

Bessie Bramble: The Secret Suffragette

Edited by Kelly I. Shaffer

TAKING Pittsburgh citizens to task for their attitude towards women, Bessie Bramble caused consternation and debate with her insightful and titillating late-nineteenth-century newspaper columns. Elizabeth Wilkinson Wade, under the pseudonym of "Bessie Bramble," was a prolific columnist. Her caustic comments appeared in the *Pittsburgh Leader*, the *Dispatch*, and the *Chronicle* from approximately 1871 through the turn of the century.

Although suffragette and women's issues provided the main substance of her clippings, "Bessie" was known to expound on subjects such as local and federal government and the building of Schenley Park, as well as criticizing the educational, political, and religious systems in Pittsburgh.

The true identity of the controversial Bessie Bramble remained a secret until after Wade retired as the principal of Ralston School. Previously having served as a teacher and assistant principal of the Pike Street School, Bramble might have feared that her journalistic activities would jeopardize her teaching career. Unknown to her reading public, Elizabeth was married to Charles I. Wade and had two children, Charles and Elizabeth.

Elizabeth, in addition to raising her children and her writing, was deeply involved in women's community activities. She began the Women's Club of Pittsburgh in 1875 and helped to create the Women's Press Club. She also gave music lessons and was a member of her church choir.

When Elizabeth's daughter contracted tuberculosis, they traveled to Aiken, South Carolina, where it was hoped that the warmer climate might prove to be more beneficial. When the trip was unsuccessful, they moved to New York City in order to gain better medical care. During this time, Bessie Bramble wrote comparisons of Pittsburgh and New York and South Carolina, commented on the national attitude towards women, and documented changes in educational strategies.

After the death of her daughter, Bessie's pen lay still from 1889 to 1890. When she again began her critical observations, Bessie did not continue for very long. According to census and other records, the Wades apparently moved in 1902, probably to California. Elizabeth Wilkinson Wade, a.k.a. Bessie Bramble, died in 1910 in Redlands, California.

The following columns written by the outspoken writer were chosen

because they address specific topics related to the women's history theme of this issue. In addition, they are prime examples of Bessie Bramble's acerbic wit and penetrating social observations. They were selected from scrapbooks maintained by her and now stored in the archives of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. For further reading about Elizabeth Wade, see: Gene Cafano, "Bessie Bramble: Without Recognition," *WPHM* 61 (January 1978): 72-80.

**BESSIE BRAMBLE SEARCHES RECORDS
And Finds that Man Alone Gets All the Credit for Noble Deeds.
A Pointer For The Modern Biographer**

Not long ago we were persuaded to write a paper for the Historical Society, and as the men of this region, even back to the earliest settlement, have been a live topic for all these many years, we determined to take for our subject the prominent women of the olden-time — women who had braved the dangers, endured the hardships of pioneer life, and made homes in the wilderness afar from all the delights and attractions of the world of civilization; women who had given their lives to the nurture and training of stalwart sons and noble daughters, and left the impress of their virtues on the character of this Commonwealth.

To this end we searched all the records to which we could gain access, and discovered to our amazement that our grandmothers and great grandmothers had not been deemed worthy of even the merest mention. Their unselfish lives and noble deeds were not recorded to point a moral or adorn a tale. Their names are unknown, unhonored and unsung, save in personal diaries, family traditions and on crumbling tombstones. In obscurity they lived and died. In "The Olden Time," a magazine gotten up to perpetuate the early history of this region, the "forgotten woman" is a most striking feature, save as she happened to be an Indian. As scientists, by a study of fossil remains and relics, are led to interpret the far-off history of the past, so we may infer that in those olden days there were women, but they are as little known as in prehistoric ages.

Mothers, it is said, leave their strongest impress on their sons, hence from the noble characteristics, the high integrity, the generous, loving hearts of our brethren to-day, we can gather the fact that our foremothers were heroic, high-minded, pure and true; but for the narrowness of prejudice, the tyranny of custom, their names might

have been held in remembrance, and their heroism, their devotion to duty, and unswerving allegiance to all that was pure, and true, and good would have thrilled the hearts of their descendants with pride and emulation. As things are, it appears that all the virtues, good qualities and noble characteristics appertained to fathers only, since no mention is made of the mothers and wives.

WHAT HISTORY SHOULD BE.

At the outset we were wholly unprepared for the utter emptiness, the entire forgetfulness of history as regards women. History in its best form should be a picture of the times, a chronicle of the manners and customs, a setting forth not only of the political, but of the domestic, life of a country in which the great events of the world lie enfolded, and from which the motive power that rules the world is evolved. But here were records that purported to be the history and chronicles of the times, with scarcely a woman even named therein.

"History," says Dryden, "is only the precepts of moral philosophy reduced to examples." But are all the examples of nobility, greatness, courage, genius and heroism confined to men only? And men too, in the main, counted and recorded as great, only because they have been foremost leaders in the wholesale butcheries of mankind. Macaulay somewhere says that the little treatise of Xenophon on Domestic Economy conveys more historical information than the seven books of Hellenics. And so a few pages on the society, the manners, amusements and domestic life of Pittsburg in the early days of its history would include a vast deal interest and information than the dry facts set forth in "The Olden Time," "The History of Pittsburg" and other works on the subject in which women are rarely or barely mentioned.

In Washington's journal such entries as the following are found: "Visited Colonel Croghan's handsome seat on the Allegheny." Not a word or a line as to Mrs. Croghan. It is likely there was such a person. Who and what was she? "Visited the farm of James O'Harra, and Mrs. Gist and dined." It would be quite interesting — certainly to women readers — to know something of Mrs. O'Harra, and Mrs. Gist, and what they had for dinner.

But "she has lived well who has kept herself well out of sight," as propounded by Archbishop Trench, was perhaps the ruling adage of the times. At all events, it appears that nobody did anything in those days worthy of mention but men, since no record of the pioneer women of Western Pennsylvania can be found.

To fully realize how ridiculously stupid this "sacred obscurity" theory is in these days, we have only to consider how manifestly

absurd it would be to set down the most conspicuous and famous for genius and good works as the worst. In view of the "sacred obscurity" theory think of the shocking badness of Mrs. Stowe, of Frances Willard, and all the prominent women of the day, who have achieved fame. Think of

THE PROMINENT WOMEN

of this city, who as managers of the Society for the Improvement of the Poor, the Church Home, the Home for Aged Protestants, the Women's Exchange, the different hospitals, the missionary societies, the Indian Auxiliaries, the Humane Society, the W.C.T.U., the society leaders, and all the various enterprises and businesses in which women are engaged, being esteemed as the worst of women because their names are so frequently before the public, and they are not personally shrouded in "sacred obscurity." Think of women being esteemed the worst of their sex because they do not hide their light under a bushel, nor bury their talents in a napkin.

That surprise and amazement with which we heard that the Historical Society had no record of any prominent Pittsburg women of the past were only to be equaled, and we may say surpassed, by the fact that in the Magazine of Western History, published only last year, (1885) and giving extended biographies of some of the foremost citizens of Pittsburg to-day, their wives and mothers are mostly ignored entirely. In the story of the life of one of Pittsburg's prominent citizens, General James K. Moorhead, in which he is lauded as a patriot, a man of moral courage and manliness, and a prince of men, his mother is mentioned as the widow of his father. That she was a woman worthy of being held up as an incentive and an example to others is only to be guessed at from the incidental facts from which, as stated, we gather that, though left without means and six children, she faced the world bravely and succeeded grandly. And since General Moorhead was only a boy of 11 when his father died, it is plainly to be inferred that to her he mainly owed his training and the habits that formed his character. And yet not even her name is given in the biography of her son. And moreover, although his wife was the genius of his home, and he is described as strong, loyal and loving in his domestic character, she is merely mentioned as Miss Jane Logan, of Lancaster.

Nor is the history of his career the worst as regards what is generally considered the principal event in a man's life, viz: his marriage, as given in the Western History, for in the extended biography of one of the prominent citizens of Pittsburg, Mr. John Harper, the fact of

his marriage is not even recorded, and save through inference by mention of his son, who served his country during the war, it would not be known he was married at all. As connected with the Bank of Pittsburg, which stands so high in public estimation, it is stated that 'no complete record of the bank could be written without including that of his life,' and yet this biography of Mr. Harper essays to give the history of his life without the remotest mention of his wife. His friendship with Edwin M. Stanton is narrated. His brother Lecky Harper is defined as a Senator from Ohio. His connection with M. & A. Luch as bookkeeper is set forth. His election to succeed John Snyder as Cashier of the Bank of Pittsburg is related, and his succession as President is duly recorded. His connection with the Western Pennsylvania Hospital, the Suspension Bridge Company, the Monongahela Navigation Company, the Western University and the Allegheny Cemetery, in the offices of director, trustee, manager and incorporator, is recorded in full, but amid all this detail of his prominence as a useful member of society, the

FACT OF HIS MARRIAGE

is never even mentioned. Mrs. Harper is completely ignored. Even her maiden name is unrecorded. The fact is given that Mr. Harper is "a close student," "a wide reader," "a thorough master of English literature," "a possessor of a fine library," and a man who served his country as Chairman of the Finance Committee of the city during the war, yet in all this wealth of information concerning him, his wife, who celebrated with him recently their golden wedding, is as completely left out of the record of his long life of honor and integrity as if she had never existed. A more complete case of the "forgotten woman" could scarcely be cited.

In the same book there is a fine picture of Felix H. Brunot, one of the most prominent and respected citizens of Western Pennsylvania, a man whose noble character and benevolent deeds will keep his memory green forever; who has been identified with almost every movement for reform and project for the advancement of morality and goodness in this city for many years; who has in every department of public interest and private benevolence taken a deep and practical interest, and who has served his country as a member of the Sanitary Commission, and of the Indian Commission. But while his wife is also equally famous in works of charity and benevolence, and has taken a prominent part in the organization of societies for the improvement of the masses, and is recognized among us as one of the purest and noblest women of the day, her name is not even given in

the history of her husband's life, with whom she has been a co-worker in benevolence and good works during their whole life.

In the record of the life of Abraham Garrison, another of the prominent citizens of Pittsburg, no matter in his life receives smaller mention than his marriage, which is summed up in the notice of his wife in one line, "He was married in Albany on August 1, 1830, to Mary Clement, his present wife." She has been his most intimate companion for 56 years, and yet in the history of his life she is merely mentioned once. And yet we have heard it said that to her sagacity and thrift he owes largely his success and great wealth.

Another distinguished citizen of our city whose virtues and achievements are recorded in this Western History is B. F. Jones, late Chairman of the Republican party, whose life as clerk on the canal, as an iron man, a business man, a director of banks and benevolent institutions is duly set forth in a detail of which his family and friends may well feel proud. His wife, his life partner, is at the same time ignored, save that he was married to Miss Mary McMasters in 1850.

Another loved and honored citizen of the present day, M. Reuben Miller, whose life has been full of usefulness, and whose record as to industry, ability and honesty is without a flaw, finds record in this Magazine of Western History. But while all the main details of his history are given, his friends, partners, associates, finds record, his offices of honor are all duly set forth, his services as school director, councilman, manager of hospitals, director of bands and companies, find careful mention; his one chief partner, first friend, most intimate associate, his fellow director in the most important affairs of his life, is merely alluded to as Miss Ann L. Harvey.

SAMPLES OF INJUSTICE

Another citizen of whom Pittsburg has good reason to be proud (Mr. William Thaw) is well portrayed in this "Magazine of Western History." In the biographical sketch his life from boyhood to the present day, the responsible positions he has filled, and still occupies, his honesty, integrity and great intellectual power, his benevolence, noble charities, open heart, modesty of character, the warmth of his friendships and his steadfast uprightness, are set forth in what we all know as words of truth that will give him a high place in the history of Pittsburg forever. But Mrs. Thaw, so well known in connection with noble charities and philanthropic enterprises, is left out completely. The simple fact is stated that "Mr. Thaw has been married twice and has a large family of children." What sort of a history of Pittsburg is being compiled now, think you, fellow-citizens, with all

mention of these prominent women of to-day left out?

Another eminent citizen, Mr. Alexander Bradley, has been written up by this "Magazine of Western History" from boy to man. About everything in which he has been engaged or taken part, the offices he has filled, the church he helped to found, the banks with which he is connected, the stove foundry, the colleges of which he is trustee, the number of men he employs, even down to some incidents of his tour to Europe, and not one word as to wife and children. Not even the slightest mention of his wife. In years to come, when the "Magazine of Western History" shall have become like "Craig's History of Pittsburgh," an authority and a relic of early times, a dispute will probably arise concerning Mr. Bradley's marriage like that of Logstown and other matters now wrapped in obscurity and debated under conflicting authorities and great warmth and acrimony. The "Magazine of Western History" will give no light on the subject, since it never mentions that matter from beginning to end.

These are a few instances of the injustice done to women, and the imperfection of so-called history. Others we may cite hereafter. That such one-sided relations of life give false ideas cannot be questioned. When only men were readers such biographies were possibly all that were desired. But now that the world reads, and the domestic side of a man's character is the truest index of his life, his mere public record is that of minor interest. It is unfair and wrong to teach, by such biographies, that the father of a family is everything, and the mother nothing and nobody worth mentioning. Many of the grandest, noblest men of the age have been trained and taught by their mothers alone, and these mothers, instead of being ignored by history and relegated to obscurity, should be held up as illustrious examples to the rising generation of girls. There is no more useful or interesting line of reading than biography. In it are found inspiration, example, and a measure of success and greatness of character and capacity that are of inestimable value, not alone for boys but girls as well. The noble lives, the worthy deeds, the high character of women should find record and go down the ages side by side with those of the men they loved and with whom they lived. History is not history in which they are nameless nonentities.

BESSIE BRAMBLE

**Tells Why One Word Should be Omitted
from the Marriage Service.**

At the Wallace-Webster wedding on Thursday evening, which was

the great social event of the week, Rev. Cowan, who performed the ceremony, got in a good, strong "obey" for the bride, not only once but twice. We are a little surprised at this since, as Brother Cowan and everybody else knows, this mouldy and ridiculous custom, which, if carried out, would impose absolute slavery upon women, is fast falling into what President Cleveland learnedly calls "innocuous desuetude." Why should a preacher, in pursuance of an empty form, call upon women to promise and vow in all solemnity what he knows is an absurdity.

No woman nowadays, in the full meaning of the word "obey" intends to do this or do that, go here or go there, stay here or stay there at the arbitrary command of her husband, and Brother Cowan knows it. She would be a blooming idiot if she did. The word "obey," as vowed by one equal to another, is simply, in the marriage service, a relic of barbarism, a survival of superstition. Whoever is pledged to obey is, in reality, a slave, and there is no getting around it with flowers and decorations. When a minister imposes such a vow upon a woman he knows it is an empty form, and she knows it is merely set words, and has no more meaning or sincerity than the vow of the groom, "with all my worldly goods I thee endow." He doesn't do anything of the kind. He usually feels he would give her the whole world if he had it, but when it comes to passing over the title deeds of his property, it is altogether another thing. And his sincerity and the absurdity of the thing are fully shown up by the law which provides that her dower is not all her husband's worldly goods, but "a third," and only the use of it at that. And then, even if it were true that he then and there, before all men and by these presents and all that sort of thing, did endow her with all he possessed, the whole vow on his part would be neutralized and made void by imposing the "obey" on her, since he could at any minute afterward order her to give them up.

In short, in these days the whole thing is a sham, and every reverend brother knows it. And to demand in the solemn service of marriage that both bride and groom shall promise and vow what they know is to no effect, is to bring the church into disrespect. No good man and true, no man of noble character, high intelligence, dominated by the teachings of the golden rule, ever intends that his wife shall be subject to him as the word "obey" implies. No woman, however loving, devoted and true, ever means so to submit unless she is a blind bigot or a fool. This being the case, is it not time that such manifest hypocrisy be dropped from the ceremony of marriage? Is it

not time that all the beloved brethren should recognize that they will do what they in no wise intend, is to cast reproach upon a form of empty words?

[On Women's Conventions]

It used to be a matter of religious observance that women should be keepers at home, and ask their husbands to enlighten them, if they wanted to know anything, but how far the sisters of the present day have got beyond those narrow limits is well shown by the women's conventions, now so common. Two of these meetings have been held lately by the Women's Missionary Societies in this city, at which were delegates from neighboring towns and sister States. Last week a number of prominent women connected with the Methodist Protestant church formed a party from Pittsburg, and, with others from various points East, constituted a fine party of delegates to attend a missionary convention in Iowa.

The good mothers of the old days had no such fun as their daughters. Their time was taken up by hard work and dullest drudgery. To take part in the affairs of the world was to them an unknown and unthought-of delight. To leave the daily grind, and put on their best clothes and go unto strange cities, and have a good time with their sisters was to them an undreamed-of pleasure. To sink the kitchen, and leave stockings and buttons and dinners to the uncertainties of fate would to them have seemed rank heresy — an infraction of divine law, but not so to their wiser daughters. "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," and the same philosophy holds true of a woman. A holiday is to her as essential to well-being as to a man, and perhaps more so, as her work is, in the main, more monotonous, and more trying to nerves and brain.

Probably the first to discover the fun of conventions were the preachers, who, by virtue of their office, were held in high esteem, and adjudged worthy of the best of everything in the line of accommodations, cookery and all that conduces to the comfort of mind and enjoyment of body. Now conventions are held by every guild or association of men of kindred pursuits, and their opportunities for acquaintance with men of like tastes and interests and the fresh stimulus of new ideas are held to be not only pleasant, but valuable and profitable in the way of business.

And now the sisters, last of all, have taken up with conventions, which combine so much that is delightful and refreshing in the way of change, with what tends to the good of humanity.

The first Woman's Convention was held in New York but half a century ago for the purpose of furthering the abolition of slavery, and was hailed with sneers and jeers from one end of the continent to the other. Now conventions held by women are so common as to excite but little comment. At these meetings women do what in those days made the world turn pale, and even now frightens a few men very considerably.

Their papers, speeches, arguments, discussions are notable for sound sense and good judgment, and would do credit to either Congress or Parliament, and yet the world does not stand still on its axis, but grows brighter, happier, sweeter as the years roll on.

Intelligence, education, brains on the part of women work for good and not evil. As a result of their new line of action will come sweeter manners, purer laws, happier homes and better times.

Bessie Bramble Invites the Knowing Men to Take a Hand at House Cleaning

AND QUIT FINDING FAULT ABOUT IT

So many men profess to be well learned in the great business of house cleaning, and are apparently so much better posted on the best ways of doing it than women are, that we have no hesitation in calling upon them to demonstrate their superior ability — not in fine theories upon paper only, but in actual practice. Having so much talent in this line, it seems strange that they have not hitherto been "called" to take up this branch of business. There is hardly a man that doesn't think he knows how to clean house better than his wife or any other woman. There is scarcely a woman that, in his opinion, does more than boggle over it — and why his more perfect knowledge should not ere this have been practically applied is a mystery as inexplicable as why the people of the dark ages did not use telephones instead of post horses. Women have always engaged in house cleaning, not because they have the brains or best talent for it, as appears, but because in the barbarous and savage state the hardest and most disagreeable work always falls to their share.

The lordly Indian shoots the deer, his wife drags it home and prepares it for food. The noble savage walks the earth in majesty, the gentle squaw carries her children upon her back and lugs the tent and domestic utensils like a beast of burden. As civilization advances

why should not men cease to sell ribbons and tapes, and pins and bustles, and dress goods generally, and give their brains and brawn to the weightier matters of house cleaning. We believe women would gladly give way. Having tried for thousands of years, and being still accounted failures, it is quite likely as things go that such business is not in their sphere. As, according to Herbert Spencer, "all evil results from the non-adaptation of constitution to conditions" it must be plain, from their ill success, that women are not adapted to house cleaning, and that all its worries and vexations and bad management are the result of the incompatibility of their constitutions with its conditions. And since most men, on their own showing, really know more about how best to do it, even without any experience, why should not women give way and let them take hold. Although men fondly cherish the delusion that women have a mania for house cleaning and revel in its spring delights, women in the main would be glad to get rid of it. We for one absolutely long to let go.

Our friend Quiet Observer says that "Life is not so long, nor the emergency so great that a house must be cleaned all in one week." But we, even in view of his superior knowledge of the subject, modestly hazard the remark, that life is too short to have the business last more than a day, if it can be so arranged. He should not object to the brethren having a monopoly of the whole matter. They might utilize their knowledge and get up a company to clean houses from garret to cellar in one day and be done with it. They might find millions in it, and welcome. Women would enjoy nothing more than to go out to spend the day, and find the whole business done when they return. Curtains up, carpets down, dust removed, everything in spick and span apple-pie order. Such a beautiful dream might be made reality. Nothing is impossible to the brains of the nineteenth century.

Men tell women not to tear up more than one room at a time. They represent that such is simply folly. But if they would kindly explain how the parlor carpet is to be retrograded to the second floor front, while that in turn is transported to the back room while the second floor back goes up to the third floor front, or down to the kitchen, as exigency demands without tearing up more than one room at a time they will confer a priceless favor upon their much-berated sisters.

Then they tell women there is no necessity to clean house anyway, but if they must do it to ease their minds, they should do it not in the spring — but in the warm weather. If they have ever worked in a mill in the summer time they would perhaps know why women, in their foolishness, would rather clean before the warm weather sets in.

Moreover, if they knew all about the spring sewing and a dozen other things they might possibly keep their heads shut.

Still, the dear brethren mean well, and we do honestly believe that if they would take hold of the house cleaning business they would put into it more soul, more energy, more labor-saving devices than the sisters. They would no more be content to go on in the same old way year after year than they would run the fire department after the same old pattern of 25 years ago. What is needed is a house cleaning commission, that will, with a requisite company of experts, do the job up in a day. Put your heads together, dear boys, and your wits to work, and take the whole thing into your own hands. Not a woman will say you nay, and moreover for you they'll ever pray. ■