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# Balancing Public and Private Lives in the Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott and Florence Kelley

Beverly Wilson Palmer

Despite their obvious differences, Lucretia Coffin Mott and Florence Kelley share some striking similarities. As prominent women reformers, they embraced three passionate concerns. First, they battled injustice to women. Lucretia Mott (1793–1880) helped organize the historic Woman’s Rights Convention at Seneca Falls in 1848 and constantly spoke out for women’s rights, not only at the ballot box but in marriage, courts of law, and the workplace. Florence Kelley (1859–1932) likewise fought for both political and economic equality for women. She worked for the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment giving women the right to vote, and throughout her career as director of the National Consumers’ League, she lobbied for better working conditions for women and children. Second, both women worked for equal rights for African-Americans. In 1833, Mott helped organize the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, regularly organized antislavery petitions to Congress, and later petitioned Congress for suffrage for all “colored people of this Nation.”<sup>1</sup> Kelley joined others to found the NAACP in 1909, fought for Congressional antilynching laws, and sought equal funding for Southern black schoolchildren. And third, they were ardent peace advocates. As a Quaker, Mott naturally abhorred war; in the antebellum years as a member of the Non-Resistance Society, she shunned all forms of violence and was active in the American Peace Society. Florence Kelley met with other peace advocates in 1914 and issued a manifesto opposing World War I, and after that war attended meetings of Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom in Zurich and Vienna.

<sup>1</sup> *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott*, ed. Beverly Wilson Palmer; Holly Byers Ochoa, associate editor; Carol Faulkner, editing fellow (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 414.

Although both women were wives and mothers, their family lives present a decided contrast. Married at eighteen, Mott enjoyed a long and happy marriage to James Mott, who encouraged her in all her reforming efforts. Of their six children, five (four daughters and one son) survived to adulthood; Mott remained closely involved in the daily lives of her children and grandchildren, all of whom lived either in or around Philadelphia and New York City. Kelley, on the other hand, had a troubled early domestic life. While studying in Switzerland she married a Russian medical student, Lazare Wischnewetzky, and they quickly had two sons and a daughter. They moved to New York City in 1886, but her husband's medical practice never flourished. Late in 1891, she left Wischnewetzky, taking the three children with her and shortly thereafter ended up in Chicago at Jane Addams's Hull House. In her divorce proceedings against Wischnewetzky, she testified to his abuse of her. Florence Wischnewetzky soon gained custody of her children, and she and they adopted her maiden name, Kelley. Thereafter as she struggled to support the children, she frequently lived apart from them. Her appointment as chief factory inspector for the state of Illinois in the 1890s required extensive travel throughout the state. These travels continued when she moved to New York City to head the National Consumers' League and to continue her campaign against sweatshops and for a ten-hour workday. Consequently, her children lived at Hull House, attended boarding schools, or were cared for by friends.

Scant documentation exists about Mott and Kelley's relationships with their spouses. Since Lucretia and James spent most of their married life together, only a few letters between them apparently exist.<sup>2</sup> No letters between Florence and Lazare have survived; during the Wischnewetzky's—albeit short—married life, they were rarely apart. Thus the family life of both women is reflected in the letters they wrote to their siblings and children. And selection and annotation are crucial in balancing public and private lives in a documentary edition.

It was a challenge to give equal space to Mott's reforming career, because more than half of the surviving letters, mostly in the Mott papers at Swarthmore, are to her sisters or her daughters (interestingly—and perhaps

<sup>2</sup> A selected letter shows the couple's devotion to each other: "Forty years that we have loved each other with perfect love . . . How much longer the felicity is to be ours, who can tell?" (Mott to James Mott, c. 19 June 1849, *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott*, 188).

significantly?—few letters to her son, Thomas, exist) and concern family matters. Although we know she wrote to Frederick Douglass, apparently no letters survive. Of the five surviving letters to William Lloyd Garrison, we included three. Mott's infrequent business correspondence contains short, formal letters such as those to Garrison in 1851 about the fugitive slave law and the forthcoming women's rights convention in Worcester. Mott often added news of the family to other reformers, such as the Irish Quakers Richard and Hannah Webb, along with discussions of religious differences with orthodox Quakers and Charles Dickens's visit to Philadelphia.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, every family letter contains many domestic details, sometimes with only a frustratingly brief comment on John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry or Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. Often letters in the volume are joint letters Mott called "a family sheet" to be circulated to sisters, children, or a favorite niece.

Many letters we selected are to Lucretia's sister, Martha Coffin Wright. Like Mott, Wright was a well known woman's rights advocate; a Seneca Falls organizer, she was president of the National Woman Suffrage Association at her death in 1875. Although fourteen years apart in age, the two shared many interests, and their letters, with their abrupt changes of topic, code words, and abbreviations, often read like a conversation. Typical is one in September 1867 when Mott mentioned, in this order, laundry, conversion of Camp William Penn to a residential neighborhood, her dyspepsia, the funding needs of the American Equal Rights Association, building construction at Swarthmore, a Pennsylvania Peace Society meeting, carpet making, family visits, and Maria Child's recent novel, *Romance of the Republic*. Amid all this she apologized: "You may not make head or tail of this sheet—and tis of no consequence that you should—I have just written on as if I had been talkg to my dear Sister here in this Library."<sup>4</sup>

Selection for our Mott volume proved difficult for we would find a trenchant comment on Lincoln's slavery policy: "Petitns. shd. now be poured in from all quarters—so that poor Abe, McClellan & the others, may see how unavailg. all their proslavery conservatism is"<sup>5</sup> amid details

<sup>3</sup> Mott to Richard D. Webb and Hannah Webb, 25 February 1842, *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott*, 183-188.

<sup>4</sup> Mott to Martha Wright, 3 September 1867, *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott*, 393-397.

<sup>5</sup> Mott to Martha Wright, 5 December 1861, *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott*, 318.

of recipes for puddings and train travel from Philadelphia to upstate New York. While some scholars argue, and argue persuasively, that these domestic details have their own merit (and indeed I hope they have for students of nineteenth-century life), we were not publishing the letters of a public figure as important as Mott solely for her views on child rearing and other aspects of her private life.

Abridging or excerpting Mott's letters was, by the principles of documentary editing, out of the question. Two solutions, however, helped highlight Mott's public career in letters filled with details of family comings and goings and children's illnesses. Through annotation we could refer, for example, to Mott's many speeches. In an 1843 letter to fellow Quaker Nathaniel Barney, Mott briefly mentioned a sermon she delivered at a Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C., "on woman's duties and responsibilities." Selections from this sermon can then be quoted: "There has been a great advancement among the people with regard to woman . . . she is already regarded in a very different light from that assigned to her from the dark ages; and she should come also to appreciate herself and be seeking to something higher than she has formerly done." Our second solution may be singular to the Mott volume but could prove useful to others editing family letters. Lucretia often wrote one long letter over several days, especially to Martha. We decided we were justified in printing an entire letter dated on, say, 4 February 1871, but omitting the continuation of that letter dealing only with family matters, stating instead "letter continues dated 5 February."<sup>6</sup>

Certainly Lucretia Mott's letters amply reflect her family concerns as opposed to the activism her deeds and speeches reveal. However, with their blend of the personal and the public, these letters represent her determination to eradicate as many evils from the world as she possibly could.

By contrast, there are few domestic details in Kelley's letters because, after her separation from her husband in 1891, she had virtually no domestic life, or at least one that is extensively documented. She never owned a home until she bought a summer house in Maine in 1907; instead

<sup>6</sup> Mott to Nathaniel Barney, 14 February 1843, 121, 123; Mott to Martha Wright, *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott*, 456.

she lived at Hull House, at Lillian Wald's Henry Street settlement in New York City, or in various furnished apartments in that city until she died.

With the exception of letters to close friends like Jane Addams and Lillian Wald, Kelley's letters to colleagues, congressmen, and Consumer League officials concentrated almost entirely on her reforming efforts. Writing about the Zurich peace conference in 1919 to an old friend, she exclaimed, "It is an indescribably wonderful spiritual experience. To see 25 Englishwomen sitting between 12 German and three Irishwomen, all passionately absorbed in finding ways to get the [Versailles] treaty and the League of Nations modified—and that quickly—was a thing to gladden the courage and strengthen the hope of a whole lifetime." Her optimism rarely flagged, even after the Supreme Court in 1923 invalidated a Washington, D.C., minimum wage law for women workers. Kelley wrote Julia Lathrop: "However, this half century having already given us Suffrage and prohibition can safely be counted upon to give us further blessings! Chief among 'em a modern Constitution and a modern minded Supreme Court."<sup>7</sup> Most of Kelley's letters to colleagues like these are exclusively professional. In contrast to editing Lucretia Mott's letters, we had no difficulty in presenting the public side of Kelley's life.

Nevertheless in a volume of letters, it's important, even crucial, to represent the whole person: Florence Kelley as woman, sister, mother, as well as intrepid reformer. So we turned to her letters to her brother and her children. Unlike the voluminous correspondence between Lucretia and her sister Martha, there exist only about forty letters from Kelley to her younger brother, Albert, and even fewer to her older brother, Will. These letters indicate that despite her busy professional life, and friends like Jane Addams with whom she had more in common, Kelley remained devoted to her two siblings and their families. Two letters to Albert appearing in our volume combine discussions of right-wing attacks on her and other reformers with excitement over her niece's budding journalistic career.<sup>8</sup>

While Lucretia Mott had as her confidante her sister Martha, Kelley's oldest child, Nicholas, provided a similar outlet. He was always and emphatically her favorite, and Kelley called him "Ko" and encouraged him

<sup>7</sup> Kelley to Mary R. Sanford, 14 June 1919; Kelley to Julia C. Lathrop, 21 April 1923, *The Selected Letters of Florence Kelley, 1869-1931*, eds. Kathryn Kish Sklar and Beverly Wilson Palmer (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, forthcoming, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Kelley to Albert B. Kelley, 24 May 1927 and 17 September 1927, *Selected Letters of Florence Kelley*.

in his scholarly efforts. Ko fulfilled his mother's expectations, graduating from Harvard and later Harvard Law School. A dutiful son, he saved virtually all of his mother's letters, even those he received while traveling in Europe. He faithfully answered her—at times daily—letters to him; not surprisingly, she also kept these. Their surviving correspondence runs to more than 1,300 letters. In fact, from 1902 to 1912 Kelley's letters to Ko are almost the only letters that exist to tell the story of her reforming efforts. When Nicholas moved to New York City and lived near Kelley, the correspondence naturally dwindled. Throughout her son's adult life, Kelley regularly asked his advice, and he became her closest male companion. Nicholas in turn regarded his mother as a role model; when practicing law in New York City he wrote her: "There is nobody at all like you in the world. I am so proud of being your son I do not know what to do. But at the same time it makes me feel dreadfully second-rate. I am always hoping that I will speed up and improve, but I do not seem to do it."<sup>9</sup>

Kelley's letters to her oldest child far overshadow her letters to her two other children. Even when these two younger children were away at boarding school in the early 1900s, they apparently did not retain their mother's letters. Kelley's daughter, Margaret, died suddenly at the age of eighteen, during her first week at Smith College. As a young girl she had written Kelley from various boarding schools, plaintively seeking responses from her mother and frequently asking for funds. References in Margaret's letters make clear that Kelley replied regularly, but only four letters survive from Kelley to her daughter. Included in the *Selected Letters of Florence Kelley* is probably her last letter to Margaret: "It runs in our blood to be leaders. . . . The future of this Republic depends largely on the college student of to-day; and my children owe it to their grandfather, and to me, and to themselves, to line up on the right side now."<sup>10</sup> After Margaret's death in September 1905, Kelley received hundreds of condolence letters, and, in a note to the letter announcing Margaret's death, we selected a few passages from some of these to indicate this outpouring of sympathy. The *Selected Letters* treats Kelley's reaction to Margaret's death in a letter—appropriately—to Ko, then a senior at Harvard: "I have been thinking since

<sup>9</sup> Kelley to Nicholas Kelley, 13 Sept 1913, *Selected Letters of Florence Kelley*.

<sup>10</sup> Kelley to Margaret Kelley, 20 Sept 1905, *Selected Letters of Florence Kelley*. Kelley's father, William Darrah Kelley, had served in Congress for nearly 30 years.

you left that, if it had been you instead of Margaret, the old College, and the Union, and the bandar log would all have had to stagger along without you! Now your first duty is to me that it shall not be you too! So please undertake the following duties, for my sake:—

1. Refuse appointments to places of responsibility;
2. Break or cancel engagements;
3. Leaveng hulking aspirants to get their own jobs;
4. All for the purpose of being in bed nine hours every night. I do not mean merely 63 hours in the week, but nine hours every night.”<sup>11</sup>

Since there are so very many letters, and good ones, from Kelley to Nicholas, it was hard to keep him from dominating her personal life. The two discussed issues ranging from Marx’s concept of class struggle to miscegenation. For example, Kelley wrote Nicholas in July 1930: “The conference of the N.A.A.C.P. was by far the best yet held. It was a fitting coming of age party, and promises a lesson to Mr. Hoover in November wherever the Negro vote forms the balance of power. One reason of my hope that this may follow is the adoption of my resolution that the women of the auxiliaries to the branches be urged to make a house to house canvass, to assure the registration of Negro men and women in every district.”<sup>12</sup>

If Ko was the good son, then John, two and a half years younger, was most decidedly the wayward son. From John’s early school years, Kelley expressed her concern about this recalcitrant student and moved him from schools in Wisconsin, to New York City and later to board with a friend in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. She frankly wrote Ko in July 1903: “I went out to Andover and decided against it because it did not offer what John most needs, supervision. This I can give him when I am here and secure for him, I think, during my absences. He would be almost as free, at Andover, as he was at Hillside, from pressure to do daily work daily. You see, I have learned, at last, the lesson that John was not up to the freedom of this last year.”<sup>13</sup>

Kelley must have written to John too, but no manuscript letters survive after 1901, when he was thirteen. Carbon copies of a few dictated

<sup>11</sup> Kelley to Nicholas Kelley, 4 October 1905, *Selected Letters of Florence Kelley*.

<sup>12</sup> Kelley to Nicholas Kelley, 5 July 1930, *Selected Letters of Florence Kelley*.

<sup>13</sup> Kelley to Nicholas Kelley, 5 July 1903, *Selected Letters of Florence Kelley*.



letters exist, including one from 1930 inviting John to a Consumers' League dinner in New York City.<sup>14</sup> The missing letters to John are not surprising, given John's nomadic life: he moved from New York to Seattle, to Canada, to Phoenix, to Los Angeles. The distribution of Kelley's letters to each child is highly uneven. The correspondence between Florence and Nicholas presents the only opportunity, unfortunately, to construct a dialog with her children.

Like the other two children, John wrote his mother frequently. There are hundreds of letters from him, beginning with childish scrawls from Hillside through his checkered life, as he moved from one boarding school to another, tried Harvard for several semesters (his mother must have exerted considerable influence to get him admitted), worked as a ranch hand in Montana and as a hotel clerk in Phoenix. Because we don't know what Kelley wrote him, his travels and his travails must consequently be documented through annotation. While lecturing in Los Angeles in 1917, Kelley wrote her colleague Edith Abbott: "Meanwhile I have this peaceful afternoon with John at work and no lecture on." Thus a remark in a recent letter from John can be included in note 1: "John had written that he had found a job as an investment banker in Los Angeles at \$20 a week and was determined to 'plug along with the crowd,' although he was not interested in industrial stocks and bonds. He wrote of Kelley's upcoming visit: 'I honestly believe it will be up to me to prove I can make good and then I can begin to be like Ko.'" Later, Florence referred to John's sailing his yacht across the Atlantic in 1921, and again this son can have his voice. He urged his mother not to worry about him: "I seem forced to do things calculated to disturb people who love me and people whom I love.—but God knows I don't do them for that reason. My curse or blessing is that I am fascinated by the seemingly impossible."<sup>15</sup> From incoming letters Kelley's relationship to this troubled son can, therefore, be inferred. John's love of and dependence upon his mother clearly represents another aspect of Florence Kelley's personal life.

<sup>14</sup> Kelley to John B. Kelley, 11 March 1930, *Selected Letters of Florence Kelley*.

<sup>15</sup> Kelley to Edith Abbott, 16 July 1917; Kelley to Nicholas Kelley, 1 July 1921, *Selected Letters of Florence Kelley*.

Any edition of letters should present the whole person: wife, mother, sister, aunt—or in the case of men, son, uncle, husband—as well as the public figure. Where family concerns predominate in the letters of Lucretia Mott, annotation (i.e., references to other letters and to her speeches) emphasizes the public side of this reformer, her leadership in the antislavery and women's rights causes. Conversely, in a situation where the writer left an extensive paper trail of her activism, the inclusion of Florence Kelley's letters to her family show a loving sister and mother, a contrast from the brusque and hard-nosed crusader reflected in her professional correspondence. Documentary editing requires editors to research all aspects of their subjects' lives as they balance the relationship between the public and the private.