Book Reviews


Reviewed by Ida Smith and Lynne Smith Partridge. Ida Smith is director of the Women's Research Institute at Brigham Young University. Lynne Smith Partridge, a graduate from BYU-Hawaii and active Primary worker for over sixteen years, is currently a Primary president in Cody, Wyoming. They are sisters in a family long associated with Primary. Their mother was on the Primary General Board under three presidents, their grandmother and great-grandmother were on the Primary General Board under Louie B. Felt (first president of the Primary), and their grandfather (an Apostle) served as advisor to the Primary.

In *Sisters and Little Saints*, Carol Cornwall Madsen and Susan Staker Oman have delineated the growth of the Primary from a single Primary unit in Farmington, Utah, in 1878, into a worldwide organization in 1978. Moreover, they chart the noteworthy history of female administration in a Church program.

A Primary organization was initially conceived in response to Aurelia Spencer Rogers's query, "Could there not be an organization for little boys and have them trained to make better men?" (p. 1). Eliza R. Snow, to whom the question was put, secured "the approbation of John Taylor ... presiding officer in the Church in 1878," wrote to Farmington Ward Bishop Hess for his approval, and then told Aurelia that she "might consider herself authorized to proceed." Aurelia did organize the first Primary, and although the participation of girls had not been discussed, she included them in order that the singing might "sound as well as it should" (p. 5). Eliza simultaneously organized a Primary in Salt Lake City in the Eleventh Ward.

The Primary grew under the direction of Eliza R. Snow and the Relief Society from then until Eliza's death in December 1887. In the first nine-and-one-half years, Eliza organized Primaries all over the Territory, having been given authority to call and set apart ward and stake Primary presidents. At seventy-six years of age, Eliza "traveled over a thousand miles by train and wagon and established thirty-five
Primaries, while conducting the business of the other women’s aux-
iliaries’’ (p. 11). Eliza was central in choosing Louie B. Felt to be the 
first general Primary president and, assisted by Precindia Kimball and 
Zina D. H. Young, she called Louie to the position, giving her “a 
grand blessing” (p. 29). Eliza also prepared materials specifically for 
Primary use, including “a hymnbook, a tune book, . . . a catechism 
of Old and New Testament questions and answers . . . and a series of 
books containing recitations and dialogues” (p. 16). Eliza’s death in 
1887 was “a blow both to the Primary organization and personally to 
Louie B. Felt, who had relied almost exclusively on her advice” 
(p. 30). Under Eliza’s direction the Relief Society/Primary relation-
ship had been one of mother/daughter as the women of those 
organizations worked closely together.

Despite shyness, illness, and a preference for remaining in the 
background, Louie B. Felt, supported by “her growing friendship 
with a young English convert, May Andersen,” proved equal to her 
stewardship (p. 35). She, as Eliza had done, gave blessings to board 
members before sending them on assignments to stakes throughout 
the Church.

Several notable Primary projects took root in Louie’s fifty-year 
tenure as general Primary president. These included the magazine 
The Children’s Friend, for which Louie put up her own home as col-
ateral (the First Presidency instructed the women that they might 
have a monthly publication—provided they paid for it and kept it out 
of debt), the idea of a hospital, the nickel fund and the idea of en-
couraging children to give to worthy endeavors, and the divisions into 
classes by age groups. The Church’s current magazine for children 
—The Friend—though now separate from the Primary organization is 
still financially independent of Church funds.

From the inception of Primary, sharing has been a focal point in 
Primary emphasis. By the end of World War I, “children and of-
ficers of the Primary had shipped over 100,000 articles to the Red 
Cross” (p. 63). In addition, “at the end of World War II [Primary 
children] were invited to gather toys and clothing for the children of 
Europe, collecting 122,794 articles that were packed into 3,451 car-
tons” (p. 132). Primary children have contributed to the Armenian 
and Syrian Relief Fund, to the building of the “This is the Place” 
Monument, and to the construction of the Primary Children’s 
Hospital with the “Buy a Brick” program. It was the Primary, as 
well, that commissioned Arnold Friberg “to paint the Book of Mor-
mon series as a commemorative feature of the fiftieth anniversary of 
the Children’s Friend in 1952” (p. 121).
Almost from the beginning, Primary administrators have concerned themselves with promoting "legislative movements to secure enactment and enforcement of proper educational and health laws" (p. 70). The Primary supported the 1918–1919 Children's Year, sponsored by the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor. Primary women pioneered Church education for the handicapped when they opened their first Primary for the handicapped in 1960. They anticipated the family home evening program with their "Family Hour" section in The Children's Friend, beginning in 1954.

In light of the present women's movement, it is interesting to note that it was LDS women who made the first inroads into Scouting by women, as a result of the decision by Church leaders to give responsibility for the first year of Scouting to the Primary. Sister LaVern Parmley was the "first woman to participate in many aspects of scouting," including sitting on numerous national Scouting committees and receiving Scouting awards. "Today there is no distinction between the service of men and women in Scouting" (p. 141).

Perhaps one of the largest impressions we derived from reading Sisters and Little Saints (beyond the dedication, intelligence, and obedience of the women who worked in Primary) is the fact that Primary was administered for the first sixty-five years by women who had no children of their own, but who had clear vision of what it means to be a "mother in Zion." They teach us that the nurturing of children is not, and ought not to be, restricted to mothers—or even to women, for that matter, as we see in the Savior’s example—for it is central to building the kingdom. These women include:

Eliza R. Snow, who taught that "the very best talent in our midst should be employed to preside over the Primary Associations," women who loved children and had "the faculty of drawing them to them" (p. 13).

Louie B. Felt, who said, "The care of children is women's special charge" (p. 45).

May Anderson, who was not only childless but unmarried, and who, if she "was convinced that a course of action was best for the children," was unconcerned with the inconvenience, however great (pp. 94–95).

May Green Hinckley, who had no previous Primary experience before her call to be general Primary president at age fifty-five, after just eight years of marriage, and who made D&C 68:28 the theme of Primary: "And they shall also teach their children to pray, and to walk uprightly
before the Lord.’’ In her patriarchal blessing May was promised that her fame would go forth as a ‘‘Mother in Israel.’’

These women exemplified the obedience yet independence described in the words from Milton’s Paradise Lost:

led in fight, yet Leader seem’d
Each warrior single as in Chief, expert
When to advance, or stand, or turn the sway
Of Battle... each on himself reli’d,
As only in his arm the moment lay
Of victory... .1

They were not looking from side to side for direction, but to their file leader: the Savior. They asked for and received the light they needed in order to act—and then moved. They were truly companions in the battle—not followers of their fellowmen. They set the example that women have not only a right but an obligation to seek for their own light in helping to build the kingdom. They did so and were blessed.


Reviewed by Thomas G. Alexander, professor of history and director of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, Brigham Young University.

For the general reader as well as the specialist, Truman G. Madsen’s biography of B. H. Roberts will fill a long-standing gap. Defender of the Faith provides a chronological treatment of the life of Elder Roberts from his birth in Lancashire, England, in 1857 to his death in Salt Lake City in 1933, highlighting in a sympathetic manner his childhood, conversion, gathering to Zion, youth, and Church service.

Son of a ne’er-do-well, B. H. Roberts lived a life in England that was virtually a page from a Dickens novel. After his mother joined the Church, the family was torn apart, and Roberts’s mother left him in England while she emigrated to America. He and his sister eventually joined her, but not before he had been subjected to the worst that early nineteenth-century England had to offer. In Utah, B. H. endured the harshness of the nineteenth-century Utah mining