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Adolescent Journals of Caroline Healey Dall

Helen R. Deese

Caroline Healey Dall (1822–1912), Boston-born reformer, lecturer, author of books, freelance journalist, memoirist, and occasional preacher, began her apprenticeship as a writer at the age of nine with the keeping of a journal. While still a child, however, she destroyed her earliest journal when she discovered her father reading it. For some time thereafter, she ceased her journal keeping. But soon finding herself unable to quell the need to express herself on paper, she resumed the habit. The journals of this second period, which ran for several years, survived until Dall was in her seventies. Then she also destroyed them, out of regard for her mother, whose mental illness the journals documented all too well. And so Dall's earliest surviving original journal dates from March 1838, when she was fifteen; from that point on, she records her activities, thoughts, and feelings until within a few months of her death at age ninety. This remarkable record of seventy-five years, now at the Massachusetts Historical Society, is, I suspect, the fullest known account of the life of a nineteenth-century American woman. In this article I will concern myself with the surviving journals of Caroline Healey's teenage years, that is, from March 1838 until June 1842, when she turned twenty. In this discussion I wish to treat certain editorial problems raised by these texts, and then I wish to give you some sense of the nature, significance, and value of the adolescent journals by introducing some of the major issues and themes treated in them. Finally, I hope briefly to illustrate the power of these journals.

Caroline Dall created the biggest editorial headache when she reluctantly destroyed the second phase of her journals. Not willing that this material be entirely lost to posterity she composed in its place what she called her "Reconstructed Journal." As a retrospective creation it is not, of course, a contemporaneous journal at all, though it in part derives from the contemporaneous journals and in part from Dall's memories in her mid-seventies of her early teenage years. The information contained in the Reconstructed Journal is quite valuable to anyone interested in Dall's biography or in her later journals, and thus I intend in my edition to publish selections from it. But how and where? I

do not wish Volume 1 of this three-volume edition to begin with the Reconstructed Journal, which is not typical of the journals as a whole, and strictly speaking is not a journal, a contemporaneous daily record. Currently I am weighing the possibility of including selections from it as an appendix to Volume 1; alternatively I am casting about for a mechanism by which the selections from the Reconstructed Journal appear at the beginning of Volume 1, but are somehow clearly distinguished from the remainder of the text. I am curious to know how other editors may have dealt with similar problems.

A second editorial problem is the familiar one of selection. The three published volumes of Dall journals will include probably less than 50 percent of the total text of the manuscript journals. I find myself debating such questions as how much space to give the crushes and flirtations of someone who is to become a major reformer. What about family squabbles: should I include them at the expense of omitting, say, her account of a lecture by Emerson? In general my selection policy for all the journals is to make the selections fairly representative of the original journals. Certainly I want to avoid making these volumes simply a chronicle of Dall's encounters with the great and famous; above all I want to preserve the thread of her own life story, with its emotional ups and downs, its mental cruxes, its crises of relationships, as well as its interplay with public events and prominent figures. And so I am including a certain amount of her adolescent flirtations, side by side with the intellectual awakening that her attendance at Margaret Fuller's conversations proved to be, or the spiritual crisis occasioned by her hearing the lectures of the radical preacher Theodore Parker.

My choice of passages from the early journals is significantly affected by my knowledge of the remaining seventy years of the journals. The single most important relationship of Dall's life was that with her father, and the understanding of this relationship rests heavily on the early journals. Here are made clear first, her father's exceptional treatment of her (the oldest of eight children) as a companion, sparring partner, and intellectual equal; and second, his inordinate demands. During her mother's frequent illnesses and confinements, the pre-teen Caroline Healey ran the household, wrote novels, read four languages, and (by the age of thirteen) was publishing articles in religious papers. Yet her father told her, at age fourteen, that she had disappointed his expectations, and the painful memory of this reproach runs like a refrain throughout the adolescent journals. My selections from these journals will also reflect Healey's persistent personality flaws—especially what other people saw as her egotism—flaws with which she struggled, largely ineffectually, throughout her life. As a teenager her outspokenness and lack of tact were already causing minor problems in rela-

tionships; in adulthood these would explode into major traumas. But balancing the naive self-conceit and presumption that are already painfully obvious in the journals are the emotional needs, poignantly expressed, that are also major motifs for as long as the journals continue: her need for approval, and especially her need for love.

A final and relatively minor editorial problem is created by the fact that Healey has, on a very few occasions, censored her own journal by cutting out one or more pages. I deal with each of these situations by a note describing, as far as I can determine, the extent of the destruction of text. In one instance my note will also give illuminating context to the defacement: On 17 July 1840, Healey attended, as she often did, the "Annual Visitation" of the Harvard Divinity School, reporting in her journal on each of the speeches and speakers. In the middle of this account, a half-page of the journal is cut out. My check of a printed program of the event reveals, and my note will disclose, that there were two remaining student speakers yet to undergo the appraisal of Healey's pen, one of whom was Charles Henry Appleton Dall, her future husband. Obviously, whatever Healey may have written of this, her first impression of the man to whom she would become engaged in less than three years, it was not something that she wanted preserved for posterity.

But what is the subject matter of Caroline Healey's early journals; what sorts of issues and themes form its core? Many of the concerns of this text are peculiarly (though not exclusively) adolescent in nature. Healey used these writings to sort out her relationship with other family members, to adjust her religious beliefs to accommodate the "newness" she encountered in Theodore Parker and other Transcendentalists, and to work through affairs of the heart. Yet more centrally, she attempted to work out a self-concept and to find her vocation, matters that were complicated on the one hand by the lofty if not extravagant ambitions instilled in her by her father and on the other by gender issues that seemed to limit her options. The young Caroline Healey had an extraordinary faith in her own abilities and her destiny for some great work, but exactly the direction that work was to take was a question she debated in her journals: "I wish I could define my genius," she mused; should she make her mark in the world of literature, or in the field of practical benevolence?¹ Several months later she wrote, apparently decisively, "I do not wish to be known as a Sabbath School Teacher—so much as a literary woman—not that I do not appreciate the privilege but that

¹Caroline Healey Dall, Manuscript Journals, 27 January 1841, Dall Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society. Hereafter cited in the text as "Ms. Journals." I am grateful to the Massachusetts Historical Society for permission to quote from the Dall Papers.

I would rather draw attention towards myself by my own merits as well as by those of my cause" (Ms. Journals, 11 September 1841). But the question was actually far from settled, and what Caroline Dall eventually found as her "work"—writing and lecturing in various reform causes—is something of a cross between the life of philanthropic action and the one of literary endeavor that she was debating in the early journals.

Gender issues played into the vocational one. Healey's mother disapproved of her literary endeavors, remarking upon hearing the cost of writing materials that her daughter had purchased, "All that you will ever write in them, will not be worth the money" (Ms. Journals, 23 August 1838). Forced to interrupt her writing to attend to domestic duties, she wrote at age sixteen, "I wish I was a man, in that case I might hope to make something of myself;—but being a woman I never can" (Ms. Journals, 25 June 1838). And later she protested against the coming-out party that her mother insisted she have, writing, "why then a slave to custom, should I enter the market of matrimony? my delicacy revolts at the idea" (Ms. Journals, 20 November 1838). Her determination not to marry she soon outgrew, but not her questioning of the restrictiveness of woman's sphere. But her stance at this stage of her life was, perhaps typically, unstable: at one time she asserted her belief that woman's task is "to remodel society—not by mounting the pulpit or the rostrum—but by the quiet—sedative moral influence she is best fitted to exert" (Ms. Journals, 11 October 1840), while at another she deplored the disparity in the respective educations of men and women: "I wish that women might enjoy—the advantages of college education, of the severe and studious training, which is lavished upon our young men,— . . . At fifteen—a woman's education—in common parlance—is finished—at twenty-five—a man's—but just begun!" (Ms. Journals, 7 July 1839). Why cannot she go to medical school? she wonders (Ms. Journals, 27 July 1839). And, visiting the Harvard Library, she is indignant at "How little the Harvard students estimate their advantages—with such a Library—it seems to me—that I could never grow tired of life" (Ms. Journals, 15 July 1840).

The world of Caroline Healey's journals, even when she was a teenager, is far from being all personal and private. This woman who was in her adulthood to associate with such public figures as leading abolitionists, women's rights advocates, social science reformers, senators and Supreme Court justices, leading scientific personalities of the day, and First Lady Frances Cleveland, was already building an impressive list of acquaintances. Those whom she treats in her journals before she is twenty include Major Thomas Melville, Lydia Maria Child, Daniel Webster, Josiah Quincy, John Quincy Adams, Charles Francis

Adams, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Margaret Fuller, Theodore Parker, George and Sophia Ripley, Dorothea Dix, William Wetmore Story, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Sophia Peabody Hawthorne. Among the public events commented upon in these early journals are commencements, class days, and other public exercises at Harvard; lyceum lectures; concerts and dance performances; dramatic readings; sermons; Transcendentalist “conversations”; Fourth of July celebrations in Boston; the “Cunard dinner” celebrating the arrival of the first steamship in Boston from England; rites of mourning upon the death of William Henry Harrison; and a ball for the visiting son of Louis-Philippe. The mention or description of these persons and events in the journals is generally not an end in itself, but an occasion for Healey’s reaction, often astute, frequently revealing of herself, and occasionally withering.

Clearly, writing her journals was an empowering act for Healey: she might not be able to participate in a Harvard commencement, but she could pass acerbic or approving judgment on those who did. Even Margaret Fuller, who seems to have overawed nearly everyone, did not overawe the eighteen-year-old Caroline Healey, whose cool observation upon first meeting her was, “I did not come away as I expected—^ to do—^ feeling that it would be impossible for me ever to accomplish as much as Miss Fuller—”(Ms. Journals, 1 March 1841). Healey’s commentary could be devastating, as in her worldly-wise evaluation of a ball that she had just attended: “I enjoyed myself—as much as usual—perhaps rather more—The entertainment was magnificent—the guests were plebeian—and the conversation—folly made audible”(Ms. Journals, 26 January 1841). One Harvard student, speaker at class day exercises, is immortalized in Healey’s journal for delivering his oration with a hangover:

It is useless to criticize Orne’s² performance—so disgraceful a failure never occurred in Cambridge. It had neither point nor pretension—the address to woman—was an insult to her name—the speech—concerning the classics a reproach to the faculty, and the moral tone of the whole oration—disgusting hypocrisy. Orne’s father arrived last night to hear his son’s oration—just as he was borne home—senseless from a drunken revel—. A pleasant greeting to a parent truly—. . . He drank in the course of his oration a pitcher of water which it would have given me real delight to have broken—He could not remember of course—and in attempting to read—invariably lost his place—which error—he corrected— by the indelicacy of drinking in the presence of the audience. Worse & worse was the order of every sentence and the Class listened

²William Henry Orne (d. 1842), member of the Harvard class of 1841, from Concordia Parish, Louisiana.

in silent agony. The Faculty and Dr Walker³—among them—were convulsed with laughter. (Ms. Journals, 15 July 1841)

The other world of Caroline Healey's early journals is the world of ideas. It is clear that by age eighteen what mattered most to her was the life of the mind. "Even now," she wrote at nineteen, "when my own mind is intensely active it seems to me as if nothing lived beside" (Ms. Journals, 5 October 1841). That life is brought to light in many forms and contexts: in extended meditations upon the proper use of what she had no doubt were her extraordinary talents; in the evolution of her religious beliefs as they were challenged by the new thought of the Transcendentalists; in her reactions to her wide reading; and in her responses to the ideas of the best and brightest of her place and time, minds like Emerson, Fuller, Frederic Henry Hedge, and James Walker. Their ideas she found inspiring in the most useful sense, as their thought became the whetstone for her own. Responding to a lecture by Transcendentalist and future Harvard professor Frederic Henry Hedge on "Genius," she offered in her journal alternative definitions: "I think I could define Talent & Genius—more briefly and accurately than he—Talent apprehends ^quickly^ and applies to its' own interest—Genius—comprehends and elaborates for the world—as quickly" (Ms. Journals, 17 February 1841). Among the writers to whose works she responded with as much confidence in her judgments as if she were their seasoned equal herself are Goethe, Emerson, Bulwer, Cooper, Longfellow, Harriet Martineau, and Shakespeare.

Caroline Healey's own mind and writings also came under the scrutiny of Caroline Healey, critic. If her critiques of the words and ideas of others seem at times presumptuous, it is worth noting that she did not spare even herself. Of her own journals she wrote scathingly,

I have been looking over—my journals for '36—& 7—and certainly if anything could, make me humble—disgust me with myself—that would—such a mass of frivolous self-applause—of nonsensical boasting never met my eyes—such a self satisfied way of talking about myself—and my productions—that certainly I would rather take a dose of Tartar Emetic than read them again. I was half-inclined to burn them up—but I . . . reflected that exposed as I am—to flattery and folly—it would be well to preserve them—as a powerful antidote—It was a sore trial of temper—however—to <reflect> be obliged to own—such trash—I think my bitterest foe—could wish me no greater misfortune than the publication of those papers—⁴

(Ms. Journals, 14 August 1839)

³James Walker (1794–1874) was Alford Professor of Natural Religion, Moral Philosophy and Civil Polity at Harvard; he was later president of the college.

⁴In fact, Dall did eventually destroy her journals from 1836 and 1837.

At times she found her own journals too much the reporter of her feelings; after reading Abigail Adams's letters to her husband she praised them but remarked that like her own journals they "contain too much sentiment—too little fact" (Ms. Journals, 5 January 1841). But however much at times she might deplore the overly personal nature of her journals, elsewhere she recognized that it was that very subjectivity, the catharsis factor, if you will, that made journal keeping so useful to her. "This Journal is my safety valve," she wrote, "and it is well, that I can thus rid myself of my superfluous steam" (Ms. Journals, 12 November 1839).

And indeed, I would argue, it is Healey's use of her journals as an outlet for feeling that gives them much of their compelling power, as opposed simply to the historical interest that they would otherwise excite. This power is enhanced by the fact that by the time she was fifteen Caroline Healey was essentially as fluent, as articulate a writer, as she ever became, and that, I might add, is no small claim. In closing, let me illustrate this power by quoting at some length the sixteen-year-old Healey's impassioned outpouring on her sense of estrangement from her family and her unsatisfied need for love:

sure am I that this family will never be united, while I live—my mother would love me better were I like Ellen—fond of housework and my needle—and though she is very, very, dear to me, never have I sat at her feet and poured out as I should love to do—the full affection of my soul, never has she spoken the one word which like oil upon the waves, calms the troubled soul—never has she encouraged me in my literary labors, never expressed the slightest desire to see what I have written—and such neglect touches the sore spot— . . . The children of course, seeing that mother has no sympathy with my pursuits, ridicule and despise them too, and this is very, very wrong—and I am very, very wrong, for I am hasty & impatient under the lash—My father, who is nearer to me, than aught else in this world—cannot feel with me, for he is not a woman—and so—but now Oh! God! that I have poured forth my complaints, give me strength to recapitulate my blessings—there is no temporal advantage that is not mine—it is the soul's necessities which are forgotten—my slightest wish is gratified before expressed—and my mother is ever my advocate—when a new hat, or a new dress is to be purchased, and my father seems to take pleasure in giving me every thing which may adorn my person—the greatest care has been taken to form my manners—to render them graceful and dignified, and Affection has seemed to invent ways to satisfy the eye, to gratify the ear or the taste, grateful am I for all—but does this satisfy the craving within me? (Ms. Journals, 3 November 1838)

The adolescent journals of Caroline Healey Dall are worthy of publication in

their own right, not merely as the work of a to-be-famous woman. The editorial problems that they present are no different in kind from those that might be presented by the works of any adult, nor, as I hope the few sample passages that I have quoted have demonstrated, is the audience to which they will appeal any different. At age seventeen Caroline Healey fantasized about the use to which her early journals might someday be put. "Suppose—for instance—I should ever attain—all that I wish to attain," she wrote, ". . . the first inquiry of a child would be—upon hearing—that I had done such & such a thing—'I wonder what sort of a little girl Miss Healey was—' Healey then imagined herself handing over to the child her early journals "and . . . she would see for herself—that after all—'Miss Healey was more foolish—than the generality of children—and that <after all> she had no excuse for her many extravagancies—but this—that she had always aspired to something noble—" (Ms. Journals, 14 August 1839). Egotistical, perhaps, but essentially true. The adolescent journals of Caroline Healey, like the adult journals of Caroline Healey Dall, reveal a figure who was a complex mix of noble aspirations and human weaknesses and emotional vulnerability. These journals combine this appealingly human persona with Healey's proximity to major figures and significant events, and with her remarkable articulateness. I believe it likely that these journals will one day find the broad and sympathetic audience that Caroline Dall herself seemed to anticipate.