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Rosanna West Walker

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THE LEGEND OF THE MIDWIFE'S BLESSING

by

Rosanna West Walker

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

DEPARTMENT HONORS

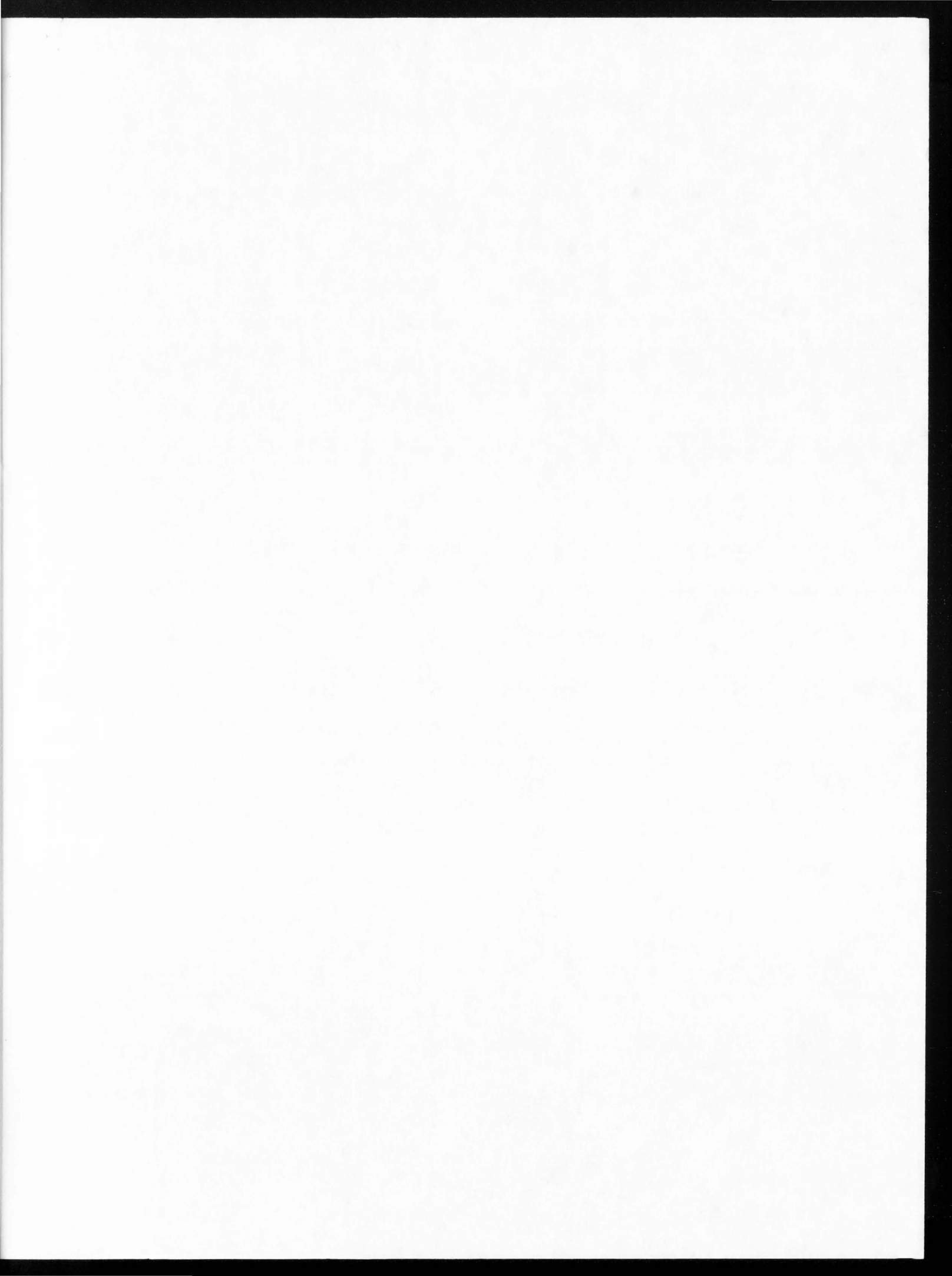
in

History

Approved:

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, UT

1995



Legend: "The Midwife's Blessing"

Informant Data:

This legend was told by my aunt, Jessie Bradshaw. She was a descendant of Scottish people who settled Wellsville in the 1850s. Her mother, Janet Leatham, died giving birth to another child, and Jessie was reared by my maternal great-great grandmother, Jane Alexander Steele Leatham, who was a midwife. The family members were all devout Mormons.

Contextual Data:

The events in this story supposedly happened to a distant relative. Many of the early townspeople, since they were Latter-day Saints, practiced polygyny. This legend takes place before polygyny was outlawed by the church.

Text:

This woman who immigrated to Wellsville from the Scottish Highlands became a midwife and was said to have the gift of "second sight." She had visions sometimes about things which were going to happen and more than once saved someone's life by warning them ahead of time. One night when she had just gone to bed she thought she heard someone weeping. She then dreamed that Mrs. Letham was calling her. She got up at once and prepared to go to the Letham farmhouse to see if Mrs. Letham, who was expecting a baby, was alright. Mrs. Letham was the second wife of a plural marriage, and her husband spent most of his time at his first wife's house in another city.

When the midwife got to the farmhouse she found that the town doctor was there, but he had no idea what to do. The baby seemed stuck and there was no way to get it out. The doctor was drunk. He started calling her names and pulled out a pair of forceps. The midwife knew there were other things that could be done but the doctor wouldn't listen. He crushed part of the baby's skull in his clumsy attempts to remove him from the womb.

The oldest daughter of the house put a candle in the window to summon the neighbors to come and help bury the baby, for it was obvious it wouldn't live long. The doctor had passed out cold on the floor from too much whiskey. The midwife rode out to a sacred spring by the foot of the mountain, which was very close by, and scooped up some water into her leather pouch. When she got back to the farmhouse she went up to the little wooden cradle containing the poor babe and sprinkled the water on his head, saying some words no one could understand.

The baby recovered and when the doctor awoke he was furious because only men were supposed to perform blessings. But later, even the elders of the church said that in the absence of a man, it was permissible for a woman to bless. The midwife lived a long time, always going to her sacred spring for healing waters. She died of old age on the first day of May in her ninety-eighth year. When she died it is said that the sacred spring she went to so often, dried up. Once a year in the spring it flows on the day she died.

ANALYSIS OF "A MIDWIFE'S BLESSING"

What wisdom manie winters hath begott
Tyme's Midwifrey at length shall bring to light.
The Pilgrimage to Parnassus, 1597

INTRODUCTION

"The Midwife's Blessing" focuses particularly on the feelings of women with regard to childbirth. This story, and other birth legends, circulated in my family for years. It seems that every time the women got together, midwifery and childbirth incidents ran like a thread through every tale.

Genealogical research has revealed midwives as far back as five generations in both the maternal and paternal sides of my family. This legend supposedly originated with my mother's great-grandmother, Jane Alexander Steele Leatham, who was one of the first midwives in Cache Valley, where Wellsville is located.

The historical background is central to understanding the story. The Mormons, like all other people anxious to pass down their stories to their children, have created a history for themselves by selectively recalling their past via legends, myths, songs, poems, and folktales. There are several ideas or motifs inherent in this legend, and in the history of those who later repeated it, which deserve a closer look.

Most of the people who settled Wellsville were first generation immigrants from Scotland where people still believed that midwives had supernatural healing gifts, and later my family, as members of the Church of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), believed in divine intervention, or miracles, with regard to

healing the sick. Therefore this story has a supernatural element as well as an anti-male-doctor motif. Frequently, especially in small frontier towns, a midwife played the role of a healer, and was also the primary person in town to prepare bodies for burial.

These immigrants may have brought their ideas of healing with nature, and the use of herbs, sacred waters, or other magical charms, with them to Utah. The attitudes of the people in my family who later recounted the legends were decidedly against polygyny and still somewhat distrusting of medical science and doctors.

The action taking place in this legend presents a vignette of the people in Wellsville, Utah in the middle to late 1800s. In the introduction to Speak Bird, Speak Again, the authors discuss the definition of "action" that I am using here:

by "action" we do not necessarily mean only physical activity. Through the process of concretization, or reification, of the non-material . . . a thought or wish becomes an action the moment it is put into words . . . that is precisely how many tales are begun: a lack is articulated, the fulfillment of which then becomes the central action of the tale.¹

How does the action work in "The Midwife's Blessing?" In the beginning of the story the midwife who has come from Scotland has the gift of "second sight." In my family this means that a person has extra-sensory perception; the midwife can tell when

¹Ibrahim Muhawi and Sharif Kanaana, Speak Bird, Speak Again: Palestinian Arab Folktales (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 45.

someone needs her, or is ill. This sets the stage for the story, because later, in contrast, the doctor is at the very opposite stage--that of total inebriation. He is not only unperceptive, he is passed out on the floor. This contrast is not an accident, it makes the folklore work. It is an artistic element, integral to the story. Considering the social context in which this tale was told, the belief that women are better at attending a birth seems to be central, because usually before or after the legend, the women would tell about their bad hospital births.

A digression on these "modern" kinds of birth experiences is necessary to understanding certain elements in legends like "The Midwife's Blessing." As I study the history and folklore of childbirth and midwifery, I notice that some of the worst birth stories come from the early to middle twentieth-century. Some of the reasons for this could be: childbirth was in the early stages of becoming a technological nightmare; women were cognizant of the fact that puerperal fever had been spread mostly by doctors; hospital birth was cold and unfriendly; and last, but maybe most important--women in the mid-1900s were often given a drug called scopolamine or "twilight sleep," because labor and childbirth were thought to be unendurable, and this drug was supposed to make a woman forget the supposedly terrible reality. Unfortunately, though doctors did not realize it at the time, scopolamine did not make a woman forget the birth, it magnified the worst aspects of it. In fact, this drug caused serious psychological and physical side-effects because it acted on the

central nervous system, causing severe delusions. Because it magnifies the intensity of an experience (and often labor is not exactly the most pleasant experience to magnify), women were routinely tied down after the administration of the drug to keep them from jumping out of windows or behaving in other strange, erratic ways. In addition, because women were unable to participate in the delivery of their child (in fact, this idea of being in control of one's birth was considered a "hippie" concept when it reached a certain vogue in the late 1960s and early 1970s), more medically invasive techniques were necessary, and these were often very painful. The idea that a magical midwife existed, but had somehow gone the way of the "wee folk" speaks of women's longing for a time when things were simpler.

It is a paradox that, at the same time, not one of the women present when I heard this tale, would have imagined having a baby at home. For several decades, home birth was not thought of as an option for women who lived in cities with hospitals. My mother once told me, "You come closer to dying at childbirth than at any other time in your life." She also said that "there is no pain like childbirth." When my father had kidney stones she acknowledged that maybe that was worse. Tales of terrible births became women's war stories; this legend may reflect these aspects of women's fears. Did the recounting of this legend mean that birth with a midwife was fine, and a male take-over or medicalization of childbirth caused all the trouble?

POLYGyny

There is a subtle anti-polygyny note to this story. We are told that this experience happened to a second wife of a polygynous union. We are also told that the husband spent most of his time at the first wife's home. After these references we never hear of him again; he is totally absent from the experience.

Sometimes polygynous marriages were disastrous for women, hence my mother's family seemed very cynical and unforgiving towards the practice. If it was sometimes hard for my Mormon mother and grandmother to understand why women put up with these conditions, it is often even more difficult for non-Mormons to understand the old practice of plural marriage. The words of Annie Clark Tanner (who once gave birth to one of her babies in a dark hotel room by herself at night) in her Autobiography of a Mormon Mother, helps shed some light on this subject:

Hundreds of young women came from the overcrowded section in the old country. They were thoroughly converted to the Gospel. . . . girls comparing their chances for matrimony often said of a Mormon leader, "I'd rather have his little finger than the whole of a man outside of the Church." It was an extremely serious thing for girls to marry outside of the Church, both socially and religiously. It jeopardized their personal salvation, that of their children, and resulted generally in social ostracism.²

In some respects Utah society was more matriarchal than any other state. Those women who practiced polygyny were often alone a great deal, especially during the "underground time" when

²Annie Clark Tanner, A Mormon Mother: An Autobiography (Salt Lake City: University of Library, 1976), 24-25.

families had to be on the move or hide from federal authorities seeking to jail their husbands and fathers if evidence (families) could be found. Emmeline B. Wells, an early pioneer, wrote, "The peculiar exigencies and experiences of Mormon life have had a tendency to make women self-helpful and self-reliant and have given them indomitable energy and undaunted courage . . ."³

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Beginning as far back as the 1400s, misogynist attitudes and actions created a slowly gathering momentum toward the eventual replacement of the traditional female midwife with the male obstetrician in most of the western world. The preemption of midwives coincided with the focus on science and the medical evolutionist views of women as set forth by Darwin and others. Also at issue was the attitude that midwifery was a lower-class profession while doctors specializing in the newer male-dominated obstetrics represented the cutting-edge of technology. The male takeover of obstetrics happened later in the United States than in Europe.⁴

In the American west, frontier conditions kept the female midwife more prominent than on the east coast, with its fashionable hospitals and large cities. Due to the nature of

³Beatrice Malouf, "The Participation of Women in Utah's Pioneer History." Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, Lesson for December, 1990.

⁴Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers, (New York: The Feminist Press, 1977, 21.

settlement, and the fact that in Utah many families like mine practiced polygyny, the midwife was firmly entrenched for even longer than in non-Mormon areas. Childbirth on the frontier took place at home with a midwife or with other women who had babies of their own and thus were presumed to know something about it. In the 1870s Brigham Young called women from rural areas to Salt Lake City to receive training in midwifery from Dr. Ellis Shipp, Dr. Margaret Shipp, or Dr. Romania Pratt.⁵ Soon Utah had a very organized, efficient group of well-trained midwives. Even small town doctors often called a midwife when their wives were in labor. It was often considered unnatural for men to officiate at births, or for a doctor to be necessary.⁶

In the mid-1800s in Utah, birth was not considered an illness, and if a baby died, it was an act of God. The fact that women used the phrase "she was sick all night," to refer to a woman's labor, does not mean labor was thought of as a disease; it is simply another one of those delicate Victorian euphemisms.⁷ The pathological point of view of birth as a medical event was

⁵For more information on pioneer midwives see Kate B. Carter, Our Pioneer Heritage, (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1963). The Daughters of Utah Pioneers have many interesting accounts of women who were called to learn midwifery. See also the histories of Julina Lambson Smith, and Jane Steele Leatham.

⁶Sylvia D. Hoffert, "Childbearing on the Trans-Mississippi Frontier, 1830-1900," Western Historical Quarterly 22 (August 1991): 281-83.

⁷Hoffert, 273-88.

not present until hospital birth became the norm in the 1900s.⁸ Infant mortality rates were high because these statistics cover the first year of life when a baby was most likely to die from one of the epidemic diseases. Perinatal mortality rates, covering birth to three months, were lower. Babies did not die so much from complications of birth as from disease in the first year of life, or from the consequences of many babies born too close together, often into poor families where the mother was malnourished.⁹ Some infer that birth at home with a midwife was worse because of a lack of sanitation, but the fact is that in America, as in Europe, in every large city where hospital birth was encouraged, women were literally dying in droves from doctor-induced puerperal or childbed fever, caused from a complete lack of knowledge about sanitation and pathogens. Statistically, until the acceptance of the practice of hand-washing and the use of antiseptics in the 1880s, women were far better off at home. Other new iatrogenic (doctor-induced) complications were created with the advent of surgical techniques, instruments like the forceps, and chloroform. In the legend of the Wellsville midwife, the doctor used invasive procedures which crushed part of the baby's skull--a possible effect of totally unskilled use

⁸Ehrenreich and English, 27. I wrote a paper about the diary of a woman named Jane Wilkie Hooper Blood, who lived in Kaysville, Utah, in the middle to late 1800s. Her daughter Ivy wrote a foreward to the diary in the 1900s. There was a marked contrast between the attitude of the mother versus the daughter regarding birth.

⁹Neal Devitt, "The Statistical Case for Elimination of the Midwife: Fact versus Prejudice, 1890-1935. Part 1. Women and Health 4 (Spring 1979): 81-86.

of forceps. Though there were women and babies with unusual complications who benefitted from the new technology, those who were not in that high-risk category suffered greatly from these invasive approaches toward labor and birth.

SACRED SPRINGS

Perhaps the motif of the sacred spring, present in Scottish and other folklore, was brought to Utah with the immigrants. The motifs of the Magic Spring (D927), and the Water of Life, or Resuscitation by water (E80) are catalogued in Stith Thompson's Motif-Index.

In Wellsville "there was a large spring of water coming down Sardine Canyon," and the pioneers built canals, and "led the water down" to irrigate the fields.¹⁰ This spring is mentioned in a community-written book, Windows of Wellsville:

The . . . settlers in 1855-56 and for several years thereafter used this road. . . . they dropped into a hollow and wound around the basin rim to a cold spring of water at the bottom of the hollow (Sardine Spring). . . . They entered at a point near the former Bradshaw ranch.¹¹

In Scotland, particularly in older times, people believed that a spring or a well had life-giving properties. In the tenth century A. D. the Catholic Church considered the pilgrimages to wells a type of heathenistic worship. The Reformed Church, as

¹⁰Bradshaw, George W. "History of Sarah Edwards Hampson Bradshaw." Tremonton, Utah: unpublished manuscript belonging to family, 1964.

¹¹The Wellsville History Committee, Windows of Wellsville (Providence, Utah: Keith W. Watkins and Sons, Inc., 1985), 20.

early as 1579 prohibited well-worship. But people continued to believe in the healing power of springs and wells, and vast multitudes visited them. There is an excellent chapter on holy wells in J. M. McPherson's, Primitive Beliefs in the North-East of Scotland. He shows that after centuries of church bans against these types of nature beliefs, people continued to practice them secretly. The fact that folklore often contains elements which are taboo in a society may be one reason why the motif of the sacred spring shows up in the legend of the Wellsville midwife.

McPherson tells about a well in Glass which was "noted for curing children." Even more interesting is the fact that different wells, fountains, or springs were known for curing different things. There were tooth-ache wells, springs for the blind or deaf, or for skin diseases. Of course, some springs were only used for childbirth or the healing of children. In the Wellsville legend, the spring is said to have dried up after the midwife died, indicating that this spring, if it exists, could have been used this way.

Even more profound is the fact that in the legend the midwife dies on May first, because McPherson says that in Scotland, there were "seasons of visiting," and that:

There is considerable evidence to show that the first Sunday of each quarter in the Celtic year was the proper day for the suppliant to pay his vows at the holy well. The first

Sundays of November, February, May, and August were the chief days of resort to the healing fountains.¹²

In addition, at the end of the midwife legend, the spring is said to flow again once each year on the first day of May. This day was always celebrated in Wellsville with a parade and young girls dancing around a Maypole. Windows of Wellsville has lists of May Queens, and photographs of this annual event. Coincidentally, McPherson says there was a fertility well on the moors by Aberdeen, and that on the first Sunday of May women could be observed dancing around an older woman, "and dipping a small vessel in the water" to sprinkle each other with. He also mentions the use of incantations. I always thought it strange that May-day was such a big event in Wellsville because we did not celebrate it when I was a child, though my mother talked about it. It is even more remarkable to me that, according to McPherson, the "custom [of dancing around the fertility well] was observed as recently as the late sixties of [the] last century."¹³ If this is the case, then people were practicing such customs in the late 1860s, so it seems even more possible that they brought the ideas with them to America.

IN SUMMARY

There are a couple of smaller elements in the legend about Wellsville: the idea of placing a candle in the window to summon

¹²J. M. McPherson, Primitive Beliefs in the North-East of Scotland (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929), 37-59.

¹³Ibid., 50-51.

help, and the idea of the drunk doctor. In Windows of Wellsville the candle custom is mentioned: "If she had any trouble, she would put a candle in the window. Sometimes the frost was so thick on the pane, the light could not be seen by the neighbors on the next farm."¹⁴

My research has not turned up any other story where a Wellsville doctor is mentioned as having a drinking problem or being drunk at a medical visit. I did find a doctor mentioned in diaries from Kaysville, Utah, who used to show up at people's homes too drunk to function.

Much more research and collection of Scottish legends (as they were told in Utah) could be done. There are many diaries of Scottish immigrants who settled in Utah. These could be gleaned for stories or references of any type to midwifery, childbirth, sacred waters, and the attitudes of women toward male doctors. It may be that the women themselves were aware that a medical take-over was occurring, and there are some stories which would reflect this. Wellsville is still primarily populated with the descendants of the Scottish immigrants. It has changed very little as far as the ethnic make-up of its people. I think it is important to interview as many individuals as possible, especially since there are still elderly people alive who are children of pioneers.

¹⁴The Wellsville History Committee, Windows of Wellsville (Providence, Utah: Keith W. Watkins and Sons, Inc., 1985), 574-75.

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