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September-November 1884: A Critical Introduction to Martha McMillan

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September—November 1884: A Critical Introduction to Martha McMillan

September of 1884 begins as a hot month for Martha McMillan, her community, and her family. She writes on one particular Tuesday, "Pleasant but very warm. Thermometer 90" (McMillan, Sept. 9, 1884). September continues in this vain, the month unusually hot and clear with dust clouding the air (McMillan, Sept. 1884). However, by the time October and November hit, it becomes a race against time and the environment. These two months are full of a sense of urgency as Martha and the McMillan family scramble to get ahead of the quickly freezing ground, the falling snow, and the dropping temperatures. The McMillan family, Martha included, approach this natural phenomena like a well-oiled machine. With the help of some passing Irishmen, the McMillan family begins to gather their crop of potatoes, and the sheep are constantly tended to (McMillan, Oct. 4, 1884). Martha is not exempt from the harvest, often preparing what the men bring in to keep for the coming seasons, even "putting up the mangoe pickles" (McMillan, Oct. 13, 1884). At forty years of age, Martha is as busy as ever, even hiring a carpenter named Henry J. Brown to work on the McMillan homestead as winter looms ever closer, November continuing in much the same vein (McMillan, Oct. 6, 1884). In what would be a normal fall and winter, a tense political atmosphere overshadows the seasonal preparations. With prohibition coming to a head and the country embroiled in the 1884 presidential election, Martha cannot escape the politics that permeate America during this time. It is through her political observations in October and November of 1884 that Martha reveals herself to be a

uniquely ordinary woman, providing insight into the political views of a nineteenth century woman within the life-writing genre.

Throughout October and November of 1884, Martha comments on the prohibition movement and party. In his book titled *Prohibition: A Concise History*, author W.J. Rorabaugh generalizes prohibition in its entirety. He writes:

> From 1920 to 1933, the Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution banned the production, sale, or transportation of alcoholic beverages [….] The American dry movement was part of a global effort to ban or control alcohol and other drugs. This worldwide effort against pleasurable but addictive and often destructive substances began with the Enlightenment, gained strength during religious-based moral uplift and industrialization in the 1800s, and peaked after 1900 amid rising concerns about public health, family problems, and the power of producers to entice overuse. (Rorabaugh 1)

It is during this period of "religious-based moral uplift" that Martha becomes involved in the prohibition movement during the industrialism of the 1800s (Rorabaugh 1). Although the Eighteenth Amendment was eventually repealed in 1933 with the ratification of the Twenty-First Amendment, the movement left a legacy ("Prohibition Party"). Rorabaugh writes, "The most important legacy of prohibition in the United States concerned a dramatic change in drinking habits. The raunchy all-male saloon did disappear for good, and per capita consumption of alcohol was reduced for a very long time" (Rorabaugh 110). Although the movement did not last, it clearly left an impact on American society, especially during the nineteenth century.

There were also many groups that advocated for prohibition, most notably in the prohibition party itself. The party was founded in Chicago in 1869 with delegates from over twenty states ("Prohibition Party"). The party joined political elections in 1872 and remains one

of the oldest third-parties in America ("Prohibition Party). There were also many sub-groups that championed the morality behind the prohibition movement. These groups were primarily made up of women fighting for legislation against alcohol, which became known as the "Women's War" ("Prohibition"). Founded in 1893 and led by Wayne Wheeler, the Anti-Saloon League "mobilized voters for prohibition. The ASL elected legislators and members of Congress loyal to its agenda. The group pushed local option where it could not win statewide prohibition. Once liquor dealers were eliminated from large areas of a state, a statewide ban was easier to enact" (Rorabaugh 3). With the rise of the ACL, a divide was created between "wet" and "dry" candidates for political office (Rorabaugh 3). Martha herself was part of a sub-group, evidenced in her prominent membership within the Women's Christian Temperance Union, which was founded in 1874 (Rorabaugh 1). Rorabaugh touches on the importance of the WCTU, writing that the group "resumed the long campaign to dry out America by fighting to ban alcohol at the local, state, and national levels. Under Frances Willard, the organization also advocated women's suffrage. Until Willard's death in 1898, the WCTU was the main organization pushing anti-liquor legislation. Local option prohibition enjoyed considerable success in rural areas, where evangelical churches were strong" (Rorabaugh 3). Rorabaugh's account of the WCTU seems to be in alignment with what we already know of Martha McMillan through her active membership in the WCTU and her place in rural, evangelical Cedarville, Ohio.

Martha's interest and involvement in the prohibition movement peaks during October and November of 1884. During this time, Martha attends many Prohibition party meetings and speeches, especially during the month of October. On one particular Friday, Martha writes, "At two O clock we attended a grand prohibition meeting held in Blacks Opera House. The meeting in the afternoon addressed by Dr. Leonard. for the evening by Gov. John P. St John [?]

prohibition candidate for president—the speeches were truly grand—the occasion truly delightful—Cedarville was well represented […]" (McMillan, Oct. 3, 1884). Not six days later, Martha again attends a prohibition meeting, writing, "This A.M. three sons and Fannie and Mr Mc and I at a prohibition meeting at the school house. Rev Mr Morton, Van [Foss?] J.R. Orr, H. Kyle, S.K. Mitchel, S.J. Galbreath and Paul [Thomasson?] addressed the meeting—we had quite an enthusiastic meeting. Bro Dan was chairman—we had a nice audience" (McMillan, Oct. 9, 1884). Clearly Martha has an intimate connection with the movement. Not only do her husband and sons attend, but her brother-in-law Daniel McMillan presides as chairman, and her pastor, Dr. Morton, gives a speech.

On a Tuesday, Martha writes of a debate she attends between the Prohibition and Republican parties, writing, "This eve Dr Carson of Xenia and Rev Dr Morton met at the hall to [discuss?] and defend the prohibition and Republican parties respectively. Fred and Homer and I over to hear them Mr Mc and Fannie stopped for it and were at Aunt Janes for tea—There was quite a good Audience" (McMillan, Oct. 28, 1884). Despite her increased attendance to these events and the positive connotations she uses to describe them, Martha shows the most emotion and fervor on Tuesday, October 7th. She writes, "Mr Mc among the sheep this afternoon. This eve he and Homer and I, and Jack—and Fred attended Leonard speech at the hall—the Prohibition party seemed to triumph tonight […] The meeting was grand—speech excellent—Truth is mighty and will prevail—I don't have a single *doubt* as to the success of [scratched out "the"] Prohibition in this country. Let us not forget that right is might 'God and one man is a majority'" (McMillan, Oct. 7, 1884). Clearly Martha's morals and faith cause her to be a staunch champion of the prohibition movement.

Coinciding with this surge in the prohibition movement is the presidential election of 1884. This election pitted Democrat Grover Cleveland against Republican candidate James G. Blaine, and scholars debate whether this campaign was "the dirtiest in American history" (Brodsky 81). During this election, the Democrats "called for reform of the federal land-sales policy, reduction of federal taxes through the lowering of import duties, and tighter controls on monopolies" (Brodsky 81). To accomplish these goals, the Democrats chose Grover Cleveland as their party candidate. Cleveland, born and raised in New York, was well known for his integrity and honesty, a refreshing figure after the slew of Republican presidents that the public considered corrupt (Hendrick). During their campaign, the Republicans "called for high tariffs, domestic market expansion, and an international standard for the relative value of gold and silver coinage. Also, they demanded more federal involvement on the local level […]" (Brodsky 82). As "one of the leading orators of the day," the Republican party chose Blaine as their candidate, although his integrity would be called into question from his days in the Grant administration (Brodsky 82, Hendrick).

With these two party candidates and political agendas, the campaign quickly turned ugly, a campaign in which "the morality of both candidates was dwelt upon to the near-exclusion of honest, intelligent debate on the issues. Indeed, more than mud-slinging, it was libel-slinging [….] With the campaign now focused almost exclusively on Blaine's integrity and Cleveland's morality, what had begun […] as a political encounter had degenerated into a political circus" (Brodsky 81, 97). Despite an election focused on character defamation, Cleveland eventually won, the first Democrat to do so since 1856 (Hendrick). Cleveland was largely successful in combating the previous corruption in the White House. Besides his focus on tariffs, Cleveland is known for passing the Dawes Act, which "Americanized" Native Americans, and for supporting

a money system based on gold (Hendrick). His presidency is generally looked upon with fondness due to his character.

Perhaps due to the nature of the election, the Prohibition party garnered much support throughout the campaign. In his book titled *Grover Cleveland: A Study in Character*, author Alyn Brodsky comments on the role of the Prohibition party during the 1884 election. He writes:

> The Prohibition party, led by former Kansas governor John P. St. John, was a major impediment to Blaine, mainly in upstate New York. Most of St. John's followers were former Republicans who may have detested both Cleveland and the Democrats but had no intention to support either Blaine or his party, whom they hated in equal measure. That hatred derived mainly from the humiliation inflicted at the Republican National Convention upon Frances E. Willard, head of the WTCU, who was permitted to present the platform committee with a petition in support of the temperance cause, signed by twenty thousand of her co-"dries." After she was politely bowed out, someone wondered derisively what to do with the petition. This evoked gleeful shouts of "Kick it under the table!" There it was found when the convention adjourned—covered with the stains of tobacco juice. (Brodsky 83)

Because the general public had a difficult time endorsing either candidate, the Prohibition party gained political power throughout the election. Martha herself becomes a part of this, attending speeches given by John P. St. John, as mentioned above.

Besides attending Prohibition rallies, debates, and speeches, Martha shows a keen interest in following the political developments and atmosphere throughout October and November. She also keeps track of local elections throughout the month of October, specifically. She describes one particular local election, writing, "This is the day of the state election—Jack and Taborn

down and voted this morning. Secretary of state the highest office on the tickets" (McMillan, Oct. 14, 1884). Outside of local and state elections, Martha shows interest in the presidential election. On one particular Wednesday, Martha writes, "This was a day set apart for fasting and prayer previous to the election on Tuesday. I would like to have gone but the rain prevented it and the confusion of workers" (McMillan, Oct. 29, 1884). Clearly Martha is invested in the politics of the nation, willing to fast and pray for the outcome of the election and for the political leaders. As her support of the Prohibition party was made clear above, Martha also makes her opinions known regarding the Republican party. On a Monday, she writes, "This eve Mr Mc and I attended a Republican speech at the hall delivered by an Hon Mr Chance—the meeting was of little importance" (McMillan, Oct. 6, 1884). While showing a more ambivalent attitude towards the Republicans, Martha also questions their motives during the month of October. She writes, "[T]he Republicans are having Blaine and Logan demonstrations tonight they have a torch light procession the town was filling up—I guess they have forgotten that tomorrow is Sabbath—and by this [dissipation?] they will be ill prepared to keep it" (McMillan, Oct. 11, 1884).

Although Martha is not quite as opinionated when it comes to the Democrats, she does note that "Mr Mc and James A. Mc at Xenia and into the night at a "Cleveland [jollification?]." Gov. spoke in the afternoon" (McMillan, Nov. 20, 1884). Whatever her political leanings and sentiments, Martha pays close attention to the election itself. On the day of the election, Martha notes the atmosphere around Cedarville in light of the momentous event, writing, "This the event day of the Presidential election J.P. Blain, Grover Cleveland John P. St. John the Candidates. Everything very quiet in C- today" (McMillan, Nov. 4, 1884). As November wears on and the election results come in through the newspapers, Martha makes sure to note the standings at the end of each day. On a Wednesday she writes, "The papers all full and running over with the

news from the election—reports seem to be in favor of the Democrats […]" (McMillan, Nov. 5, 1884). The following Thursday, she writes, "[T]he latest news from the election The Democrats still claim the victory" (McMillan, Nov. 6, 1884). By paying close attention to the election results and to the most up-to-date details, Martha shows an interest in the political happenings of the country. This is also clear, when, at the end of the month, Fannie returns from school with a homework assignment that Martha deems important enough to include in her journal. She writes, "The children all at school. Fannie had an essay—subject—'why women should not vote' […]" (McMillan, Nov. 28, 1884).

By framing Martha within her political context, her significance as a nineteenth-century woman is apparent. In a male dominated sphere where women could not yet vote, Martha invites readers into her own world of political opinion and thought, providing valuable insight into a nineteenth-century woman's political views. Martha demonstrates that she is politically conscious as well as politically active, as much as her gender and station allow. Martha accomplishes and creates this significance primarily through her medium, the life-writing genre. In her article titled "Reading and Interpreting Unpublished Diaries by Nineteenth-Century Women," author Suzanne Bunkers writes of life-writing, "Diaries like these are not a retrospective examination and interpretation of a life already lived; they are a commentary on a life as it was lived, on life as process, not product. Such diaries, then, may well represent the most elemental form of autobiography, for they reflect life as lived experience rather than as carefully shaped, edited text" ("Reading and Interpreting" 15). By illustrating the politics of the time and her own political opinions, Martha adheres to this aspect of life-writing. She depicts the events of the elections and campaigns chronologically as they unfold, highlighting the processes of life rather than the outcomes. In another work, Bunkers writes:

> Women's diaries in particular provide fertile ground for such an exploration because they challenge the reader to expand the traditional definition of autobiography to include texts written day by day, many with no editor except the writer herself, many with no statements about an intended audience and few, if any, preconceptions about the shape which the completed text would take [….] For a Midwestern American woman writing during the latter half of the nineteenth century, a diary represented more than a book where she could comment on daily events; it often provided a forum for the generation of statements about her identity, both as an individual and as a woman. ("'Faithful Friend'" 8-9)

Martha's political opinions are significant because they challenge the reader by writing about the mundane and the ordinary. In Martha's case for these specific months, her daily life includes observations about the political atmosphere. As such, Martha's life has meaning because she informs her audience about her identity as a nineteenth-century woman within the political sphere.

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