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The MacMillan Journals: A Place to Comment and Space to Gain Intellectual Agency (1894)

Austin C. Becton

Cedarville University, austinbecton@cedarville.edu

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The MacMillan Journals: A Place to Comment and Space to Gain Intellectual Agency (1894)

Austin C. Becton

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For over 40 years, Cedarville resident Martha MacMillan ensured that every day of her married life was recorded and safely kept. Not only does she consider the mundane details of farming life in Cedarville, but also she records her many reflections and curiosities about religion, parenting, and community life. The first four months of 1894, in particular, consist of more than the complicated daily activities of her family and farm. She embeds thoughts and emotions into her entries—small insights into the character of herself and her community. Her longest entries usually consist of her thoughts about the Sermon at Church, or what was considered at prayer meetings and Bible study. For MacMillan, religion is not simply an activity to take part in once-per-week, but an intellectual process and a dedication to sacrifice for others. Because spiritual matters influence almost every part of her life and routine, she bases the entirety of her intellectual life on Church membership. MacMillan's personal faith and membership to the Church, then, grant critical insight into contemporary readings of her journal, her community, and her own identity as a person.

In the contemporary era, both the university and village of Cedarville have become symbolic of Baptist heritage. Yet their religious and ancestral roots lie deeply entrenched in 19th century Presbyterianism. Baptists maintained a significant presence in the village's history but did not become a dominant ideological force or population until much later, when the college merged with the Baptist Bible Institute of Cleveland (History 3). Instead, many citizens could trace their history to Scottish Covenanters, a sect of Presbyterians who rejected the establishment of state religion and moved to America. These ancestors first moved to Kentucky or South Carolina and

later established their families in Ohio to protest southern slavery. Those who settled near Massie's Creek would later form the village of Cedarville (Dills). Their dedication to faith and progressive causes testify to the area's strong minds and devoutness of religious belief, a tradition that continues today and functioned throughout Martha MacMillan's life. Cedarville's Presbyterians would also experience peaceful yet divisive periods. In lieu of national trends, the local congregation divided over the "Old School" and "New School" controversies, mainly the result of Church government disagreements as well as political and theological **issues**. The two would later reunite as the United Presbyterians, but MacMillan and her family spent most of their time under the reformed Church's Pastor Morton, who contributed to the founding of Cedarville College (MacMillan).

Presbyterianism distinguished itself beyond its unique views of Church governance and doctrinal perspectives—congregants, including Martha MacMillan, were often steadfast supporters of education and progress. Cedarville best demonstrated this adherence to education by the village's consistent pursuit of scholastic development at all levels. In addition to investing many thousands of dollars into primary education, the Presbyterian population would eventually charter Cedarville College under their denomination in 1887 (Centennial 6). Additionally, some local citizens, such as the MacMillans, sacrificed their economic production in order to send their children to school (MacMillan 1-40). Presbyterian Cedarville clearly held deep convictions about sharpening the mind. This manifested itself into the college and resulted in highly successful descendants including Whitelaw Reid, who would become a prominent diplomat and a Vice Presidential Candidate (Centennial 1-5). Beyond Cedarville's many successes, though, Presbyterianism formed the backbone of the village, and created a central ideological and physical space where the community gathered.

While MacMillan does travel to the homes of family and friends, commercial businesses in the village and in Xenia, as well as other locales, she spends more time with the Church. She frequently attends the prayer meetings, special services, and traditional sermons held throughout the week. On many occasions, these services lead her to contemplate the spiritual and even political side of life. On one January Sabbath, for example, she considers the sermon topic to be relevant and thought provoking. “If you want to know what God is going to do, read the Bible—but if you want to know what the devil is going to do, read the newspaper,” she records (MacMillan 21). Small notes like this one, in addition to her occasional meanderings about faith and parenting, spread throughout the journals. On more rare occasions, MacMillan produces her own poetry, which usually relates to her faith or an event. Also in January, she composes a poem on the new year. “A happy New Year ___? Can make it my dear / by ___ being and doing your best / be cheery and ___? the ___? months through / so shall the New Year be blest,” she continues, “___ through the days and months of 1894. By being cheery and true and smiling and doing our best” (MacMillan 1) Throughout the rest of the poem, clear theological consideration marks her rhetoric.

Contemporary readers should consider the intersection of Church, context, and MacMillan’s journal. During a time when women had a limited voice in both society and church—the Presbyterians refrained from hiring a female pastor until over 100 years after her death—the journal creates a safe space where she can engage in her intellectual and creative pursuits, especially relating to religion. Perhaps the journal even grants us insight into the ‘real’ Martha MacMillan, as opposed to the socially restricted version that her family and friends encountered. The journals, then, offer significant insight into the real life of a 19th century woman of the Midwest, and of a religious woman who believed in herself and her ideas. The journals act as a

crossroad of parenthood, citizenship, and theological independence because of both their security and accessibility. But beyond all of these reasons, Presbyterianism grants us insight into why Martha MacMillan cares so deeply to comment on theology, politics, and education—from her perspective, these are the most relevant and pressing issues of her day. They run in her blood and they form the framework of her faith. The blank, lined pages with which she returns to each day grant her agency as a female Presbyterian and as a woman who cares about academics and cultural affairs. The journal itself becomes her way of interacting vocally with the preacher, the community, and their ideas.

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