

Mary's Diary:
Courting, Schooling, and Skating
in Mid-Victorian Plattsburgh, New York

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ISBN: 978-0-557-86729-5

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Mary's Diary in Context

Diaries were all the rage in the Victorian era, especially for women. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was mostly men who kept journals (Culley, 1985; Kagle, 1988). By the 1880s, however, Mary Elizabeth Collins was just one of many middle-class white women who, in a number greater than men, were keeping track of their days.

The spread of education for women contributed to the nineteenth-century diary boom in both western Europe and North America. Women's secondary schools and colleges burgeoned throughout the nineteenth century. At the same time, many institutions became co-educational, allowing women more opportunities to study (Solomon, 1985). Though a fierce debate circulated about the supposed intellectual deficiencies of women (see Mary's entry for March 14, 1886, in which the boys debate whether "the mind of woman is inferior [inferior] to that of man"), co-education was commonplace by Mary's day.

As they became more literate, women read all sorts of printed matter that affected diary-keeping (Blodgett, 1988; Hunter, 1992; McCarthy, 2000); as a matter of fact, women commonly recorded the books they read and their opinions thereon (Mutz, 1996). Epistolary novels, or novels in the form of correspondence, showed female readers that telling about one's impressions and experiences made for interesting reading (Blodgett, 1988). Conduct manuals – etiquette books that instructed readers on appropriate behavior – prescribed keeping a diary as a ladylike activity (Culley, 1985; Hunter, 1992; McCarthy, 2000; Rose, 1995). Published journals by rich or notable authors also gave women the idea that their lives were worthy of record as well.

Mary's diary reflects a typical engagement with the world of print. She periodically notes what authors she is reading; she especially likes James Fenimore Cooper and Sir Walter Scott. In one case, she even compares her diary to a literary one, that of Irma, protagonist in *On the Heights* (1865), by Berthold Auerbach. Thinking the literary heroine's journal "especially fine" for its deep record of feelings, Mary writes in her July 8, 1886 entry that her own diary pales in comparison. "[M]ine is mostly of what I have done not of what I have felt," Mary says, an inaccurate rendering of her journal, which regularly bursts with passions. Mary's reading lists and her reaction to *On the Heights* give one example of how female Victorian diarists used their journals to interact with the expanding array of reading material available to them.

Education and literacy provided bourgeois female Victorian diarists with the tools to write about their lives. At the same time, a general rise in the amount of leisure gave them the time in which to use their writerly tools (Blodgett, 1988; Hunter, 1992). While Mary's entries show that duties of housework, schoolwork, and child care occupy much of her days, they also reveal a varied round of activities, including making social visits, writing and waiting for correspondence, reading novels, having photographs taken, loitering at the post office, ice skating, watching (and gambling on) polo matches, redecorating the house, singing with the Philharmonic Society, attending plays and concerts, and the quintessential pursuit of those with time and money, "shoping [shopping]." Seeing her packed schedule, one wonders where she finds the time to write in her diary. The point, however, is not that Mary barely has time to write, but that her numerous hobbies demonstrate how much time she has for leisure pursuits, which include the keeping of a journal.

While many women during the Victorian age kept diaries or journals, the formats that they used were diverse. Some, usually women in rural farming communities, wrote in pocket

diaries, which were closely related to the accounting books kept by farmers or merchants (Motz, 1987). Pocket books were small, slim volumes bound with informational pages at the front. These almanac-like inserts contained information about planting schedules, lunar phases, and weights and measures (McCarthy, 2000; Motz, 1987). Compact enough to be tucked into a sleeve or a waistband, pocket diaries typically supplied only several blank lines for a day's entry. Those who used pocket diaries wrote, almost of necessity, terse, fragmented entries, usually about the weather, the day's labor, and familial health and milestones (Bloom, 1996; Culley, 1985; McCarthy, 2000). Entries about emotions appeared, but sparsely (McCarthy, 2000). Women with pocket diaries chronicled less of the psychological development of their personal selves and more the shifting natural world, as well as their ties in their community (Culley, 1985; McCarthy, 2000; Motz, 1987).

A more introspective form of diary flowered at the same time, influenced by both spiritual autobiographies and the French tradition of the *journal intime*, or "intimate diary." In the spiritual autobiography, imported from England by seventeenth-century Puritans, writers recorded their religious conversions, emotions, doubts, and prayerful thoughts. The goal was for the writer to reflect on his or her transgressions, to take solace in his or her faith, and to become a more devout servant of God (Culley, 1985; Kagle, 1988). The *journal intime* flourished later in nineteenth-century France; it encouraged its predominantly young, female writers to emphasize their inner lives – their thoughts, feelings, and fantasies – rather than their social milieu or larger world (Culley, 1985; Lejeune, 1996). Both the spiritual autobiography and the *journal intime* emphasized the writer's personal sensations and opinions. The influence of these two genres made it acceptable for writers of introspective journals – usually more suburban and literate than the writers of pocket diaries (Motz, 1987) – to use their diaries as tools of self-exploration.

The pocket diary and the introspective diary represented two distinct forms of many that a diary might take in nineteenth-century America. Besides these, people also kept letter diaries (addressed and often sent to a family member or close friend), travel journals, and war diaries (Culley, 1985; Kagle, 1988). Sometimes two types of journal were kept at once, usually a brief memorandum book supplemented by a fuller, more private accounting in a personal diary (Blodgett, 1988; Hunter, 1992).

Various journal subgenres often mingled in a single volume. For example, in Mary's initial entry (January 1, 1884), she speaks of her diary as "a confidential friend, one who I may and must confess to every evening." The religious overtones of confession situate her firmly in the discourse of pious self-betterment typical of the spiritual autobiography. In comparison, when she begins courting Mr. Parmenter, her attraction, anxiety, and confusion impel her to a poetic self-examination (see her January 31, 1885 entry for an example) worthy of a *journal intime*. During happier days, her descriptions of Altona's Dead Sea (August 11, 1884) and the Montreal Winter Carnival (March 19, 1887) have a sprightly, travelogue-like quality. Diaries such as Mary's may tend toward the introspective, but cannot be categorically labeled.

While people today think of a diary as a private record, Victorian diaries such as Mary's may be more aptly termed "semi-public" (Culley, 1985). Parents and older siblings sometimes encouraged girls to keep diaries (Hunter, 1992), in the way that Birdie suggests that Mary should keep a diary (January 1, 1884) and Mary's mother requests that she track her expenses (January 9, 1884). In the Victorian era, parents often prodded their children to keep written records for the purpose of moral improvement, self-discipline, and refinement

(Hunter, 1992). The diaries were then monitored for indications of proper deportment and maturation. Mary grumbles at her mother's incursion into her financial life, commenting, "I thought it [keeping a ledger] would [be] to [sic] much trouble for the good it would do" (January 9, 1884), but such enforced self-improvement through diary was not unusual then.

Victorian parents literally sought open books in their children's diaries, but young writers were more interested in showing their journals to their companions than to their guardians (Hunter, 1992). When exhibited to trusted associates, one's diary became a symbol of one's close connection with a friend. Indeed, the journal was often personified ("dear old Journal," in Mary's case) and addressed as "a confidential friend" (January 1, 1884), the entries becoming the equivalent of counsel between intimates (Culley, 1985; Franklin, 1986). Mary herself operates on the principle of diary as intimacy, allowing Birdie a look into its pages "even though it is supposed to be for my own special benefit" (April 6, 1884). With this gesture – giving an important piece of herself "for my own special benefit" to her sister – Mary both demonstrates how much she esteems her sister and cements that esteem. Conversely, *not* being allowed to read someone's diary established a clear limit on the relationship, as when Mary withholds her entries' contents from Mr. Parmenter (November 5, 1884) because she does not feel as close to him. Diarists like Mary used their "semi-public" journals without compunction as social currency, a means of defining and reinforcing their circles of friends.

Though they were employed less covertly than today's journals are, Victorian diaries contained an agitation for greater privacy (Bloom, 1996; Hunter, 1992). Mary's attitude toward her writing reflects this trend away from the diary accessible to all family members and toward the diary for the writer's eyes only. In her July 24, 1884, entry, Mary explains, "Dear journal you have again been neglected for two days this time, but the reason you should know is that Hattie has been in my room at the time when I usually write so I could or would not." Mary's unwillingness to even put pen to paper when her eldest sister is in the same room illustrates this developing perception of the diary as a secret, highly personal document meant for the writer alone.

Victorian girls guarded their diaries with increasing vigilance so that they could use their diaries to organize their thoughts, experiment with identity and sexuality, and even rebel without disrupting their families (Franklin, 1986; Hunter, 1992; Motz, 1996). Like most diarists of her period, Mary uses her diary for a variety of closely related reasons. The record of her relationship with Mr. Parmenter, for example, neatly crystallizes many of the above principles. On January 31, 1885, when she is dealing with the aftermath of Mr. Parmenter's marriage proposal, she says, "He is not such a man as I wish to be my husband," but she also admits that she cannot stop thinking of him. Her ambivalent feelings lead her to question herself and, more generally, the prevailing expectations of courtship and marriage, as when she prays, "Now I can only say God help us both and make him more worthy of some good woman's love than he has been of mine." In revealing her worries about courtship and marriage to her diary, Mary, like many diarists of her age, employs her entries to interrogate dominant cultural expectations in a socially sanctioned manner.

Because they were using their journals as tools with which to craft their selves, Victorian diarists lavished attention on the diary as document, often with an eye toward the future. They emended, commented on, and reread their entries regularly (Culley, 1985). Thus, Mary is not unusual when she writes on July 20, 1884, "Since we came home I have done all of my usual work lunched and read in my journal the record of two months that

brought considerable of both pain and pleasure to me.” Mary’s frequent reference to past entries implies a comparison between her life back then and her current life. There is also an unstated expectation that she has changed and hopefully improved. The diary was not only a tool of present-day self-construction, but also a useful legacy to one’s future self (Franklin, 1986).

The diary’s utility in creating and addressing one’s future self appears in Mary’s anguished entry of January 31, 1885, where she writes about her marriage prospects. After her conversation with Mr. Parmenter, Mary feels disturbed and immature, calling herself a “poor creature half woman half child.” Her description of herself as not quite human (a “creature”), neither a girl nor a woman, typifies her self-perception as a scatterbrained, childish person. She chides herself for being broken-hearted, conceding, “I have not as yet quite become the woman whom I see in the future bearing my name and being known as me.” Even though she is in a state of romantic confusion and emotional upheaval, Mary can still envision herself as a “woman,” a wholly mature and calmer being. She uses her diary to inscribe the vision of her older, wiser self, and then, through rereading and comparison, attempts to translate her written description into active reality. In a very real sense, Mary’s journal is much more than a repository of her days’ deeds. It is both the tool of, and a look into, the developing mind and spirit of a young woman on the cusp of modernity.