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Beverly Wilson Palmer's "Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott" - Book Review

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The frustration of the Rhwymbooks project is the lack of information available for readers to begin to answer these questions. No information is given about the originals of these pamphlets, other than their place and date of publication. The appearance of these texts should prompt research. It would have been helpful if the publishers had, at the least, indicated where the originals can be found, whether they have changed such features as spelling and punctuation, and whether any other copies or editions of these texts are known.

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Beverly Wilson Palmer, ed., *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), pp. 580, including appendix and index; front material includes biographical introduction with notes, editorial principles, key to editorial notations, chronology, biographical directory, and guide to Quaker terminology. ISBN: 0-252-02674-8. Hardback. \$55

Admirers of the nineteenth century reformer Lucretia Coffin Mott, as well as all researchers of Quakerism, women's studies, and reform movements, will welcome this long awaited collection. Earlier works, such as Margaret Hope Bacon's *Valiant Friend: The Life of Lucretia Mott* (1980, 1999), and Dana Greene's 1980 compilation, *Lucretia Mott: Her Complete Speeches and Sermons*, provide invaluable information regarding Mott and her accomplishments. This volume of authentically transcribed and meticulously annotated letters makes accessible a new wealth of detail on the life, thought, and milieu of this remarkable American Quaker woman.

Publication of the letters is an outcome of the Lucretia Coffin Mott Papers Project, founded in 1997 to identify and compile a database of all extant Mott correspondence. The project's principal editor, Beverly Wilson Palmer, and assistants Holly Byers Ochoa and Carol Faulkner, have identified some 950 surviving letters and letter fragments that Mott wrote during her long lifetime (1793-1880). They have chosen to transcribe, edit, and annotate 200 of those that especially reflect the central issues and themes of her public life. An appendix further identifies and indicates the current location of all existing letters both to and from Mott.

Those wishing to explore the selected letters would do well to read the section entitled 'Editorial Principles', which explains the basis for the choice of letters and the manner in which the editors have elected to transcribe and annotate them. Mott wrote most frequently to family members and friends who doubtless understood her unique abbreviations, inconsistent spellings and capitalization, and abrupt changes of subject. The editors display remarkable skill in deciphering words, clarifying ambiguous shifts, and – most commendable of all – identifying the countless individuals, movements, issues, and frequently obscure happenings alluded to in Mott's letters. For readers unfamiliar with

Quaker terminology, they provide a list of practical definitions.

Palmer's introductory essay on Mott's life and work is brief but insightful. Its title, 'Wife, Mother, Quaker, Activist', is descriptive of the woman as she reveals herself through her correspondence. Mott is best known today for her activism on behalf of women's rights, antislavery, and peace, but the letters disclose that her primary concerns were her family and her Quakerism. Although the editors deliberately omit letters that deal solely with domestic matters, the bulk of the selections contain countless allusions to the activities, health, and welfare of family members. Only slightly less evident throughout the letters are references to the beliefs and actions of Quakers. The letters verify what other Mott scholars, such as Bacon and Greene, concluded – that Mott's Quaker heritage, itself a family legacy, was foundational to her reformist activism.

Arrangement of the letters is by periods reflecting four different phases of Mott's involvement in public life; each section includes an introductory explanation of the biographical and historical context of the selected documents. Particularly during the first two periods, November 1813 – July 1840, and December 1840 – December 1856, Mott's letters reveal significant details regarding the stresses and strains in nineteenth century Quakerism.

As members of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Lucretia and her husband James Mott were intimately involved in the events that led in the late 1820s to the division of the Society of Friends into Orthodox and Hicksite branches. The Motts' convictions concerning the primacy of obedience to the Light within rather than to human authorities or to Scripture led them to follow the Hicksite faction. Some members of their immediate and extended families (including Lucretia's sister and James's mother), as well as close friends, chose the Orthodox branch. Mott's letters make known not only the personal anguish this involved, but also the profound effect the Orthodox/Hicksite split had on personal and social relationships within both groups of Friends.

Mott's letters also expose the often-glaring divisions among Hicksites, particularly over the appropriate role of Quakers in dealing with one of the issues with which she was most concerned – antislavery. Should Quakers be abolitionists? Should they join with persons of other religions (or no religion) to address slavery or, indeed, any other social evil? Many Hicksites evidently disagreed with Mott's affirmative answers to such questions. Particularly among Hicksite Quakers, there still existed a leaning toward Quietism and the conviction that Quakers should remain a 'peculiar people'. Many devout Hicksites believed that public activism, even to combat such a grave evil as slavery, showed insufficient reliance on God's power. While Hicksites are commonly described as more tolerant of diversity than the Orthodox, Mott's letters illuminate the rank intolerance that often existed within Hicksite meetings toward members who did not conform to the usual mold.

A number of Mott's letters during the 1840s, especially those addressed to family members and close Quaker friends, refer (usually acerbically) to George F. White, a then popular New York Hicksite minister. White used the harshest

language to denounce all Hicksite Quakers who participated in any of the principal reform movements of the day – particularly abolitionism. He and his followers succeeded in bringing about the disownment by New York Yearly Meeting of three well-known Hicksite abolitionists; Isaac Hopper, the most prominent of the three, was the father-in-law of Mott's daughter. White and his supporters, some of them also Hicksite ministers, then sought Mott's disownment by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, fortunately without success.

In a letter addressed to Edward N. Hallowell in February 1870, responding to an inquiry regarding Quakers' support for abolitionism, she describes pithily the actions taken in various Hicksite meetings against members who supported the abolitionist cause, including Mott herself. The charge brought against her was that 'she had lost her gift in the ministry'; an explanatory note indicates that she did not receive a traveling minute from 1843 – 1858, and would have been denied one had she requested it. Nevertheless, Mott notes that she had always felt sufficient support within the Society, particularly from its younger members, to continue her travels speaking against slavery.

The Hallowell letter with its accompanying annotations is but one example of the kind of detail this collection makes available. The Mott Papers Project's editorial staff and advisory board have performed a thoroughly commendable service in producing such a valuable resource.

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