Emma Hale Smith Bidamon: A Study of How the Enigma was Forgotten

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EMMA HALE SMITH BIDAMON:
A STUDY OF HOW THE ENIGMA WAS FORGOTTEN

by

Christine Hegstrom Merrill

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

DEPARTMENT HONORS

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History

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Emma Hale Smith Bidamon:
A study of how the Enigma was forgotten

Senior Honors Thesis
by
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(Graduating May 2006)

Faculty Advisor:
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“Beyond history’s garden gates, the thick jungle of the past remains, and memory’s trails lead off into it” (Richard White). Historians throughout time have had to decipher and toil between memory and history as they have reconstructed the past—laboring with the similarities between the two, as well as major differences. With these historical studies have come theories about memory and history, with new divisions within each category, from private to public to historical memory and from autobiographical to biographical histories. This paper originated as a biographical study of Emma Hale Smith Bidamon, a leading figure in the early days of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the LDS or Mormon church), as well as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (RLDS church, now known as the Community of Christ). It began with simple questions: What was life like for Emma when Joseph Smith, her famous husband, was alive? What was it like after his death? As I studied, I quickly found that while Emma left few written documents herself, her name was found in newspaper articles in the East, and thrown back and forth in political debates in the West. Personal memoirs, as well as official, public histories, mention her very specifically and with some depth of feeling. The question soon became: How and why is Emma used by these different groups?

As I read and reread primary sources and secondary studies, it became apparent that Emma is very definitely an “enigma” as her biographers Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery have defined her. However, much of this mystery does not come as a direct result of the few written materials left by Emma, but rather because of the many varying views by others of Emma. These views, or the memory of her as seen by different people and organizations,

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2 This term has become a very common coin in reference to Emma Smith. It appears to have been first used by Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith (New York: Doubleday, 1984)—a famous biography and study of Emma’s life, continuing to be so even now at its second edition printing.
persistently “leave out” or “forget” the parts of Emma’s story that don’t “fit” with their various interpretations of the past and their present realities. As this argument became more and more clear, the interaction between what actually happened to Emma, her history, and what people saw as happening, or rather their memory of her, became more and more important to understanding Emma’s history. In this study, Emma is remembered in three distinct views: the World view, the RLDS view and the LDS view. Through these views of Emma Hale Smith Bidamon during the last half of the 19th century and early 20th century, the nature of historical memory is revealed as a product not only of social, political and religious turmoil, but also as a result of purposeful forgetting.

**Emma and the 19th Century**

The 19th century saw many changes in the United States from Industrialization to the Second Great Awakening to Westward migration. Coming in the wake of the American Revolution and the founding of a new, national Constitution, the nineteenth century dawned bright with hope for the future. The world was also quickly changing. Industrialization took a hand in reshaping the lay of cities, particularly Northeastern cities where factories and their accompanying smoke stacks transformed the skyline. In upstate New York, new religious fervor set off, or was set off by, the Second Great Awakening, encompassing the surrounding countryside and sweeping across the states. Debates in Congress over slavery led to interstate conflict and, ultimately, the Civil War. Westward expansion, too, changed the nation as pioneers pushed Indians out and new frontier towns began.

With all this economic and political modification and alteration came much social change. Factory employment began to draw women out of the home, or at least into a “putting
out” system of production established in the home and increasingly involving women. ³ Barbara Welter argues in “The Feminization of American Religion” that it is during this time that American religion, too, was undergoing fundamental and rapid change, leading to the “feminization” of American religion, as church relied more and more heavily on women members. ⁴ Other reform movements blossomed as well, particularly the suffrage movement. This movement, “which concentrated on obtaining suffrage but had . . . more diffuse goals as well,” would fuel other reforms: “Indeed, the abolitionist, temperance, and peace societies depended on their women members to lick envelopes, raise money . . . and influence their husbands and fathers to join in the good work.” ⁵ Marked by, as well as culminating in, the famous Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, the suffrage movement began a push for the “unalienable rights” guaranteed to all men, as stated in the Declaration of Independence, broadening the interpretation to encompass women as well. ⁶ As these new conditions in the home, at work, at church and in politics arose, “new roles to fit these new conditions” also arose. ⁷

In seeming opposition to these new movements in which women were encouraged to leave the home, came the concept of a woman’s proper sphere as the home. Ministers, along with other men, began to preach “true womanhood,” or the virtues of “piety, purity (meaning sexual purity), domesticity, and submissiveness” in women. ⁸ However, historians continue to debate “to what extent [the definitions of feminine] have been imposed on women, [and] to what

⁴ Ibid.
extent invented by women." To be sure, the “cult of domesticity,” as it is now called by historians, was established primarily by women and readily agrees with the doctrines of “true womanhood” in affirming that “females were uniquely suited to raise children, care for the needs of their menfolk, and devote their lives to the creation of a nurturing home environment...[having] no place in the public world outside the home.”

This dogma, in which women’s moral superiority was championed and which was heralded by middle-class, white, urban men and women, soon began to subvert itself in the mid- to late-1800s. Suffragists and other feminists soon took this argument of women being morally superior as part of their own movements. On one side of the spectrum, Catharine Beecher argued that women should be the teachers and educators for all children, even if it led to women leaving the home for the schoolroom. Moreover, she argued that, as they were religiously more competent, they should participate in foreign missionary work. However, she also argued that they should not intrude into the grime of politics. On the other, more extreme side, suffragists disputed that because women were morally superior, they had an obligation to vote and put leaders into public office who would lift the world from the filth and disparity it was currently under. Voting, as understood during the Civil War era, was “key to political identity, to inclusion within the ranks of freedom.” Thus, the right to vote became emblematic of those belonging to the “citizen” group of the U.S.—a group these women claimed a right to.

As part of this grand debate, or some could argue at the heart of it, was polygamy, a practice established by the LDS church in its early years wherein a man could marry more than one wife. Though not widely practiced in the earliest days of the LDS church (i.e., during

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9 Ibid, 17.
11 Ibid.
Joseph Smith’s time as President, or from the New York period through the Nauvoo era, 1820-1844), the system became much more widely established when the Saints moved West to Utah. As it became more widely practiced, it also became more widely known and hotly debated on the national level. As one author put it, “to Victorian-era sensibilities, which treated the monogamous domestic sphere as a cornerstone of civilization itself, the practices of Mormon patriarchs on the wild frontier seemed barbaric.”

Kate Field, a nineteenth century opponent of polygamy, proclaimed it to be “monstrous...[a] rock that need[ed] blowing up with the dynamite of law.” She went further in comparing it to slavery with statements including: “[LDS women] assert that they are perfectly satisfied...[however] before the abolition of slavery the world was assured that negroes were happy in their chains.” This statement, and others like it, were “common coin” among many suffragists and Congressmen. This was an all-encompassing argument, for as Sarah Barringer Gordon describes, the polygamy question concerned Congressmen and politicians, who saw it as a part of state and territorial rights issues. As a result, those few politicians who advocated polygamy were Southern Democrats as a result. In addition to these, the question also concerned suffragists, whose political theories became dethroned as the “degenerate” women under polygamy’s rule gained the right to vote before much of the rest of the nation and quickly proceeded to vote with their husbands. It struck at the heart of their arguments, for if women were to vote with the morally inferior men as opposed to

15 Ibid., 830.
16 Ibid., 816.
17 Ibid., 831.
lifting them out, their supposed moral superiority was for naught. Consequently, they argued that polygamy, along with becoming a mockery of marriage, was also a mockery of woman suffrage, making the 1880s (the period this was most hotly debated) a “low point” in the movement.

Perhaps even more important than this political debate, and more crucial to Emma Smith’s history is that polygamy “played itself out [not only] on the political and legal [stages, but on] the religious and cultural stages.” Particularly between the RLDS and LDS churches, this practice and doctrine were hotly contested. At the time of Joseph’s death in 1844, there were many Saints who joined Brigham Young (the senior apostle) and the westward movement. However, others, largely those who debated Young’s ascension to the presidency (polygamy was not the original dividing factor), joined other organizations, each dealing with the “succession to Joseph” and his leadership in different ways. One of these groups, indeed the best known, was the RLDS church, that claimed that Joseph Smith III, son of the Prophet Joseph and twelve years old at the prophet’s death, had been designated by his father to succeed in the presidency. He was later chosen as Prophet for the RLDS at a conference in Amboy, Illinois on April 6, 1860, the same conference in which Emma was admitted without rebaptism into the RLDS church as she had already been baptized. It is during this time that “church members, wanting to protect Joseph Jr.’s good name, embraced Emma Smith’s 1879 testimony given...that disavowed any connection between her husband and the aberrant marital practice. [Joseph III] determined that

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18 Ibid., 830. This argument, that LDS women’s votes were “dictated by their husbands,” was used by many suffragists. This one in particular comes from Mary Livermore, a suffragist and temperance advocate, speaking in 1877.
19 Ibid., 816-817. It is interesting to note that the only act discussed in Congress concerning women’s suffrage at the end of the 1800s was the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1886 in which women’s voting rights in Utah were revoked—a sour pill to swallow for the suffragists.
22 Ibid.
his father would have been wrong if he had advanced such a belief.” The RLDS church rejected as fraudulent LDS claims that the foundations of polygamy were found in Joseph’s doctrines.  

Into this world “saturated with religion,” with changing conditions and controversial views, stepped Emma Hale, born on July 10, 1804. In every account, Emma is noted for being quite beautiful and very gifted. In one author’s words: “She was tall and thin and had black hair, brown eyes, and an olive complexion. She sang well and was educated to be a schoolteacher.” Though not much is known of her early life, she did not long remain in obscurity, for in 1827, she married Joseph Smith, Jr., the proclaimed prophet, and a very controversial figure in the surrounding countryside. As her parents strongly disapproved initially, and his parents were pleased, Emma and Joseph eloped, going to live with Joseph’s family directly after.

As indicated in many sources, this marriage and relationship was a loving one. Emma stated during an 1879 question/answer period that “preferring to marry him [Joseph Smith] to any other man I knew, I consented.” Later in the same interview, she mentions their relationship, asserting that “there was no necessity of any quarreling. He knew I wished for nothing but what was right; and, as he wished for nothing else, we did not disagree.” Because his life is so well documented, there are many more sources portraying Joseph’s love towards his

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24 Ibid. As part of the answer to this question, the RLDS, or Community of Christ, states that it “does not take positions on issues of history [as a policy]” now, as there is not sufficient evidence to be declaratory either way.
29 Mark L. McConkie, Remembering Joseph: Personal Recollections of Those Who Knew the Prophet Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 301. The interview spans pages 300-304. It was conducted by her son, Joseph III, her second husband, Major Bidamon and “a few others” (300) from the RLDS church.
30 Ibid, 303.
wife than Emma's love for her husband. When first discussing the matter with his parents, Joseph echoes Emma's sentiments about their marriage by affirming that: "Miss Emma Hale...would be my choice in preference to any other woman I have ever seen." Writing in later years, Joseph tenderly proclaimed:

> With what unspeakable delight, and what transports of joy swelled my bosom, when I took by the hand, on that night, my beloved Emma—she that was my wife, even the wife of my youth, and the choice of my heart....Oh what a commingling of thought filled my mind for the moment, again she is here...undaunted, firm, and unwavering—unchangeable, affectionate Emma!  

His letters home during times of separation are further evidence of his love, with statements like "my heart is entwined around you forever" and "yours in the bonds of love." There is no doubt that Joseph loved his wife very much.

Following their marriage in 1827 through Joseph's death in 1844, Emma began the seemingly never-ending task of establishing home after home as the LDS people were forced to move again and again while mob violence and persecution escalated in the areas they had chosen to settle. Despite the many hardships, including the deaths of 6 of their 11 children, "she stood by her husband in all the exigencies that arose...[and] sought as best she could to support him in his extraordinary calling." Mother Smith (Lucy Mack Smith, Emma's mother-in-law), affirmed that "I have never seen a woman in my life, who would endure every species of fatigue and hardship,...from year to year, with that unflinching courage, zeal, and patience, which she has ever done...which would have born down almost any other woman." Even modern scholars

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31 Lucy Mack Smith, *The History of Joseph Smith, by His Mother*, George A. Smith and Elias Smith, eds. (American Fork: Covenant Communications, Inc. 2000), 97. This book was dictated by Lucy Mack Smith, Emma's mother-in-law, right before she died. It is primarily a history of her son, Joseph, though it also gives some family genealogy.


34 Ibid.


admit that there was much mob violence surrounded the LDS gathering as others grew suspicious of the large gatherings taking place and the theology associated with the group.\textsuperscript{37}

Because the Missouri pro-slavery mobs were afraid of the anti-slavery voting bloc growing larger and larger as the LDS church gathered, Missouri went so far as to issue an Extermination Order, which legalized the killing of the LDS congregations who had not left already. In addition to managing the household, Emma was often called to do other work by the church. For example, she was called to organize a selection of “sacred hymns” for the church,\textsuperscript{38} and served as the first president of the Relief Society—a women’s organization in which women help others (both men, women and children) in times of need.

This society is a great part of Emma’s life story. It must be noted that in comparison to Victorian views of the woman’s key place in the home and out of the public eye, this organization, while totally supporting the Church’s doctrine of the eternal importance of motherhood, led many women to help and support the community in some very public roles—editing women’s magazines, making public speeches, “expounding scripture,”\textsuperscript{39} and, in the cases of Emma and Mother Smith, holding surprising power over opinions within the community. Thus by many accounts, this could be viewed as a “feminist” organization, especially considering the times in which it was established. Emma, at its head, can thus be viewed as a

\textsuperscript{37} McLemee, \textit{Op. Cit.}

\textsuperscript{38} Doctrine and Covenants 25:11. This is the section of the Doctrine and Covenants (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981) that is a revelation to Joseph Smith from God to Emma, received July 1830. It begins with stating she is an “elect lady” (verse 3)—key phrases used later in the succession debate—and goes on with words of comfort and guidance—from stating that “the office of thy calling shall be for a comfort unto” Joseph (verse 5), to an appeal to keep the commandments of God (verses 13-15).

\textsuperscript{39} Doctrine and Covenants 25:7, \textit{Op. Cit.} Specifically, it states: “And thou shalt be ordained under his hand to expound scriptures, and to exhort the church...” This includes authority only women ministers in other churches would have—thus, it was something many more conservative women would have rejected as feminist.
sort of ‘feminist’ as well, for she was a great leader of social change within her community, who
proclaimed the power and obligation of women to become part of the societies around them.\textsuperscript{40}

The many upheavals led the Saints along a westward migration, finally settling them
along the Mississippi River in Commerce, Illinois—later renamed “Nauvoo.” While the mobs
stayed quiet, initially, there was difficulty within the community when malaria struck while the
people worked to drain the swamp next to which Commerce was built. During this time, Emma
worked feverishly, “disregarding herself...turning her house and yard into a kind of field hospital
for the sick and dying.”\textsuperscript{41} As Nauvoo became established and started to thrive, Emma and
Joseph had a brief moment in which to live peaceably. This peace was shattered however, on
June 27, 1844 when Joseph and his brother, Hyrum, were “lynched”\textsuperscript{42} by mobs at Carthage Jail.
It is impossible to explain Emma’s sorrow and pain as her husband of 17 years was killed.
However, as it is the historian’s job to “humanize” the past,\textsuperscript{43} I will use Mother Smith’s account
to give the tiniest glimpse of the sorrow that enveloped the community:

I entered the room [where the corpses where], and saw my murdered sons extended both
at once before my eyes, and heard the sobs and groans of my family, and the cries of
“Father! Husband! Brothers!” from the lips of their wives, children, brothers and sisters,
it was too much, I sank back, crying to the Lord, in the agony of my soul....Emma was
carried back to her room almost in a state of insensibility. Her oldest son approached the
corpse, and dropped upon his knees, and laying his cheek against his father’s, and kissing
him, exclaimed, “oh, my father! my father!”\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{40} “Video: Instruments in the Hands of God,” from the \textit{Ensign} Vol. 35, number 11 (Salt Lake City: The Church of
Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, November 2005), 105. This video was presented at an annual General Relief
Society meeting on September 24, 2005. It represented the founding of the Society in march of 1842, where Emma
states that “each member should be ambitious to do good” (from Relief Society Minutes, March 17, 1842, Archives
of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). The video also states that this society has grown to “more than
five million [members]” (p. 105)—thus showing the great growth of this organization, as well as the social impact it
can and has had as its women members all over the world have been “ambitious to do good” (p. 105).

\textsuperscript{41} Buddy Youngreen, \textit{Reflections of Emma: Joseph Smith’s Wife} (Orem: Grandin Book Company, 1982), 24.

\textsuperscript{42} McLemee, \textit{Op. Cit.}

\textsuperscript{43} Scott Davis, public lecture at Utah State University’s Phi Alpha Theta induction ceremony on November 15,
2005.

\textsuperscript{44} L. Smith, \textit{Op. Cit.}, 292-93.
five months later, Emma gave birth to David Hyrum.\textsuperscript{45} Then, in February, the Saints began the exodus from Nauvoo to the Salt Lake Valley.

It is at this point in time that memories of Emma become so vastly different. Some basic points are clear. She continued to work and raise her children and care for her mother-in-law. She remarried in 1847 to a Major Lewis Bidamon. Emma and Bidamon ran the Nauvoo hotel, taking in visitors from all over the country (many of whom questioned the Martyr’s wife, leading to later memories about her). She grew old and gray. Finally, on April 30, 1879, she died. Here again, while not the tragedy of young Joseph and Hyrum’s death, her passing was deeply felt.

On May 9, her obituary in the \textit{Nauvoo Independent} read: “it is safe to say the respect, esteem and love with which she was regarded by all, is but a just tribute to the sterling virtues of the woman, wife, and mother, whom the community so soberly, so sadly, and so tenderly laid away to rest on that beautiful May day.”\textsuperscript{46} Elizabeth Jamison, speaking in 1912, stated that Emma “was one of the kindest and sweetest of women, well known to us all, and I’m sure no better woman ever walked the streets of Nauvoo...she was a very dear old lady beloved by all.”\textsuperscript{47}

\textbf{Forgetting Emma}

“Many women who have become influential in [history]...have been known initially because of their association with prominent men.”\textsuperscript{48} There is no doubt that this statement applies to Emma. Her husband, known across the country and around the world, was the means of

\textsuperscript{45} Youngreen, \textit{Op. Cit.}, 27.
\textsuperscript{46} Donald Q. Cannon, “Research Materials, 1840-1981” found in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University, the originals are housed in the IL State Historical Library, Folder 1, Warren L. Van Dine Papers, 6. The obituary was also reprinted in the \textit{Saints’ Herald} November 26, 1925.
\textsuperscript{47} Dunn, Charles, “Testimony Regarding Emma Smith Bidamon, Nauvoo, IL, 1912 Jul 29” in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University. Eliazbeth Jamison was a young girl who knew Emma after the Saints had left and was interviewed by Charles Dunn on a research trip to Nauvoo.
bringing her into the public eye and remains so to a great degree today. There is also little doubt that her Prophet-husband is the cause of her status as “enigma.” Nothing shows this better than the three prominent views held by those in the United States about Emma in the last half of the 19th century; namely: the “world” view, the RLDS view and the LDS view. While these memories portray a sometimes extreme (and false) portrait of Emma, through them memory is clearly seen as a construct built from a combination of the political, social and religious views which surrounded those creating the public memory of Emma and from the purposeful forgetting of key facts and events in Emma’s life. In other words, “such narratives...depend upon forgetting,”49 for it is in forgetting these events that the world, RLDS and LDS peoples can build the memory best suiting their needs and purposes.

The World View

This view denotes the views outside of the two religious organizations, the LDS and RLDS, tied so closely to Emma, and focuses on two main constructors: public historians and newspaper/magazine writers in the United States. It is very interesting to note how it comes about that a woman like Emma, very well known within her sphere of influence in the RLDS and LDS communities, but rather unknown during her lifetime beyond those spheres, should be so widely spoken of and written about in Eastern newspapers and area histories in which she played no vital role. For example, Recollections of the Pioneers in Lee County, collected and written in 1893 by a group of public historians in Lee County, Illinois—a county Emma had never lived in—has a full 10 pages on Emma’s life.50 Apparently, Emma’s sister-in-law’s sister was a well-known teacher in the area and thus Emma needed to be included. Furthermore, in the same

50 Recollections of the Pioneers of Lee County [Illinois], compiled by the Lee County Columbian Club (Dixon: 1893), 96-107. Found in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University.
school building where this young lady taught, Joseph Smith once preached. While this public history is purely about women, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young are both brought up. In Joseph’s case, they portray him as a wonderful man of integrity while Brigham Young is spoken of as a monster. Emma is specifically linked with Joseph and disassociated with Young: “Mrs. Smith steadily and positively opposed, not only the dogma and practice of polygamy, but Mr. Young’s rule as well. She was never a convert to plural marriage or spiritual wifery, but always, from her innate womanly qualities, rigorously opposed to it.”

The biography focuses on Emma’s role in the home, from her early years growing up with parents who “were pioneers of a self-reliant race, brave, honest, of unshaken fidelity and unquestioned integrity,” to her years of trial and turmoil with her husband Joseph Smith. Throughout the narrative, Emma is portrayed as a loving wife who “[waited] in faithful expectancy” for her husband’s release from prison, and who then “welcomed him with a wife’s rapture, and was ready to begin again the life of devotion to his happiness as she had ever been.” Everything she did was “in the calm dignity and conscious rectitude of splendid womanhood” and in opposition to that “evil with which the Nation has wrestled in Utah,” or polygamy. Through it are seen several interesting points, particularly whereas the book was published in 1893, in the throes of the polygamy battle. However, the most important point is the power of the political ideas of the Victorian “cult of domesticity,” as the portrayed-Emma’s main role in life was a wife and mother whose greatest aspirations were for her husband and children. Thus, this is a case wherein “women themselves...imposed their own definitions of the

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51 Ibid., 107. Page 96 first introduces Joseph and Brigham Young, here again stating Emma’s disassociation with Young.
52 Ibid., 96.
53 Ibid., 99.
54 Ibid., 103, 107.
female on other women.”  

From this biography, a “good” woman is one who waits “with faithful expectancy” for her husband: a wife first and foremost. Furthermore, the “best” woman is one who raises her children with moral integrity, as well as being a woman who is conscious of her womanhood—both in her public appearances and in opposing the “self-degradation” of polygamy.

Polygamy, as mentioned earlier, had become a central political debate around the country, and in this public history, Emma is used as a pawn in a political statement against the LDS church in Utah. These public historians forget the controversy which surrounded Joseph and Emma in the early years of the 1800s—a controversy so volatile that it led to their expulsion from several areas (including their forced exile to the swampland of the Mississippi as they were not allowed to settle in areas like Lee County). They also forget to mention Emma’s involvement in the Relief Society, perhaps because it had become closely linked to polygamy. They forget too the rumors that flew around the countryside against Emma’s virtuous character right after the Prophet’s death, 50 years earlier. On the other hand, they remember that she fulfilled her womanly roles, and they remember that she opposed polygamy—two elements needed in their construction to promote their own political and ideological opinions.

Newspaper and magazine clips about Emma, while stuffed with inaccuracies, show the extent to which Joseph was known on the Eastern seaboard. Newspapers and magazines

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59 *The Elect Lady* (Plano: The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1867—this date is in question as the publication information at BYU states it is 1867, but the article itself refers to the “conference in October 1869” on p. 3), found in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University. This pamphlet quotes from a *Times and Seasons* (the Nauvoo and LDS newspaper) article by John Taylor, published 7 months after the Prophet’s death and just a month after Emma’s son’s birth, in which it states that “the story [of Emma’s dishonoring her husband] must have been put in circulation [after her husband’s death]” (p. 1).
generate interest largely with their headlines; in these headlines Emma is not mentioned directly even once, nonetheless, she is the center of the story. The headlines refer to her husband’s name—“the widow of Joseph Smith” and “Mrs. Joe Smith” are the commonly used phrases.\(^{60}\) Thus, even Emma’s name is forgotten in these constructions. They use Joseph’s name to catch the readers’ attention and then precede to tell how Emma was either opposed to his religion in general (an earlier article from 1845 states this),\(^{61}\) or use Emma’s statement that she was the “only wife” of the Prophet Joseph to denounce LDS claims of Joseph’s involvement in polygamy (the articles being published near the turn of the century).\(^{62}\) These “public historians,” if you will, forget not only her name but that she instilled the doctrines of Joseph in her children—leading to her son’s formation of the RLDS church, initially exactly like the LDS church with the big exception of polygamy and the succession of Brigham Young. In these histories, Emma is used as a publicity pawn as well as a political banner, while her life and name are forgotten.

The RLDS view

The RLDS view, in comparison to the world view, largely focuses on Emma’s religious (and later social) leverage, as opposed to her political utility. Very simply stated, Emma originally serves as the RLDS’s link to its claims of religious authority over the LDS church and claims against Joseph’s having founded polygamy. The RLDS pamphlet entitled The Elect Lady is perhaps the best evidence for this. Published sometime around 1869, this pamphlet first

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\(^{60}\) “Mrs. Joe Smith: an interview with the widow of the noted Mormon leader,” in the Wellsville daily reporter (Oct. 27, 1884) and “Mrs. Joe Smith” in Lippincott’s magazine (Oct. 1884)—these were the same articles, the original is in Lippincott’s. “The widow of Joseph Smith writes from Nauvoo...” in the Boston Investigator (December 17, 1845). All found in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University.

\(^{61}\) Boston Investigator, Op. Cit. This quotes a letter reportedly written by Emma to the New York Sun, in which she denounces the faith of Joseph. I am not here to argue the validity or falsity of claims or arguments associated with this letter, other histories do that (see Linda King Newell’s “New Light of the Sun: Emma Smith and the New York Sun letter” in Journal of Mormon history, Vol. 6 (1979), p. 23-25). I will state that in the 1879 interview conducted, Emma bore witness to Joseph’s divine role as translator of the Book of Mormon (see McConkie, Op. Cit., 302-303). Many historians have tried to reconcile these two contradictory statements, but it is not my purpose here to do so.

begins with establishing Emma’s title as one of the ‘elect,’ called by God in modern revelation through Joseph, her husband. The pamphlet also establishes Emma’s life as “a pattern of piety and social worth.” Interestingly, the pamphlet, shows that Emma was highly regarded by the LDS church during “the Martyr’s life time” and the time directly following his death. It quotes from a *Times and Seasons* article, which is being noted as “published under the authority of the Twelve [Apostles of the Church],” in which Emma is stated to have “honored her husband while living and she will never knowingly dishonor his good name while his martyred blood mingles with mother earth!” The next page is entirely devoted to demonstrating through scriptural evidence that “the elect,” i.e. Emma, cannot be deceived by “false prophets.” In other words, they conclude, “if Joseph [III] is not the successor of his father he is an imposter, and the ‘elect lady’ is deceived, and the words of Jesus have proved untrue.”

This pamphlet does not proclaim to be a biography of Emma’s life, but is very much a religious statement against the LDS claims to priesthood authority. It is short and thus does not contain all the elements of Emma’s life; in all reality, it is a propaganda tool. The card-stacking used is clearly evident, particularly as the pamphlet does not directly mention polygamy, although some might argue that it is clearly understood. Indeed, by the time it was published, questions were already arising within the RLDS community concerning the validity of Emma’s strong declarations about the Prophet and polygamy—that she was his *only* wife. Thus, while stating their opposition to this doctrine would have helped them politically speaking, the pamphlet doesn’t mention polygamy directly, for it would have thrown into sharper relief, for some, Emma’s integrity and honesty, or her “elect” nature. They forget polygamy. This said, Emma was used in other religious debates that centered on polygamy. Indeed, the RLDS church

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64 Ibid., 1.
65 Ibid., 3.
joined the rest of the U.S. in speaking against this practice largely based on Emma’s testimony against her husband’s involvement in any such practice.66

Other constructed views of Emma become apparent in RLDS teachings about her. Two sources in particular are of interest here: the first comes from research materials collected at request of a Sunday School teacher, the second, in an address from Emma’s grandson, President Frederick Smith. The Sunday School materials create an image of Emma not unlike the image presented in Recollections of the Pioneers of Lee County. Indeed, it shows her as “a nice girl...[with] a world of common sense,” a girl who was virtually perfect to be a wife, through her voice training and ability in “everyday niceties...[and] housekeeping.”67 Of her later life, it states that she was

a woman who crossed angry [sic.] rivers with her children clinging to her and with her husband’s papers under her arm, who slept on hard floors so that his friends might ease their fever racked bodies in her beds, who presented his case before governors with inspiration, who attended him when he lay in hiding a fugitive with a price on his head, who admonished him onward to Zion when his hands slackened the least bit, who was able to say, “Thy will be done, O God,” when the time came to say goodbye to him and to watch him ride away to die like the Savior did....When the book of gold in which the deeds of men are written is opened and men are judged it will certainly be found that the Church and mankind are eternally indebted [sic.] to this woman.68

For the RLDS, Emma was an important character in their religious history, a character worthy of emulation. Yet even with this record, seemingly protected from claims and debates about succession, and thus safe for all facts about Emma’s life, they forget her involvement in the Relief Society. There is not one mention of it. While it can be stated that they forgot it because it had become an LDS organization, the RLDS church never reinstating it, it can also be said that

66 Even today the debate lingers as evidence in this article, stating that “Church members, wanting to protect Joseph Jr.’s good name, embraced Emma Smith’s 1879 testimony given in the last weeks of her life that disavowed any connection between her husband and the aberrant marital practice....Today, Community of Christ acknowledges that there is no conclusive evidence that unquestionably links Joseph Jr. to polygamy.” “What position...?” in Frequently Asked Questions, Op. Cit.
68 Ibid., 2, emphasis added.
this “feminist” society would have undermined their carefully constructed image of Emma as the perfect, submissive wife. Bringing up the Relief Society would have portrayed Emma as a strong-willed, vibrant leader and touched on the contested issues of the woman’s sphere.

The RLDS view, like other memory, was not stagnant. Frederick Smith’s speech, while given in 1945, well after the period directly concerning this study, shows the change wrought in the RLDS view of Emma. She is no longer used in the succession question, for that is not the primary question anymore; rather in his talk, Smith specifies 13 reasons why Emma should be venerated. Eight of the thirteen focus on her role as wife and mother, with one of the largest sections explaining that “as a mother it was her duty to keep her place in the home.”

This speech came at a time in the nation’s history when more and more women were seeking jobs and opportunities outside of the womanly sphere of the home—a continuation, really, of the battle centering on the “cult of domesticity” notion from the nineteenth century. Moreover, World War II, the war which had caused so many women to enter the workforce, or at least seek higher paying jobs, was drawing to a close, raising concerns about whether or not women would quickly reenter the domestic sphere. Here, as in the Sunday School materials, Emma’s association with the Relief Society is quietly left out. Moreover one of the points states that she was “not inordinately ambitious,” totally disregarding her determined declaration that Joseph III was to be the next prophet in the church—an ambition which led her to discredit Brigham

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69 Frederick Madison Smith, “Articles” found in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University.
70 Norton, Op. Cit., 350. Norton explains on this same page that “historians once thought that “Rosie the Riveter”...was an unemployed housewife before the war.” She continues with “[but] now it is clear that many of the “Rosies” who sought high-paying position in defense industries had previously worked in typical, poorly paid “women’s jobs.” This said, it is obvious from the primary sources written at the time that many women were entering the workforce who had not worked before the war (see Norton, Op. Cit., 351-360—particularly 358-360 about women working in Utah).
Young as well as leading her to remain in Nauvoo behind the other Saints. Thus, Emma’s memory is constructed to push for the traditional woman’s role in the home. As Michael Kammen states, “the inventions of the past (as tradition) may occur as a means of resisting change or of achieving innovations.” In other words, Emma’s memory, as a tradition of the RLDS past, occurred, or was constructed, to resist the social change brought about by women working during and after WWII.

The RLDS view of Emma is most definitely a product of social and religious turmoil. Here also, Emma is a religious battle flag—waved as the testament for Joseph III’s succession to his father over Brigham Young’s claims, as well as the RLDS claims against polygamy, as in the earlier views. Later, she is used as a social banner for a specific woman’s role. As with every construction, key points of Emma’s story are left out, while other points were capitalized on in order to form a solid foundation from which the constructor could build. Whether it was forgetting her involvement in the Relief Society, or forgetting her strong and vibrant will, bits and pieces of her story are left out in order to reconstruct the “perfect, religious woman.”

The LDS view

In contrast to the RLDS memories of Emma, very much alive throughout the end of the 1800s, the LDS view leaves something to be desired, particularly for the roughly hundred-year period from 1845 to the 1940s. Officially speaking, during this time there was nothing written about Emma in LDS public histories. One book, entitled *Women of Mormondom*, published in 1877, goes on about the “chosen women of the latter-day dispensation” for over 550 pages.

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72 William Adams (1822-1901), *Autobiography*, 1894 found in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University, 38. On a visit with Emma, she reportedly states that she “considered it to be [Joseph III’s] right” to be president of the Church.


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without ever once mentioning Emma’s name. Mother Smith and Eliza R. Snow (not only a General Relief Society president—like Emma—and renowned LDS poetess and songwriter, but a reported plural wife to Joseph Smith) are two of the many key players here.\textsuperscript{74} It is interesting that such a woman, the wife of the prophet, the first president of the Relief Society and such an obvious player in the LDS early days, should be totally forgotten in the public histories. As public officials know, though, the best way to help an enemy’s cause is to acknowledge it. Accordingly, by destroying Emma’s memory, they were destroying RLDS claims and arguments against Brigham Young and polygamy.\textsuperscript{75} The LDS church was very aware that “there was still power and authority associated with the Smith family, both dead and living.”\textsuperscript{76}

Alongside this is the acknowledgement that the RLDS church was not the only group to be opposing the LDS in Utah. Groups against polygamy “were scattered across the political, social, and religious spectrum...virtually everyone...opposed polygamy.”\textsuperscript{77} In addition to these groups, there were other religious groups besides the RLDS who opposed Brigham Young’s succession to the presidency.\textsuperscript{78} As opposition to polygamy grew, the LDS church did not have the means to debate with all these groups. Thus the next option was to publicly forget the other groups. The struggling church could not acknowledge Emma in its public histories without the fear of losing more to her persuasions; rather they focused on women who had “kept the faith,” like Eliza R. Snow and Mary Fielding Smith, the wife of Hyrum who was also martyred at Carthage. In comparison to these, Emma was, or had become, an apostate to the faith.

\textsuperscript{75} Hall, \textit{Op. Cit.}, 448. Here, rather than referring to the RLDS and LDS question, Hall is referring to the South’s driving out of Black politicians, she states that by “destroying even the memory,” white politicians destroyed “the possibility of an interracial opposition.”
\textsuperscript{78} “The Mormons left Nauvoo in 1846...” in \textit{Frequently Asked Questions, Op. Cit.}
All this taken into account, it is interesting how many times Emma comes up in private
histories; it is as if the private memories of Emma were kept alive because so many had lived
near her and seen her and the Prophet. Thus Emma’s memory became a link to the Prophet
Joseph. One private history comes from Enoch B. Trip’s diaries, in which he tells of a trip
back to Nauvoo in November of 1855, not ten years after the Saints had traveled West. A
year before his actual visit, he was told that “the widow of the Prophet Joseph Smith...had
married a Gentile by the name of Badaman [sic.] and that She had lost the Spirit of
Mormonism and also all her children.”79 During his visit he mentions Emma’s bitterness
towards Brigham Young, her statements against gathering with the Saints in Utah, and
then writes of Joseph III claiming that placing “pencil on paper that his Father converses
with him.”80 The author denounces this, stating that Joseph III was receiving revelation
in a way in which “God...never [has], nor ever will, converse with the children of men.”81
He then relates a visit with “the Prophets [sic.] Mother,” Lucy Smith. In contrast to his
view of Emma, he calls Lucy “a great Mother in Isarail [sic.].”82 Like Women of
Mormondom, Trip sees Lucy as a Saint still and a chosen woman of God. Emma, on the
other hand, is seen as an apostate, in his view. Part of this, as portrayed above, seems to
stem from her marriage to Bidamon, which effectively erased her many years as Joseph’s
wife. Another part of this negative view of her in personal memories stems from her
children’s lack of interest in the LDS church, as well as Joseph III’s apparent obvious

79 Enoch B. Trip, “Papers, 1841-1908” in Diaries Vol. 1 found in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B.
Lee Library at Brigham Young University, IO 1. Enoch Trip was a school teacher, having taught the Smith children
when the Saints were still in Nauvoo (p. 259).
80 Ibid., 259.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
misunderstanding of LDS gospel doctrines. Here, then, is another example of how Emma’s gender helped to shape others’ views: Emma’s success as a person is in direct proportion to her success as a mother and wife (a “good” wife would marry within the church,\textsuperscript{83} not to a “blasphemer.”)\textsuperscript{84} Totally forgotten is how she cared and tended to her family and husbands, the hard work she did, and the lives she touched within the LDS community.

Less favorable accounts like Enoch Trip’s are most frequent in these early LDS private histories. In a letter written to Utah from the East in 1860 (the same year that Joseph III became the second RLDS prophet, and five years after Trip’s visit), Samuel Smith extolled Joseph III not as a blasphemer or imposter, but as “open and friendly,” thinking well of him.\textsuperscript{85} Nonetheless, while celebrating the “young Prophet,” he discredits Emma almost with every turn. He even goes so far as to blame Joseph’s anti-polygamy notions on Emma’s influence; for, despite the “young Prophet” and his assertions to the contrary, he states that “it is evident that Joseph has been under the influence of his mother....[so that] it appears that his mind has been formed against the principle of Polygamy.”\textsuperscript{86} Later, while still discussing Emma and her family, he states briefly that “Emma was pritty [sic.] much the same as she use to be, she has that same way about her which is very Strange.”\textsuperscript{87} Interesting that a lady so renowned in her earlier

\textsuperscript{83} Welter, \textit{Op. Cit.} mentions the same thing (see footnote 5), where women were to influence their husbands to do (and be) good.
\textsuperscript{84} Samuel H. B. Smith, “Letter, 1860” found in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University, 5. Samuel Smith states that “Bidiman [sic.] is the same blasphemer.” Emma is often faulted by early Saints for marrying outside the church, this is but one example of that.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid, 5.
days for her goodness and leadership should be called “Strange” as if she was and had always been thus. Consequently, Samuel H.B. Smith must purposefully forget the revelation from the Prophet in which Emma is an “elect lady” of God, as well as the many virtues the Saints proclaimed she possessed during her time among them.

One of the most favorable among personal LDS histories is William Adams’ *Autobiography*, which mentions in detail the visit Adams had with Emma while returning from a mission in the Eastern United States some 30 years after the Saints had left Nauvoo. He speaks favorably of Major Bidamon, Emma’s second husband, and then of the “very plesant [sic.] time” conversing and eating with Emma. His account is very interesting in that he mentions Emma’s question to him about how the Smith family would be received if they were to join the Saints in Utah. He replies that “nothing would please the Saints better than to see the Family of the Prophet returning to the body of the church.” This enthusiastic reply, in and of itself, shows just how powerful Emma, with her relationship to Joseph, still was. Despite several reports that Emma was apostate, she undoubtedly would have been welcomed back by the Saints (for it would imply she was wrong about the succession question and would quiet her statements against polygamy), becoming again one of the “chosen women of the latter-day dispensation.” It is also interesting to note that this last example, really the only one that is remotely favorable, is also the latest one, written in 1894 of a trip taken around 1875. As the past grew more distant, old disgruntlement was forgotten. Adams remembers the rift between the RLDS and LDS churches still;

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89 Adams, *Op. Cit.*, 37-38. William Adams simply states that he was “a little acquainted with” Emma some 30 years before—hence part of his interest in seeing her and the Mansion House (p. 38).
however he is much more favorable towards Bidamon and seems to still enjoy Emma’s company. He was more distant from the lynching at Carthage and the discord brought about after it, as Emma and Joseph III’s followers left the main body of the Saints.

Despite the many private memories of Emma, it took about 100 years for Emma to reemerge in LDS public histories. It seems to have begun with her selection of hymns, which the LDS church still used.\(^1\) Moreover, the earliest biographies about Emma strive to explain why she could not have come to Utah, as if apologizing for her actions.\(^2\) The early references also capitalize on how diligently Emma served, how she loved Joseph and how Joseph loved her.\(^3\) As time progressed, the polygamy issue lost popularity, the battle between the RLDS and LDS churches ceased, and Emma was able to enter the LDS history. Her memory was no longer a battle standard used by the RLDS church or a battle cry for the anti-polygamy groups. Her memory had become safe through forgetting those events and debates.

**Historical Memory**

As the views of Emma show and historian Jacquelyn Hall has argued, “historical memory [can] become both a cultural obsession and a powerful political weapon...knitting people

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\(^1\) Vesta Pierce Crawford, “Book Drafts, ca. 1950” found in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University, Box 1, Folder 8. This box not only had the actual book drafts, but also contained the copies from which information was taken for the book. Folder 8 contained many copies of articles about Emma’s selection of sacred hymns. One article in particular caught my eye. It was from an LDS magazine, containing no date, by E. Cecil McGavin, called “Emma Smith’s collection of Hymns,” states that “we have neglected to impress upon the minds of this generation how diligently [Emma] fulfilled this divine mission to which she was called” (p. 38). These are the earliest references to Emma in any good sort of way in the public record.

\(^2\) Ibid., Box 1, Folder 4. The book drafts are full of how hard it was for Emma, and then, on page 181, states Emma fell out with Brigham over the property she felt she should receive.

\(^3\) Widtsoe, *Op. Cit.*, 35-36 (also mentioned in other biographies). Elder John A. Widtsoe, who wrote this particular history, was a member of the LDS Quorum of the Twelve, the highest governing body in the LDS church—this thus was taken by many Saints as doctrine; that he is kind to Emma’s memory is most remarkable considering the rifts which had been.
together in ‘imagined communities.’” Her memory is used both as an obsession as well as a weapon—the RLDS used her memory as a political weapon against the LDS, while in recent years, her memory for the LDS has become an obsession. I was struck by this the other day while walking through Deseret Books, a popular LDS bookstore. Pictures portraying Emma accompanied the many pictures of Joseph. Books about them both were numerous, as were books focusing just on Emma. Most stunning however, was the book entitled *Emma and Joseph*—always in the book titles containing both their names, Emma is placed second. This title has thus come to represent how Emma’s story and her memory has become more and more popular in LDS ‘pop culture.’ Her history is constructed by many “from scattered, surviving shards”—for Emma left very few written documents of her own (just a few letters from the years after her husband’s death remain). History, like the memories of Emma, is a construct. However, unlike the memories of Emma, history is “an ‘intellectual and secular production,’” wherein the story of the past is built on the foundations of the knowledge the historian has of that past. Memory, while also constructed, is often viewed as “self-serving and inexact.” “Memory is not history...[history] is the enemy of memory.” However, as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall points out, memory and history are very closely intertwined. One builds on the other—the memories constructed of Emma by the LDS biographers in the 1950s were made within the history already constructed of the early days of the church and Joseph’s life. As much as the impersonal historian would like to draw a distinctive line between “memory” and “history,” it is increasingly apparent that there is no line. Memory is used to “breathe life into history” while history, in

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96 Ibid., 440, emphasis added.
97 Ibid.
turn, revives the memories long thought dead.\textsuperscript{100} Hence the term “historical memory” is used here; for Emma’s memory is the combination of both “memory” and “history.” It emphasizes how both memory and history are used together in the construction of the past.

This concept of constructed memory is by no means a new or outstanding discovery in the field of history. Alfred F. Young, in \textit{The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution}, published in 1990, goes into great detail in explaining the differences between public and private memory, as well as memory in general. He speaks of the “subjective experience of remembering,”\textsuperscript{101} and how the implications of the new psychological understanding of memory “is constructed...not made in isolation but in conversations with others that occur in the context of community, broader politics, and social dynamics.”\textsuperscript{102} Memories of Emma reflect this concept: the “world” view, the RLDS view and the LDS view were constructed in light of other memories of her. The RLDS view responded to LDS criticisms of her in its private memoirs and its obvious neglect in the public histories. The “world” view constructed her memory from the social constraints on womanhood then being debated, or the broader politics of the nineteenth century. That is not to say that every memory is a political statement, but everything that is remembered—even when it is false memory, like the magazine articles describing Emma as having “black eyes”\textsuperscript{103}—holds clues to what the author of the historical memory thought or felt about a particular subject and the larger world.\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{100} Young, \textit{Op. Cit.}, 87-91. The second half of Young’s book deals with the question of how George Robert Twelves Hewes, a shoemaker of no particular famous nature, came to be a hero in the 1820s—as he and the Boston “Tea Party” are rediscovered by the public.

\textsuperscript{101} Young, \textit{Op. Cit.}, xiii.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., xiv. Young is quoting David Thelen, the editor of the \textit{Journal of American History}.

\textsuperscript{103} \textit{Lippincott’s, Op. Cit.}

\textsuperscript{104} Young, \textit{Op. Cit.}, xii.
Likewise, why something is *forgotten*, or "swept under the rug,"\(^{105}\) holds essential clues to the world of the past. In 1998, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall published an article in which she stated that "turning memories into stories...[is] a potent form of forgetting...[it] depends on the suppression and repression of contrary, disruptive memories" including others' memories of the same event—and I would add, others' memories of the same person.\(^{106}\) As shown earlier, much if not most, of Emma's actual history is forgotten in the memories preserved by individuals and constructed by the public. Both public and private memory then becomes "the willful forgetting and a purposeful remembering of [history]."\(^{107}\) It becomes necessary to forget in order to construct a congruent whole. All historical memory remembers as well as forgets in its creation of the past. It is in finding what is forgotten or remembered that the astute observer can more fully understand the author's world and their intent in retelling the past.

**Conclusion**

With all this in mind, it must be noted that these authors and "memory keepers," if you will, felt they were presenting the true and complete history—many Saints *really did* see Emma as an apostate just as strongly as RLDS members *really did* feel she was a prophetess. Just as this argument could not encapsulate all the arguments and definitions about memory and history, so it is with others' historical memories of Emma. There is simply too much to tell to remember everything about any one event, much less an entire life's story. Emma was used in the above views because she was a pillar in the communities she lived in, because she so well represented, in their honest eyes, what they were arguing for or against. There is no doubt now, *looking back*,

\(^{105}\) S. Gordon, "The Liberty...", 847 refers to how the suffragists "swept under the rug" the polygamy issue to lessen its deadening effects on their movement.


that her memory was a construction of the social, political and religious winds of the nineteenth century, as well as a result of purposeful forgetting. However, hindsight is always 20/20, and thus for the people then and there, it must be said that they defined her how they defined their own lives—according to the religious, social and political turmoil they experienced. Moreover, people themselves forget about “most of the scenes and sensations that constitute the vast rush of ‘experience’” in day-to-day events. 108 It is thus not surprising that scenes and sensations are left out of Emma’s experience. If anything, in writing this essay, I realized that the historian’s job is not so much to construct the past as a whole to the reader, as it is to present the memories from the past and let the appreciative audience draw their own conclusions. As Hall states, the best historical writing is “writing that admits its own limits, writing that respects the integrity of one’s subjects rather than treating them as extensions of oneself, writing that [like memory] keeps the blessed conversation between the past and the present, the dead and the living, alive.” 109

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