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Edited by Beverly Wilson Palmer, et al.

Leigh Fought

Montgomery College, foughtlk@lemoyne.edu

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Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott

Leigh Fought

Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott. Edited by Beverly Wilson Palmer, et al. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

Lucretia Coffin Mott (1793–1880) sprang from that enclave of independent women and “Quakers with a vengeance,” Nantucket, Massachusetts, where she spent the first decade of her life.¹ Not surprisingly, then, she became one of the earliest and foremost abolitionists and woman’s rights activists. In James Mott she made a fortunate choice for a husband as his religious and political inclinations matched her own and he encouraged her public life even as their family grew, an unusual act in the nineteenth century, even among the most radical of marriages. The two formed a partnership in both private and public; and they joined, organized, and lead various organizations and committees within the abolitionist movement until James’s death in 1868. Lucretia remained active into her eighties, continuing her involvement in the woman’s rights and suffrage movements—which she had helped to found at the Seneca Falls, New York, Convention in 1848—as well as aid to the freedmen in the South, the temperance movement, the Universal Peace Movement, and the Reform League. Because of her long life and constant involvement in a variety of reform movements, her letters reveal the scope, development, and interrelationships of nineteenth-century reform activism. In fact, a cursory glance through the names of her correspondents leads one to believe that she may have known every famous and important activist of her time, and not a few of the lesser-known ones.

Such a long and active life naturally produced a prodigious body of correspondence. Beverly Palmer, editor of *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott*, estimates that there are 950 letters by Mott alone, and these are the ones that have survived. References within those letters suggest that Mott wrote many more. Yet, the letters of Mott have appeared in a printed volume only once. That volume, *Lucretia and James Mott: Their Life and Letters*, published in 1884,

¹Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851; New York: New American Library, 1961), 86.

was edited by Mott's granddaughter Anna Davis Hallowell in a fashion that might be described today as something more akin to "proofreading."

If, as a 10 March 2007, article in the *New York Times* suggests, the availability of historical documents in the public sphere through digitization and publication (as opposed to availability in archives, which limits the number of potential users to those who have access to that particular archive) influences the way history is written and presented, then the absence of Mott's letters from the public sphere has excised her to some degree from historical discourse despite her enormous contributions.² Thus, Palmer's edition comes as a welcome addition to scholars who do not live near, or have the funding to travel to, Swarthmore and Smith colleges, where the greatest numbers of original Mott letters reside.

To produce this volume, Palmer and her staff—veterans of the Charles Sumner Papers project—scoured not only the collections at Swarthmore and Smith, but also approximately 30 other repositories and private collections to compile a complete listing of Mott correspondence. A "Guide" to these documents, listing their physical description and repository location, appears in an appendix to this volume. This guide, which complements the Lucretia Coffin Mott Papers Project database, runs for fifty pages and should be of boundless assistance to those wishing to locate the original letters not published in this volume.³ Palmer and her staff then attempted to restrict their selections for this edition to Mott's public work, intending to "demonstrate the key involvement of LCM in the political, social, and religious movements of nineteenth-century America" (p. xxxii). They soon found that many missives naturally drifted into private matters. In order to underscore the permeable barrier between these spheres, the less public aspects of these letters were retained. After eliminating invitations, acceptances or declines of invitations, and wholly private letters, Palmer and her staff chose approximately a quarter of Mott's letters for inclusion in their volume.

In light of the dated editorial policy of the 1884 Hallowell edition, Palmer and her staff attempted to provide accurate transcriptions with as little editorial intervention as possible. Thus, they retained the peculiarities of Mott's punctuation, grammar and spelling, abbreviation (although with superscript lowered), and Friends-style of dating. They have, however, standardized the format of the letters as well as provided a very detailed explanation of emen-

²Katie Hafner, "History, Digitized (and Abridged)," *The New York Times*, 10 March 2007.

³See the Lucretia Coffin Mott Papers Project website: <http://www.mott.pomona.edu/> (viewed 1 March 2007).

dations. As a result, the reader gains a sense of the action in Mott's life. Dashes, abbreviations, exhaustingly long paragraphs that read like streams of consciousness, followed by brief paragraphs that read like telegrams or today's quickly dashed-off e-mail messages, all convey the ebb and flow of Mott's thoughts as well as the fact that she was too busy to compose a long, eloquent, well-organized epistle. She had information to convey, and little time or patience with which to convey it.

The importance of documentary editing, however, lies not only in the accurate presentation of primary sources to a broader audience but also in the context that the editors provide for those documents. The biographical introduction, "Lucretia Coffin Mott—Wife, Mother, Quaker, Activist," provides an outline of Mott's life as an activist, a discussion of her letter writing, and the arguments for her importance in the study of the history of women, religion, and reform. Since an introduction cannot fully detail Mott's life, this edition also provides a "Chronology" highlighting key events such as the birth of children, important speaking engagements, and important meetings. Although these apparatus might be sufficient on their own, Palmer and her staff provide further assistance to readers by also including a brief glossary of Quaker terminology and a "Biographical Directory" of people who recur throughout the volume. This last is a particularly ingenious tool, as a tedious search through annotations for details about one or another frequently mentioned person can be eliminated simply by referring to this directory. Other people, as well as events and quotations, are well annotated at the end of the appropriate letter. The final product, then, conveys the ideological connections and intricate relationships among activists across the nineteenth century.

In the middle of the 8 March 2007 *New York Times* obituary for historian Winthrop D. Jordan, the writer notes that Jordan's mother was "Lucretia Mott Churchill, a great-great-granddaughter of the abolitionists James and Lucretia Mott."⁴ Lucretia Coffin Mott does not appear in the news on a regular basis these days. As this volume demonstrates, although Mott tends to be remembered primarily as an abolitionist and as a woman's rights activist, she also labored as an advocate for peace and the rights of poor women, at the same time raising five children and maintaining a working partnership both at home and on the lecture circuit with her husband James. These struggles against poverty, for peace, for women's rights, and for a balance

⁴Margalit Fox, "Winthrop D. Jordan, Expert in the History of Race Relations in America, Is Dead at 75," *The New York Times*, 8 March 2007.

between home and professional lives are as immediate today as they were over a century ago. The role that Mott played in these struggles suggests her continued relevance as a historical figure and the importance of this edition of her letters.