

8-8-2016

# Martha and Her Help: A Different Kind of Relationship

Victoria E. Krus

Cedarville University, vekrus@cedarville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/mcmillan\\_research\\_papers](http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/mcmillan_research_papers)

 Part of the [Agriculture Commons](#), [Animal Sciences Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), and the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#)

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.

## Recommended Citation

Krus, Victoria E., "Martha and Her Help: A Different Kind of Relationship" (2016). *Research Papers*. 13.  
[http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/mcmillan\\_research\\_papers/13](http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/mcmillan_research_papers/13)

This Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Papers by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@cedarville.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@cedarville.edu).

Victoria Krus

Dr. Wood

LIT 4230

5 May 2016

### Martha and Her Help: A Different Kind of Relationship

In nineteenth century America, middle-class families often had domestic servants in their home. Domestic service looked different in various parts of the country and at different points in the century, but a common theme of racial tension and class struggle defined servant/employer relationships throughout the hundred year period. In Ohio, Martha McMillan recorded the events on her family's farm in a series of journals from 1867 up until her death in 1913. Thousands of pages portray the day-to-day events of a farmer's wife, her children, and her relationship with farm employees. In contrast to nineteenth-century employer/employed attitudes and practices, Martha treated her employees with respect and kindness making them a part of her family rather than a member of her workforce.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's *House and Home Papers* reflects a common attitude towards domestic help in the mid nineteenth century. During the darkest days for the Union army in the Civil War, Stowe wrote a collection of essays on different aspects of running a home that were published in the *Atlantic Monthly* (Hedrick 312). Stowe knew that essays on home would appeal to the *Atlantic Monthly* audience amidst the horrors of war (Hedrick 312-3). Stowe went by the name "Christopher Crowfield" and wrote from his perspective:

"The rise of a masculine literary establishment, intimately connected with the decline of the parlor. Meant that even parlor talk was now to be filtered through a male voice. From there it would be a small step to devaluing women's culture and women's literary

achievement during what had been the formative years of American literature, 1830-1860” (Hedrick 314).

If Stowe had published these essays under her own name, they would probably not have been published depriving future readers of her insights on a large section of the population that was virtually invisible to the public eye. As a young married woman, Martha McMillan received Stowe’s collection of essays from a friend, Mary Park (Wood 1). This text would have certainly influenced the way Martha ran her home, a job she found quite overwhelming at first.

One essay featured in Stowe’s collection gives instructions on servants. The piece starts with Crowfield discussing the servants with his wife and newly married daughter, Marianne. Marianne visits home upset because her cook makes sour bread (Stowe 197). Crowfield comments on how the work of servants often goes unnoticed by people in the house if they do their job well (Stowe 196-7). If the bread tastes good, the coffee is not burnt, and the table is laid properly, the servant has simply done what he or she is paid to do (Stowe 196-7). But, Crowfield remarks, one might be surprised to learn that the face behind the work is an Irish immigrant: “That sparkling jelly, well-flavored ice-creams, clear soups, and delicate biscuits could be made by a raw Irish girl, fresh from her native Erin, seemed to them a proof of the genius of the race; and my wife, who never felt it important to attain to the reputation of a cook, quietly let it pass” (Stowe 196-7). Crowfield tells Marianne that perhaps the family her cook served before never knew her bread was sour and therefore never instructed her to bake it differently (Stowe 198).

Crowfield instructs Marianne that the first job of a housekeeper in America is “that of a teacher,” and Marianne must teach her cook to do things the right way (Stowe 199). Crowfield’s wife agrees and adds that Marianne’s “Bridget” is “worth teaching”: “She is honest, well-principled, and tidy. She has good recommendations from excellent families, whose ideas of

good bread it appears differ from ours; and with a little good-nature, tact, and patience, she will come into your ways” (Stowe 200). Marianne replies that she did not anticipate such a simple thing becoming such an ordeal (Stowe 201). Crowfield instructs her to make the bread herself for a month and teach the cook as she makes it: “Poor as your cook is, she now knows more of her business than you do. After a very brief period of attention and experiment, you will not only know more than she does, but you will convince her that you do, which is quite as much to the purpose” (Stowe 201-2). Crowfield suggests that a reconstruction of the power structure in Marianne’s home must take place; Marianne must assert herself over her cook if things are to be done correctly.

Crowfield’s wife adds that good servants are taught how to be good. She says, “Good servants do not often come to us; they must be made by patience and training; and if a girl has a good disposition and a reasonable degree of handiness, and the housekeeper understands her profession, she may make a good servant out of an indifferent one” (Stowe 202). Crowfield’s wife believes that most problems in American homes can be fixed with well-taught servants (Stowe 206). This portion of Stowe’s essay reflects nineteenth-century class hierarchies because employers required their servants to do things the way they wanted them to be done.

The rest of Stowe’s essay takes on a more formal tone and recounts details of domestic servitude in American homes and retains Crowfield’s voice. Though England and America had been separated for decades, influences from England’s feudal system still pervaded domestic service in America, and the attitudes from Southern states often drifted to their Northern neighbors (Stowe 207). In early America, girls often worked as domestic servants, but eventually they stopped because they felt the work was too demeaning. When they moved to the factories

and other places of employment, “foreigners” took their place as domestic servants (Stowe 208-10). Crowfield writes,

“From this cause domestic service in America has had less of mutual kindness than in old countries. Its terms have been so ill understood and defined that both parties have assumed the defensive; and a common topic of conversation in American female society has often been the general servile war which in one form or another was going on in their different families,—a war as interminable as would be a struggle between aristocracy and common people, undefined by any bill of rights or constitution, and therefore opening fields for endless disputes” (Stowe 210-1).

While in England, a class system was in place and domestic servants knew they could not rise above their class, America had opportunities for even the lowest of servants. Stowe characterized the class system in England as one that allowed for more civilized relationships between servant and master. She argues that employers/employees acted kindly towards one another because the servants knew that they had no other option but to be servants somewhere else (Stowe 211). In America, there was no class system to hold people back, and domestic servants wanted to do more than serve for their whole life: “[Domestic service] is universally an expedient, a stepping-stone to something higher; your best servants always have something else in view as soon as they have laid by a little money; some form of independence which shall give them a home of their own is constantly in mind” (Stowe 212). Without a class system and with dreams of a comfortable lifestyle, finding good domestic servants in America grew increasingly difficult.

Nobody wanted to put himself or herself under someone’s rule in someone else’s home. Domestic servants did not feel like they were contributing to anything great or worthwhile (Stowe 213). Employers of domestic servants often felt superior to their workers and expressed

their superiority by trying to get the most out of their domestic help for the lowest price (Stowe 213). Crowfield notes, “Other families, more good-natured and liberal, provide their domestic with more suitable accommodations, and are more indulgent; but there is still a latent spirit of something like contempt for the position” (Stowe 213). After summarizing the problems with domestic service in America, Crowfield offers some advice.

Crowfield provides insights on how to properly treat a domestic servant throughout the rest of the essay. First, he instructs that masters and mistresses should not hold their servants accountable for anything they are not contracted to do. If the family often hosts parties late at night, the servants should be made aware of this before they are hired: “It is much better to regulate such affairs by cool contract in the outset than by warm altercations and protracted domestic battle” (Stowe 215). Second, Crowfield warns people not to treat their domestic servants as “pets” but rather as people (Stowe 218). Third, Crowfield explains that mistresses of American families should make it their mission to be a missionary to their servants with exceptions: “In speaking of the office of the American mistress as being a missionary one, we are far from recommending any controversial interference with the religious faith of our servants. It is far better to incite them to be good Christians in their own way than to run the risk of shaking their faith in all religion by pointing out to them the errors of that in which they have been educated” (Stowe 219-20). Lastly, Crowfield encourages readers to put their own daughters in the place of their Irish domestic servants who have moved to a foreign country with little to no domestic experience in order to send money back to their friends and families (Stowe 220). Crowfield hopes that by imagining this, the reader will be more obliged to treat their servants as a “fellow-citizen, with an established position of his own, free to make contracts, free to come and go, and having in his sphere titles to consideration and respect just as definite as those of any

trade or profession whatever” (Stowe 221). Through the voice of Crowfield, Stowe provides modern readers with an understanding about how nineteenth-century employers negotiated the inherent tensions in US employer/employee relationships.

As more Americans passed domestic service jobs onto immigrants, racial tension and stereotyping influenced the domestic service conversation. In the 1840’s, a surge of Irish immigrants in America made the discussion of domestic servants and Irish immigration inseparable (Byrne 17, Urban 264). Fifty percent of Irish immigrants were women, and eighty-seven percent of these women worked in domestic service (Byrne 17). During this time of mass immigration and large amounts of Irish women working as domestic servants, the stereotypical figure of “Biddy” or “Bridget” was put to use by different advertisements and magazines. This figure allowed American mistresses to think of themselves as transforming unruly and inexperienced Irish women into wholesome American women that would be useful in society (Urban 265). The common belief surrounding Irish domestic servants was that they were “slovenly, insolent, relaxed in their attitudes towards alcohol, and Catholic” (Byrne 17). On the other hand, Lauren Byrne writes, “The ability of Irish servants at a time when American women would not do the work helped the suffrage movement, since it freed up middle-class women from housework and gave them time to organize” (Byrne 18). Unfortunately this surge in the suffrage movement depreciated the worth of Irish women.

Stowe’s *House and Home Papers* echoes some common themes found in different publications. Magazines encouraged employers to patiently teach their Irish domestic servants different skills because the servants had probably lived an impoverished life in Ireland with simple diets and dirt floors (Urban 263-4). Artists often painted “Biddy” as a masculine caricature that did not know how to do common household chores and often put up a fight with

her employer (Urban 265). The role of middle-class woman with Irish domestic servants was to control them; they were the “Secretary of the Interior” as one woman wrote in a letter to the editor of the *New York Observer* (Urban 266). Middle-class women defined themselves by their ability to control their domestic servants by teaching them how to keep up their house and transforming their “Biddy” attitudes into American values (Urban 265). Ultimately, the mistresses believed she held the most responsibility, servants, after all, were easily replaceable (Hollinger 63). Hollinger comments, “A mistress who is unable to reproduce others in her own (ideal) image is, in fact, no mistress at all” (63). The widespread belief among the middle-class in nineteenth century America was that the mistress was to keep up the home with the help of immigrant servants while also converting them into good American citizens.

But on a farm in southwest Ohio, Martha McMillan treated her domestic servants and farm help a little differently from Stowe’s depiction of US employer/domestic employee relationships. A reading of Martha’s 1899 journal provides insight on how the Presbyterian farmer’s wife dealt with her many employees. Throughout the year, many different faces come and go from the McMillan homestead, and more often than not, the McMillan’s treat the servants like family and with kindness. Also, Martha praises them for their hard work and faithfulness. Martha’s journal gives a record of the McMillan farm and the McMillan family. By reading any given entry, one would learn the weather, where the family members went, who worked on the farm, what he or she did on the farm, and who came to visit. Martha rarely includes personal thoughts or feelings, and she only records what is most pertinent to the running of the farm and her future family members. Therefore, anything other than day to day events mentioned by Martha must have been important to her.

In the year 1899, fourteen individuals work in the home and on the farm for a period of time and are named in the journal. All but three of these people leave before the year is up. Uncle Joe, Uncle Dan, and Philip help out on the farm all year. They feed, haul, plant, and mend anything and everything within the course of the year. John Glover, Andrew Bennet, and Mike Farrell work for a few weeks at different points in the year and then leave. The “young Hamilton boy” comes to work for the family on March 27<sup>th</sup>, and the next day, he disappears. Martha never mentions him again. When Daniel Flessner leaves a little over a month after arriving in the summer of 1899, Martha expresses her disappointment: “These partings must come” (June 15, 1899). Robert McFarland and Albert Harris begin working on the farm in 1899 and continue throughout the year. Frank Perkins and Milton Parks leave the farm unexpectedly and return a few days later. In both instances, Martha refers to them as the “prodigal son.” When Frank returns, she writes, “He acknowledges his faults...Quite cold this eve—all of us home—that belong here now” (Jan. 31, 1899). Martha felt that Frank belonged in her home and that his rightful place was with their family. J.W. Watt comes to work on the farm shortly after the Hamilton boy disappears, but takes off less than a week later. Martha writes on April 6<sup>th</sup>, “Our good man, Mr. J.W. Watt of Greensburg, Ind. became offended this morning, and he packed his trunk and Jason took him to the train. I can not understand him. Of course we are all disappointed.” Though not everyone stays for long, and though they leave for different reasons, Martha becomes attached to the help and is sad to see them go.

Martha does not provide details about many of the names that fill her journal. She does not often record their age or their race, but there are a few exceptions. A painter comes to paint the house from May 16<sup>th</sup> to July 28<sup>th</sup>, Martha gives his real name, W.R. Copse, a few times, but she mostly refers to him as “old Louis the painter” which reveals that, at least to Martha, Louis

was old. A group of men come to check on the meat every once in a while, and Martha calls them the “dutchman butchers.” Lastly, Mrs. Webster comes to help in the kitchen while the regular kitchen maid, Mary Peterson, takes a vacation. On August 30<sup>th</sup>, Martha records that Mrs. Webster attended the “colored Assoc. in Xenia.” To Martha, the most important thing about her domestic servants and farm help was their presence and not their age or appearance.

Without knowing the names of Martha’s children before reading the journal, confusing the help and the family members would be easy. Martha’s two sons, Clayton and Jason, often help on the farm in 1899, and their duties are listed with the helps’ duties. The way Martha records things in her journal makes it difficult to distinguish who is a son or daughter and who is an employee. Also, the helps’ whereabouts and lives are recorded in the journal almost as much as the McMillan family’s. But the relationship between Martha and the help never becomes paternalistic in the same way slavery did. In order to justify slavery, some slaveholders bragged about how their slaves were a part of their family (Oakes 558). Though, more often than not, the actual relationship between the slave and the master was abusive and far from friendly (Oakes 589). In Martha’s case, she could easily claim that the help was family to her. Martha often records how her children ride and back and forth into town with Uncle Dan, Uncle Joe, Philip, or Albert. The employees often attended church and Sabbath School with Martha and her family as well. Also, the children help the employees with their work. For example, in May, Jason helps Louis paint the interior of the house. Additionally, the employees often stay for dinner. On June 6<sup>th</sup>, the plasterers stay and eat at the McMillan home. When the McMillans employ someone to work in their house or on their farm, they become invested in their life and welcome them into their home.

Next, Martha treats her employees fairly. She gives them time off, is flexible with their needs, and assists them in hard times. In February, Uncle Joe becomes sick, and Martha lets him stay at the house in front of the fire until he is better. On the Fourth of July, Albert and Philip have the day off to celebrate with their families. When J.W. Watt and John Glover first arrive at the McMillan home, they stay the night. In May, Daniel Flessner has to go home to Dayton to take care of some paperwork, and Mr. McMillan takes him there. Two days later, Daniel returns and Martha writes, “We gave him a glad welcome” (May 25, 1899). Lastly, Philip and his wife, Fran, have a baby, and the baby dies in October. Martha goes to their home and washes and dresses their deceased baby. Then a few days later, Martha visits their home and meets Philip’s mother. Martha performs an intimate task in taking care of their baby. Her actions speak volumes about how she respects her employees.

Finally, Martha praises the domestic help and the farm help for their work. When Mary Peterson returns in January after spending the holidays with her family, Martha writes, “Mrs. Mary E.P. began work this morning. She has put in a full day and our home is the better of her being here—in appearance” (January 17, 1899). She calls J.W. Watt “worthy,” Daniel “easy,” and on Mrs. Webster’s last day she writes, “How kind she has been—I will not forget her” (September 2, 1899). Martha recognizes when her employees do their jobs well, and she records it in the family journal.

Martha does not treat her domestic help and farm help with the same assertiveness and racial aggressiveness that the magazines of her time reflected. She sets herself apart from typical nineteenth-century attitudes about domestic help through her journal and shows her employees respect. She does not record training them or transforming them into good citizens. Instead, she welcomes them into her home and makes them a part of her family. Martha’s journal proves that

she rejected the common discourse on domestic servants and did not hesitate to make them an integral part of her life.

#### Works Cited

- Byrne, Lauren. "The Help." *Women's Review of Books* 27.2 (2010): 17-18. *Literary Reference Center*. Web. 29 Apr. 2016.
- Hedrick, Joan D. *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*. New York: Oxford UP, 1994. Print.
- Hollinger, Andrea. "America's Culture of Servitude at War: The Servant Problem, The Soldier Problem, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *House and Home Papers*." *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 61.1 (2015): 37-72. *Humanities International Complete*. Web. 29 Apr. 2016.
- McMillan, Martha E. 1899. *Martha E. McMillan Journals, 1867-1915*. Cedarville University Archives.
- Oakes, James. "'I own my slaves, but they also own me': Property and paternalism in the Slave South." *Reviews in American History* 2010: 587. *JSTOR Journals*. Web. 3 May 2016.
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *House and Home Papers*. Carlisle: Applewood Books, 1865. Print.
- Urban, Andrew. "Irish Domestic Servants, 'Biddy' and Rebellion in the American Home, 1850–1900." *Gender & History* 21.2 (2009): 263-286. *Humanities International Complete*. Web. 3 May 2016.
- Wood, Michelle M., "Martha E. McMillan and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *House and Home Papers* (1867)" (2015). Research Papers. Paper 6.  
[http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/mcmillan\\_research\\_papers/6](http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/mcmillan_research_papers/6)

