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Critical Introduction to the 1908 Transcription

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Dr. Wood

Archival Recovery Work – Independent Study

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Critical Introduction to the 1908 Transcription

A cold, black, winter night with a broken furnace; an overflow of mud blocking a flooded road; a dusty drought during harvest time—all of these dreary scenes depict the difficult year Martha McMillan faced in 1908. Eight years into the twentieth century, all of Martha's children were grown up, and most of them had moved away from home and started their own families. Martha's husband, James, kept busy with duties in town and on the farm. Even though she had a family reunion in early fall, Martha still experienced much loneliness, especially as she and her husband had to leave the family farm in Cedarville, Ohio and move to a new house in the town of Yellow Springs. Martha's 1908 journal, written for public record, details these events in all their sadness, but entries in the back pages of the diary hint at Martha's hopeful approach to the depressing year. The spatial margins of Martha's 1908 journal reveal her God-focused attitude throughout the difficulties of the year, reflecting a uniquely Christian view of early twentieth century life.

One of the unique troubles of Martha's life in 1908 is the harsh weather the small, Ohio town faced, details of daily life Martha records every day in her journal. Martha says the weather on January 8 was "rough and disagreeable," and on January 12, the weather was "too disagreeable to go to church." As February rolls around, conditions worsen: "Heavy rain last night and stormy to day — wind blowing — a hurricane — and very cold all day — and dark and stormy evening [...] a terrible rough weather to night" (February 1). On February 2, the

McMillan's furnace broke down; Martha records, "Another cold day — below zero this morning. We had quite an experience last night — the furnace froze and has gone to wreck this morning. It was such a severe day — that none of us went to church." In a life on the farm when the conveniences of technology were not yet developed, a broken furnace was disastrous for a family in the middle of a cold winter. "Harry North and his furnace man" repair the broken furnace a few days later, but in the cold nights in between, Martha and her family were "keeping close to the fire" (February 4, 5). As winter melted into spring, "heavy rain" poured over Cedarville, increasing the amount of mud on the dirt roads (March 3). On March 4, Martha uses repetition and underlining to emphasize the prevalence of the rain and muck: "Mud. Mud." The weather continued its unfavorable nature into the spring, and on the morning of June 1 it was "Bordering on frost." The fall of this year turned "very dusty and dry," and throughout August and September a state of drought, or as Martha calls it, "drouth," occurred. There are many lovely and beautiful days in 1908 also—but the extremeness of the broken furnace during winter, the muddy floods of spring, and the drouth of fall were abnormal and unfavorable weather patterns that produced hardship for Martha and her community.

In addition to the uncomplimentary weather throughout the year, Martha and her family also faced difficulties on the farm. In June, the prime season when chickens grow and lay eggs, many of the McMillan's chicks died unexpectedly. On June 6, she writes, "we have been having some losses among the little chickens — very serious losses." A few weeks later, she records the total amount that died: "I counted the chickens last night since they have stopped dying — since I greased the little ones the 1st of June 132 died ~~There are one hundred~~ There were 171 left of the original 300 & counting all the little chickens we have on hands to day makes 24" (June 16). Not only did animals face loss, but the McMillan farm produce also suffered. During harvest time in

October, Martha states, “Irvin gathered the entire crop of apples which was half a bushel. Apples a failure this year” (October 16). Half of bushel of apples for the entire season’s crop is a feeble amount, and Martha’s short sentences and underlines reveal the frustration she faced.

Sickness and death were extremely prevalent in Martha’s life in 1908. Many times Martha finds herself on “the sick-list,” and she does not go to church for three months because of feeling unwell (March 15). Martha’s son Homer became seriously ill in January, and she writes, “We are feeling very uneasy about him” (January 3). Because the health sciences were still an evolving discipline at the time, doctors did not have strong diagnoses or medicines to help others. Many times, such weak treatment led to death, which fills Martha’s community in 1908. Martha records at least ten specific deaths throughout the journal, including her own Uncle John Murdock (January 14). Martha writes that he passed away “very suddenly” after he and his wife were on the “sick-list.”

Finally, as is a theme in Martha’s other journals, she appears quite lonely throughout the difficult year. After her Uncle John Murdock passes away, Martha writes this beautiful but somber reflection: “[John] passed quietly away almost immediately to awaken up in heaven, to change his rags of earth for the beautiful robe of heaven – How glorious – It is the ones who are left that are the lonely ones” (January 14). As people in her community continue to die around her, Martha remains alive and lonely. In August and September, the McMillans invite all their children and respective families to stay with them at their farmhouse one last time before the move. However, when everyone begins to travel back home, Martha is filled with an intense loneliness. On September 2, the day when Fanny’s husband Mr. McKenzie leaves, Martha writes, “I do feel lonely tonight.” A few days later when Fanny and her children leave, Martha records, “It certainly does feel like breaking up camp today and this evening, there is not any

disguising the fact that we are indeed lonely, but parting belongs to earth — may we all without the loss of one awaken in the morning and be all together in the ‘Sweet by and by.’” (September 4). Martha feels intense waves of loneliness at the departure of and separation from her family. Overall, dreary seasons of suffering consume Martha’s year and outweigh the easier years of her past.

For readers to understand Martha’s 1908 journal and the year’s difficulties clearly, the historical context of Martha’s life, specifically the view of diary literature, is critical. Typical for women’s lives in the nineteenth century, journals like Martha were “semi-public documents intended to be read by an audience,” unlike contemporary, private diaries (Culley 3). In *A Day at a Time: The Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present*, scholar Margo Culley emphasizes, “Women diarists in particular wrote as family and community historians” (4). Against the modern-day stereotype of women journaling their private thoughts and emotions, women in the nineteenth-century wrote to record “the births, deaths, illnesses, visits, travel, marriages, work, and unusual occurrences that made up the fabric of their lives (4). The variety of life, especially for a busy farmer’s wife, a mother, a political advocate, and a faithful Christian, gave Martha daily inspiration to record her life’s happenings for future family members or readers. Lynn Z. Bloom, in her essay “‘I Write for Myself and Strangers’: Private Diaries as Public Documents,” writes, “the public diarist’s range of subjects is potentially infinite, generated by the writer’s response to her world, varied and variegated, including not only people and events but her reading and intellectual and philosophical speculations” (28). Even though nineteenth-century women primarily wrote journals for a public audience, they could not avoid occasional bias in writing; indeed, it is impossible to remove personal voice and subjectivity completely from any kind of writing.

As America moved into the twentieth century, journal conventions for women began to change. Culley states, “changing ideas of the self, influenced by romanticism, the industrial revolution, and the ‘discovery’ of the unconscious contributed to changes in the content and the function of the diary” (3-4). The “modern idea of the secular diary” included more “self-centeredness” and inner probing of thoughts and emotions, and women’s journal writing became more personal (Culley 4). The additional inclusion of private words reflected greater female subjectivity in women’s diary literature. The transition of journal conventions from the nineteenth into the twentieth century is evident in Martha’s journals, as readers note increased personal information in Martha’s 1908 journal than her past diaries in the late 1800s.

Readers can observe a combination of semi-public writing and Martha’s subjectivity in her 1908 journal, especially in its physical layout. Literary spatial theory measures not only the meaning of space in a text’s story but also in the actual, physical space of a text itself, especially in diary literature. In her essay “Textual Boundaries: Space in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Manuscript Diaries,” scholar Cynthia A. Huff discusses space in physical texts: “space is more than just a dichotomy between inner and outer. Rather, space is socially and culturally constructed and reflects our ideas about how we interact within a culture and how that culture influences us” (123). As society affects and changes human life, people use physical space to reflect their ideas and emotions. Literary archivists can use theoretical spatial readings to interpret women’s diaries, especially for a journal like Martha’s, which occupies a unique historical space because of its transition between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Huff states, “Nineteenth-century [...] women’s manuscript diaries are just an ideological site of contestation, a space” (125). Since women began to drift away from public writing to more personal journaling during the transition between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, the

space of women's physical diaries reflect their ideologies; so, the physical space of Martha's 1908 journal informs her inner thoughts and feelings. Huff asks, "How does the inclusion of extratextual material, such as drawings, newspaper clippings, official letters, and other's poems and observations modify or extend the spatial boundaries of the diarist's written account?" (124). These specific extratextual materials Huff identifies are helpful in analyzing Martha's uniquely written and spaced journal.

But how do the extratextual, spatial aspects of life writing factor into Martha's 1908 journal? The answer lies in the margins. Literary theory frequently emphasizes the marginalized, groups of people whom those in power passively define and objectify. However, people are not alone on the margins—texts can be also be marginalized, like Martha's journal itself, or even more specifically, writing that may occur in the literal margins of a journal. If Culley is correct that the nature of women's writing in diaries was shifting from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century, Martha could be including more personal opinions and subjectivity, versus objective, semi-public information, into the physical margins of her journal. Foundationally, journal and diary spatial theory allows readers to interpret the entirety of the journal through the lens of these marginal writings.

The literal and metaphorical device of margins is key to understanding the spatial layout of Martha's 1908 diary. From the journal's first page, Martha records her year day by day in chronological order. When she moves from Cedarville to Yellow Springs in mid-November, she ends the journal, leaving many blank pages untouched by her pen. However, the very last page of the journal and its back cover contain random writings that do not align with Martha's daily recordings. Martha noted the date when she recorded all of these marginal quotations—so why did Martha write these in the back of her journal and not on the actual days she records them?

Although the majority of Martha's year contained many hardships, the margins of her 1908 journal reveal her hope in God and her others-focused attitude through the whole of the year's difficulties.

The first quotation in the back cover of the diary is from a novel titled *The Wheel of Life*, by Ellen Glasgow. Originally published in 1906, *The Wheel of Life* tells a story about "domestic unhappiness and tangled love affairs," and the book faced negative reviews from critics and readers (Wagner 36). However, Glasgow was a popular writer during the early twentieth century, so it is plausible that Martha read her work and enjoyed the book enough to quote it in her own writing. The beginning of the section Martha quotes describes a man, Roger Adams, pitying his friends. Martha writes, "'They seek for happiness but it is mine,' he thought. And because they seek it first, it will keep away from them forever. It is not to be found in pleasure, nor in the desire of any object, nor in the fulfillment of any love — for I, who have none of these things, am happier than they'" (McMillan 301). In her underlines, Martha is clearly emphasizing the meaning of the passage: one does not find happiness in simple pleasure, objects, or love. The character of Roger apparently has none of these things, but he is happier than his friends are. Indicated by her quotation and her underlining, Martha may have felt similar to Roger's happiness, despite his lack of pleasure, material possessions, or fulfilled love.

After Martha's quotation of Glasgow, she goes on to write Christian-related sayings in the margins of her journal. One line states, "Thou art the God of the sea and its perils; / of the land and its sorrows" (McMillan 302). She also emphasizes the importance of good deeds to others and quotes her family friend Potter: "A good deed rings like a bell through heaven" (302). Martha also offers a prayer to God and writes, "O God help me to think my thoughts after thee" (302). Finally, she records a quotation from Reverend F.B. Meyers, a Presbyterian pastor who

might have visited her church. Martha writes these important words on the back cover of her journal:

“when you are doubtful as to your courses, submit your judgment absolutely to the spirit of God, and ask him to shut every door against you but the right one. In the meantime continue along the path which you have been treading. It is in front of you; pursue it. Abide in the calling in which you were called. Keep on as you are, unless you are clearly told to do something else. Expect to have as clear a door out as you had in: and if there is no indication to the contrary consider the absence of indication as the indication of God’s will that you are on his track” (McMillan, journal emphasis included).

Meyer’s powerful sermon advice to pursue God’s guidance and trust in his sovereign leading was significant enough for Martha to remember and record. Through all of these Christian quotations, Martha establishes a few important themes: God’s sovereignty in life’s difficulties, a plea to think like Him, and an emphasis on the importance of good acts to other people.

The marginal quotations in the back of the journal, in addition to other extratextual pieces of writing in her diary, help interpret the difficulties of Martha’s year. One specific example occurs after the page with the June 10 entry, where Martha inserts a newspaper clipping entitled “Clover Tea for the Blood,” in which a writer to an editor discusses the healing effects of clover tea for one’s health. Despite the public recordings of Martha’s and others’ sicknesses, her insertion of this note inside her journal shows the active hope she maintained through illness. In regards to her farm troubles, one can interpret them with the journal’s marginal quotations—even though the farm did not reap its normal amount of apples and lost many chicks, the Glasgow quote reveals that Martha believed happiness lies outside of possessions. Similarly, amidst farm troubles, sickness, and death, Martha believed in the truth that Reverend Meyers spoke: Christians should trust in God’s sovereignty and follow his guidance. Similarly, Martha also treats all her neighbors and friends with love, believing in the promise that doing good toward others will result in spiritual fulfillment. Martha includes a note with a white, bookmark ribbon

after the page on the March 18 entry; the bookmark quotes Revelation 22:14 from the Bible, emphasizing the importance of following God's commandments to gain eternal life. The quotations in the back of Martha's journal and the other extratextual notes she includes between the journal's pages emphasize the God-centered focus Martha has throughout all the troubles of the year.

The troubles of Martha's year culminate in her move from Cedarville to Yellow Springs, symbolic of a great life shift for Martha and the uncertain direction for her future. On September 14, Martha reveals that they are searching for a new home to which to move: "This afternoon Clara and Isabel at the Y. Springs to look after a house for us. They came back very much delighted — found a furnished house." Researchers of Martha's life assume that because all of Martha's children were grown up and she and James were getting old, it was too much work to maintain the farm and remain there. On October 9, Martha remembers the 41st anniversary of living at the farm: "It is 41 years this morning, 1867-1908, since Mother McMillan and Aunt's Jane and Jeanette and Matt left here and went to Cedarville and Mr. Mc. and I took up our abode at this old plantation, and have held the fort ever since." However, after she says this, Martha ponders on the brevity of time and the speed of life, writing, "As the old hymn reads — 'Our live as a dream, our time as a stream — how quickly our years glide by.' Everything seems to be pointing to eternity." Martha's move away from the McMillan farmhouse continues on October 29, the day of Clayton's and Jason's marriages, and she reflects, "How strange to think that these boys and girls have indeed left the Old Home Nest to go out to make homes for themselves — where they will work out the great problems of their lives." The brevity of time and the presence of eternity consume Martha's thoughts and increase her loneliness during her last months at home. Martha even ends the journal on the day they move, November 9, and does not finish

recording the year in this diary—a huge spatial symbol of the fragmentation she felt as domestic meaning faded away. As her life moved into the twentieth century, her home, the symbol of her old nineteenth-century life, was no longer a strong presence in her life; Martha’s move away from her solid, centered life to a unfamiliar space left her feeling fragmented.

Yet, like all of Martha’s other troubles, the margins of her 1908 journal help interpret her God-centered attitude and complete trust in His sovereignty throughout the challenges she faced. In her last 1908 entry on November 10, Martha writes, “This afternoon the order was for us — to leave the old and depart to our new home at the Yellow Springs — it was the farthest from our plans for we really felt we were of such importance the old plantation could not run without us — but when we arose and obeyed the call, this feeling vanished.” Her thoughts about the move perfectly reflect the quotation she recorded in the back of the journal from Rev. Meyers: even if God closes a door, keep following the path He lays out in life and trust in His guidance and sovereignty. Although Martha wrote that quote months before her move, she still applies its wisdom to the Yellow Springs move, and Martha feels secure in God’s plan. Like always, eternity is on Martha’s mind even in the sadness and suddenness of leaving her old house: “Now since we are here and the old home left the change seems so sudden — I wonder if this is not something like the change will be when we leave here (this world) and go to that other home up yonder — I mean in point of suddenness — but not in brightness — and glory and in triumph — never” (November 10). Fixing her eyes on her Christian hope of Heaven, Martha copes with the sudden loss of her home with the promise of a greater, Heavenly home where she will truly feel free and fulfilled in community. The final words of Martha’s journal are bittersweet, and although readers may see them as the culmination of a year’s worth of suffering, the marginal

quotations of the journal help readers interpret Martha's final, poetic words as another opportunity to express her Christian faith through life's troubles:

"I have kept this books [*sic*] through all the days and months and years since January fifteenth 1867 — 41 years — 10 months and four days — The happenings of our family at the old Home on the pike near Cedarville, Ohio — Many have been the changes in that time — A family has come and gone and tonight are scattered here and there — far and near — May we not hope and pray — that in the evening we may all be gathered home — into that glorious and beautiful city of God —

Now this is the end — the book is closed — forever and it came sooner than I thought — "where the tree of life is blooming meet me there, Farewell & Farwell" (November 10)."

Naturally, these troubles do not comprise Martha's entire year—like any ordinary life, she faced "ups and downs" every day (September 22). However, when interpreted through a spatial lens, readers can see the unique Christian hope that seeps through every experience Martha encounters. Truly, she is an example of a strong, Christian woman, and shows how to apply Biblical promises practically—which many times become cliché to believers—in daily challenges. Martha's 1908 journal, aside from the many other themes and historical insights it reveals, ultimately reveals a unique Christian perspective amidst a rapidly changing twentieth century American culture. Martha expresses this theme beautifully on November 9: "It is well for us not to forget the great things God does for us — and to express our gratitude and thanks."

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