

MARGARET K. BRADY. *Mormon Healer and Folk Poet: Mary Susannah Fowler's Life of "Unselfish Usefulness."* Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2000. xi; 222 pp. Photos, sketches, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$44.95.

Reviewed by Kristi A. Bell

During the course of her life, Mary Susannah Fowler filled many roles: a much loved mother who underwent twelve pregnancies, a midwife and nurse, a leader in Church and civic organizations, a poet, and a wife. Margaret K. Brady's *Mormon Healer and Folk Poet* looks at the different aspects of these roles and their significance both to Mary and to those around her. Born October 23, 1862, in Woods Cross, Utah, Mary Susannah Fackrell was the seventh child of David Bancroft Fackrell and Susannah Sumner Fackrell. David had come west during the gold rush of 1849, had found relatives in Utah, and had joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Susannah, orphaned at the age of twelve, had crossed the plains with the Mormon pioneers and, upon arriving in Utah, had been given a home by the Fackrells in Bountiful. When David discovered his Fackrell relatives, he met Susannah. David and Susannah fell in love and were married.

In 1862, David took a second wife, Hannah Proctor, and six years later, when David was called to settle the Muddy, he took Hannah, her children, and Susannah's oldest son with him. Two years later, he returned for Susannah and the rest of their children. By the time David, Susannah, and their younger children arrived in southern Utah, the mission to the Muddy had been disbanded. Over the next few years, the Fackrells lived in St. George, Mt. Carmel, and Long Valley, before settling in Orderville.

After living in the united order during her adolescence in Orderville, Mary taught school for two years. On September 29, 1880, she married a man from Orderville, Henry Ammon Fowler, in the St. George Temple. The couple remained in Orderville following their marriage and started a family. Sometime between 1886 and 1888, Henry took a second wife, Eliza Norwood, who had been employed as a nurse for Mary when her daughter Laura was born. In 1888 the family moved to Huntington, Utah, in search of better economic opportunities. Except for four years spent in Provo while two of her sons attended Brigham Young Academy, Mary lived in Huntington. She died on October 27, 1920, in Salt Lake City following an operation to remove a growth in her colon.

A serendipitous event brought Mary Fowler to Margaret Brady's attention. While preparing for a presentation on folk medicine at the 1996 Fife Folklore Conference at Utah State University, Brady happened across a typescript copy of Mary's diary in the Marriott Library at the University of

Utah. The diary sparked Brady's interest and marked the beginning of extensive research and fieldwork on Mary Susannah Fowler. Brady, a professor of folklore at the University of Utah, specializes in American Indian studies, folk narrative, women's folklore, and folklore method and theory. Since Brady is not a member of the Church, she brings a unique perspective to this study of a very Mormon woman. This is not the first time that Brady's scholarship has focused on a Mormon woman. In 1987 the *Journal of American Folklore* published her well-received article "Transformations of Power: Mormon Women's Visionary Narratives."<sup>1</sup> In her book on Mary Fowler, Brady successfully weaves her expertise into a very readable and engrossing study.

In the introduction to the book, Brady provides a synopsis of each chapter. For those unfamiliar with folklore theory, it helps to follow Brady's suggestion to "read the first chapter for some essential background and then flip quickly to the last where you will find . . . a theoretical perspective" (6). Brady espouses the theories of reflexivity and reciprocity in her fieldwork and analysis. According to Brady, reflexive theory is a "postmodern methodology . . . [that] emphasizes the involvement of the researcher with the materials that he or she examines" (4). Reciprocal ethnography takes reflexivity one step further. Brady describes this process, developed by folklorist Elaine Lawless, a leader in reciprocal practices, as one "in which both the folklorist and those she interviews work collaboratively by 'foregrounding dialogue as a process in understanding and knowledge retrieval'" (4).

As part of her research, Brady interviewed some of Fowler's descendants and used the type of reciprocity that Lawless describes. Although she cites trends in literary and historical theories that encourage active "participat[ion] in the ongoing conversation of the texts themselves," Brady does not limit her reflexive and reciprocal interpretations to her living informants (4). While her application of reflexivity and reciprocity allows us to trace the development of Brady's understanding and appreciation of Mary Fowler, it also allows Brady to come to conclusions that may be based more on her own philosophies than those that guided Fowler's life. Two examples that support this view are Brady's conclusions about how Fowler felt when a literary club she belonged to was discouraged by Church leaders and how Mary felt about her husband Henry's second wife, Eliza.

In February 1900, Mary became part of a group of women who founded a women's club. As one of the leaders, Mary helped determine the direction of the group. Mary's journal entry for April 18, 1900, reads: "Attended a special meeting and had the privilege of shaking hands with Apostle Teasdale. He doesn't heartily approve of the ladies club. But says we may go on if our actions are approved of by the Bishop, which they have

been all the time. But unless we get a warmer consent than that I am not in favor of continuing” (67).

Four days later, Mary recorded that she had learned that a letter from Apostle Teasdale about joining clubs or societies had been read in a church meeting. He counseled Church members to confine their membership in clubs or societies to those sponsored by the Church. Mary admitted frustration at what seemed to be Teasdale’s earlier advice and concluded that she was “glad for once that [she] was not at meeting” (67).

In an interview with Brady, Rae Spellman, Mary’s granddaughter, described the controversy over what she termed a “book club.” Regarding her grandmother’s feelings, Spellman recounted, “Well, she was very unhappy about it, but there was no confusion about it for her. Now today there might be more discussion, but then every one of the sisters felt that they should obey the priesthood. So they just stopped having the club” (69).

Mary had already expressed hesitancy about continuing with the club before Teasdale’s letter was ever read in church, and the club existed, in fact, for less than three months. It is difficult to believe that the disbanding of the women’s club was a pivotal point in Mary’s life. Brady’s final chapter discusses “the matrix of voices,” and it is important to consider whose voice is strongest in this incident. Choosing to value modern-day sensibilities over realities of Mormon life in the early twentieth century may have led Brady to misunderstand Mary’s community of discourse.

Brady also appears to have difficulty in completely understanding Mary’s position as the first wife in a polygamous marriage. When discussing polygamy stories circulated in the late twentieth century, folklorist William A. Wilson would remind his students that the tales represent current attitudes towards polygamy rather than the feelings of those who were actually involved in polygamous relationships. Brady, too, seems to interpret Mary’s feelings about her situation more by Brady’s own attitudes than by the realities of Mary’s life. While scholarship like Jessie Embry’s *Mormon Polygamous Families: Life in the Principle* indicates that polygamy was not a bed of roses for many,<sup>2</sup> Brady bases her conclusion that Mary was likely dissatisfied with polygamy upon two brief mentions of Eliza in poems Mary wrote her husband. Throughout the rest of the book, Brady remarks on Mary’s circumspection about her polygamous state. After all, Mary had grown up in a polygamous family and lived in a polygamous marriage; polygamy was simply a part of her life. Brady does concede that any qualms Mary might have had about polygamy were made manageable by “the strength of [Mary’s] own spiritual beliefs” (157).

The strength of Brady’s book lies in her theme of interconnectedness among the different roles in Mary’s life and the lives of her descendants, as well as in Brady’s life and her relationship with her own daughter. Chapters

two through five deal with different discourse groups and roles in Mary's life. At least two of the chapters were presented as papers at annual meetings of the American Folklore Society. So while these four chapters could each stand alone, they are best understood and the depth of Brady's work is best revealed when all four are taken together. The final chapter of the book, "'Your Words Like a Balm': A Matrix of Discourses," is an excellent summary of how many voices actually go into the construction of Mary Fowler. Mary's story will mean different things to different people, but it should not be only what others would have it be. When all things are considered, Brady allows the many facets of Mary's life to shine through.

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1. Margaret K. Brady, "Transformations of Power: Mormon Women's Visionary Narratives," *Journal of American Folklore* 100 (1987): 461–68.

2. Jessie L. Embry, *Mormon Polygamous Families: Life in the Principle* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987).