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Mary Robinson Hunter: Reminiscences of Her Life in Brazil

Evelyn M. Cherpak

As a Latin Americanist with a specialty in Women's History, I was eager to edit a diary kept by an American woman in South America, so I was pleasantly surprised when I called the Newport Historical Society and spoke to the curator of manuscripts who told me that the Mary Robinson Hunter diaries in their collection covered her residence in Brazil from 1835 to 1848. I promptly visited the Historical Society, read the journals, found them fascinating, and began my part-time editing project.

The diaries consist of six volumes in which Mary Hunter wrote nearly every day. Each entry, penned in brown ink, included the month and day, with the year identified only in the first January entry. Most entries filled half of a page or more; entries of only one or two sentences were rare. She drew illustrations of local scenes—the terrace of her daughter's Montevideo home or of her own summer residence in the Tijuca Mountains—on the inside covers of the diaries. Interestingly, the inside front cover of her first diary contained a quotation: "Men should make diaries and women fancy they must do the same." Given that assertion, I concluded that Mary believed her life and experiences in Brazil were of value and worth recording. Her immediate reason for keeping a diary was that she wanted her children to know what her life was like in Brazil; hence her writings served as a personal and family memoir. But she hoped that they might eventually be published. She began with imitating what men did—keeping diaries—to a private purpose, and, then, to a much larger public one.

At first the editorial aspects of this project were daunting because of the volume of material. However, they were eased by the fact that Mary Robinson Hunter was a literate woman whose writing skills had been honed by an active correspondence and by a previous diary that she began after the death of her son Godfrey in 1828. This diary, however, was more a spiritual handbook of poetry, prayers, and extracts on the Christian life than a daily account of events.

Mary's spelling was excellent so there were few orthographic problems. She

had a good hand, and only a few times did I have difficulty deciphering words. Punctuation, however, was a concern. The lack of commas, periods, and semicolons made reading difficult, so I decided to supply these for ease and clarity where appropriate.

The sheer volume of the diaries required me to be scrupulous in selections for inclusion in the final work. It would have been impossible to publish her diaries in their entirety. They amounted to several thousand manuscript pages. I selected entries that were most revealing of her life in Brazil, of her health, family, daily routine, religion, and social life; what she thought about Brazil—about its food, about slavery, crime, Emperor Dom Pedro II and the Imperial Court, her social contacts with the Royal Navy and the United States Navy, and her feelings, both positive and negative, toward her adopted country. The edited diaries are now three hundred typescript pages long.

I annotated the diaries, identifying people, places, foreign words, and United States Navy ships and merchant vessels. Identifying merchant vessels required discovering the port of embarkation, which was difficult. The Civil Reference Branch of the National Archives was very helpful, but some ships remain unidentified. The annotations are located at the end of the text.

The diaries at the Newport Historical Society are just one part of a larger Hunter family collection that includes Mary Hunter's correspondence with her children, letters from Newport friends, other personal papers, and a genealogy. To date, nothing conveying the vastness and richness of the collection has been published other than a letter from Catherine Engs Dennis to Mary Hunter in Brazil, and an article, "A Newport Romance," an account of Mary's courtship by William Hunter, the man she eventually married. Both of these appeared in *Newport History*, the Historical Society's quarterly journal, in 1984 and 1927 respectively. Without finding aids, and as the letters and journals are not indexed, the massive amount of research source material has been an impediment to scholars, although a thorough investigation of the papers would prove fascinating for family and social historians as well as for women's studies scholars. A card catalog is of some help to researchers.

* * *

I have read all of the Hunter diaries and have edited selections from the Brazilian journals in the hope of having them published. The diaries are important for several reasons: they provide rich impressions of Brazil during the Regency and Second Empire; they convey Mary Hunter's personality and concerns during a unique period in her life; they offer material for both social and family history for the period; and, lastly, they contribute to our understanding of

women's lives in the nineteenth century.

Mary Robinson Hunter was born in New York City on 11 January 1787, to William Robinson, a prosperous merchant, and Sarah Franklin Robinson, both members of the Society of Friends. Mary, the fifth of eleven children, lived a life of wealth and ease for that time. Tutored at home and schooled in a private academy, she was an indifferent student and never fully mastered academic subjects, something she regretted later in life. Her youth was spent shuttling between New York and Newport, Rhode Island, where her paternal grandparents lived and where the family spent the summers to escape yellow fever epidemics.

In Newport, during the summer of 1803, she met William Hunter, a lawyer some thirteen years her senior, an Episcopalian, and a member of a prominent family. The couple fell in love and planned to marry. Despite her father's objections on personal and religious grounds, Mary's independence of mind and spirit prevailed in her choice of a mate, and the couple were married in July 1804. Mary, however, was excommunicated from the Society of Friends for "having gone out of marriage with a person not in membership with us which was accomplished by the assistance of a priest,"¹ and she was virtually disowned by her parents. Eventually parental objections melted away, and by 1805 she was once again reconciled with her family.

During the first thirty years of her marriage, Mary resided in Newport, where she bore eight children over a nineteen-year period, two of whom died at an early age. At first, the Hunters had a happy and stable marriage, despite recurrent financial troubles and long separations. In order to increase his income and support his growing family, William Hunter entered politics, serving in the Rhode Island legislature from 1799 to 1812, again from 1823 to 1825, and in the United States Senate from 1812 to 1820. His son William, a clerk in the State Department, was instrumental in obtaining his father's appointment as chargé d'affaires to Brazil in 1834, whereby the Hunters hoped to further improve their financial situation. On the voyage from Hampton Roads, Virginia, to Rio de Janeiro, aboard the *Louisiana*, Mary began keeping a daily diary, a practice she continued for the rest of her life.

And now to the diaries and what they tell us about Brazil and South America in the 1830's and 1840's as seen through the eyes of a North American woman.²

¹Anna F. Hunter, "A Newport Romance of 1801," *Newport History*, 61 (April 1927), 20-21.

²The Hunter diaries are the only extant unpublished diaries that I know of kept by a woman during the Regency and Second Empire. However, there are a number of published accounts by nineteenth-century women from other countries about life in Brazil:

Mary Robinson Hunter was not well traveled before she sailed with her husband and five children for Brazil in November 1834. But by the time she returned home she had lived abroad for fourteen years, not only in Rio de Janeiro but in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Montevideo, Uruguay, where she witnessed civil war and a naval blockade by the English.

The Hunters arrived in Rio de Janeiro in January 1835 and quickly settled into a house on Flamengo Beach near other Americans. Blessed with an adventurous spirit, Mary eagerly explored her surroundings. She climbed to the summit of famous Corcovado Mountain where she was rewarded with a spectacular view of the bay and harbor; she traveled to an island in Guanabara Bay, which was a tropical paradise; and she regularly walked to the public gardens, the National Museum, the royal palace at São Christovão and Gloria Church. The Hunters moved five times during their years in Rio and each time Mary explored her new neighborhood on foot.

While the geography and sights of Rio impressed Mary, she found other aspects of life in Brazil objectionable. One of these was the climate. Although the Brazilian weather was not as severely cold as that of Newport, the spring sea breezes were harsh, so much so that she could not enjoy her verandah or open the windows. Winters were damp and the heat of summer oppressive with its humidity, clouds of dust, and gastric fever. To avoid these, she repaired to a cottage in the Tijuca Mountains above the city, where in her diary she eloquently described the beauty of her surroundings. As time went on, however, Mary became accustomed to the Brazilian climate and even referred to it as "delicious."

A Quaker convert to the Episcopal faith, after twenty-six years of marriage, Mary Robinson Hunter was a deeply religious person. She rarely missed a Sunday service at Rio's Anglican church and she spent the rest of the day reading the Bible and praying. Not surprisingly, the relaxed and casual observance of the Sabbath by Catholics and Protestants alike shocked her sensibilities. Visiting, parties, and entertainments were standard Sunday fare. Mary judged the morals of the clergy as low. Priests cohabited freely with mulatto women and had illegitimate offspring of every hue in their homes. Confessions and parochial teaching were practically non-existent. The Hunters, along with other members

Maria C. Graham, *Journal of a voyage to Brazil and Residence There During Part of the Years, 1821, 1822, 1823* (London, 1824); Therese, Prinzessin Von Bayern, *Meine Reise in den Brasilianischen Tropen* (Berlin, 1897); Elizabeth Bishop, ed. and trans., *The Diary of Helena Morely* (New York, 1957) and Marian McMurrugh Mulhall, *From Europe to Paraguay and Matto-Grosso* (London, 1877).

of the diplomatic corps, attended Catholic religious processions on Holy Days. A critical observer, Mary Robinson Hunter judged the Good Friday observances elaborate, profane, and lacking in solemnity. The pomp and pageantry of these ceremonies stood in sharp contrast to the simplicity of Protestant worship, to which she was accustomed. She found offensive and intrusive the pre-Lenten custom of pelting passersby with bottles of water, known as the *Entrudo*, as she did the noisy celebrations surrounding saints' days.

However, Mary had only praise for the Brazilian people whom she judged civil, polite, gregarious, affable, and respectful of women. Courtesy permeated all classes, from the very rich to the very poor, and she observed that the manners of a storekeeper's wife were as fine as those of a noble woman at court. She felt safe walking the streets of Rio after dark, something she was afraid of doing in the United States. Yet, because she did not speak Portuguese and was a foreigner, Mary did not socialize often with her neighbors; hence she made no lasting friendships with them and was unable to observe Brazilian family life firsthand.

The Hunter diaries are replete with references to slavery in Brazil.³ Mary employed four or five blacks (both slave and free) in her home as domestics. She developed a warm, maternal relationship with her personal servant Roberto who was with her for fourteen years. She taught him to read and write, took him to church, and tried to instill in him her own sense of Christian values. Her relations were not so serene with her other household help. She described them as lazy, undisciplined, and impertinent, but she was constrained in disciplining them by her husband who objected to whipping. Mary herself; initially, did not approve of corporal punishment, and she decried the harsh beatings meted out by Brazilian slaveholders. She wrote: "A poor Negro boy has been dreadfully whipped in one of the yards near us, his cries ceased while the lash was still loud. I think he must be dead or nearly so. Sunday is the day the lash is most used. The masters are then at home and the mistress brings before him all complaints."⁴

However, as time went on, Mary wrote of her increasing impatience with her slaves, and her attitude toward whipping changed. She even administered the blows herself on occasion. Her diary entry of 19 May 1847, gave proof of her change of heart "It is proverbial and true that you cannot elicit gratitude in a

³For an analysis of slavery in Rio de Janeiro, see Mary Karasch, *Slave Life in Rio de Janeiro, 1808-1850* (Princeton, 1987).

⁴Brazilian Diary of Mary Robinson Hunter, 5 February 1836. Hereafter cited as Diary, MRH.

black or obedience unless with the whip.”⁵ Despite this, Mary’s Christian nature triumphed and a number of times she interceded with owners on behalf of slaves who were chained, abused, whipped, and manacled. Sometimes she succeeded in having punishments abated; other times her remonstrances went unheeded.

Mary’s diary reflects the deep, underlying fear whites had of the slave population in Brazil. Reports and rumors of insurrections filled Mary with foreboding, since slaves outnumbered whites twenty to one. In December 1835, Mary mentioned a foiled uprising in her diary: “The Negroes of some Brazilian family had been bribed to admit others in the house at night, which was to be the watchword for a general massacre and extermination of whites. These reports alarm me very much.”⁶ Mary felt an uprising was inevitable, a mere matter of time, even though she herself was never endangered by one.

Her diary contains reports of violence committed by slaves against their masters. These included murder, attempted murder, poisoning, stabbing, and robbery. Murder was punishable by death, and slaves were hung from the gallows in Rio’s main square. An attempted poisoning resulted in the whipping and sale of the culprit. Torture was employed to make slaves confess. Mary noted that slaves retaliated against their owners because of oppressive conditions and cruel treatment. Sometimes, however, she described slaves as committing crimes just for a lark, as in the case of several young blacks who murdered an overseer but didn’t rob him.

As the wife of the United States chargé d’affaires, Mary was invited to court functions and state occasions. She watched Dom Pedro II, literally, grow to manhood, and she delighted in her connections with the royal family, as did her daughters Kate and Mary who were presented at court. Mary first encountered the royal family during a walk in the palace gardens in 1837, and she recorded this meeting in her diary. “There was the little Emperor with a white jacket and pants and cloth cap . . . [He] was with childish mirth, talking, laughing and running. I was delighted to see him in this natural state of enjoyment at his age.”⁷

The Hunters were invited to the pre-coronation festivities as well as the coronation of Dom Pedro II on 18 July 1841. A year later, Mary attended his wedding to Teresa Christiana, an obscure Neapolitan princess, whom she described as “. . . very large, not tall, rather fair, light, but a very coarse, homely face. She appeared quite self-possessed dressed in a superb robe of white silk, embroidered all over with silver, a diadem of brilliant diamonds round her forehead

⁵Diary, MRH, 19 March 1847.

⁶Diary, MRH, 23 December 1835.

⁷Diary, MRH, 6 January 1837.

and head, diamond bracelets”⁸ Their connections with royalty continued until William Hunter was recalled from his post in December 1843. However, even after that Mary commemorated royal events in her diary, including the presentation of Prince Alfonso, heir to the throne, to the legislature in 1845.

Throughout her years in Brazil, Mary never became accustomed to the exotic food of the region. She complained about the quality of the food and looked forward to shipments of Newport pork, New York beef, ketchup and apples, which she regularly ordered. She described the “mutton [as] black and tough, the poultry stringy and tasteless and the beef . . . like tainted liver.”⁹ She did try black beans, *farinha* and dried beef once, the standard fare of slaves, but there is no mention of other Brazilian dishes—manioc, *pirão* and *vatapá*—so one would assume she did not sample them. Given the lack of refrigeration, the poor sanitary conditions, and her own digestive problems, she watched her diet carefully and kept to bland foods.

In addition to her observations on Brazil, the diaries convey Mary Robinson Hunter’s own unique story, her personality, and her attitude toward life. Despite her willingness to explore her surroundings, described earlier, she was nonetheless an introvert, a reader, a thinker, a devout Christian, a good mother, a loyal friend, and a connoisseur of the finer things in life. Not a particularly social person (she preferred a quiet life), she was, perhaps, not the ideal candidate to be a foreign minister’s wife. In fact, as time went on, the Hunters retreated more and more from what they considered the decadent social life of Rio, with its gambling, card-playing, and balls.

Mary Hunter’s years in Brazil were marked by personal tragedy. Her youngest and favorite daughter, Kate Greenway, died in childbirth in 1846, leaving an infant son. Mary, literally, was consumed with grief for the next two years. She went to Montevideo, Uruguay, where she took charge of the Greenway household and cared for her grandson before they finally returned to Newport in 1848. Mary’s grief was extraordinary and pathological, and she confided in her diary that she could not understand why others did not mourn as she did. Hypersensitive, she resented her son-in-law’s attempts at socializing, and her grief became a reproach to those around her. In 1851, her grandson was taken by his father to England where he was raised by relatives. Once again, Mary was distraught as her last link with her favorite daughter was removed.

For unknown reasons, the Hunters’ marriage deteriorated during their years abroad. Passages relating to family problems were inked out of the diaries by her

⁸Diary, MRH, 4 September 1843.

⁹Diary, MRH, 14 March 1836.

daughter, Elizabeth Hunter Birckhead, before they were donated to the Newport Historical Society, so it is difficult to know why the long-standing union fell apart. But Mary confided in her diary that she no longer loved her husband. When he departed for the United States in 1844, she remained in Brazil and would have stayed indefinitely if she had had an independent income. Apparently there was no communication between the couple once William Hunter returned to the United States; nor did she mention him again in her diary entries. Although they lived together after she returned to Newport in June 1848 until his death in 1849, she was not well provided for in his will. He left her the family homestead, Newport's famous Hunter House, and \$300 per year, which proved inadequate, and so she faced financial problems in her old age.

Health problems plagued Mary throughout her lifetime. She had a history of heart trouble and suffered three heart attacks while in Rio. Heart palpitations, fatigue, and weakness were recurrent symptoms of her condition, hence rest, moderate exercise, and a quiet life were necessary. She was plagued by chronic indigestion because of unsanitary food and water. Depression and nervousness troubled her as well. Some of her physical ailments seemed psychosomatic, triggered by worry and mental stress. Given her personal and physical problems, Mary's life was characterized by ill health, loss, and unhappiness.

The diaries provide insights into family life and social history as well. A devoted mother, Mary's life revolved around her family of six children, three sons and three daughters. Eliza, Mary, and Kate went to Brazil with their parents, as did Thomas, a naval storekeeper, and Charles, who later joined the United States Navy. William remained in Washington, D.C., with his family. Their distinct personalities, their marriages, the births and deaths of their children, family quarrels, economic misfortunes, and Mary's concern for her children's welfare and religious training are clearly apparent in her daily entries; less so is her husband's personality and their relationship. The routine of daily life—cooking, cleaning, social calls, parties, balls, the Hunters' close connection with officers of the United States Navy and the Royal Navy on the Brazil Station, theatrical events, and Mary's taste in literature—are reflected in her journals.

Mary Robinson Hunter's writings also convey the restrictions and limitations imposed on women in the nineteenth century. Religion, domesticity, work, marriage and family were the proper spheres for women, and Mary's life was bound by those strictures. In that sense, it was no different from that of countless other women of that time period. However, her opportunity to travel and live in South America distinguished her from most, and, of course, her personal story was unique.

Wealthy, well-born, and educated beyond most of her contemporaries, Mary found solace for her physical problems and family quarrels in religion. Her faith and trust in God, although imperfect, were a constant source of support to her throughout her lifetime. In this way, she conformed to the prevalent stereotype of the pious woman. The world of the kitchen or the salon was not the milieu for Mary, though. She reluctantly performed household chores, including cooking, sewing, and cleaning, preferring to read or to take walks. Accustomed to being a lady of leisure, she left housework to the servants as did most women of her class. Marriage and family were not sources of joy and contentment for her either. Her feelings toward her husband changed dramatically over the years until the union was one of mutual dislike. Divorce was unthinkable, so the couple just endured and lived apart for five years after Hunter's tenure in Brazil was over. Her children, whose nurturing was her main concern, turned out to be, in her words, "broken vessels"—the myth of the happy family, if indeed ever true, was not found in the Hunter household.

The Hunter diaries reveal what Mary Hunter thought, saw, and did while she lived in Brazil during the Regency and the beginning of the Second Empire. They also tell us about the harshness and precariousness of life, the primitive state of medical science, the omnipresence of death, the perils of sea travel, the difficulties in maintaining a home, slavery, and the restrictions and limitations imposed on women by society. There is much more in the voluminous Hunter family papers, such as letters from Mary to her children, and also in the newly acquired Robinson family papers, all of which add to our knowledge of Mary Robinson Hunter. The publication of selections from Mary Robinson Hunter's diaries will not only add to our understanding of Mary's public and private worlds but will contribute to our historical understanding of the larger world of nineteenth-century women to which she belonged.

