

# "Sunshine and Rain in Iowa"

## Using Women's Autobiography as a Historical Source

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AS WOMEN'S HISTORY has become a major field of study, historians have begun to make greater use of women's personal writing in their research. In particular, scholars who examine the history of women in rural and frontier America have relied heavily on women's diaries, letters, and retrospective writings.<sup>1</sup> In their reliance on the personal, unpublished writing of "ordinary women," these scholars demonstrate the importance of investigating women's historical experience through the words of its unexceptional participants. Instead of focusing on the lives of women who typically publish their autobiographical writing—famous actresses, spokeswomen for political and social causes, women who have encountered some unique experience—scholars who seek to research the history of women's "everyday lives" more profitably rely on the writing of less prominent women.<sup>2</sup>

One example of such writing is Ada Mae Brown Brinton's "Sunshine and Rain in Iowa: Reminiscing Through 86 Years."

1. See, for example, Julie Roy Jeffrey, *Frontier Women: The Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1880* (New York, 1979); Glenda Riley, *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* (Ames, 1981); Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York, 1982); Elizabeth Hampsten, *Read This Only to Yourself: The Private Writings of Midwestern Women, 1880-1910* (Bloomington, IN, 1982); Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, eds., *The Women's West* (Norman, OK, 1987).

2. See Elizabeth H. Pleck, "Women's History: Gender as a Category of Historical Analysis," in *Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives on the New Social History*, ed. James B. Gardner and George Rollie Adams (Nashville, 1983), 51-65; and Marilyn J. Boxer and Jean H. Quataert, "Restoring Women to History," in *Connecting Spheres: Women in the Western World, 1500 to the Present*, ed. Marilyn J. Boxer and Jean H. Quataert (New York, 1987), 3-17.

Born on a farm near Stuart, Iowa, in 1891, Brinton was a long-time member of that community. As an old woman, she wrote about her life in Stuart and then donated the seventy-page essay to the State Historical Society of Iowa. Although Brinton's work often suffers from awkward sentence construction and the frequent use of clichés, it nevertheless presents a thoughtful account of her life in rural Iowa.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, retrospective works such as Brinton's do not always receive the attention they deserve from historians. A major obstacle to historians' extensive use of such material is that it is often mislabeled as "memoir" or "reminiscence," when it actually represents a richer form of retrospective writing—autobiography. As the subtitle of Brinton's work indicates, the author herself thought of her essay as a reminiscence, but its characteristics more nearly resemble those of autobiography, as scholars have defined the genre: a memoir or reminiscence directs attention toward events or persons beyond the self; an autobiography—like Brinton's work—focuses attention on the author herself. Although Brinton writes about her experiences with other people, she remains the central focus of her work. In addition, her self-focus is not merely a reconstruction of events in her past but an interpretation of those events and her thoughts about them. Such interpretation and analysis are also important characteristics of autobiography—characteristics that distinguish it from the genres of reminiscence and memoir. Brinton's autobiography certainly does not demonstrate the depth of analysis of a work like Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, but it does organize Brinton's life events in a way that reveals her personality and character.<sup>4</sup>

3. Ada Mae Brown Brinton, "Sunshine and Rain in Iowa: Reminiscing Through 86 Years," State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City. An abridged version of this work, edited by Glenda Riley, was published under the title "Eighty-Six Years in Iowa: The Memoir of Ada Mae Brown Brinton" in *Annals of Iowa* 45 (Winter 1981): 551–67. Riley's selections from the essay are primarily those passages that deal with Brinton's "external life"—discussion of her relatives, descriptions of community life, memories of turn-of-the-century customs and activities—rather than the portions of the original essay that deal with more personal issues. Only Brinton's original, unpublished essay is referred to in this article.

4. For a full discussion of the characteristics of autobiography, see Roy

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The methodologies and interpretive strategies commonly employed by historians and the expectations they bring to their research represent further obstacles to adequate interpretation of works like Brinton's. For example, historians might be wary of Brinton's essay because it does not follow a strictly chronological order and, on one level, appears to be disjointed. At one point Brinton breaks off the narrative entirely in order to reproduce diary entries from various periods of her life. Often, the narrative even takes on a stream-of-consciousness quality. After discussing the art of rug weaving, for instance, Brinton unexpectedly states, "I first heard the expression, 'nasty nice,' from Aunt Cassie Kempton who cared for me when Justine [Brinton's eldest child] was born. It comes to mind whenever I hear of some one who is overly particular."<sup>5</sup> Following these comments, Brinton immediately launches a discussion of her grandparents.

In order to understand the importance of Brinton's work as a rich historical source, historians must recognize that Brinton's fragmented writing style is itself an important interpretive tool, perhaps unique to women's autobiography. Even autobiographies by professional women writers, such as Lillian Hellman's *Unfinished Woman* or Kate Millet's *Flying*, frequently employ a form similar to that used by Brinton. This form—or lack thereof—reflects the ambiguous situation of women within American society. Just as the orderly style of male autobiographies reflects men's socialization to pursue the single goal of a successful career, women's social conditioning in multiple roles appears within the organizational framework of their autobiographies.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the form taken by Brinton's work is entirely appropriate for communicating its author's experiences and personality.

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Pascal, *Designs and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA, 1960), 1-20; James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton, 1972); Albert E. Stone, *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts: Versions of American Identity from Henry Adams to Nate Shaw* (Philadelphia, 1982), 1-27.

5. Brinton, "Sunshine and Rain," 27.

6. Estelle C. Jelinek, "Introduction," in *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Estelle C. Jelinek (Bloomington, IN, 1980), 17.

HISTORIANS might also be wary of substantial reliance on Brinton's work because she devotes so little attention to national or world events. For example, Brinton's first discussion of events during World War I centers not on the doughboys but on household tasks: "during World War I, everyone was making their own soap for laundry work."<sup>7</sup> In contrast to male autobiographies, women's autobiographies in general rarely reflect the political history of their times. Instead, they focus on women's personal lives—domestic details, family problems, close friends, and people who have influenced them. This focus on "the personal" emerges even in the autobiographies of such public women as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Emma Goldman, Lillian Hellman, and Margaret Mead.<sup>8</sup>

Brinton demonstrates this unique "personal knowledge" of events in the essay's first reference to political history, a recollection of President William McKinley's election in 1900 and his subsequent assassination.

I remember when there was a church oyster supper held in the unoccupied space of the ground floor of the Masonic Temple on election night. A large hand bell was rung as a gentleman caller walked the block announcing the supper. . . . this was at the time of the Presidential election between McKinley and William Jennings Bryan. The returns were sent by a long distance telephone located in the Herriott Drug Store. . . . At this point I will say that I clearly remember when the news of the assassination of President McKinley was received in town in 1901. The church bells were tolled for some time from the Methodist, Congregational, Christian and Catholic churches.<sup>9</sup>

Initially, the McKinley-Bryan election seems incidental to Brinton's major focus in the first half of the passage—the oyster supper. Even though Brinton's comments on the election reflect childhood memories of the event, readers might expect an account of the experience to be fleshed out by the adult author's

7. Brinton, "Sunshine and Rain," 46.

8. Jelinek, *Women's Autobiography*, 8. Also see Robert J. Lifton, "Woman as Knower: Some Psychohistorical Perspectives," in *The Woman in America*, ed. Robert J. Lifton (Boston, 1964), 31.

9. Brinton, "Sunshine and Rain," 24–25.

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analysis of the election. For instance, readers might expect the author to include information on her parents' opinions of McKinley's second administration or information on whether or not her father voted for McKinley. The historian looking for no more than Brinton's personal knowledge of the event, however, will find her account entirely appropriate—and revealing. For example, this passage describes how election days were celebrated at the turn of the century, how important information was disseminated before the advent of radio and television, and how people excluded from direct participation in the political process—including women—might still participate in the experiences surrounding political events.

Brinton's personal knowledge of wartime experiences can also prove informative to historians. During World War II, Brinton recorded her experiences on the Stuart homefront, and she reproduces selected entries from that diary near the end of her autobiography. Only four of these entries refer directly to the war. She noted the bombing of Pearl Harbor, then two months later recorded the fact that all males between the ages of twenty and forty-four were now required to register for the draft. On D-Day she wrote, "Allied invasion into France beginning in early morning. All listened to news bulletins with tense nerves." Her August 23, 1944, entry—"Paris in hands of Allies. Rumania turned over to our side"—is on the page next to comments about her daughter's wedding shower.<sup>10</sup>

The remainder of Brinton's diary sheds light on the individual characteristics of her wartime experience: the deaths of two sisters-in-law, the planting of a cherry tree, her daughter's tonsillectomy, Des Moines's heaviest rainfall in thirty years, and her husband's weight on September 14, 1944. Brinton's writing strongly supports writer Lillian Smith's argument that women's wartime diaries are particularly reliable historical sources because they "push aside the politicians and the speeches, the war cries and the jingoism and write about things as they exist in the home or town or in their small group of friends. . . . They [record] our individual differences while the newspapers [record]

10. *Ibid.*, 65.

our group sameness."<sup>11</sup> Brinton's diary entries suggest that for many people—including older women without sons—life went on much as usual during the war.

**BRINTON'S WORK** not only lends new insight into events in political history but serves as a valuable source of information on women's domestic experience. Brinton's autobiography provides detailed descriptions of turn-of-the-century household technology, early twentieth-century courtship customs, and women's recreational and employment opportunities of the era. Additional information about women's experience lies in the focus and language of her narrative.

Brinton's focus on the domestic sphere, for example, emphasizes her concern with the *matriarchate*—"the home in which a child grows up, its management and domination by the mother and by feminine values of nurturing, relatedness, process."<sup>12</sup> Just as women's diaries and letters of an earlier era provide evidence of a "female world of love and ritual," so do many well-known retrospective accounts of women's lives, including Margaret Mead's *Blackberry Winter*, Lillian Hellman's *Pentimento*, and Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*.<sup>13</sup> Women autobiographers often practically ignore their fathers and instead focus on the mother-daughter relationship. Brinton's work is no exception. Although her father appears occasionally, her mother, Rhoannah Hinkson Brown, dominates Brinton's description of her early years.

As an elderly woman, Brinton treasures certain of her mother's belongings, including a spindle that her mother had saved as a souvenir of her days as a mill girl in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Brinton's fascination with her mother's personal be-

11. Lillian Smith, "Autobiography as a Dialogue Between King and Corpse," in *The Winner Names the Age: A Collection of Writings by Lillian Smith*, ed. Michelle Cliff (New York, 1978), 190-91.

12. Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos, "The Metaphysics of Matrilinearity in Women's Autobiography: Studies of Mead's *Blackberry Winter*, Hellman's *Pentimento*, Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," in *Women's Autobiography*, ed. Jelinek, 180.

13. See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1 (1975), 1-30.

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longings is best expressed in a lengthy passage describing how she entertained herself as a child in church.

I remember lying in the pew with my head on my mother's knees. . . . [I] listened to the ticking of my mother's watch when she would say, "Listen to the little boy chopping wood." In the summer she carried a fan which folded completely out of sight into the handle case. . . . that fascinated me. Another form of entertainment was provided by my mother's allowing me to try on her mitts.<sup>14</sup>

Before she married, Brinton accompanied her mother on frequent visits to Brinton's married sister. After Brinton's own marriage, she began a daily ritual of visits to both her mother and her sister, and her mother often reciprocated by driving out to the Brinton farm for visits. In other words, Brinton and her immediate female relatives made an effort to keep the matriarchate intact after the daughters had grown. At one point in the narrative, Brinton needlessly drives the point home, commenting, "My mother and I were very close."<sup>15</sup>

**WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES**, in addition to providing insight into female relationships, also impart information about women's self-perceptions. The unique strategies and language of women's autobiographies play a part in providing this information. In contrast to the self-aggrandizement often found in men's autobiographies, women's writing frequently displays a sense of self-consciousness rather than self-confidence, and women use a variety of forms of understatement to distance or detach themselves from intimate details in their life stories. Rather than glowing narratives, women tend to write straightforward accounts of their girlhood and adult experiences, although they may write obliquely or humorously in order to disguise their feelings.<sup>16</sup>

Brinton's treatment of the major crises in her life as a wife and mother demonstrates this distancing strategy. She devotes no more than a sentence each to the deaths of two of her chil-

14. Brinton, "Sunshine and Rain," 9-10.

15. *Ibid.*, 7.

16. Jelinek, *Women's Autobiography*, 15.

dren and the death of her husband. In mentioning the death of her daughter Justine, Brinton merely states that the girl died at the age of two "by an accident," but she leaves the reader wondering about the rest of the story. When recounting the death of her husband of sixty years, she says simply, "We lost Marion on April 28, 1974 at the Dexter, Iowa Hospital."<sup>17</sup> Such passages strike the reader as particularly unusual in contrast to the detailed descriptions that Brinton provides for less significant events in her life.

Another way women's autobiographies provide information about women's self-perceptions is in their authors' focus on serving or pleasing others. Whether the autobiography is actress Joan Crawford's *My Way of Life* or an unpublished work like Brinton's, women writers often disguise personal ambitions and selfish motives—which male autobiographers write about openly—by describing their actions as being in some way selfless. By so disguising their real motives, women avoid responsibility for acting on their own behalf.<sup>18</sup>

Brinton's use of the "selfless disguise" appears most prominently in her discussion of personal freedom—an issue often prominent in women's autobiography.<sup>19</sup> In speaking of her daily visits to relatives, Brinton does not refer to her traveling as an independent action but as something her husband "let" her do. "Marion always inquired at noon if I had plans to go. If so, he harnessed a horse and left it hitched to the buggy all ready for me. After we had a car he made sure all was in readiness for me. . . . I'm afraid this made me too independent."<sup>20</sup> Even more telling are Brinton's remarks about her interests in fashion and home decorating. "He never objected to my buying clothes. In fact he always urged me to buy something . . . when in Des Moines or away on a trip. He allowed me to become very independent, for if I took a notion to paint the walls of a room, I did so, selecting my own color, and I did the painting myself—

17. Brinton, "Sunshine and Rain," 54, 68.

18. Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Women's Stories, Women's Selves," *Hudson Review* 30 (1977), 33.

19. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Female Imagination* (New York, 1975), 306.

20. Brinton, "Sunshine and Rain," 34.



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which I liked to do."<sup>21</sup> Although Brinton obviously enjoyed traveling and decorating, she does not describe her pursuit of those interests as a means of furthering her personal growth or pleasure. Instead, she implies that she acted as she did because it pleased her husband to give his wife these opportunities. By her account, he "allowed" her these freedoms; she did not step beyond appropriate feminine boundaries to grab them for herself.

IT IS NOT ENTIRELY ACCURATE to say, as literary critic Patricia Meyer Spacks has, that the "housewife seldom offers her life to public view."<sup>22</sup> Such women *do* write about their lives, but their writing remains unpublished and thus lost to most readers. That is all the more reason why historians should recognize the rich potential of such sources, read them sensitively, and incorporate this material in their scholarship and publications. Brinton's work reminds historians that women in American society must be considered on their own terms and through their own language. A careful reading of a variety of autobiographical works will ensure that more women's voices will be heard. To understand the full range of women's experience, historians need to listen as carefully to Ada Mae Brinton's voice as they would to the voice of Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Emma Goldman or Margaret Mead.

21. *Ibid.*, 66.

22. Patricia Meyer Spacks, "Selves in Hiding," in *Women's Autobiography*, ed. Jelinek, 112.

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