

Belle Cowdrey's Diary

Some diarists expose remarkably revealing details about themselves, and the era in which they lived. A diary, because it was not intended for public consumption, may provide considerable insight into the author's character. The diary of Belle Cowdrey in The History Center's collection is a notable example.

Belle Cowdrey (1838-1922) the only daughter of coach maker, Adam Cowdrey, had the will and the money to resist societal pressures that dictated marriage and motherhood as the only option. Still, her desire for an education and an intellectual life somewhere other than "quiet Ithaca" was thwarted.

In the first half of 1858 Belle's mother was away and Belle was intensely pursuing studies in Latin, Geometry, and Algebra at the Ithaca Academy. Additionally she perused the standard young ladies fare of her day, Tennyson, Longfellow and Bryant, but also works by Fanny Kemble Butler and the very radical Margaret Fuller Ossoli. She wrote of her "cherished hope of going to the Albany Female AcademyI will not think of the possibility of being disappointed."

However, on July 6, Belle wrote, "Mother returned tonight, we were not expecting her. I had started out for a walk, and seeing the omnibus stop at our house, came back and found her here, I suppose there will be a change now. I have been a free agent for the last 6 months trying to improve my mind as much as possible, now I fear I will have to give up all my intellectual pursuits." Her fears were apparently realized as the diary now detailed a round of social activities, much less reading, and the Albany Female Academy was not mentioned again.

Belle was young and wealthy and perhaps pretty. She had a circle of feminine friends and the Cowdrey home was a magnet for aspiring young men. Belle, however, was disdainful and wrote, "I never expect to meet my ideal, and I think I shall never meet a man whom I can love, as I have dreamed of loving, therefore I shall never love at all."

Her diary is full of waspish comments on her unwanted suitors. She gave them unflattering nicknames including Expire, Immoral Tendencies, Peculiar Circumstance, and Anatomy. "This evening 'Expire' came to take me out sleigh riding. I would not have gone with him, had it not been that the sleighing was so fine, and I had been wishing for a ride all the afternoon." "'Expire' was here again - Would not I like to be the 'expiration' of him though; he had all his best fixins on. Just came from

the barber's shop, as he informed me no less than half a dozen times; as if I cared if he had been to Guinea. I was cool as a snowball, did not invite him to come again, hope he will not." "A 'Peculiar Circumstance' attended me home from school today... I suppose he thought I would invite him to call again, but, if he did he was greatly mistaken."

The family lived at 128 East Buffalo Street near DeWitt Park in Ithaca during Belle's childhood and early youth. In 1868 her father purchased the house built in 1831 by Jacob McCormick at 408 East State. Belle would live in this substantial Italianate mansion until her death at age 84, for many years alone with her parrots.

Her lively diaries detail life in Ithaca before and during the early part of the Civil War. They are filled with descriptions of creek baptisms, funerals, sleighing, female friendships, and other customs.

Mary White is the archival assistant at The History Center in Tompkins County
