

CONNIE BURNS

MARGARET JANE MUSSEY SWEAT AND THE
EXPANDING FEMALE SPHERE

An examination of the life and writings of Margaret Jane Mussey Sweat provides a valuable means of elucidating the experience of some nineteenth-century women, and forces a reassessment of the stereotypical notion of Victorian women as passive, domestic, and restricted by rigidly proscribed gender roles. Sweat's published and unpublished writings – her diaries, literary reviews, verse, and novel – illuminate and reflect the intersections of private life and public life with which Victorian women struggled. From her life and writings comes an understanding of the tension arising between women's private sphere and their less acknowledged public sphere. Within this tension can be discerned the emergence of the women's movement, along with the roots of gender assumptions with which we still struggle today.

The ideal of Victorian women as passive and restrained, confined to a private sphere defined by the domestic concerns of the home, was embodied in the Cult of True Womanhood, and particularly in the notion of Republican Motherhood. Women were deemed innately capable of child rearing and solely responsible for children, home, and morality.¹ Thus, not only was the ideal woman removed from public life into a private and separate domestic sphere, but she also had that removal rationalized: Why worry about a few votes when one already ran the country by the raising of the next generation of male leaders? The doctrine of separate spheres at the heart of Victorian domesticity led to a sentimentalized notion of women and female roles, to the genteel cult of the lady, and to the entrenchment of encumbering household customs which still strongly shape twentieth-century attitudes and images of feminine and masculine roles.



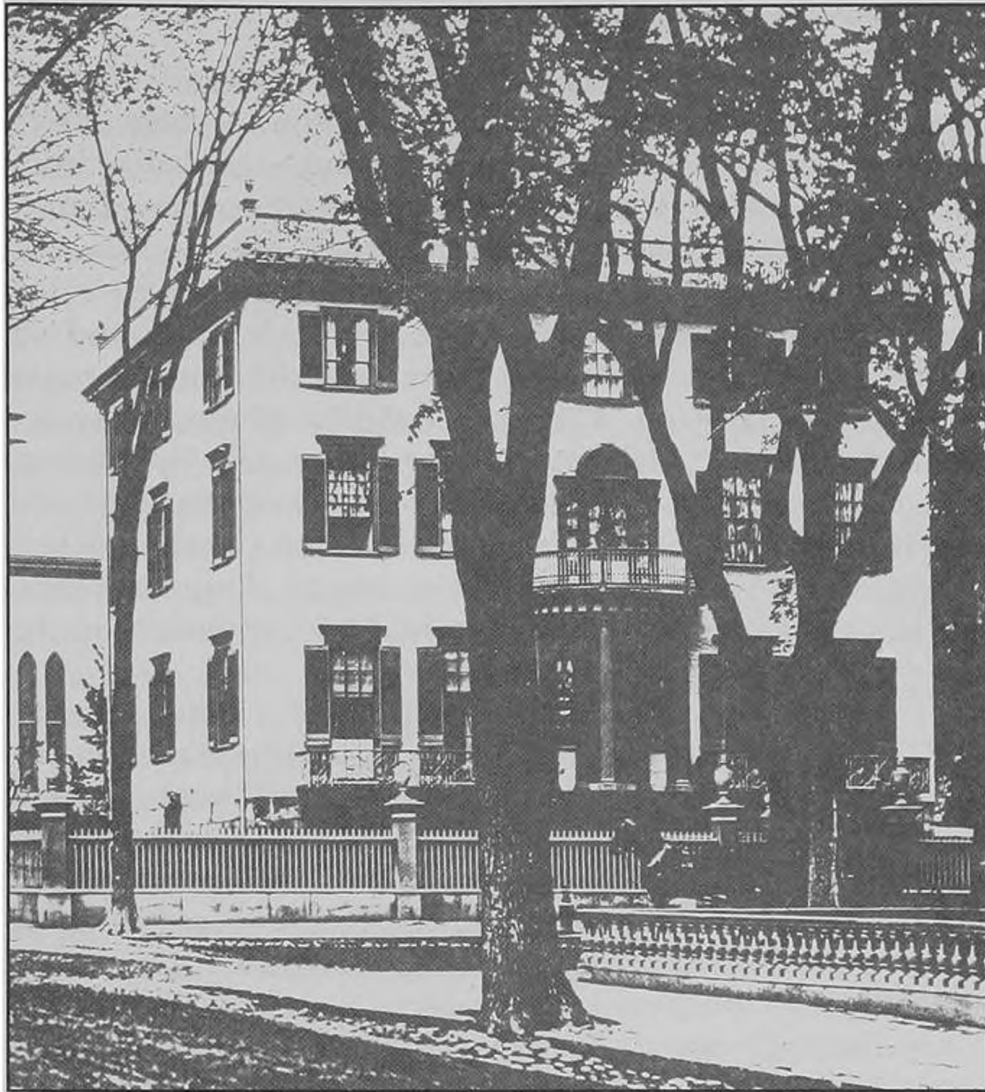
The career of the talented and well-traveled Margaret Jane Mussey Sweat forces a reassessment of Victorian women's lives. Like others, Margaret Sweat carved an active and influential life out of an encumbering social milieu.

Photo courtesy Maine Women Writers Collection, Westbrook College.

A study of the era through the life and writings of one woman, Margaret Sweat, reveals the notion of women's private sphere to have been far less a reflection of reality than an ideology promoted in the midst of rapid social change and the dreaded "Woman Question." It was an ideology that advanced cultural homogeneity and social containment.² Ironically, during the very years that middle-class male perceptions of women were positing females as inhabiting a separate and private sphere, middle-class women were leaving home to fight injustice, purify the world, and create meaningful female roles. As men increasingly defined women's roles as unlike those of men, women's experiences came to parallel those of men. While changing social circumstances provided more opportunities for women, cultural messages defined women's place to be in the home.

As a study of Margaret Sweat reveals, some women subverted the meaning of public life and tradition, often through membership in voluntary associations and women's clubs, without appearing to challenge the Victorian ideology frontally.³ During the mid-nineteenth century many women, referred to by Nathaniel Hawthorne as "that damn scribbling mob," became avid writers and readers of the popular novel. This feminization of American culture is further evidence of women's involvement in society.

Victorian gender ideology is apparent in the works of the Boston School artists (1890-1918), whose paintings would have been familiar to Margaret Sweat. Edmund Charles Tarbell, Frank Weston Benson, William McGregor Paxton, and others deliberately denied the real lives of many middle-class Boston women, who were energetic, active reformers, and painted idealized, passive women in quiet domestic interiors.⁴ Foreign observers noted the involvement of American women in social and cultural life.⁵ Club women were pursuing intellectual stimulation, learning administrative skills, and becoming increasingly active and visible in public life. Literacy among women was rapidly expanding, as were educational opportunities. Women's public sphere was widening, even as these male



Margaret and her husband, Lorenzo de Medici Sweat, spent their summers in Portland at the McLellan-Wingate house, on the corner of Spring and High streets, beginning in 1880. Margaret bequeathed the house to the Portland Society of Art in 1909.

MHS photo.

artists were depicting dreamy, idealized figures, projecting onto these women feminine ideals of passiveness and compliance in an effort to contain and regulate the rapid social change occurring around them.

Margaret Sweat's life clearly illustrates that white, middle-class Victorian women had opportunities to participate in as well as to shape the society in which they lived. She was born on November 28, 1823, in Portland, Maine, the daughter of John

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Mussey, a prosperous merchant and landlord, and Lydia Tracey. She was raised in her parents' home, The Elms, located on the corner of Danforth and High streets. Her father graduated from Bowdoin in 1809, one of five members of the college's fourth graduating class. Although no account of Margaret Sweat's formal education can be substantiated, her father was liberal in his views and provided her with a good education and an environment in which her progressive ideas and attitudes could develop. The Portland of Margaret's childhood and adult years was cosmopolitan. Maine, with its seafaring and shipbuilding, was more urbane than the Maine of a century later; Portland vied with Boston to be the region's center. Portland's location – a half a day closer to Europe – was enviable. Several eloquent preachers and great interest in literature and the arts enhanced the city's status.

In October 1849, Margaret married an attorney, Lorenzo de Medici Sweat, a Bowdoin graduate and the son of a doctor from Parsonsfield. While Mr. Sweat served in the Maine House of Representatives, Margaret wrote a weekly column, "Augusta Correspondence," for a local Portland paper, providing an up-to-date report on the legislative sessions. She was a frequent writer of impassioned letters to the editor as well. In 1863 Mr. Sweat was elected to a two-year term in the thirty-eighth United States Congress. After that time, the Sweats divided their year between Portland, Washington, D.C., and travel abroad. They were enthusiastic and adventurous travelers, visiting Europe, Egypt (Margaret's favorite spot), Japan, Cuba, and Russia. In Washington, Margaret Sweat served from 1866 as a vice-regent from Maine of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, one of the earliest successful preservation efforts, which is still in existence today. She was also a founder of the wryly named Cobweb Club, an elite group of a dozen or so carefully selected women members who discussed controversial and contemporary issues. This club later expanded to become the well-known Washington Women's Club, one of the first effective women's clubs.

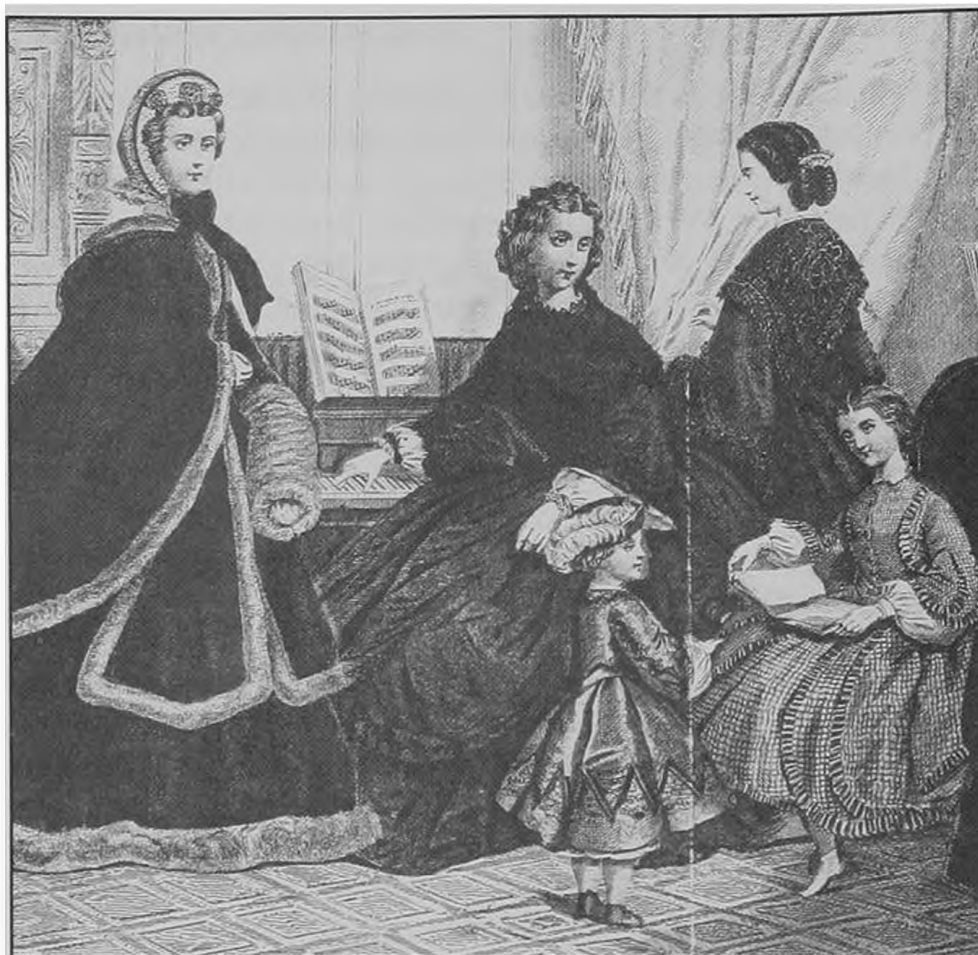
In 1880, the Sweats bought the McLellan-Wingate House, located on the corner of Spring and High streets in Portland.

The house served as the Sweat's summer residence. Lorenzo died on July 26, 1898, at the age of 80. Margaret followed him to the grave ten years later, on January 16, 1908. In her will she bequeathed their Portland home to the Portland Society of Art to serve, together with a building erected by means of an additional \$100,000 bequest, as an art museum and memorial to her husband.⁶ While Mrs. Sweat is best remembered for her largess toward the Portland Museum of Art, her writings contribute significantly to an understanding of the complex nature of the world of nineteenth-century women.

Margaret Jane Mussey Sweat's obituary opens with a description of her as "one of the most talented and accomplished women whom Portland can claim as daughters."⁷ During her lifetime, her career eclipsed that of her husband; until the turn of the century she is mentioned in several reference books of notable people.

This recognition was due in part to the sheer volume of her literary output, as well as to her publications in prestigious journals. One of only three women to contribute to the *North American Review* in the 1850s, Sweat was an American authority on George Sand, writing an extensive critical essay appended to Sand's *Antonia* which elicited a letter of thanks from the French author. Sweat's choice of Sand, an iconoclastic, independent woman, concerned with passion, radicalism, social justice, and equality, is revealing, as is her fondness for Charlotte Bronte, about whom she wrote a lengthy essay for the *North American Review* on the occasion of the British author's death. Sweat also wrote numerous book reviews for various publications, many of which she compiled in a notebook. This volume of over one hundred reviews, and other of Sweat's writings, including her travel journals, diaries, novel and volume of poetry, are available for study at the Maine Women Writers Collection at Westbrook College in Portland.

Sweat's position as literary critic and reviewer in the male-dominated literary world of the latter half of the nineteenth century is prestigious.⁸ Like Margaret Fuller who immediately preceded her in the 1840s and 1850s as



Sweat's accomplishments in journalism, literature, literary criticism, and Washington social activities contrast markedly with the portrayal of women as passive denizens of quiet Victorian homes. Her career was remarkable, but perhaps not all that atypical of women of her time.

Mame Historical Society Collections.

a writer for the *North American Review*, Sweat was writing professionally during a seminal period in the formation of American literature – a period when a national identity and a national literature were being defined, especially by literary figures from the Northeast. As a female professional reviewer, Sweat also was defining and stretching gender roles and forming literary tastes. Sweat brought to her reviewing an interest in works by and about women, romances, and children's literature. Her reviews of such writing elevated those genres and titles in the minds of the reading public. She helped both reflect and shape the emerging American literature during a critical period in its formation.

To the Reader.

If there is aught of truth within these pages, it will assert itself without assistance and without explanation.

If there is any power of expression in these words, it will speak to the hearts which recognize it; and if there is any charm of sentiment beneath the imperfect utterance, it lays itself at the feet of those who give it welcome.



Forward to *Ethel's Love-Life*, considered by some critics to be the first lesbian novel in America.

MHS Collections

As an avid traveler and writer, Sweat kept lengthy journals (17 of them are available at the Maine Women Writers Collection). In 1859, she published her journeys in *Highways of Travel*. Other journeys found their way into books as well: *A Fortnight in St. Petersburg* (1899) and *Hither and Yon by Land and Sea* (1901).

Sweat's writings also include correspondence. During the early years of her marriage, she formed an intense emotional relationship with novelist, poet, and journalist Elizabeth Drew Barstow Stoddard. Forty-five letters written by Stoddard to Sweat provide insight into nineteenth-century romantic friendships between women. These letters, which are part of the Allison Shelley Literature Collection at Penn State University, also inform an analysis of Sweat's novel and her diaries. In January 1859, just prior to the publication of *Highways of Travel*, Sweat's only novel, *Ethel's Love Life*, was published. This novel, considered by some critics as recently as 1982 to be the first lesbian novel in America, illuminates nineteenth-century women's romantic friendships and the evolving social construction of gender and sexuality.⁹ Written as a series of letters by Ethel to

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her fiancé, the novel describes her relationships with rejected suitors, as well as with two women bound to her by “strange and irrevocable ties.”¹⁰ Sweat’s *Verses*, printed for private distribution, similarly contain intimate expressions of affection towards women.

The diaries kept by Margaret Jane Mussey Sweat begin on October 30, 1849, with the following entry:

At 11 o’clock in the morning I was married to Mr. Sweat by the Rev. I. Nichols – in the presence of about fifty friends. The ceremony was the Episcopal form varied by an extemporaneous prayer and one or two minor alterations....No tears were shed and there was of course less stiffness than usual, as no one felt called upon to look melancholy.

Transitions and dislocations, such as travel or marriage, often prompt diarists to begin recording, as Sweat has done.¹¹ In 1849, altering the wedding ceremony even slightly was a daring thing to do. After her honeymoon trip to New York City, Sweat returned to Portland to make or receive between ten and twelve social calls in a day. She traveled frequently, and noted the number of miles (over 24,000 in 1858). Even the briefest entries are intriguing and revealing: on August 17, 1849, she “Went down to be weighed- felt quite mortified at weighing only 100!”

The initial diary volume covers the years 1849 to 1880 and, while revealing little of what Sweat felt or thought, it is a rich source with which to plumb Victorian social life and women’s roles. In page after page she records births, deaths, weddings, what she had for breakfast, household financial transactions, weather reports, club meetings, and letters written and received. Other diary volumes are available for the years 1873, 1900, 1901, 1902, and 1903. These brief jottings become, in the words of Virginia Woolf, “diamonds in the dustbin.”¹²

Sweat’s summer days were filled with buggy rides to Two Lights State Park in Cape Elizabeth for picnicking on the rocks,

trips to the Casino in Cape Elizabeth, and excursions to the White Mountains Station House in Gorham, New Hampshire. The evening entertainments were frequent and varied. Sweat might view "Panoramas" on Egypt or a whaling voyage, hear a lecture on mesmerizing or, for an admission price of seventy-five cents, see Lola Montez dance. She was very aware of political events, noting the funeral of President Taylor and the assassinations of Lincoln and McKinley. She attended Pierce's inauguration, meeting him at the White House and visiting with Maine Senator Hannibal Hamlin. She was a frequent visitor to the White House during Roosevelt's presidency. Alice Longfellow was a longtime Portland friend, and Sweat's Washington friends included Mrs. Graham Bell, Mrs. Secretary Knox, and Mrs. Jeff Davis. She heard Ralph Waldo Emerson speak ("pungent as usual"¹³), Horace Greeley orate, Fanny Kemple sing, Stephen Douglas debate, Dickens read, Booth act, and Susan B. Anthony discuss the Woman Question. On the evening of September 1, 1858, Sweat attended a Grand illumination in Portland for the success of the Atlantic telegraph, and she was at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in September, 1876.

Sweat poignantly revealed a legitimate fear of her era when she wrote of several fires which consumed portions of the city of Portland. The great fire of 1866, she recorded, burned 327 acres, eight miles of streets, and nearly 2,000 buildings. Sweat noted in an entry: "Really the city seem[s] in a fair way to be burnt up piecemeal, one can hardly go through a street without seeing blackened ruins and falling walls."¹⁴

Sweat's concern for her health, evident in her diaries, reveals that she was not immune from the often inexplicable bouts of ill health and depression to which others of her gender and class in this era were prone. She frequently complained of neuralgia, cholera, influenza, and nervous headaches, for which she took *bella donna* and opium. Far more interesting are the frequently noted illnesses whose symptoms lack a diagnosis. When she became ill in Vienna in 1873, experiencing high fever, exhaustion, and fits, the male doctor suggested she be placed in an insane asylum – advice refused by Mr. Sweat, much to

Margaret's appreciation. The episode is reminiscent of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, written in 1892, chronicling the emotional breakdown of a young wife confined to her bed by her doctor husband. Women, particularly ambitious ones, present a widespread pattern of nervous difficulty and depression in the nineteenth century that was in part symptomatic of the sharp disparity between the needs of women and the restrictive ideologies woven around them. The model woman was not only confined to her house; her confinement extended to restrictive clothing as well.¹⁵

Several other themes run through Sweat's diaries. Most significant to this study of the public roles of nineteenth-century women is Sweat's involvement in several voluntary women's associations. Sweat mentions D.A.R. gatherings, meetings of the Washington Statue for France, a conference with the Scientific Association Committee, and an organization regarding the New York Customs petition for better treatment of ladies. Sweat spent a great deal of time on the Mt. Vernon Ladies' Association, serving on the Executive Council as secretary and later as the vice regent from Maine.

The rise of voluntary associations provided women with a public space located between the private sphere of the home and the public life of the formal institutions of government.¹⁶ Voluntary and reform efforts channeled ambitions that may have been frustrated by women's restrictive roles. The Cult of True Womanhood implied a superior righteousness of feminine endeavors, thereby adding validity to the efforts of female reformers. Ironically, the very ideology that men espoused to control and restrict women became the basis for legitimatizing their reforming efforts. Slowly women like Sweat began to enter the world that men had built, largely with the intention of righting a world that men had wronged.¹⁷ Such reform efforts organized and empowered women; their link to the early women's rights movement is clear.

A leader in the incipient women's club movement, Sweat was the single prominent figure behind the formation in 1890 of the Cobweb Club, which in turn evolved into the prestigious



Margaret Sweat, circa 1900.

Courtesy Maine Women Writers Collection, Westbrook College.

Washington Club for women. Among Sweat's personal volumes at the Maine Women Writers Collection are the annals of the Cobweb Club for the first two years of its existence. Victorian women, they make clear, were considering weighty contemporary issues beyond the domestic sphere. Sweat was not only secretary; she also was unanimously elected president. In her rooms at the Richmond Hotel, she hosted the meetings of the dozen women who belonged to the club and who took turns presenting papers upon which the others commented. Indeed, Sweat's participation was a serious intellectual endeavor. A contemporary newspaper article about the Washington Club noted that, unlike men's clubs which were places of recreation, women's clubs promoted self-culture.¹⁸ The column concluded by mentioning the astonishment of club men at the "remarkable

economical management” of the Washington Club. Victorian women not only entered the domain of men, they succeeded in it, gaining administrative and organizational skills and employing business acumen not generally conceded to them.

The birth of women’s clubs, in which Margaret Sweat was pivotal, serves as an indication of the changing role of women in the late nineteenth century. Clubs helped express the unmet needs of middle-class women for intellectual stimulation and served as mechanisms of upward social mobility that were not controlled by their husbands. Victorian women typically had fewer children (Margaret Sweat had none), more money, longer lives, some leisure time, and some education. Women’s clubs would have appealed to women who were too conservative for more radical reform groups, but whose skills and ambition to do something useful often led them to turn to civic philanthropic work in the tradition of female benevolence.

The meaningful roles women created for themselves are in sharp contrast to sentimentalized notions of women of the last century – notions which in part are the roots of contemporary gender assumptions of women as passive, domestic, and largely ineffective in the public domain. By allowing women’s own words and experiences serious consideration, we receive a different, more balanced picture. An analysis of Margaret Jane Mussey Sweat’s life and writings adds much to the creation of this new image of women as active participants in cultural affairs and less centered in domestic concerns. Sweat eludes prevailing paradigms, forcing a reassessment of the actual sphere of influence of white middle-class Victorian women.

Margaret Sweat was not without wit and humor, however. An epitaph she penned for herself reveals her willingness to speak up, take a stand, and not care what others thought of her:

Among all the women you must have met,
I’m not sure you’d notice one small Mrs. Sweat.

She saw with her eyes and walked with her feet,
And said many a thing we dare not repeat.

Twass said she thought a great deal of herself
And never was willingly put on the shelf.

Some loved her, some hated and some didn't know
When she left this world to which other she'd go.

NOTES

¹Cathy Davidson and E.M. Broner, eds., *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature* (New York: Ungar, 1980), p. 116.

²Kathryn K. Sklar, *Catherine Beecher: A Study of American Domesticity* (New York: Norton, 1976), pp. 12, 156; Sara Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press, 1989), p. 91.

³Evans, *Born for Liberty*, p. 92.

⁴Berenice Kramer Leader, "Antifeminism in the Paintings of the Boston School," *Arts Magazine* 56 (January 1982): 112.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁶Martin Dibner, ed., *Portland* (Portland, Maine: Greater Portland Landmarks, Inc., 1986), p. 9.

⁷Obituary of Margaret Jane Mussey Sweat, "Eastern Argus, January 21, 1908.

⁸Paul Robeson, John Holversen, and William Barry, "Portland Reflections," *Portland (ME) Evening Express*, November 20, 1975.

⁹Lee Agger, *Women of Maine* (Portland, Maine: Guy Gannett Publishing Company, 1982), p. 100.

¹⁰Margaret Jane Mussey Sweat, *Ethel's Love Life* (New York: Rudd and Carleton, 1859), p. 71

¹¹Margo Culley, ed., *A Day at a Time: Diary Literature of American Women from 1764 to the Present* (New York: Feminist Press, 1985), p. 8.

¹²Mary Jane Moffat and Charlotte Painter, *Revelations: Diaries of Women* (New York: Random House, 1974), foreword.

¹³Margaret Jane Mussey Sweat, *Diary*, December 14, 1853.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, March 29, 1852.

¹⁵Bell Gate Chevigny, *The Woman and the Myth: Margaret Fuller's Life and Writings* (Old Waterbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1976), p. 21.

¹⁶Evans, *Born for Liberty*, p. 92.

¹⁷Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Knopf, 1985), p. 89.

¹⁸Abbie G. Baker, "The Washington Club: The Origin and Work of a Woman's Organization," n.d.

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