives to make useful a comparison of their variations. Begin with one woman, this woman, Mary Haskin Parker Richards, and continue on. Only when all the stories are gathered, and their interweavings made apparent, will we begin to know what it meant to be a woman on America's western frontier. Or anywhere.