

Book Reviews

MAUREEN URSENBACH BEECHER. *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow*. Volume 5, *The Life Writings of Frontier Women*, ed. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2000, xx + 316 pp., bibliographical references, appendices, illustrations, index, \$34.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper).

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The first printing of *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow*, published by the University of Utah Press in 1995, received that year both the Association for Mormon Letters prize for Biography and History and the Mormon History Association award for Best Book. The printing sold out completely. Now, Maureen Ursenbach Beecher's prize-winning collection has been reissued in cloth and paper by Utah State University Press. The book features Eliza Snow's "Sketch of My Life," Nauvoo journal (1842–44), and trail diaries (1846–47 and 1847–49), all introduced and annotated by Beecher with exquisite, scholarly care. These documents, as Beecher observes, "do not present a finished portrait or even a gracious and candid interview" with Zion's poetess and Relief Society president, revered for her spiritual gifts and temple ministry. But they do provide "close-ups, details" of a complex woman in a variety of circumstances and moods. The personal writings, with their bits of information and scraps of feeling, humanize the legendary, enigmatic, inimitable Eliza R. Snow who "lives in Mormon history as the most significant woman of its past" (xviii).

Originally, Beecher intended Snow's writings to be "the flagship of a

much larger fleet” of women’s life writings (vi). That fleet sailed forward—but not under the colors of the University of Utah Press, whose priorities changed just as Beecher’s volume on Snow went to press in 1995. Instead, in 1996, Utah State University Press launched Beecher’s Life Writings of Frontier Women series with a different flagship, Maurine Carr Ward’s *Winter Quarters: The 1846–48 Life Writings of Mary Haskin Parker Richards*. During the past four years, series editor Beecher has overseen the publication of additional volumes featuring life writings of Patty Sessions (edited by Donna Toland Smart), Louisa Barnes Pratt (edited by S. George Ellsworth), and Effie Marquess Carmack (edited by Noel A. Carmack). Now, *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow*, refurbished with the striking black-and-white cover Michelle Sellers designed for the series, is Volume 5 of Beecher’s recognizable, sturdy fleet.

Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, formerly Professor of English and Senior Research Historian with the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History at Brigham Young University, retired from BYU in 1997 after twenty-five years of pioneering work in Mormon Women’s Studies. She now lives in Ottawa, in her native Canada, where she continues to edit women’s life writings and to serve as general editor of the Life Writings of Frontier Women Series. Over the years, Beecher produced more than a dozen articles on Eliza Snow and shaped eight of them into an insightful book of essays, *Eliza and Her Sisters* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1991). But *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow* undoubtedly will be Beecher’s most lasting contribution to Eliza R. Snow scholarship. This painstakingly accurate edition of Snow’s writings—with clear, uncluttered text; explications of the context and provenance of each document; and useful historical and bibliographical references in endnotes and appendices—will serve more than one generation of scholars. And it will serve not only students of Mormon history, women’s history, and American history but also students of literature, as well. For, Beecher insists, “the life writings of ordinary women, frontier women, Mormon women . . . constitute a literary genre of their own” (xiii).

Indeed, Beecher’s general introduction to the volume places Snow’s writings not within the framework of Snow’s life or Mormon history but rather within the framework of women’s autobiographies, diaries, and letters—“the explication of those parts of a woman’s life which she chose to tell, in a way that suited her telling” (xiv). Beecher uses the analogy of a quilt, describing diary entries as pieces “saved from the fabric of a woman’s day” and describing diaries and journals as “a jumble of unconnected pieces tossed together into a box and pushed under the bed.” The swatches are later pulled out and arranged “into a full quilt top”—an autobiography—that “uses the stuff of the past as raw material out of which the present is ordered

and represented” (xvi).

The analogy sheds light on the writings that follow. First is Snow’s carefully crafted autobiography, “Sketch of My Life” (6–45), which assembles fragments from eight decades of her life in a narrative ordered to reflect her faith in God and the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. Unlike the women’s narratives referenced in Beecher’s introduction, written “not to the world . . . but to their children and to their children’s children” (xv), Snow’s narrative was written for a public audience, both Mormon and non-Mormon. Its tone is formal rather than intimate. An early draft was composed for inclusion in Edward Tullidge’s 1877 *Women of Mormondom*; the 1885 revised draft, “Sketch of My Life,” was written to supplement historian Hubert Howe Bancroft’s work on the history of Utah and is now housed at the Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California. Beecher presents the Bancroft document—but beneficially inserts from the Tullidge version sections that Snow deleted or significantly revised. Snow writes about her parents and childhood, her thirty-two years in Ohio, and her family’s experience in Missouri, much of which is not recorded elsewhere. She writes with restrained feeling of Nauvoo, of “my husband, Joseph Smith, the Prophet of God,” and of his martyrdom, letting “language keep silence” regarding the grief of “loving wives and children” (16–17). She testifies “that Plural Celestial marriage is a pure and holy principle” (17), devotes some ten pages to the westward trek, and briefly surveys events in Utah prior to the 1867 reorganization of Latter-day Saint women’s Relief Society. The remainder of the sketch largely treats the significant and diverse accomplishments of Latter-day Saint women under her leadership as Relief Society general president and head of the women’s organizations of the Church. Her history cannot be told apart from the history of her people; and she weaves the stories together, so tightly at the end, that distinctions between the woman and the institution disappear. Written two years before her death and some forty years later than her diaries, this piece nonetheless is appropriately placed first, furnishing a useful overview of Snow’s “variegated life” (6).

The three diaries from the 1840s follow, and their irregular entries—raw scraps and swatches—offer a striking contrast to the selective, patterned, and finished narrative of “Sketch of My Life.” Each diary’s fragments are torn from a different cloth, a different interlude in Snow’s rapidly changing life. The chapter titled “Nauvoo Journal and Notebook” (52–99) presents Snow’s June 1842 to April 1844 Nauvoo diary,¹ first published by Beecher in *BYU Studies* in 1975. Commenced on 29 June 1842, the day Eliza Snow was secretly married to Joseph Smith as a plural wife, the Nauvoo diary does not reveal the secret, at least not explicitly. Many of the entries are, as Beecher observes, “concise, concrete accounts of events” (51). Others are obscure

emotional or philosophical outpourings prompted by undisclosed incidents. “To rejoice, or even feel calm and contented when suffering injustice from our fellow creatures; would certainly require an exertion of mind and a firm command of feeling; yet it is an attainment within our reach,” Eliza wrote on 5 October 1843 (85). Of the injustice Joseph Smith suffers at the hands of his enemies, she speaks openly and fiercely. But a significant subtext is the injustice Eliza herself feels when unnamed persons condemn her, presumably for entering into plural marriage. “What tho’ by some who seem devout/ Our names as evil are cast out,/ If honor clothe us round about/ In the celestial glory,” she affirmed in verses addressed to Emily Partridge, another of Joseph Smith’s plural wives (87). In the inner battle etched between the lines in Eliza’s diary, tradition and criticism hurl themselves against her faith in “the principle” and her devotion to the Prophet Joseph. She writes explicitly about President Smith, the prophet and friend in whose home she resided from August 1842 to February 1843. But a careful reading of the prose and poetry discloses her tender attachment to her beloved husband Joseph. “Who can paint the emotions of the heart?” she writes in the summer of 1843 (78). Yet the flecks of feeling in her entries—faith and frustration, anger and consolation, hurt and hope—come together like dots of color to create a discernible picture of newfound angst and joy, an apt reflection of Nauvoo where tensions peaked at the same time Joseph taught his crowning doctrines.

Both trail diaries—now preserved at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California—have been published previously, albeit with some deletions described by Beecher. The two volumes, as Beecher emphasizes, vary somewhat in tone, and she wisely makes each its own chapter. The first diary (113–75) begins 12 February 1846, the day before Eliza crossed the Mississippi and permanently left Nauvoo. It ends in May 1847 at Winter Quarters. With enthusiasm, Eliza notes in the early entries variations of landscape and weather, unfolding plans for the journey, meaningful visits with friends, and tasty meals. The drawn-out and difficult crossing of Iowa, however, injured her fragile health and strained her relationship with the Markham family with whom she traveled. Through the record of her illness and waning patience with “family discord,” one senses the loneliness of a woman uprooted and disconnected. When her friends Newel and Elizabeth Whitney pressed on ahead of her company, Eliza noted with sadness, “Every departure makes us more & more lonely—it seems almost like the days of Peleg when the earth was divided but we hope to follow soon” (133).

Writing some twenty-seven camp songs and occasional poems occupied and sometimes “amused” her (113). She found comfort in her steadfast faith in God and in the “kindnesses” shown her by friends who wrote and visited

her (24). In informal gatherings at Winter Quarters, Eliza and other women, many of them plural wives of Joseph Smith, repeatedly received the charismatic gifts of tongues, prophecy, and healing. These spiritual outpourings Eliza described as “a glorious time,” “a rejoicing time,” “a refreshing time” (169–79).

Eliza’s sense of connectedness to a circle of women and particularly to Brigham Young’s wives—“the female family”—increases in her June 1847 to September 1849 diary (176–230), where her relationship with Brigham and his family is a central theme. Eliza Snow became one of Brigham Young’s plural wives thirteen weeks after the death of Joseph Smith. Brigham arranged her travel westward, first with Stephen and Hannah Markham and then with Robert and Hannah Peirce. In her diaries, Eliza registered each meeting with Brigham during the trek and in the valley. Upon arriving in the Salt Lake Valley in October 1848, she recorded her move into a room in the Old Fort with Brigham’s wife Clara. Her visits with Young family members increased in frequency as Brigham began organizing the family “for living together” (228). “Mov’d to Prest. Y.s Log. row,” she noted 28 June 1849 (229). It had been six years since she had lived in a family she could claim as her own.

The first trail diary’s narrative of disconnectedness has been transformed, by the end of the second diary, into a narrative of connectedness and growing self-confidence. During a visit with Brigham on 10 September 1848, Eliza noted, “I ask’d who was to be my counsellor for the year to come—he said E.R.S. I said ‘she is not capable’—he said ‘I have appointed her president’” (199). She accepted the calling. Writing, sewing caps, ironing, cooking, picking currants, and even submitting her journal to assist “in making up the history of the Camp from W. Quarters” (216), Eliza settled into the Salt Lake Valley and took charge of her life, though she still struggled with health problems. Beecher observes in her introduction to this fourth and final chapter, “Eliza Snow, however weak in body, is well on her way to that strength of spirit, that ‘noble independence’ which will exemplify the rest of her life, and, as she gains in prominence, will become a model for generations of Mormon women” (175).

Beecher’s meaty, meticulous endnotes bring to light important primary and secondary sources, many of which Beecher herself discovered or produced. There are two appendices: the first, a listing of Eliza R. Snow family members; the second, a helpful register of names. A useful editorial addition to the diaries would have been headers or footers referencing changes in months and years, as Snow usually dated her diary with only a day and a number, quickly confusing readers. Chapter introductions alert readers to distinctive concerns and themes in each document, even though one might

quibble with some of Beecher's interpretations—her characterization, for example, of octogenarian Eliza Snow as “a vast, efficient business machine, polite and intelligent, but remote and unapproachable”(5). But the introductions are deliberately brief and allow each reader her or his own encounter with the documents.

By making available Snow's personal writings in a form as close as possible to the original text, Beecher's collection has already spawned fresh interpretations of Eliza R. Snow by such seasoned scholars as Marilyn Arnold and such new scholars as Sandra Ailey Petree, harbingers of a new generation of Snow scholarship.² Of course, there are important questions Snow's autobiography and diaries do not address. For example, the Nauvoo diary says nothing about the beginning and ending of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo. The autobiography contains none of Eliza's theological reflections and reveals little of her close relationship with her sister Leonora and brother Lorenzo. There are no extant diaries for the last four decades of Eliza's life. Historians will have to look to other sources to complete the story, particularly to other essential Eliza R. Snow documents, including her poetry, prose, letters, and discourses. Nevertheless, with the *Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow*, Maureen Ursenbach Beecher has laid a sound and enduring foundation.

Notes

1. Eliza R. Snow, “Eliza R. Snow Journal, 1842–82,” holograph, Church Archives, Family and Church History Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah. The book is both a diary and notebook. The Nauvoo diary entries are followed by miscellaneous poems and letters dating from the 1850s to the 1880s. Beecher chose not to include these later disconnected writings in her collection.

2. Marilyn Arnold, “‘To See the Game Thro’, & Enjoy the Scenery’: Eliza Roxcy Snow, 1804–1887,” *Heroines of the Restoration*, ed. Barbara B. Smith and Bythe Darlyn Thatcher (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 54–70; Sandra Ailey Petree, “The Power of the Word: Self-Inscription in the Journals of Nineteenth Century Mormon Women,” Ph.D. dissertation (University of Arkansas, 1999) includes an insightful chapter on “The Journals of Eliza Roxcy Snow: Private Writings of a Public Woman,” 36–96.