

THE DIARY OF MARY OAKLEY BARTINE

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MARY BARTINE's brief but lively account, written between February 24 and March 9, 1897, bridges the gap between the cultural expectations of young women of the mid-Victorian era and of our own time. As Mary enters adulthood at the beginning of the twentieth century, she is neither a dependent Victorian nor a liberated woman of our day; her experiences illustrate the continuing influence of the past along with the mitigating changes effected by the passage of time.

But these considerations are not the immediate concern of the adolescent daughter of John and Margaret Bartine, who lived in the New Jersey town of Somerville in what she describes as "comfortable circumstances." Mary's diary portrays a strong involvement with school, church, a closely knit coterie of female friends, parties, and a young man named Alex—although not necessarily in that order.

With a diffidence common to women who were not encouraged to be active in public life or to have their thoughts appear in print, Mary begins her essay with an apologia for its existence, and a consideration of her present status. But within these mannered and obviously polished paragraphs which disclaim any literary pretensions there lurks an expectation that it could be read by someone in the distant future:

This is not, as may be supposed, for the benefit of my children, if indeed I should bestow any descendants upon coming generations, but it is intended simply for my own amusement in future years. To begin with I am seventeen years old, having attained that dignity on the sixth of May 1896. It is now February the twenty-fourth 1897 and May seems a step in the distance.

One is tempted to speculate how the diary survived to be read eighty-seven years later.

But Mary's speculation about the future does not preclude an active interest in her relationships with her peers, especially with the other five girls who form the club they call "The Jolly S.F.J."¹;

¹ There is no explanation of the initials of the "Jolly S.F.J." in Bartine's diary or poem.

and it is precisely this sense of camaraderie and enthusiasm that links Bartine with the authors of those letters and diaries analyzed by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg in her article, "The Female World of Love and Ritual." Written between 1760 and 1880, these unpublished documents substantiate the existence of a "female world of varied yet highly structured relationships which appear to have been an essential aspect of American society."² The development of supportive networks among women at this time was due in large part to the strict gender-role differentiation within the family and society which led eventually to the emotional segregation of men and women.³ The actuality of emotional segregation underlies much of Bartine's narrative and should be kept in mind if we are to understand those influences in her life that she unquestioningly accepts.

Central to Bartine's recollections are fond memories of the adventures and pranks of her girl's club, the S.F.J., which is celebrated in a separate poem that survives with the diary into the twentieth century. It relates in detail their excursions to Rocky Hill and Chimney Rock and a scary trick played on the six at a slumber party. They were not very different from the school girls at mid-century who banded together to endure the crisis of adolescence as they socialized by giving teas and balls; Bartine's group not only gave parties but scheduled weekly Thursday meetings which occupied a prominent place in their social experience. Together they explored the larger world and dared to engage in "unlady-like" behavior: "This afternoon six of us girls walked abreast in Main Street. We ought to have been ashamed." Significantly this diary owes its existence to the mutual support derived from friendship within the group: "Today I took a walk with Bess and we decided to write diaries."

The emotional segregation of the sexes postulated by Smith-Rosenberg is amusingly exemplified in Bartine's description of a dancing class and a Saturday night party. In both instances separate groups of boys and girls converge on a central meeting point and reluctantly interact with each other:

² Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth Century America," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1975, p. 1.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

March 2nd: Irving Outwater was oblivious to everyone but Bert Case although he did do his duty and dance with all of us. He danced with me twice but I think he did it because he had to.

The behavior of Bartine's girls continues to deviate little from that of their earlier counterparts insofar as they refrain from same-sex criticism and allow themselves to express a great deal of hostility toward peer-group boys. In this case, however, the hostility is mutual and leads Mary to express an uncharacteristic opinion:

March 2nd: Will Chambers did his best to make me uncomfortable by making cutting remarks so everyone could hear. . . . Will Chambers, D.K. & Irving were all on the sofa watching me & to all appearances making fun of me . . . I have decided I don't like Saturday night parties.

True to form, female gatherings produce only positive comments. In the entry dated February 24th, women met at a card party are described as likeable, "cunning," "very nice" and "lovely." Perhaps this favorable reaction is due in some measure to the fact that all the women, newcomers included, were related through friendship or family ties.

Since Bartine consistently evaluates her reactions to persons of either sex, it is significant that she remains silent regarding her opinion of a young man named Alex. Unlike the writers of the Smith-Rosenberg manuscripts who tended to refer to all young men, especially potential suitors, in a formal and oblique manner, Bartine freely writes of her visits with Alex—their trips to church and outings on horseback. Only an admission of anxiety provides a clue that her interest is more than casual.

Feb. 24th: On the corner I met Alex who was spending Sunday in town. I came up home & worried because Alex did not come, but finally he did about five o'clock and he staid to supper and took me to C.E. (Christian Endeavor) and church.

It may be that the origin of this silence is as much cultural as it is personal.

There is little doubt that in some cases silence can reveal more than words; and the loudest silence in this diary is the omission of any mention of Mary's father, aside from the fact that he lives in Somerville with the family. One tends to look for him when workmen keep the house in an uproar as new flooring is being laid down,

when the massive job of clean-up is left to the women, when the Mother becomes temporarily bedridden, and when company comes to visit, but he is never there—in her consciousness at least. It is tempting to attribute this absence to the influence of gender role differentiation which is responsible for the strict division of labor that cloisters women within their households and involves men in their business to the exclusion of all else.

Despite the dominant theme of adolescent relationships that runs so strongly throughout Bartine's diary, it is possible to discern varying cultural influences from the past that also affect her life. Ann Douglas notes in *The Feminization of American Culture* that "most historians agree that America began its momentous shift from a productive to a consumer economy in the decades between 1860 and 1890,"⁴ and that women's economic role changed from the performance of indispensable work for the maintenance of their families to that of non-productive consumers.

Although freed from the drudgery of maintaining a self-sufficient household, Bartine followed in a more relaxed fashion the tradition central to mother-daughter relations—that of apprenticeship in the domestic arts of housewifery and motherhood. Smith-Rosenberg observes that "late adolescent girls temporarily took over the household management from their mothers"⁵ to share in the skills passed on from previous generations and to form bonds born of shared experience. Apparently Mary Bartine had been similarly taught since she was able, when the occasion demanded, to confidently and efficiently assume the role of nurse and housekeeper:

March 9th: I have been a housekeeper and a sicknurse combined for the last few days. . . . That night I came home with a frightful toothache and in the middle of the night Mamma was taken sick with Gripp. . . . Meanwhile I had to keep house and take care of Mama and now since she is up and getting better I am going right on with the housekeeping.

Bartine's domestic training differed from that of most women of her grandmother's generation since she was not required to perform any of the more productive aspects of housekeeping e.g. cooking, sewing, etc. Because they belonged to a more affluent

⁴ Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon Books, 1977), p. 77.

⁵ Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," p. 16.

family, neither Mary nor her mother were required to sew but made use of the services of a professional dressmaker:

Feb. 26th: We had Mrs. Laner the dressmaker here fixing a dress for us to wear to Will Nolan's party tomorrow night. She made a new waist to my old green shally and it really looks very nice.

As members of the affluent middle class, both women conform to Ann Douglas' perception of the expensively educated, well-treated, well-dressed woman whose function was to "advertise male earnings and also compensate themselves for their own lost productivity."⁶ In keeping with the changing role of women as the primary and often sole producer of all the household's needs, the Bartines have relegated much of the work to two servants, Aaron and Etta, whom Mary mentions in passing as a presence in their home.

Beside the mastery of domestic skills, young girls of earlier generations actively participated in the "visiting and social activities necessary to find a husband."⁷ This custom continued to thrive in Bartine's social sphere. Her diary records a total of ten visits within a period of thirteen days, with Mary personally making six of the calls and receiving some of the remainder with her mother. Visits for Mary were not perfunctory calls but social affairs of longer duration and included suppers, card parties, dances and overnight visits with friends with whom she conversed late into the night.

In keeping with Smith-Rosenberg's understanding that the world of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century woman was "bound by home, church and the institution of visiting,"⁸ we find that even at the turn of the century the church occupied a prominent place in the lives of Mary Bartine and her friends. To investigate Bartine's particular religious ideals would be out of place in this discussion because she writes little about them. What can bear scrutiny is the social aspect of church-going in the lives of contemporary young women. The diary consistently confirms that the entire day of Sunday was customarily devoted to church activities often attended in company with her girlfriends. On each of the Sundays recorded, Bartine participated in three to four church functions which she sometimes attended with Alex when he was in town. The church

⁶ Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, p. 71.

⁷ Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," p. 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*

provided an approved and consistent focus for the social gatherings of young people—especially young women. In the entry dated March 9th Bartine describes a typical Sunday:

Sunday morning was communion & Joe Parker & Walter Creator joined the church. Beside them three other men joined but Joe was the only one who had to be baptized. Sunday afternoon Lizzie Long and her cousin Clara went to Sunday school with us. Our class was very large but when Lathrop Haynes asked us to write the catechism none of us could do it so we read it & felt ashamed of ourselves. Sunday night I went to C.E. alone & read a verse. After C.E. we three, Mary P., Mabel & I went to the second church where they had an anniversary for the Y.W.C.A.

But Mary's life was not merely a carefree round of social affairs and Sunday school classes; a more somber thread of sickness and pain runs through her narrative. A protracted "siege at the dentists" occupies a prominent place in her diary and the modern reader is given a glimpse into the way dentistry was practiced near the turn of the century.

Thursday I went to Plainfield to the dentists & sat for two hours in the chair with a rubber mask & two steel clamps in my mouth. The doctor filled the tooth in which he killed the nerve. It did not hurt so very much but was dreadfully tedious. . . . That night I came home with a frightful toothache.

Cases of pneumonia and gripe are common occurrences among family and friends during the winter months and Mary seems to have more than her share of discomfort. Within a span of two weeks she notes that she had been "laid up in bed with a pain," and that boils on her feet prevented her from wearing shoes and attending classes for a day.

It is difficult to know to what extent Mary's education was designed to prepare her to fill the role that earlier tradition had assigned to women as housewives excluded from partnership or competition with men in the marketplace. Mary's diary notes that she attended a co-educational school, attended classes in physics and French, and took private, advanced lessons in French on Saturdays. The extra attention given to French is a bit mystifying since her written English shows a need for improvement in spelling, sentence structure and organization of ideas.

But the patchwork arrangement of thoughts in Mary's diary

doesn't detract from the provocative quality of the questions it raises. The last page of her little copybook ends with "continued in book 2." Since a second notebook is unavailable, one is led to wonder if it had been written and then lost, if her attempt at diary keeping had been abandoned and, most especially, if the passage of time justified her statement that "I am as happy as any girl my age can expect to be & that of course is very happy for this time in ones life is said to be the brightest." But then, diaries are intriguing because they never tell the complete story and raise as many questions as they answer.