Out Of The Black Patch

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In recognition of the importance to literature of biography and autobiography, the Association for Mormon Letters in 1987 was offering a new prize in life writing. I was asked to help in identifying appropriate candidates for the prize. Elder John Carmack, then managing director of the Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City shared with me a rare mimeographed volume of the memoirs of his grandmother Effie Marquess Carmack. I was charmed. The committee, however, considered the manuscript as yet unpublished, so the AML prize went to another book. But I never forgot Effie’s story.

My history-writing colleagues and I, researchers in the LDS Church Historical Department and the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Church History and beyond, had long been accustomed to reading, as resources for our historical inquiries, the life writings of frontier women. We loved the diaries, the letters, and the autobiographies, but had not thought them a literature of their own. With Effie’s text, however, I felt a new compunction: with or without historical research as motivation, others might well read this raw material with as much relish as we. I passed the manuscript on to a literature-sensitive friend whose judgment I trusted.

She agreed—it was a delightful read. Would she consider editing it for publication? Not just now, she replied. But certainly it deserved a place among American autobiographies available for general readers.

Not a “written for publication” autobiography, this text grew, as such memoirs often do, out of a mother’s wish to share her life and its meaning with her children. Much more, however, than the testimonials of the religious faithful which were its literary precedents, Effie’s account provides in vibrant colors a richly detailed background for her testimony. Every sense is enlivened—the taste of Postum that brings back her first summer in Arizona; “this mixture of smells, cedar smoke, greasewood, and sour dock greens”; the roughness of the ground under a wire fence
as she escaped from a crazed cow and the squeak of the wires through the staples as she pulled herself through. The text is laced through with Effie’s awareness of beauty: “roses, jonquils, and honeysuckle”; “a sweet-toned guitar with twelve strings”; her first child, born too small but then “fattened like a little pig, . . . a perfect roly poly of a baby.” Effie explains that as a child “I surely must have had an unnatural love for pretty things, especially flowers.” That she became a painter of note in the Southwest is not surprising.

But there was ugliness, too, in Effie’s world. The “black patch” that is Kentucky’s tobacco country becomes tactile in Effie’s words: “Worming and suckering tobacco was a terrible, backbreaking job, and the gum from the sticky green leaves would soon be all over our hands and clothing, so thick that when a garment became folded and stuck, it was hard to pull it apart again. The sickening smell of the hot sun on the green tobacco usually gave me a headache.”

But for the most part there is joy in Effie’s text, and love, and faith, and achievement. Effie accepts herself, warts and all, with a candor which inspires trust. “I was a thin, scrawny child,” she writes, “ugly and small for my age.” But at the dances, the sing-alongs, the parties, she was popular: “I usually got a partner of some kind.” And admirers a-plenty.

There is candid disclosure in Effie’s account, but there is mystery in what she leaves unspoken. The reader is caught between the lines with unanswered questions: why, for instance, after page-long descriptions of Effie’s young loves is her marriage so bluntly and abruptly stated: “Edgar (Carmack) went to work for Evert, and we were soon married, and moved to the old Birchfield Marquess place.” No courtship, no in-and-out-of-love, no suspense, just “we were soon married.” One wonders.

In her later life, honors came to Effie Marquess Carmack for her good works in the community, for her art, for her memory of the folklore and the folk music of her past, for her service to her church. She hardly mentions those; her focus is on others, her family of origin at first and then her own eight children. For them she composed her life into the text her grandson gave me. It made me want to know her, and to share her story.

Years passed, and Effie’s text sat patiently on my shelf waiting for its time to come. When I compiled a list of publishable texts for this present series, Effie’s book was at the top for its appeal to general readers and scholars alike. Karen Lynn Davidson, former professor of English and chair of the Honors Program of Brigham Young University, accepted the invitation to prepare the manuscript. She was then living in Southern California near the final residence of Effie Carmack and the current home of some of her family, a coincidence which would prove fortuitous. With Carmack family members as resources, Karen transcribed the mimeographed volume, researched its provenance, and began the
process of documenting Effie’s genealogy. She researched the folk song repertoire and examined the poetry of the multi-talented Effie.

Karen’s manuscript languished while the Life Writings of Frontier Women series proved its worth. Its first three volumes each won a prize for excellence in its field. By the time senior editor John Alley and Utah State University Press were ready for the next text, however, Karen had moved to Princeton, so Noel Carmack, Effie’s great grandson, the preservation librarian at Utah State University and the author of a journal article on Effie Carmack’s career as an artist, undertook further documentation of the manuscript and the writing of a new introduction. His research brought out the historical context and folkways that influenced Effie’s life and writing. Noel also provided copies of the paintings and photographs reproduced here. With undiluted enthusiasm we now present the completed text to the series and to the reading public.

Out of Kentucky’s Black Patch came this bright rainbow, this cheerful, affable, resourceful, honest, diligent achiever. Effie lived a splendid life; more than that, she also wrote it with the same vigorous splendor with which she lived it. We are proud to present her now, in the fourth volume of the series Life Writings of Frontier Women.