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Introduction to the 1893 Martha McMillan Journals January-April

In her journal entries from January through April 1893, Martha McMillan describes the experiences of her daily life on the McMillan farm as well as her experiences in relation to others within the Cedarville community. Most days, her husband, James McMillan, works around the farm chopping wood, nursing animals, looking after stock animals, or tending to crops but also frequently travels to conduct business or make social visits in nearby towns. But, for Martha during this time, daily life primarily consists of “keeping house” while taking care of her three-year-old son Paul (January 5, 1893). Martha could visit family and friends much less frequently than James, typically leaving the farm to attend church services or other meetings such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. Like James and Martha, the McMillan children stay busy. Clayton, age twelve, and Jason, age ten, either assist James or attend school while Harlan and Clara live in Springfield to work and attend the local high school. Despite the McMillans’ shared values, including their rigorous work ethic and devout Presbyterian faith, in these journals, it becomes apparent James and Martha spend much of their time apart, divided by their work as James is able to spend much more time away from the family farm than Martha can. However, through her journals, Martha displays her active social life in the Cedarville community even while she remains physically centered in the home she constantly works to maintain. As Martha writes in the journals to connect her to the, at times, distant community, the journals also reveal much about Martha’s personal beliefs and how she engaged with others.

Middle class farming families like the McMillans, Linda Peterson explains, “erected the strictest boundaries” between the private domestic space women inhabited and the public marketplace men participated in (16). As women remained in the domestic sphere, they were expected to embody the ideal of true womanhood, characterized by “piety, passivity, and submissiveness” (Pinar 281); however, as historian William Pinar explains, the ideal of true womanhood and its genteel virtues masked the arduous work demanded of women to maintain the domestic space (281). Wives on farms, on average, “worked from early morning to bedtime... a ten-hour day in winter and a thirteen-hour day in summer” while being the primary caretaker of young children (281). These women were responsible for carrying water to the house for cooking, laundering, and bathing as well as making soap, brooms, clothing, and preparing food (281). While the husband gained social power “from his ownership of property, farming activity, local business and charitable activity” (David and Hall qtd. in Peterson 117), the wife remained disempowered despite her work in the domestic sphere where she “oversaw her children’s education, managed the servants, kept accounts of household expenditure, regulated the domestic routine” by acting as “the social and moral [arbiter] of good taste and good behavior” (Peterson 116-117, 117). In the meantime, men could participate in social activities outside the home, “politics, and the marketplace...to devote themselves to the divinely ordained political appropriation and economic exploitation of the continent” (Pinar 272). As Carolyn Haynes concludes in *Divine Destiny: Gender and Race in Nineteenth-Century Protestantism*, “The true womanhood traits served the greater autonomy and power of men than the advancement of women’s spiritual state or the glory of an ethereal god” (88). It stands to reason that one of these domestic tasks, such as fetching water or milking cows early in the day, had already been performed by Martha on the morning of January 4, leading her to write, “It is

too cold for me to venture out today again” as she stayed home while James, Clayton, Homer and Jason travelled to church.

However, despite the labor and discursive divisions separating male and female spheres of action, the masculine public and feminine private spheres remained ideologically interconnected and codependent in practice, allowing women to negotiate and redefine the gendered spheres. As Amy Kaplan analyzes in her essay “Manifest Domesticity,” domesticity and Manifest Destiny share “a vocabulary that turns imperial conquest into spiritual regeneration” and domesticity intrudes on the masculine sphere of conquest as domesticity “imagines a home coextensive with the entire world...[justifying] its domesticating mission” beyond the bounds of the home (588). In the pursuit of spiritual regeneration, women could justify the expansion of the domestic sphere to denote the entire world. Though the home remained women’s supposedly “legitimate sphere of action,” women could use religious language to portray themselves as called by God “out of the ordinary sphere of action” to take responsibility for social change (Brown 35). Despite the social opprobrium that suggested “feminine virtues...could not be sustained if she ventured from the private sphere,” “many middle-class women actively extended the discourse of feminine virtue to envisage themselves as the great redeemers of American society” (Flowers 16).

Through reading her journals, one can understand how Martha placed herself within this discourse and how she operated within the expectations of a postbellum Cedarville society to pursue spiritual redemption. Suzanne Bunkers explains, for women like Martha writing in the late nineteenth-century Midwest, the “journal became a place to write about relationships with others, thereby validating themselves as members of the community...reflect[ing] the day-by-day process by which that self-concept was formed” (Midwestern 198). Martha developed her

own self-concept based on her view of herself in eternity as well as in the terms of the socioeconomic necessities of her family's daily life. On January 15, the eve of her 26th marriage anniversary, she writes, "Half or more of the people that were living then are dead now. And ~~in~~ their places a whole generation has come and taken their places," ultimately concluding that "the world moves on...and "eternity is over there." While acknowledging the generational death in relation to her own life, Martha also portrays eternity, a form of higher reality, as "over there," implying her temporal and mortal restrictions can be contextualized and mediated in light of her faith in the afterlife. More frequently in her journals, Martha expresses her relationships with others by recording the activities of her family on a daily basis, on January 16 for instance, she writes, "Gideon and Jason looking after the Stock. Paul here with me. Notwithstanding the cold the sleighs keep passing. Everything quiet at our homes today and evening." As the journal provides Martha a space to express and explore her relationships with the world around her, it also enables her to begin to engaging with cultural norms and resolving their tensions (Huff 6); because journals reflect social experiences in a form that is "accessible not exclusive, comprehensible not arcane, and in their very accessibility they establish ties between...one human being and another," journals can create new, non-normative relationships (Huff 6). The evolution of gendered norms became most evident in the burgeoning women's movements during the late nineteenth century that attempted to reform public life, the largest of which—the Women's Christian Temperance Union—Martha McMillan was an active member.

By the 1890s, women's organizations, particularly the Women's Christian Temperance Union, attempted to deploy the domestic discourse to recreate American culture to accord with domestic values. In the latter nineteenth century, Judith Papachristou explains, women began to attempt to influence public life and participate in temperance and suffrage organizations as they

reconceived of political action as “an extension of their domestic responsibilities and described their political activities as... ‘home protection’” (495). In the early 1890s, domestic values started to come into direct conflict with the masculine sphere of life and Frances Willard, president of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, exemplified the conflict between the domestic and economic spheres by questioning the values of “several of the fundamental aspects of nineteenth-century American society” such as corporations, economics, and “the relationship between labour and capital” (Flowers 25). Women’s movements began to contest male agendas directly in political life and, in 1891, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, as well as the National Council of Women, began petitioning congress to avoid foreign wars (Papachristou 497). While temperance societies had existed before, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union was the first society for women in which they were no longer “secondary” to men (Masson 166). The Women’s Christian Temperance Union, “truly an organization of women, by women, and for women,” initially advocated for temperance but “soon grew into a mass movement for social reform” and, at the local level, acted as “the main champion of women’s rights” (163). In Martha’s community, the W.C.T.U. shows the community of women meeting to critically discuss problems within their community as well as attempt to change their women’s role in their society. During these months between January and April, Martha attends W.C.T.U. meetings on March 9 at her mother’s and on April 7th at Mrs. Morton’s, marks when her relations attend a meeting (Aunt Mary, Bell, and Matt in Spring Valley on March 16) and counts twenty women in attendance at the meeting in her mother’s house, showing Martha’s concern regarding the Women’s Christian Temperance Union’s social influence as a means for change.

Because journals “offer one of the most reliable indicators of what their lives were like and of how they saw themselves” (Reading and interpreting 15), Suzanne Bunkers explains

journals can reveal how women personally negotiated cultural discourses, enabling readers to witness their “understanding of the relationship between personal circumstances and political views, thereby blurring the artificial distinction between the ‘private’ and ‘public’ realms” (Diaries 19). While “virtually all women acknowledged that...writing an autobiography was, to some extent, an act that made them ‘public,’” women traded the loss of privacy in order to contribute to “a greater common good” (Peterson 115). The greater good of publicity, for most women, allowed them to fulfill the ideals of domesticity as women used diaries, in addition to describing their own daily life, to fulfill their “status as family chroniclers through their letter and memoir writing” (Diaries 17). Then, women could use diaries to both record their personal lives as well legitimize their status as educated, white women (Culley 4). Because journals are based on “first-hand accounts of nineteenth-century American women’s experiences” (Diaries 17-18), these journals also reveal how these women’s experiences were constructed by “four interwoven contexts: the geographical, the cultural, and socioeconomic and situational” and, ultimately, how women work to “[validate] themselves as members of their communities” (Midwestern 192, 198).

Martha McMillan displays her private sense of self participating in the public sphere especially as she writes to connect herself as well as her family to the greater community. As a woman writes journals to negotiate the expectations for her public and private selves, the journal becomes, as Suzanne Bunkers explains, “A safe place where she could generate a sense of self, share thoughts and feelings, contemplate her relationship with others, and comment on institutions and events” (Reading and interpreting 15). As she can be deliberate in expressing herself in the journal, Martha develops a sense of herself and how she ought to orient herself in the community. For example, after attending Old Mr. Henderson’s funeral on January 6, Martha

uses the diary to make sense of her thoughts and emotions by accepting the inevitable death in her own life, writing, “‘Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return’ is true of every one of us.” Most frequently, Martha develops her sense of self as she reproduces the sermons from church and explores her own thoughts regarding theology and how she can apply it to her own relationships. After attending Reverend McKinney’s sermon on March 27, Martha feels compelled to evaluate herself and finds her spiritual life inadequate, writing, “Our hearts need to be right. We need to work in our homes. Our homes are not literally Bethels as they should be_ Our children are not Serving the Lord as they should. They are not working in the prayer meeting as they should. nor in the Sabbath School nor the town nor the Community.” After writing about the sermon, Martha directs these conclusions to her own life and mothering, writing, “Clara Clayton Jason and Paul at home. there was a mistake about them not going to church today.” Connecting her role as a mother to the need for children to serve in the community, Martha uses the journal to show the significance of her family’s domestic life in the public sphere.

Martha displays the ideology of domesticity as she imagines the home as both the starting point and ultimate goal for social reform, providing herself with an eternal hope that also locates herself at the center of reform in her own life. On her first entry of the year, January 1, Martha cites a poem that imagines the home as the final goal of her own spiritual journey, writing,

“Thy praises I will sing
And when at length ‘Tis ended,
And pilgrim trials o’ver,
In nobler Strains I’ll Praise Thee
At Home for evermore.”

As her underlining of “Home” shows the evocative nature the word home has for her, Martha suggests the heavenly conception of home resonates with her own pre-existing ideas surrounding the meaning of home. This idea of an eternal home provides hope for the home of the present, as

in her own writings Martha suggests the home can alter the rest of society, writing, on March 27, “To be sensible and alive to this thought as we should will mend all that is wrong in the home state or church or the world.” She imagines the home in relation and directly comparable to the state, church and world, contextualizing her work in the home within the larger goal of global communion as mending the home mends the entire world. Martha finds this image of the home personally motivating as the heavenly home proffers peace and fulfillment to the virtuous, justifying their suffering. On April 9, Martha imagines the home as the ultimate telos of her life as she compares heaven to a home, writing that her community will endure “hardships all through the wilderness until we come to the heavenly city. but blessed be God their [sic] is a home a rest and a crown awaiting us there.” Thus, while she inhabits the wilderness of earth, Martha understands heaven in terms of her own home, both using the home to provide hope for reform on earth as well as an ultimate reward in heaven.

Through this lens, one can understand how Martha enacts spiritual redemption in her own life as she tries to expand the influence of the home as a space for virtue. As noted in *The Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*, the Presbyterian church associated the Women’s Christian Temperance Union’s advocacy for women’s rights with ideals of piety and revival movements—all understood as “the fruit of the gospel” (Pendleton 45). Martha committed herself and trained her own family to enact them. For instance, after the “Chapman revival” in Springfield on February 27, Martha records, on April 9, that Reverend Morton used a book by Dr. Chapman that Clara loaned him to compose one of his sermons, showing her value of piety can influence the world beyond the domestic sphere. Through preparing her home and to strengthen its influence, Martha could also prepare a space to spiritually support her family, invite others in to expand the home’s influence and share the fruits of the gospel, inviting “a poor

man” in for lunch on January 11 and a German traveler for lunch on April 2. Despite the struggles of completing even her daily work, Martha’s belief in the eternal enabled her to complete these tasks and more, as she wrote on February 19, “There is grace and Strength enough in Christ at our disposal to fit us for every work.”

By enacting her spiritual ideals into her everyday life, Martha shows how she connects herself as a public witness for her beliefs through her journal, hoping she can change the world by operating through and negotiating with the ideals of domesticity. Martha McMillan, as she displays throughout her journals, balanced her responsibilities in the McMillan home in order to influence the community around her. While many of her daily concerns were centered in the home, Martha displays how she can affect change in the community and negotiate the domestic expectations of femininity to engage with and change the male-dominated society that surrounded her.

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