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And to the interest and encouragement of my husband, Gordon, I owe the completion of this woman's story.

Library of Congress

Emmeline B. Wells, women's rights advocate, by Charles Milton Bell, Washington, D.C., 1891.

Chapter 1

Prologue: A Woman's Advocate

I desire to do all in my power to help elevate the condition of my people especially wom[e]n.[1]

I was first introduced to Emmeline Blanche Wells while I was writing a thesis on the *Woman's Exponent,* a biweekly periodical for Mormon women that she edited from 1877 to 1914. I had nearly completed my study of its editorials, most of them written by Emmeline B. Wells, when I learned that Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, had just acquired forty-seven volumes of her diaries. Time allowed me only a brief scanning of the diaries, but I knew then that I wanted Emmeline Wells to be part of my academic life.

As an 1842 convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), Emmeline Wells followed the Church's western migration from Nauvoo, Illinois, to its final headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah, which became her permanent home after 1848. A Massachusetts native, she did not return to her home state for more than forty years, but did return in 1885 as a dedicated suffragist, a well-known editor, a friend and co-worker of many of the national leaders of the controversial woman movement, and a plural wife of a prominent Mormon leader.

As my acquaintance with her deepened over the years, I became determined to write her biography. It was a daunting task to try to

reduce this extraordinary woman's life to my words, since she left behind so many of her own. I am convinced, however, that her story needs telling, and I am committed to being one of the storytellers.

This volume is only part of Emmeline Wells's story. It is not a biographical narrative. Rather, it is a study meant to illuminate the motives, challenges, and achievements of a local worker in a national movement. It is also meant to show how a young girl from a small mill village in rural Massachusetts was able, through the strength of her convictions and determination, to transform herself into a self-confident, nationally known spokesperson for women and for her faith. This is the overall theme of the book. Experience was her teacher, and she brought to the task a voracious appetite for learning and an indefatigable energy. This book centers on Emmeline's social activism, a consuming passion and a major identifying quality in her adult years.

Like many of her contemporaries, she experienced both the security of marriage, home, and family life, as well as the uncertainties of widowhood and self-dependence. But unlike many nineteenth-century women, she was both socially aware and politically astute. Although she was not, strictly speaking, a renaissance woman, her interests did transcend geographic, ideological, and social boundaries. And her determination to advance women's status was deeply rooted. "I stand for the higher advancement of woman the world over," she explained in 1906, "for everything that will better her condition, mentally, morally, spiritually, temporally."[2] Her public work as an advocate for the "emancipation" of women from the arbitrary and constricting rule of custom and her role as a defender of the principles of her faith demonstrated her resolve.

Throughout the preparation of this volume, I was haunted by a warning to biographers to avoid the "fatal split between the private and public identities" of the subject.[3] Many scholars in women's history have questioned the delimitations that arise from conceptualizing the past in terms of distinct gender spheres that separate the private (women's sphere) from the public (men's sphere), finding women's lives more fluid than earlier perceived.[4] Indeed, that women created their own "public space" has been a premise of many historical studies.

A review of the autobiographical writings of women contemporary with Emmeline shows just how much their lives resisted the dichotomy of the private and the public that historians had initially imposed as a framework for studying woman's experience. A theme of "connectedness," literary critic Susan Cahill noted of women's accounts, placed the individual and those who comprised their world within what she called "a single web of life."[5]

Emmeline moved freely between the public and the private, their boundaries extremely permeable in her world and their values closely allied. She, and many women like her, created their own public spheres, a female domain of public activity that often overlapped but more often bordered the traditional public sphere of male institutions. Thus, my decision to separate the public from the private and proceed with this volume came after a long, internal debate. I concluded that the rhetorical duality I was imposing by writing two biographies of her, the public and the private, accommodated itself to a pattern of dualities that hyphenated, more than disconnected, the various elements of her complex life.

Emmeline was at once a very private and a very public person; a devoted, almost obsessive, family woman and a driven, ambitious professional; a poet of sentiment and nostalgic yearnings and a pragmatic, astute businesswoman; a woman of deep yet quiet faith and a public advocate of the principles of that faith; a thinker and a doer. Moreover, Emmeline created for herself a dual literary persona with accompanying pseudonyms: the sentimental "Aunt Em," who authored most of her poetry and nostalgic New England sketches, and the "strong-minded" Blanche Beechwood, an ideologically liberated equal rights advocate. The sheer volume of her public writings and the national and international scope of her political activities seemed to warrant this artificial biographical division. Extracting these sometimes contradictory elements for this study helps to situate her more clearly within a historical context beyond her Utah and Mormon environments. Thus, I have followed her lead and separated her two personae, with hyphens where necessary. This book is primarily Blanche Beechwood's story.

It is important to note that Emmeline imposed certain barriers around segments of her life, which, though they failed to prevent the public from intruding on the private, did firmly restrict much of her private life from encroaching on her public work. The very private agony she experienced as a neglected plural wife, for instance, never diminished her passionate, public defense of the practice of polygamy.[6] Similarly, neither age nor the weariness she felt at each day's end deterred her from agreeing to head committees, to serve as a patron of various organizations and as a member of civil and corporate boards, or to lecture, speak, or write for one cause or another. Known as a sympathetic listener and an encyclopedia of broad-ranging information, Emmeline was sought after for counsel and direction. A longtime widow, she was nonetheless included in the social gatherings of the leading families of the LDS Church and city for her wit and knowledge. Withal, she bore her personal disappointments, frustrations, and sorrows privately, a legacy from the stoicism of her New England background.

I am keenly aware, however, that the activist life Emmeline Wells made for herself cannot be totally disconnected from either her personal relationships or the religious institutional foundation that provided motivation, encouragement, assistance, and emotional support. Few women of her time functioned in the public sphere without the backing of a female network and a strong sense of female community. Emmeline's five daughters, her LDS Relief Society co-workers, and her expansive cluster of associates outside Utah provided a base that generated and supported her public service.

Traditional class and urban/rural social distinctions, though existing in some measure within the Mormon female community in Utah, generally yielded to the structured, pervasive, and unifying network of the women's Relief Society. This multileveled organization, which brought numerous women into leadership positions and linked its members through rounds of visits by the general officers from Salt Lake City and the semimonthly reports of their activities in the *Woman's Exponent*, collectivized the social service agenda of Latter-day Saint women. Economic, political, and benevolent social action was part of that agenda. Such public activism contributed to the politicization of Mormon women.[7]

These women were pioneers in the movement, not only in testing the waters of an often-alien world but also in evaluating their ability to cope with and eventually conquer their own self-doubts. The efforts of politically active Mormon women gave a feminine voice, style, and perspective to an otherwise male-defined social environment. Emmeline Wells and other Mormon activists functioned from the strength of this female collective. Emmeline was not, in other words, isolated from her social roots because of her public activism; indeed, she was nourished by them.

Another problem with which I grappled while writing this volume was to understand how Emmeline reconciled her feminist activism with what many non-Mormons felt was an oppressive religion. The historical context in which both lifestyles originated helped to provide an answer. Issues we would call "feminist" today fell under the rubric "the woman question" in her time, a social issue that divided Americans over the movement it generated for the equality and "emancipation" of women.[8] The cultural milieu in which the movement developed was principally immersed in the values, attitudes, and assumptions of American Victorianism, a social system that attempted to impose order on a society still basking in the heady atmosphere of the Revolution but facing the social and ideological dislocations generated by developments in industrialization, immigration, urbanization, and geographic expansion. Victorianism offered a value system that found fertile soil in the traditions of rural America and the verities of protestant evangelicalism. In this ambivalent social setting, the nineteenth-century woman movement was fostered.

Victorianism was essentially optimistic and progressive, but it resisted definition as a unified social philosophy. Its contradictions and inconsistencies derived from a society in flux. While this movement fostered the moral and philosophic values of a simpler time, it embraced the dramatic changes that were occurring in American life as evidence of an ineluctable move toward a preordained destiny. Victorianism was not only an ethnocentric social outlook—self-conscious and introspective—but it was also confident and self-righteous. Expressing itself in moral terms more than religious, Victorianism prescribed a

set of behavioral standards that pervaded all segments of American society. These external indices of Victorianism comprise the popular understanding of the term.[9]

In America the conservative personal values associated with Victorianism—character traits such as self-denial, thrift, industry, self-improvement, and self-reliance—became stepping stones to economic and social advancement. Both the Revolutionary and Jacksonian periods propelled American democracy toward broader interpretations of that political philosophy and widely extended political and economic opportunities for men; but for women there was no corresponding change. Rather, such advances for men more visibly exposed the restricted opportunities for women, particularly as industrialization shifted the locus of production for many men from the home to the marketplace, creating separate and distinct male and female working domains with differentiated values.

The Victorian creation of an idealized domestic ethos was, to a large extent, a response to a redefinition of the home and woman's function within it. The home, as the traditional transmitter of society's values, became the focus of Victorian idealism, and woman, within her domestic sphere, became the custodian and mentor of the Victorian culture. She both derived this responsibility from and shared it with the clergy. Moreover, with the development of the popular press—especially the proliferating ladies' magazines and etiquette books—and the increasing popularity of the lecture circuit, these social values could be widely disseminated. Female editors, writers, and lecturers became the purveyors of Victorian values, while women were expected to serve as caretakers of the nation's moral probity.[10]

While never disavowing woman's domestic value, some women found domesticity limiting and the social constraints of Victorian "propriety" too restrictive. Some women also became more aware of their marginal role in the economic, political, and social processes of a burgeoning American society and rebelled against the excessive idealization of the domestic role of women as the rationale behind their peripheral public presence. Seeking greater autonomy and a wider field of social participation, women initiated a movement that

would involve the imposing task of removing the psychological dominance of a male-defined social order to which many women, as well as men, subscribed. Those who sought for change encountered thickets of opposition. Tradition, especially, hedged in their efforts.

At issue were two contradictory worldviews of woman's place and function in society. These comprised the "woman question," which penetrated literature, religion, medicine, science, law, and politics, with the ballot ultimately symbolizing the goal of the emancipation effort.

Emmeline Wells personified the dilemma of women seeking to define American womanhood in the nineteenth century. From a traditional New England background but a participant in an untraditional marital practice, she interpreted the shifting circumstances of her own life within a larger social context and left a voluminous written record that reflects her response to the conflicting social currents of her time. Becoming one of the "strong-minded" women seeking to make change, she found her main impetus outside the evangelical or enlightenment arguments of her feminist peers. To the perplexity of many of her suffragist allies, her religion was a major wellspring of her activism.

The LDS Church's tenets of individual progression and free agency meshed with Romantic and feminist notions of the sovereignty of the individual and each person's need to grow and develop to its fullest potential, unfettered by arbitrary constraints. Moreover, by the latter part of the nineteenth century, Utah's social landscape included voting rights for women, property rights for married women, admission to institutions of higher learning, open career and economic opportunities, and leadership roles in a variety of religious and civic enterprises, all goals of the woman movement, enjoyed by few women elsewhere.

Several other factors engendered competence and initiative in Latter-day Saint women. Polygamy and the absence of husbands during long periods of missionary or other ecclesiastical service made Emmeline Wells and many of her peers both economic and spiritual heads of their households. "My husband is too much engrossed with public affairs to devote much time or even sympathy to his family," Emmeline wrote in 1875; "therefore the care and responsibility devolves upon the mother."[11] Moreover, most of her associates, like herself, were

first-generation Latter-day Saints, who knew the privations and demands of conversion, repeated geographic relocations, and challenges of settlement. They were, willingly or not, models of female strength, endurance, and self-reliance. In that early labor-intensive period of Mormon history, the skills and talents of women were needed and highly valued. The genesis of Emmeline's arguments against passive, submissive women or arrogant, self-sufficient men is obvious. Since official LDS Church rhetoric did not dichtomize the educated, contributing, self-reliant woman and the dutiful wife and mother, her feminist discourse did not seem noticeably at odds with the Church's prevailing domestic ethos.

Emmeline Wells and other Latter-day Saint women leaders reminded the women in the Church, whom they called "sisters," of these realities in their editorials and speeches, hoping to unleash the power of conviction that had enabled women to join the LDS Church in the first place. Emmeline wanted to use that self-confidence to establish a Mormon presence in the world. She wanted to confront the critics, so adamantly opposed to the practice of plural marriage, and not cower or wither at their sly barbs and heated attacks.

As the impasse sharpened between Congress and women's reform groups on the one hand and the Mormons on the other, Emmeline Wells increasingly found herself in a mediating role. From the Victorian ethos into which she was born, Emmeline developed a strong fidelity to the notion of a common womanhood. Women's biological functions and nurturing capacities, she believed, drew them together in shared experiences that overrode any social differences. This foundational principle in her worldview enabled her to brave the ridicule, opprobrium, and pity leveled at Mormon women during her era of public activism. Emmeline was convinced that once their disparagers came to know them, what they held in common as women would diminish their condemnation of Mormonism. She acted on the assumption that female solidarity need not be equated with conformity and appealed for respect for individual differences.

Emmeline Wells became adept at personal diplomacy, and the friends she made among women not of her faith laid the groundwork