

Melissa Lambert Milewski, editor. *Before the Manifesto:
The Life Writings of Mary Lois Walker Morris.*

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Reviewed by Cherry B. Silver

In *Before the Manifesto*, readers will be drawn into the late nineteenth-century world of Mary Lois Walker Morris (1835–1919) by a happy blend of memoir and diaries, introduced by a capable documentary editor, Melissa Lambert Milewski. *Before the Manifesto* contains the multifaceted record of a Salt Lake City poet, plural wife, and Church worker, who writes about her life with passion, faith, and keen insights in a time of religious tension and social expansion.

Mary Lois Walker emigrated from England with her parents after the family joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. At age seventeen, in St. Louis, Missouri, she married the young Welsh artist John Thomas Morris. Despite their devotion to each other, the marriage ended tragically in 1855 with the death of their son followed by John's demise from tuberculosis in Cedar City, Utah. On his deathbed, John, invoking the principle of levirate marriage, asked his older brother Elias to marry Mary Lois and rear up children to him. Brigham Young "approved the arrangement and set the date for the marriage in a year's time." Elias and Mary Lois were accompanied on their journey to the Endowment House in Salt Lake City by his first wife, Mary Parry, and two children. Mary Lois was sealed "for time" to Elias and "for eternity" to John (8–9, 11).

Together Mary Lois Walker and Elias Morris had eight children born between 1859 and 1882 with five surviving to adulthood. Their descendants became outstanding Church and community leaders: their son Nephi Lowell served as Salt Lake stake president and businessman, another son, George Quayle, served as an Apostle (1954–62), and their granddaughter Adele Cannon Howells served as the general president of the Primary (1943–51).

Mary Lois Walker Morris began writing diaries in a series of daybooks on January 1, 1879, and continued for forty years. She stopped writing just six months before her death. From these accounts, editor Melissa Lambert

Milewski selects passages written between 1879 and 1887 that are “among the most dramatic and significant in her life” (ix). Mary Lois and her husband lived together every other week until 1885 when prosecution against polygamy prompted their separation. The diaries convey her feelings as a plural wife going into hiding in 1885 and again in 1886. When Elias Morris was arrested and later tried in 1887, “she publicly denied their marriage” (ix). Charged with unlawful cohabitation with her between May 1, 1883, and December 31, 1885, Elias asked Mary Lois to testify that they had not lived together since 1882. She so testified, and he was acquitted. Thereafter they maintained separate residences.

An epilogue included in this volume covers another dramatic event. Mary Lois’s youngest daughter, Kate Morris, married her sister’s husband, George M. Cannon, in 1901, a decade after the Manifesto supposedly put an end to authorized Church plural marriages. Mary Lois stayed with Kate from 1902 to 1905 among the Mormon families in Colonia Juárez and seized the chance to study at the Juárez Academy. After the birth—and death—of Kate’s twins, Mary Lois’s son George brought her and Kate back. Mary Lois lived in Salt Lake City, and Kate returned to exile in Preston, Idaho.

What do these selections from her diary and life sketch, along with Milewski’s perceptive introductory essay, contribute to our understanding of religious practices and women’s history? Milewski is wise to cover contemporary concerns—particularly those of race, class, and gender. The diaries include entries that tell us people of color—African Americans in slavery, Native Americans, and Mexican nationals—“occasionally penetrated her awareness” (30). The editor summarizes these entries in her introduction (30–31). Milewski also contrasts social levels in Salt Lake City. On the timeline of Salt Lake’s development as a city, many began in poverty but rose through merit. The Morrises were such. Mary Lois helped support the family while Elias was in Wales on a mission (1865–69) and as his early business ventures underwent hard times. Milewski quotes text from Mary Lois’s 1878 millinery advertisement in the *Woman’s Exponent* (26). We learn from her autobiography that after the couple’s separation, she continued to live in the house Elias Morris built for her and drew an allowance from the Morris businesses.¹ For ready cash, she took in female college students as boarders, sold a little milk from their cow, and took help from her son George’s paycheck to support Kate’s university education and Nephi’s mission.² She creatively fulfilled her positions in the Church and maintained her artistic bent through sewing, writing poetry, reading, and home entertainments.

For many readers, the drama of Mary Lois's two family-related events—becoming a second wife to her husband's brother and lying to defend him from imprisonment for polygamy—centers the interest of the book within the field of gender studies. Morris's life sketch includes contradictory responses to plural marriage. First is her despair at the time of being sealed to Elias Morris in 1856. The young Mary Lois expressed intense sympathy for the first wife Mary Parry as well as personal dread:

So I kneeled on the altar in God's Holy House with the deepest dread in my heart that I had ever known. No physical strength could have drawn me there, had I consulted my own feelings. But God required it. I sensed keenly that it was no[t] my happiness alone that was sacrificed, but it was marring the happiness of others, which rendered the cup doubly bitter. I knew that nothing that I could do would remove the sting that comes to the heart of a first wife when her husband enters into the order of Plural Marriage. (124)

By Elias Morris's death in 1898, she saw him as her "benefactor," deserving of high respect, but almost a stranger (42). Furthermore, in her older years, she strongly encouraged Kate to enter into plural marriage. Addressing her older children, she wrote:

Some time previous to this, your sister Kate had decided to keep one of the laws of God which the world, with the enemy of souls at the bottom of it, has been fighting for the last seventy years.

And I will here bear this testimony, if I never bear it again, that God has sent to earth through this principle, some of the noblest spirits that ever left their Father's courts above. And so much faith have I in this Celestial order of marriage that I would go to the ends of the earth to sustain it, although I am verging onto my seventy-seventh year. The way is thorny and the path is steep. I have trodden it before them, and I hope that my children will have the courage and integrity to walk therein. I know such a path is "the refiner's fire and the fuller's soap." So we will leave our little Kate in the crucible and I know that God will stand by her if she trusts in him.³

Milewski expands the story by relating the negative reactions of sons Nephi and George to Kate's marriage along with hints that Mary Lois Morris herself encouraged Kate to become a polygamist wife (46). The editor uncovers older sister Addie's unhappy and even desperate response as reported in a descendant interview:

Despite the LDS church's official announcement ending polygamy in 1890, Addie's husband, George M. Cannon, married two plural wives in 1901, one of whom was Kate.⁴ According to family lore, Addie did not learn about her husband's plural marriages until after the weddings and

was so upset “when she found out that he had married her sister she tore her hair out by the roots. She was just horrified.”⁵

Not just events but intense emotions emerge from these reports.

What is omitted in this volume? Sections of Morris’s “Autobiography” covering the 1890s and events after 1905 are not published, understandably, because the book already numbers 574 pages, but regrettably, too, because we lose her fuller accounts of family and social life by focusing on material before the Manifesto of 1890. In the typescript “Autobiography,” one also finds detailed descriptions of the funeral festivities for her husband Elias, how she took in boarders and managed the family cow, illnesses and healings, the missions and marriages of her mature sons Nephi and George, the birth of grandchildren, and praise of her son Nephi’s house décor. All the descriptions are eminently readable and round out the picture of turn-of-the-century Mormon society. In unpublished sections, Mary Lois alludes to the economic contrasts between her two daughters married to George M. Cannon: there was the first wife, Addie, living comfortably in an attractive house in Forest Dale, and the second wife, Kate, with her little daughter, fighting dust and floods in Mexico, meeting crises of health in rented quarters in Preston, Idaho, or by 1907 tucked inconspicuously into her brother’s house in Salt Lake City.

I also regret that the published selections do not cover the expansive feminine social scene in Salt Lake City. A scan of the Emmeline B. Wells diaries, for instance, reveals Mary Lois Morris’s participation in the club movement beginning in the 1890s, where she was a presenter and officer in the Reapers’ Club. As program chair in 1902, Mary Lois went to Wells, the group’s founder, to clear a topic she proposed on religious studies, since Wells was “the mother and founder of the Club.”⁶ Also omitted is Mary Lois’s contribution as counselor to Camilla Cobb in the Salt Lake Stake Primary Association during years of expansion of the kindergarten movement. These Primary leaders rallied around her when she was widowed in 1898.⁷

If space had permitted, more characters could be indexed or included in the biographical register. When I recommended this volume to descendents of Gladys and Joseph C. Bentley for the excellent accounts of the Bentleys’ kindness to Kate and Mary Lois Morris in Colonia Juárez, I had to flip through the epilogue page by page to locate characters not in the index.

Nonetheless, this volume is a worthy addition to the Utah State University series. Its value lies in the alertness and acumen of the diarist, the intensity of the issues covered, and the skillful interpretations of the editor.

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1. Mary Lois Walker Morris, "Autobiography, 1895–1903," 1976(?), typescript in L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

2. Morris, "Autobiography," 253–55.

3. Morris, "Autobiography," 338–39.

4. The other was Ellen Christina Steffensen. www.familysearch.org.

5. Gabrielle Woods (daughter of George Q. Morris), interview, February 15, 2003, quoted in "Introduction," 44.

6. Morris, "Autobiography," 331–32.

7. Morris, "Autobiography," 269.