

Eliza R. Snow as a Victim of Sexual Violence in the 1838 Missouri War– the Author’s Reflections on a Source

By **Andrea R-M** (<https://juvenileinstructor.org/author/andream/>) – March 7, 2016

Perhaps you have heard or read that I gave a talk called “Beyond Petticoats and Poulitces: Finding a Women’s History of the Mormon-Missouri War of 1838” at the Beyond Biography: Sources in Context for Mormon Women’s History (<https://juvenileinstructor.org/beyond-biography-sources-in-context-for-mormon-womens-history/>) conference at Brigham Young University. My paper sought to address the history of how women experienced the violence in Missouri, particularly as victims of sexual violence. As part of that research, I examined the case study of Eliza R. Snow as a possible victim of a gang rape that might have left her unable to have children.



(<https://juvenileinstructor.org/ji-content/uploads/2016/03/Eliza-R-Snow.jpg>) I looked at a few of the rapes and attempted rapes in Missouri, recalled by various witnesses, legal testimonials, and personal accounts, with a discussion of why women are not specifically named in most sources. The

scarcity and limitation of sources has presented historians with the difficulty of uncovering a history of sexual violence in Missouri, and of identifying actual victims. So I concluded with an examination of a primary source that amazingly came to me only three weeks prior to the conference, via a colleague who received it from a member of the family where the source is held. That source gives a description of Eliza’s rape, and its larger meaning in Snow’s life and possible motivations for her polygamous marriage to Joseph Smith.

The case of Eliza R. Snow has received considerable media attention in the last four days, and has invited many questions from those who have read the brief report in the Salt Lake Tribune (<http://www.sltrib.com/home/3613791-155/shocking-historical-finding-mormon-icon-eliza>) and other outlets (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3476831/Mormon-suffragette-icon-married-Brigham-Young-Joseph-Smith-gang-raped-eight-men-1838-left-infertile.html>). A brief newspaper report, while introducing readers to this information, could not possibly address the larger history, context, and methodology I offered in my paper. So, to that end, this post is meant to respond to those questions in brief, while also opening an important and ongoing conversation about the history of sexual violence in Church history, and the particular case of Eliza R. Snow.

The account comes from a portion of the autobiography of Alice Merrill Horne written in her later years. Horne was a member of the Utah State Legislature, a board member of the General Relief Society, and a famed art critic and patroness. Born in 1868, she was the granddaughter of Apostle George A. Smith and Bathsheba W. Smith, the 4th General Relief Society President, who was one of the original members of the Female Relief Society in Nauvoo in 1842, and close friend to Eliza R. Snow and other high leadership of the Relief Society in Utah Territory. Bathsheba’s granddaughter Alice remembered visiting her grandmother as a young girl, and hearing the elderly women of Mormonism reminisce about the early days of the Restoration. I quote here using Alice Merrill Horne’s own words: “The most important Mormon women of the nineteenth century often gathered at the Smith home abutting the Church Historian’s Office.” Alice would “sit on her grandmother’s lap and listen, catching . . . the whispered word unraveling, spelling, and signs made by those ladies.” It was there, at one of these rendezvous of feminine confidences, young Alice overheard the account of the brutal gang rape of Eliza R. Snow. “There was a saint—a Prophetess, a Poet, an intellectual, seized by brutal mobbers—used by those eight demons and left not dead, but worse. The horror, the anguish, despair, hopelessness of the innocent victim was dwelt upon. [W]hat [sic] future was there for such a one? All the aspirations of a saintly virgin—that maiden of purity—had met martyrdom!?” In this case, the rape left its victim not only emotionally scarred, but also permanently affected. Eliza R. Snow would never be able to have children.

Horne links Eliza’s inability to bear children in part to the decision to marry Joseph Smith polygamously in Nauvoo, Illinois. To her, the connection was clear: “The prophet heard and had compassion. This Saint, whose lofty ideals, whose person had been crucified, was yet to become the corner of female work. To her, no child could be born and yet she would be a Mother in Israel. One to whom all eyes should turn, to whom all ears would listen to hear her sing (in tongues) the praises of Zion. She was promised honor above all women, save only Emma, but her marriage to the prophet would be only for heaven.”

So, with that brief introduction to the source upon which I am basing my argument for Eliza R. Snow’s rape, I want to address the four most significant questions that I am receiving from online forums, colleagues, and friends.

1. The first question has to do with the authenticity of the source itself. Admittedly, the source is problematic, as a hearsay account written forty or fifty years later from the memory of a young girl, listening to elderly women describe something that had happened thirty years before. Without apparent corroboration from Eliza herself or other sources, this source on its own might be worthy of dismissal. Audience attendees, as well as online commenters, have sought clarification on this point. And justifiably so. Here are some of my thoughts, lettered a through f:

a. What I revealed last Thursday is not necessarily new information. I first heard of the rumor probably ten years ago from Eliza’s biographer, Jill Mulvay Derr, who discussed it with me when the question of the Emma-Eliza stairs story came up at an MHA conference. Further, Derr had at times discussed Eliza’s possible rape in some semi-public forums, which were then reported in various blogs (<http://timesandseasons.org/index.php/2006/09/jill-mulvay-derr-on-eliza-r-snow-smith/>). What made my presentation unique from Derr’s is that I had access to and presented the official source publicly at this official conference. Further, Derr has argued that Eliza’s poetry about Missouri exposed a particular rage, as well as carefully-worded and brutal descriptions of the Missouri mob violence, while not going into specifics about herself. Not a smoking gun, but certainly contextually significant. I discuss some of these poems and interpretive frameworks in my paper.

b. Horne’s account is not distant and vague; its language and tone are personal, intimate and familiar. Horne gives no indication at all that she didn’t get the information from Eliza herself. In fact, later in the document, Horne describes in detail her personal relationship to Eliza R. Snow, as a mentor and friend and Relief Society leader. By virtue of being the granddaughter of one of Snow’s best friends, and in spite of her age difference to the elder leader, Alice apparently enjoyed some

kind of intimacy with the Presidentess. I consider it unlikely that Horne would have reported an account of this severity without some kind of prior communication and verification from Eliza herself.

c. The source comes from Alice Merrill Horne, not some easily discounted anonymous or outside observer. In other words, she was no yahoo. Horne was well-respected, educated, influential, widely published, and connected to the highest circles of church leadership. By virtue of her reputation and her social and religious credentials, it is difficult to dismiss the source outright as the ramblings of an unknown, a fame-seeker, or a gossip.

d. Alice’s motives are not to debase or disrespect Eliza R. Snow, but to describe how she overcame great trial and struggle to become the spiritual, political, and artistic leader that she was. Horne viewed Eliza’s life as a triumph over tragedy and constructed it as such. Given that construction, what possible other motives could she have in describing it as she did? As a private autobiography that went unpublished, she did not receive money or fame for the disclosure. But she apparently intended it, in part, as an instructive lesson for her descendants or the larger membership of the Church, on how an important Mormon leader and the most famous Mormon woman was able to overcome a violent crime and still make a successful life.

e. The importance of “institutional” family memory is worth consideration here. Memory is tricky, especially when disseminated through families, it becomes like a game of telephone, with details and interpretation changing with each telling. And yet, in each family, life-changing events of the past become part of the self-identification and group construction of that family, and are sometimes remembered quite clearly. I can’t remember when my father’s family first told me about the tragic death of their grandmother in 1925 from complications related to childbirth. And yet, I heard the story so often that I knew it completely changed the trajectory of my grandmother’s life and the lives of her siblings. So much, that the stories of two step-mothers, some child abuse, and the young children shuttered from home to home during the Great Depression were often the subject of dinnertime conversations and family gatherings well until my grandmother’s death. And at some time in my young life, I remember hearing my grandmother’s own account of the day her mother died. She went into her parents’ bedroom, saw her mother lying on the bed (there might have been blood on the sheets or not, that is unclear in my memory) and my great-grandmother softly said, “Bee, I need you to go get your daddy.” My great-grandmother died that day. If I ever write my family history, I will include a tragic moment witnessed and remembered only by an eight-year-old girl in 1925, without corroboration, shared with a granddaughter in the 1980s, and written down here in 2016. Similarly, Horne’s 1930s account of Eliza R. Snow’s 1838 rape invites us to consider the

possibilities and limitations of individual and institutional memory and how it is transmitted. Perhaps Horne remembered details of Eliza’s rape incorrectly: were there eight assailants, or just one? Were there more? The various accounts of gang rapes from the Missouri period list many different numbers. Lack of clarity on details doesn’t mean that the rape didn’t happen at all, since it was significant enough for her to include fifty years after first hearing it.

f. If readers are still not convinced of the authenticity of this source, I readily invite those concerns in the comments here. But, as a preview, I offer the (hopefully) future publication of my research, which will include at least one corroborating source on Eliza that has been given to me in the last few days. I am eager to explore other primary accounts of the Missouri violence as Mormon women experienced it. Further, I am keen to consider what a rape account might look like, if passed down through family memory. I think it would look exactly like this one.

2. Eliza and Emma and the infamous stairs story. This story is persistent and tenacious. It was the very first question I received in the Q & A following my presentation, and I have received many more questions about it. It boils down to whether Eliza’s ability to have children could possibly have been “damaged” from Missouri, when she was supposedly pregnant and miscarried in Nauvoo. The stairs story has largely been discounted by many historians, including Richard Bushman, Linda King Newell, Valeen Tippetts Avery, and Derr herself, as apocryphal, as motivated by anti-Emma sentiments in the 1870s, and as a way of sensationalizing the Nauvoo polygamy experience. It is impossible to cover the Emma-Eliza stairs story here, but I offer for your consideration, JI’s Amanda’s overview here (<https://juvenileinstructor.org/the-stairs-a-nauvoo-rumor-featuring-emma-smith-eliza-r-snow-and-plural-marriage/>), as well as Brian Hales’s examination of the same here (<http://mormonhistoricsites.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Emma-Smith-Eliza-R.-Snow-and-the-Reported-Incident-on-the-Stairs.pdf>). I am sure that comment on this post will address this event, and I invite those discussions as we complicate Eliza’s narrative in light of the account of her rape.

3. Eliza’s supposed infertility or inability to have children. No one knows why Eliza R. Snow couldn’t have children. She was 34 years old when she experienced the Missouri violence, and 38 when she married Joseph Smith, and 41 when she married Brigham Young. Her age might have precluded being able to conceive as easily had she been in her twenties. But, without the obstetric knowledge that might have diagnosed some kind of trauma to her reproductive organs, or some other condition unrelated to age or rape, it is highly improbable for historians to give her a posthumous diagnosis. But, if the Horne account is accurate, it appears that Eliza herself considered the Missouri rape to be the cause of her infertility. Does that mean the rape was so violent that her internal organs were damaged? Does it mean that she was unable to have intercourse at all, either from emotional or

physical trauma? Or did she perhaps acquire a sexually transmitted disease like chlamydia or gonorrhea? Both of which are known to cause pelvic inflammatory disease that can scar the fallopian tubes, cause inflammation of the uterus, and make it impossible to bear children. In a pre-antibiotic era, such an infection would have gone unchecked to the point of incurable damage. It is impossible to know. But this account offers an alternate explanation for Eliza’s infertility that counters the dubious stairs-miscarriage story.

4. The fourth question I have heard is whether I am using the Eliza case to defend or justify polygamy, according to Horne’s description, and my Tribune statement, which has received much criticism for being an apology for polygamy. I did not intend it that way. Let me be quite clear on this point: The origins and practice of Mormon polygamy, as introduced by Joseph Smith in Nauvoo, are complex, multi-faceted, and difficult to pin down with uniformity or consistency. Before I had seen the Horne source, I had often wondered at the connections between the traumas that women experienced in Missouri and the origins of polygamy, in that Mormon male leadership had felt incapable of protecting women from mob assaults. The vulnerability that women felt perhaps fostered a climate whereby celestial marriage offered solace, protection, or some kind of spiritual connectivity that kept the community cemented together in the face of danger. The Horne document presented me with evidence of the possibility that Joseph offered, and Eliza accepted, a polygamous marriage as a way of providing spiritual comfort in the absence of earthly justice. I am interested in exploring this question, but I also invite readers not to project their issues with Joseph Smith onto a topic which I have intended to bring historical attention to very real and violent crimes committed against Mormon women. I am merely trying to understand how Eliza viewed her polygamous marriage to Joseph Smith as a response to her own personal circumstances, and that is a fair historical question to ask.

Finally, I hope that readers will consider the impact of knowing Eliza’s status as a rape victim. I worried, even agonized over revealing this brutal part of her past, that those who cherish her memory would consider her identity somehow changed by this. I am mindful of those who think I was wrong to reveal this at all, but I stand by what I did. If we seek to conceal this crime against her out of some kind of protective impulse, I believe that we are perpetuating the idea that rape brings shame to its victims. What are your thoughts on this, readers? I do think Eliza would want to be remembered for the wholeness of her amazing life, her poetry and hymns, her Relief Society leadership, her role in significant Restoration and pioneering events, and her contributions to Mormon women then and today. Her story humanizes and feminizes an event that has always been told as a story of male war, male imprisonment, and male victimhood. She unsilences the silenced.

And yet, her victimhood does not and will not define her, but this new knowledge has the potential to bring hope and healing to other victims of sexual violence among our Church membership and others, for whom Eliza provides an emulative model of strength, hope, faith, and resilience. Whether as a historian or a Mormon woman, that is my main purpose in sharing Eliza’s story.

Article filed under **Announcements and Events, Biography, Gender, Memory, Polygamy, Reflective Posts, Research Tools, Responses, Women's History**

Comments

1

Thanks for this, Andrea. This is a fascinating insight into both an important and difficult part of the Mormon past and historical methodology as it relates to the source(s) that document that point.

Comment by Christopher — March 7, 2016 @ 7:26 am

2

You’re a saint, Andrea; this is important research, both for the historical community and the Mormon community writ large. I hope that readers encountering this for the first time recognize 1) that you’ve been working on this for a long time, and this isn’t a conclusion you jumped to quickly, and 2) that your paper digs into sexual violence more broadly, as this is just one of many cases. As you say, this lens should change how we view the Missouri War on many fronts.

My two thoughts:

1) As I’ve told you, I approach this issue with this question: if Eliza were raped in 1838, what would the evidence look like? Because of the culture of shame and silence, women wouldn’t (and didn’t) write about it. Men wrote about the rapes, but always erased the names. So you could have circumstantial evidence, like Eliza’s poetry, which you mention. And you’d have oral traditions passed down in intimate settings and perhaps not written down until someone is two or three generations removed, of which we have two accounts in this instance (including the Horne reference). So what would evidence for Eliza’s rape look like? Exactly like this.

2) This is radical speculation, but I do wonder if there is a connection with the “stairs” story. Not to a real stairs incident, but to the story: what if the Snow descendants, who passed along the story generations later, sought for a way to explain her infertility while also maintaining her “virtue,” so to speak. And knock Emma down a peg at the same time.

Again, this is important work, Andrea. It was an honor to hear the paper in person, and I hope to see it in published form as soon as possible.

Comment by Ben P (<http://juvenileinstructor.org>) — March 7, 2016 @ 7:43 am
