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Martha McMillan: Rewriting the Spanish-American War (1898)

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The [McMillan Journal Collection](#) is an archive of the journals of Martha McMillan of Cedarville, Ohio, who maintained a daily journal from 1867 until her death in 1913.

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Martha McMillan: Rewriting the Spanish-American War (1898 – April-July)

Bethany Miller

(2015)

The Spanish-American War (April 24, 1898 – Aug. 12, 1898), occurred because of a confluence of various influences, including American religion and sense of mission, political tensions between the US and Spain, Spanish violence against the people of Cuba, and the Cuban desire for freedom from colonization. Martha McMillan's 1898 journal has an entirely different focus despite being written during the time of this war. While McMillan shows the same sense of strong, patriotic religion and mission that led the US to intervene in Cuba, she also critiques male narratives about the war by telling a vastly different historical tale about American life in 1898. McMillan effectively rewrites the history of the summer of 1898 from a rural Ohio mother's perspective, providing an alternative narrative to traditional US history.

Cuba, a Spanish colony, revolted in 1895 to try to gain independence from Spain (Gould). Spain viewed Cuba as an integral part of their nation, and "no Spanish government could long remain in power if it accepted the loss of Cuba without putting up a fight" (Gould). The conflict was intense and resulted in roughly 100,000 civilian deaths in Cuba (McCartney 267). The Spanish herded many rural Cubans into compounds, and the Cubans "were not provided with sufficient food or sanitation . . . as a result large numbers of Cuban civilians died of starvation and disease" (McCartney 267). These injustices (and some underlying political motivations) caused the United States to intervene in 1898, overthrow Spanish rule, and gain Cuba and the Philippines as US colonies.

It is impossible to deny America's colonialist presuppositions in approaching this war. Rudyard Kipling wrote his famous poem "White Man's Burden" after the US won Cuba, and

most of the motivation for America entering the war was “based on a construction of U.S. national identity that held the United States to be a just, humane civilization that was duty-bound to aid an oppressed people and to punish their wicked persecutors” (McCarthy 269). This was largely based on America’s Protestant Christianity, which made citizens eager to defend justice and bring the light of Christianity and civilization to needy places like Cuba, where starvation and injustice reigned. This sense of duty combined with the fact that America had not been to war in half a century made the Spanish-American War wildly popular. Most historical accounts mention how “volunteers jammed the army and navy recruiting offices,” and many American citizens enthusiastically followed the war updates (Gould).

Martha McMillan’s journal entries do, in some places, fit into the traditional historical narrative of America in the summer of 1898. On May 22, 1898, Martha ruminates over a baccalaureate sermon given to the graduating high school class in Cedarville, Ohio. She writes that the speaker “spoke grandly on the outlook of the world, the nations of the earth, and summed up with the question: ‘Who knoweth whether thou art come to the Kingdom for such a time as this?’” (McMillan). McMillan’s journals confirm that most Americans in 1898 looked at world affairs from the perspective of Protestant Christianity and sensed God’s purpose in their relationship to other nations. Martha believed that she and other Americans like her, as Christians, had a responsibility to act in the world as messengers of the Kingdom of God, which led them into the Spanish-American War. In this way, Martha’s journals support traditional narratives about the Spanish-American War.

Yet despite her Protestant Christian outlook, Martha’s journals largely conflict with historical perspectives on America in the summer of 1898. Martha mentions the Spanish-American War (which she calls the “Cubian War”) a totally of 3 times in the months of April-

July 1898. On April 20th, she writes that “Uncle Joe and Alex” are “reading war news,” and that is all she says (McMillan). She travels to Springfield on April 27th to see a popular speaker with her husband, and writes: “There were 800 soldiers gathered up from Dayton & Charleston and Springfield on their farewell parade in Springfield – they have enlisted for the Cuban war . . . the town [is] crowded” (McMillan). Then, on June 29th, she mentions that Homer, her son, goes to see a friend in Charleston who enlisted for the war and would soon be deployed (McMillan). From the traditional historical narratives about America during this wartime, it would seem that every citizen paid rapt attention to the war. Martha, however, only claims that her male relatives read war news, and when she records facts about the war, it is because they directly pertain to her personal experience. Her only interest in the parade on April 27th is that it made the town crowded while she was there to hear someone speak. On June 29th, she recorded the activities of each of her children, so the only reason she wrote about the war was because it influenced the life of her child in a small way. This lack of interest in the Spanish-American War does not mean that Martha was disinterested by politics – on the contrary, she was incredibly active in her local chapter of the W.C.T.U. and she submitted the first ballot ever cast by a woman in her local school district election (McMillan, April 11, April 21). Martha was politically active, but she cared more about her local community than international affairs. She felt it was more important to record the life of her family and her farm than to record war news.

Martha McMillan’s journal provides an alternative historical narrative to the history books writing about the Spanish-American War. Some themes overlap, but Martha’s life in many ways rewrites history as America understands it. She shows that for many Americans, particularly women in rural settings, the Spanish-American War was not even close to the most important event in the summer of 1898. Far more important were the visits of her children, the

upkeep of her farm, and the death of a close friend. These personal experiences are no less valid than the war between Spain and America, as proven by the 1898 journal of Martha E. McMillan, who, as an American writer, decided to focus on the domestic and the local rather than the global.

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