



Courtesy Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

David and Emma Ray Riggs at Zurich Lake, Switzerland, 1922, while he was presiding over the European Mission.

# “Twenty Years Ago Today”

## David O. McKay’s Heart Petals Revisited

*Mary Jane Woodger*

David Oman McKay and Emma Ray Riggs were married January 2, 1901, making them, as David noted, the first couple sealed in the Salt Lake Temple in the twentieth century. As David’s public profile rose with his call as Apostle in 1906 and then as President of the Church in 1951, the McKays became known popularly as the Church’s happiest couple. During their marriage, President McKay wrote poems and other expressions of endearment for Emma Ray. He delivered these “heart petals,” as he called them, from the Tabernacle pulpit and in the *Deseret News Church Section* on their anniversary, her birthday, holidays, and other occasions. He publicly wooed his wife and intermittently even said to his audience, “May I give you what I call a ‘heart petal’ as we sit in sacred communion?”<sup>1</sup> Latter-day Saints identified with their prophet’s charm. Emma Ray McKay valued her husband’s efforts. She expressed her appreciation and affection:

In marriage, a woman’s happiness is committed to a husband’s tender care. David has given me that care always, trying to make everything as easy as possible in the home. He is neat in his habits, always desirous of getting help when needed, especially concerned with my state of health, never reproaching me for my personal or mental defects, ever making me feel that I am of the greatest importance to him. “A man never appears to greater advantage than in proving to the world his affection and preference for his wife.” It is a joy to have my birthday and Christmas roll around, not so much for a material gift from my sweetheart as for the “heart-petals in rhyme” with which he continues to woo me and which always thrill me. . . . Charm . . . is as natural to him as life.”<sup>2</sup>

During his sixty-three-year tenure as a General Authority, the effect of David O. McKay’s “heart petals” to his wife, and the resulting example to

the Church at large, is immeasurable. These letters have been published for the first time in a collection entitled *Heart Petals: The Personal Correspondence of David O. McKay to Emma Ray Riggs*.<sup>3</sup> The greatest explanation for President McKay's successful marriage is found within his words, which share his desire to bless his wife's life. The letters chart the evolution of the relationship between Emma Ray Riggs and David O. McKay. The devotion of these loyal companions is exemplified in the development of qualities and attitudes that made their marriage an ideal pattern for courtship and marriage. Moreover, the letters evoke President McKay's voice, revealing a "great and greatly loving man."<sup>4</sup>

Carefully examining the inward sentiments of a future prophet during his courtship, through the lens of his own written words, can bring precious insights. In these early letters, most of them written as he served a mission in Great Britain, David emerges as an insecure young man enamored with a young woman back home. As he describes his endeavors, it is clear the letters are focused on seeking her approval. His correspondence includes the vivid memoirs of a young man at the brink of courtship, the central theme being the developing story of a relationship in the years before, during, and after falling in love.

The bond between the McKays was initiated, developed, and solidified to a large degree through the medium of pen and paper. David O. McKay did not keep Emma Ray's letters written to him; fortunately, Emma Ray treasured the correspondence even from their earliest days. These letters, covering decades of correspondence, demonstrate the affection of a young man for his sweetheart and, later, the remarkable devotion of a husband for his wife. The McKays are revealed not only as partners in rearing a family, managing a household, and fulfilling church and civic responsibilities, but as romantic lovers as well.



Courtesy Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Elder McKay of the Quorum of the Twelve wore a reserved handlebar mustache.

Though many have previously called the McKays college sweethearts, the published collection, *Heart Petals*, begins with President McKay's first invitation to Emma Ray Riggs on July 1, 1897—after his university graduation. The collection concludes with a letter he wrote in 1932 as an Apostle and father of seven. David and Emma Ray McKay were dedicated in their correspondence to each other, and readers will delight in David's descriptions of personal experiences. The letters provide opportunities for historians, researchers, teachers, church leaders, Latter-day Saints, and others to better understand the personal nature of President McKay within the spiritual, cultural, and sociological framework of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In a time when postal services were used more extensively and overseas telephone usage was rare, McKay's correspondence also represents a slice of American history and culture—letter writing as a crucial means of communication.

McKay's innermost feelings, joys, heartaches, and determinations pervade the letters, imparting a wealth of insights into his personality and thought. One of the most significant contributions of the personal notes is the documentation of McKay's growth from a young man into a mature husband and leader. Such growth through personal experience developed and matured immensely through the years as McKay was called to be a General Authority at the age of thirty-two. His visits to the far corners of the earth are recorded, reflecting his hesitancy to be away from his home and family, yet his quiet resolve to do the work he was called to do. Firsthand experiences written to Emma Ray, his confidante, show the character of a truly thoughtful, loving man and his dedication to church service.

The letters McKay wrote during 1921–22 are of particular interest. In 1919, McKay became the first LDS Church Commissioner of Education. Part of his responsibilities in this calling included a worldwide tour of all LDS Church missions and schools to “become personally acquainted with conditions in all parts of the world.”<sup>25</sup> McKay



Courtesy Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Emma Ray Riggs McKay

copied some of his journal entries in his letters home to Emma Ray, which include information and impressions he received while traveling. These experiences became significant in McKay's recommendations for LDS Church policy as an Apostle and in his administration as prophet, seer, and revelator. These letters trace McKay's evolving attitudes that correspond largely with the development of the Church from a small regional entity into a global religion. For instance, in a letter to a friend, McKay disclosed that the more he traveled the more he became convinced that those of European descent had "no monopoly on the fundamental truths that contribute to real manhood and true womanhood."<sup>6</sup> Similar attitudes are found in his letters to Emma Ray. McKay's travels were essential for the establishment and development of the LDS Church in foreign lands and in the lives of those with whom he personally interacted.

As a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the insights David O. McKay shared with his wife are valuable both institutionally and biographically. Few such letters have ever been published, and, outside of Joseph Smith's letters to Emma, no published collection like David O. McKay's letters exists. The following letter, written by President McKay to Emma Ray on their twentieth wedding anniversary and, coincidentally, during his world tour, represents the richness of his correspondence. David O. McKay often underscored single letters, words, or segments of words for emphasis, and this has been maintained. However, at times he used a double or triple underline, and this has been standardized with a single underscore mark.

Tokyo, Japan

2 January 1921

My Sweetheart:

You were my sweetheart twenty years ago this day; you are twenty times twenty times my sweetheart now!



Courtesy Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

A Birthday Kiss for Emma Ray, June 21, 1963

It doesn't seem possible that a score of years have passed since you and I covenanted to walk side by side and heart in heart along the Pathway of life through Eternity; yet the reckoning of Old Father Time says such is the fact!

There are three great epochs in a man's earthly life, upon which his happiness here and in eternity may depend, viz., his birth—his marriage, and his choice of vocation. With the first he has little to do, so far as we know; but he is fortunate indeed who can look back upon his birth as a truly regal one. Not in the sense of tinsel show, or the veneer of the false standard of so-called society; but the birth that inherits the true wealth of nature—pure, untainted blood, a strong body, and nobility of soul—a birth that furnishes the environment in which these gifts may grow in [indiscernible word] development. Such a birth was yours, Dear; and such was mine.

It is generally conceded that American men and women, unlike the Japanese, have the right to make their own marriages, the right or privilege of <each one's> choosing a mate being almost inviolate. With this thought in mind, I pride myself in having manifested for once in my life perfect wisdom. But when I analyze the conditions I find that very little credit is due to me, for it required no superior or discriminating judgment on my part to choose any life's partner when once I had met her. No other girl—and you know my girl acquaintances were not a few—possessed every virtue with which I thought a sweetheart and wife should be endowed. All these you seemed to have. I thought so, even when I met you for the first time, in the doorway of your old home, when a country lad, I paid you our first month's rent, and half acknowledged as much when I returned to our rooms, but was told by Jeanette<sup>7</sup> that "There was no chance." Later, one afternoon, after Thomas E. and I had greeted you and Bill<sup>8</sup> on the porch of one of the little cottages, I remarked to him as we drove away, that you were my ideal, possessing every grace and virtue. So, after all, it was not any judgment, but your superior endowment to which I am indebted for my first interest and choice.

But I give credit this Twentieth anniversary to even a higher source. When I think of the varied circumstances that brought us together; of the nearness with which we both came several times of making a mistake; of the hundred and one little experiences that combined to draw us together rather than to separate us, I am willing to acknowledge the guiding influence of a Divine Power.

As long as Memory and Feeling shall endure, I shall always hold in sacred remembrance the absolute Trust and Confidence that hallowed my

love for you—even before we were engaged to be married. It became in Courtship the foundation stone of our future happiness.

It gives me such joy even to recall those happy young days that I wish I could write all day; but it is nearing Priesthood meeting time.

Twenty years ago today! Never before have I placed such value upon my choice of a profession. Happy thought when I decided to become a teacher; for that decision was a factor in directing my footsteps to you. That third important epoch has been made fruitful and happy because of your inspiration, unselfish devotion, and love.

January Second Nineteen One marked the beginning of a new year, the beginning of a new century, the beginning of a new and happy life!

I loved you that morning with the love and fire of youth—it was pure and sincere. You were my heart’s treasure [indiscernible word] bride more sweet, and pure, and beautiful! But this morning, which I see you with these virtues and your many others crowned with the glory of perfect motherhood, when I see our seven precious boys and girls shining like heavenly jewels in the precious [indiscernible word] that crowns these twenty happy fruitful years of your life, I think I didn’t know what love was when I took you as my bride. It was but as the light of a star compared with glorious sunlight of Love that fills my soul to-day. The only cloud that occasionally dims it is the realization that I haven’t been able to give you the comforts you deserved for the untiring thoughtful devotion to your Loved Ones!

May twenty years hence find our love for each other and our children to-day twenty-times twenty-times sweeter and more precious!

Your Devoted Sweetheart,  
David O.

---

Mary Jane Woodger (mjw5@byu.edu) is Associate Professor of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University, and in 1998 she was honored by Kappa Omicron Nu for her dissertation research, entitled “The Educational Ideals of David O. McKay.” Dr. Woodger has authored and co-authored numerous articles that have appeared in various academic journals, as well as venues for the LDS audience including the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, *Deseret News Church News*, and *The Religious Educator*. Her recent publications include *David O. McKay: Beloved Prophet*, *The Teachings of David O. McKay*, and *Heart Petals: The Personal Correspondence of David Oman McKay to Emma Ray McKay*.

1. David O. McKay, “Baccalaureate and Commencement Exercises,” *BYU Speeches of the Year, 1951* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press), 4.

2. Llewelyn R. McKay, *Home Memories of President David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1956), 269.

3. *Heart Petals: The Personal Correspondence of David Oman McKay to Emma Ray McKay*, ed. Mary Jane Woodger (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2005).

4. David Lawrence McKay, *My Father, David O. McKay*, ed. Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), x.

5. Richard O. Cowan, *The Latter-day Saint Century* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999), 74.

6. David O. McKay to Squire, July 18, 1921, David O. McKay Scrapbook, no. 127, Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City.

7. Jeanette Isabelle McKay, 1879–1971.

8. The reference to “Thomas E.” is Thomas Evans McKay, 1875–1958. “Bill” cannot be identified positively by the author.