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History Of Louisa Barnes Pratt

S. George Ellsworth

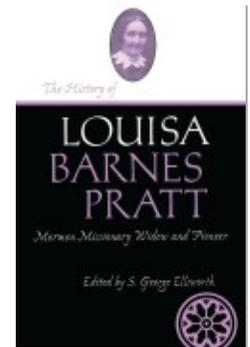
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FOREWORD

Maureen Ursenbach Beecher

By the most open definition, whatever a woman writes in the course of her life might be considered a life writing: a note, a letter, a recipe book, her personal phone directory, a diary or journal, her laundry list, a personal essay, an autobiography, memoir, or reminiscence. Each has its own way of reflecting her life experience, revealing her character to whoever might read the document thus created. And the overlap of one into the other increases the value of each as complement to the whole.

For the purposes of this present series, *Life Writings of Frontier Women*, three main categories are of concern: letters; diaries or journals; and autobiographies, or reminiscences, or memoirs. They bear distinctions of source and interpretation which must be understood if the text is to be accessed appropriately. Each form is true, in its own way, but contradictions and prevarications might well cast doubt on the writer's veracity unless the circumstances of its creation and reception be considered. Memory, immediacy, audience, intent, and the writer's sense of herself and her contemporaries all introduce some sort of distortion.

Letters have in the foreground the image of the recipient for whom they are created. The same event a woman would describe to any two separate readers would appear different in each case, not that both would not be factual, but that each recipient would be, in the writer's mind, aware of, interested in, and biased toward or against particulars of the event.

How a letter writer might describe the event to another person and how it might appear in her own diary entry would also vary. Diary entries are generally terse reminders to the reader of the larger picture—hints, suggestions, images written to remind the writer of what happened and how she regarded it. In her mind as she writes may well be other purposes for the exercise: to leave a record of her days for her posterity; to create a work of literary art; to justify her actions to an unknown reader; to purge herself of confused or emotionally laden feelings. Day by day, entry by

entry, these and other agendas influence what the diarist writes, and how. Even so, the immediacy of the description enhances the event and draws the reader into the moment.

When at some given point in her life a woman decides to compile an autobiography, or memoir, or reminiscence—the boundaries of these genres are so fuzzy that there is little merit in trying to delineate differences—she takes on a new persona. She becomes the creator, in a sense, of her life. How she sees any given moment of the past is now determined not so much by what happened then as how she perceives in the distant view. What went before and what has intervened sets the event into a context which often alters its significance and the significance of its various aspects, so much as to make the later account seem at variance with the original. The longer view has, then, the advantage of scope and sequence, of distance and increased objectivity. The author-as-subject is also the author-as-object. The focus shifts with the point of view.

Only in the identification of the circumstances of the creation of the text can its meaning be captured. And even then there will be undercurrents and overtones to reach for, to ponder and guess at. Women's life writings become in the hands of distant readers as fascinating as the most carefully crafted mystery, with the added charm that the scenario is real life and the characters real people.

In the case of the memoir and diaries of Louisa Barnes Pratt, we have an overlap of genres which creates a richness in what might seem a straightforward text. Some of the remembered events in the memoir were composed fresh as their author sat in her cottage in Tahiti; some were recreated from diary accounts consulted as the diarist-turned-autobiographer reviewed them in her Beaver, Utah, home many years after the fact. The author-as-editor seems always to be looking over the shoulder of the writer, casting the events into the longer view, setting them in the context of the whole life so far. The complexity of the text is part of its fascination. The seasons of Louisa Pratt's life, her maturing womanhood, her circumstances, and their effect on her image of herself all affect her self description. For the historian combing the document for documentary evidence the complexity of the text makes more difficult the search; for the reader of a woman's text as a work of literary depth and insight, the same complexity is a mitzvah, a bonus. It becomes an integral part of the interplay of the writer's life-as-lived and her life-as-written.

The reader of this and the other texts in this series is invited to sit back, relax, and let the words flow. Consider the reading a conversation with a neighbor, an introduction to a new friend. Let her tell her life as she experienced it long ago and perceived it later. Go with her through the vagaries of her life, sympathetic to its foibles and idiosyncrasies. Walk the road together for a while and delight in your shared humanity.