

Third Annual

Alice Louise Reynolds
Lecture

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Presented by

Madeleine B. Stern

Noted Author and

Rare Book Dealer

March 21, 1991



Friends of the Brigham Young University Library

Provo, Utah

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Madeleine B. Stern

Madeleine B. Stern was born and reared in New York. Her parents were drawn to that metropolis at a young age. Her father, Moses R. Stern, arrived there from his native Hartford in his early teens; her mother, Lillie Mack Stern, was brought there when six months old from her native Cincinnati. Here, too, Madeleine was educated, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Barnard College in 1932, having honored in English Literature and been elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Graduate work at Columbia University continued her concentration on English literature (her master's essay concerned the role of Mary Magdalene in literature) and culminated in a Master of Arts degree in 1934.

During those years of economic depression, I applied a little of what I had learned at New York City's secondary schools where I was a teacher of English. In January 1942 her first biography, *The Life of Margaret Fuller*, was published by E. P. Dutton and was widely and enthusiastically reviewed. On the strength of the Fuller biography, she was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship to work



Madeleine B. Stern

on a biography of Louisa May Alcott. The fellowship was renewed, and when it terminated she resumed teaching for a brief period.

Meanwhile, however, her dear friend and co-worker Leona Rostenberg, having completed her graduate studies and endured a five-year apprenticeship in the rare book trade, opened her own establishment in September 1944 for the sale of rare books. Six months later, Madeleine resigned from the teaching profession and joined Leona as a partner. Madeleine Stern and Leona Rostenberg have been partners, friends, and renowned booksellers ever since.

Since 1945, Madeleine has happily led a double life: her researches in the rare book business have concentrated upon books, mostly foreign, published between 1500 and 1800; her more or less solo studies have centered upon the personalities, events, and ideologies of nineteenth-century America. *Work for one has refreshed me for the other, and if my intellectual life has been divided, it has also been reciprocal and mutually rewarding.*

This is especially true in the case of Madeleine's research and writings about Louisa May Alcott. In this instance, she has not only written about this nineteenth-century American literary genius but has also been instrumental in assembling BYU's Alcott collection.

Madeleine Stern's writings about Alcott are numerous, including a biography, *Louisa May Alcott*, originally published in 1950 by the University of Oklahoma Press and reprinted twice by that press, in 1971 and 1985. In addition, she has edited or coedited several Alcott-related books, among them, *Louisa's Wonder Book—An Unknown Alcott Juvenile* (Central Michigan University, 1975), which contains her bibliography of Alcott. A series of four books of Alcott's previously unknown thrillers were the outcome of Dr. Leona Rostenberg's discovery in the early 1940s of Alcott's pseudonym and pseudonymous shockers. The suspicion among scholars that Alcott had indeed penned unacknowledged sensational narratives remained merely a suspicion until Dr. Rostenberg's discovery was announced. As a result, Madeleine was eventually able to collect and edit *Behind a Mask: The Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott* (Morrow, 1975), *Plots and Counterplots: More Unknown Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott* (Morrow, 1976), *A Double Life: Newly Discovered Thrillers of Louisa May Alcott* (Little, Brown, 1988), and the forthcoming *Freaks of Genius* (Greenwood Press, April 1991). In addition, she has edited *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott* (G. K. Hall, 1984) and *A Modern Mephistopheles; and, Taming a Tartar* (Praeger, 1987) and coedited Alcott's *Selected Letters, Journals,*

and *Selected Fiction* (all published by Little, Brown, 1987, 1988, 1991).

Although Louisa May Alcott has exercised an enduring fascination for her, Madeleine has not confined her labors to Alcott alone. Some of Madeleine's writings—mainly biographical in approach—are concerned with the reforms and fads of nineteenth-century America, as in *The Pantarch: A Biography of Stephen Pearl Andrews* (University of Texas Press, 1968), *Heads and Headlines: The Phrenological Fowlers* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), and her edition of *A Phrenological Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Americans* (Greenwood Press, 1982).

Other books have been devoted to feminists and feminism, not only Madeleine's *Life of Margaret Fuller* (which has just been reprinted in an enlarged edition by the Greenwood Publishing Group) but also her *Purple Passage: The Life of Mrs. Frank Leslie* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), *We the Women: Career Firsts of Nineteenth-Century America* (Schulte Publishing Co., 1962), and two biographies for younger readers: *So Much in a Lifetime: The Story of Dr. Isabel Barrows* (Messner, 1965) and *Queen of Publishers' Row: Mrs. Frank Leslie* (Messner, 1966). She has also edited feminist writings: *Women on the Move*, a series of four books of travel

literature by nineteenth-century American women (B. De Graaf, 1972), and *The Victoria Woodhull Reader* (M & S Press, 1974).

Still another facet of her career as a writer, linking it closely to her career as a rare bookseller, is the bibliophilic or bibliographical. She has authored several books about books, including *Imprints on History: Book Publishers and American Frontiers* (Indiana University Press, 1956), *Books and Book People in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bowker, 1978), *Antiquarian Bookselling in the United States: A History from the Origins to the 1940s* (Greenwood Press, 1985), and *Nicholas Gouin Dufief of Philadelphia: Franco-American Bookseller* (Philobiblon Club, 1988).

In this category the works that have attracted the most attention and yielded the greatest delight, to her at least, are those she has coauthored with her partner, Dr. Rostenberg. These are *Old & Rare: Thirty Years in the Book Business*, originally published in 1974 by A. Schram and brought up to date as *Old & Rare: Forty Years in the Book Business* in 1988 at Modoc Press, *Between Boards: New Thoughts on Old Books* (Allanheld & Schram, 1978), and *Bookman's Quintet: Five Catalogues about Books* (Oak Knoll Books, 1980). In 1983 Dr. Leona Rostenberg and Madeleine B. Stern were corecipients of the American Printing History Association award for

“advancing understanding of the history of printing and its allied arts.”

Madeleine Stern’s major interests and preoccupations are reflected in her life as a bookseller and as a writer. It is particularly stimulating when those two aspects are closely interrelated. In Madeleine’s words, *The thrill of the chase is intensified; the rewards of discovery are enriched; and sometimes—as in the case of Louisa May Alcott—a collection is shaped that becomes a tribute not only to its central figure, but to those who pursue that figure with scholarly intent and build a library around it.*

The Alice Louise Reynolds Lecture

“Louisa May Alcott at BYU”

Madeleine B. Stern

Brigham Young University, March 21, 1991

It would be interesting to know whether Alice Louise Reynolds ever heard of Louisa May Alcott. In 1888, when Louisa Alcott died, Alice Louise was fifteen and was studying at Brigham Young College in Logan. Her love of books had already clearly manifested itself, and it is tempting to believe that she may have found somewhere in Utah a well-thumbed copy of *Little Women* or the more recently published *Jo's Boys*, the book that signaled the end of the March family saga. Alice Louise Reynolds's progress was just beginning in 1888, and although her career was to deviate from the paths taken by Louisa Alcott, there were several points of common ground where these two redoubtable women might have met. There are connections everywhere; between Alcott and Reynolds four connections are discernible: their love of the printed word, their activism in the cause of women's rights, their devotion to service for others, their single blessedness. Alice Louise Reynolds, however, was primarily an

educator. Louisa May Alcott was primarily a writer, and her educational emissaries were books. Today I should like to talk with you about those books and their presence here in Provo.

The building of any literary collection by a university library involves problems of decision and selection, planning and strategy that might challenge the judgment of a Solomon. The initial choice—the individual subject of the collection—is perhaps the most difficult. Some years ago, BYU decided that the work of one nineteenth-century American woman author warranted the arduous efforts of collection. A large number of her writings appealed so strongly to the young of many generations that she had been dubbed America's best-loved author of juveniles. Nonetheless, her enormously productive career had resulted in an oeuvre so varied that it attracted an equally varied readership. The author had been dead for approximately a century; hence her reputation and influence were established. At the same time, other libraries had already laid claims upon the records, printed and in manuscript, of her life and work. Would it be possible to amass another collection? The author who prompted an affirmative response to that question was of course Louisa May Alcott (1832–88). A New Englander, she had transmuted

the local into the universal and touched the world's heart. Her writings, her life, her influence could be the focal points of a significant library collection.

The century that had passed since Alcott's death in a Roxbury, Massachusetts, nursing home in March 1888 had not only sustained the reputation she had attained during her lifetime but in a sense enhanced it. In recent years, discoveries had been made that disclosed previously unknown aspects of Alcott's life and writing. Even her acclaimed masterpiece, *Little Women*, had yielded undreamed-of possibilities to modern critics and novelists. Indeed, in 1985, E. M. Broner, in a book entitled *Her Mothers*, interwove her thoughts not only on Louisa Alcott's fiction, but on what she called "the fiction of Louisa's life."¹ Five years later, Judith Rossner, in *His Little Women*, based a principal character upon Alcott and produced a kind of parody of the original *Little Women*.² In 1990, a biography of Simone de Beauvoir revealed the enormous influence exerted by *Little Women* upon that great French writer and feminist: "When she reflected upon the condition of women during the writing of *The Second Sex*, she found herself focusing on the four March sisters as examples of different kinds of women and she projected different adult lives upon them, all of which served as

points of departure for the formation of some of her theory in that book.”³

There is no doubt that Louisa May Alcott is still, a century after her death, very much with us. To build a collection that reflects her life, her work, and her influence is to add stature not only to an author but to the library that builds. This is what the Harold B. Lee Library of BYU has been doing for some ten or fifteen years and is still doing. Its shelves now bear the fruits of a productive and variegated career, and the fruits are still being harvested.

Alcott’s earliest work is represented by the author’s first published book in first edition, a volume that encapsulates much of her youth.⁴ The Alcott family, living in Concord, Massachusetts, when Louisa was in her teens, owed much to their generous and illustrious neighbor Ralph Waldo Emerson. To tutor his children, Louisa opened a little school in the barn of the Alcott home Hillside, and for Ellen Emerson especially wove a series of romantic fables about flowers. Much of the lore she insinuated into her romantic tales was the result of outings in the woods guided by neighbor Henry David Thoreau. At all events, the stories were told, and their scribbled records kept. Some years later, when the impoverished Alcotts had moved to Boston and Louisa was trying to eke a living from work of

any kind—sewing, teaching, domestic service, writing—a benefactor, Miss Wealthy Stevens, subsidized the publication of her first book. As the proud author wrote in her journal, “The principal event of the winter is the appearance of my book ‘Flower Fables,’ . . . I feel quite proud that the little tales that I wrote for Ellen E. when I was sixteen should now bring money and fame. . . . People began to think that topsey-turvey Louisa would amount to something after all, since she could do so well as a housemaid, teacher, seamstress, and storyteller.”⁵ *Flower Fables*, published in December 1854 by George W. Briggs of Boston, and priced at 62 cents, has become, after nearly 150 years, a treasure. Its auction price has soared—the latest hammer price being \$2250. The Harold B. Lee Library fortunately obtained a copy before its price had inflated. It was and will always be a poignant little volume whose unpretentious appearance is in inverse proportion to its interest and its value.⁶

What makes Louisa May Alcott so intriguing to study and to collect is the fact that she attempted so many different genres of narrative over the years, often almost at the same time.⁷ The decade of the 1850s was punctuated for the author by early experiments in romance as well as early experiments in more credible and realistic narratives. As she had written to her mother of *Flower Fables*,

“I hope to pass in time from fairies and fables to men and realities.”⁸

That passage she would assuredly make. But in between, and especially during the 1860s, Louisa May Alcott indulged in a wild foray into the sensational genre. Her secret, long-concealed experiments in the shocker, or thriller, provide fascinating clues to the complexities of her thought processes, to her progress as a professional writer, and even to certain phases of her life. The BYU Alcott Collection has representative holdings that mirror Alcott in her darker moods—Alcott as spinner of tales of madness and revenge, murder and opium addiction. The original discovery of those stories and of the pseudonym “A. M. Barnard” behind which the sedate Concord spinster sometimes chose to hide was made by Dr. Leona Rostenberg.⁹ The story of that discovery is itself a thriller of sorts.

The suspicion of scholars that Louisa Alcott had secretly authored sensational narratives issued pseudonymously or anonymously remained only a suspicion until Leona Rostenberg discovered, among Alcott family papers at Harvard’s Houghton Library, five letters addressed to Miss Alcott from the Boston publishing house of Elliott, Thomes & Talbot. In that revealing correspondence the publishers requested

more stories under the pseudonym of "A. M. Barnard"—stories like "Behind a Mask" or "The Marble Woman." So began the search for Alcott's—"Barnard's"—shockingly uncharacteristic tales in the pages of the elusive periodical *The Flag of Our Union* published during the 1860s by Elliott, Thomes & Talbot of Boston. In addition, thanks to entries of titles and payments in her account books, similar stories penned by Alcott and issued anonymously by the New York publishing magnate Frank Leslie were subsequently discovered. Largely as a result of such detective work, the Harold B. Lee Library now boasts a very representative sampling of the pseudonymous and anonymous shockers in which the indefatigable Alcott spun her pageturners about a woman's power or a Hindu curse, a Mephistophelian pact or the effects of mesmerism, an experiment with hashish or mind control. The titles themselves suggest the many faceted creativity of the author of *Flower Fables* and the future author of *Little Women*: "Behind a Mask: or, A Woman's Power," "The Fate of the Forrests," "The Freak of a Genius," "A Pair of Eyes: or, Modern Magic," "Pauline's Passion and Punishment," "Perilous Play," "Enigmas," "A Whisper in the Dark."

A far cry from her tales of darkness, violence, and revenge were Alcott's Civil War stories. Written at the same time as many of her

thrillers, these realistic narratives reflect not only the problems and horrors of a nation at war with itself but her own literary versatility. Indeed, most of Alcott's experiments in realism between 1863 and 1869 were outgrowths of the Civil War and her own brief but devastating experience as a nurse in that war. During her six weeks at the Union Hotel Hospital in Georgetown, D.C., she witnessed and participated in the daily hospital routine, the food and living conditions, the attitudes of nurses and doctors, the agonies of wounded and dying. All these she reported in letters sent home, "letters written on inverted tin kettles, in my pantry, while waiting for gruel to warm or poultices to cool, for boys to wake and be tormented, on stairs, in window seats & other sequestered spots favorable to literary inspiration."¹⁰ Her life as army nurse was shortened by a grave illness, but after her recovery Alcott reshaped the letters penned for her family by "Nurse Tribulation Periwinkle" into sketches—*Hospital Sketches*—published first in the *Boston Commonwealth* and later in book form by the fiery abolitionist publisher James Redpath. Several chapters had been added, and it was, according to the author, "quite a neat little affair."¹¹ The "neat little affair" garnered praise from the press, and the realism of "Nurse Tribulation Periwinkle" seemed as popular a literary commodity as the

sensationalism of "A. M. Barnard." None of the original letters written home by "Nurse Periwinkle" has survived, but the BYU copy of *Hospital Sketches* in first edition, along with the 1869 expanded reprint, *Hospital Sketches and Camp and Fireside Stories*, is sufficient reminder of the realities of a nation at war and the varied skills of the reporter.

Commenting on *Hospital Sketches*, Alcott observed, "I find I've done a good thing without knowing it."¹² Her literary experiments with fiction were far more consciously contrived. Of the three experimental novels directed to an adult readership and published during her lifetime, BYU has all in first as well as in later editions.

Alcott's first novel, *Moods*, was published in December 1864, some five years after she had begun work on it. In August 1860, when she was twenty-seven, she reported in her journal, "Genius burned so fiercely that for four weeks I wrote all day and planned nearly all night, being quite possessed by my work. I was perfectly happy, and seemed to have no wants. Finished the book, or a rough draught of it, and put it away to settle. . . . Daresay nothing will ever come of it, but it *had* to be done, and I'm the richer for a new experience."¹³ It *was* done, developing into a novel about unhappy marriages,

“unmated pairs trying to live their legal lie decorously to the end at any cost.”¹⁴ Alcott labored many years over it, remodeling, reworking, writing and rewriting. At the request of the Boston publisher Aaron K. Loring, she cut ten chapters, a revision she came to regret. Nonetheless *Moods* made its debut over the Loring imprint, evoking from young Henry James a castigation of the author’s “ignorance of human nature” but from *Harper’s Weekly* the laudatory comment that “the conflict of passion in noble characters” had been “drawn with great delicacy and skill.”¹⁵ The author herself was not satisfied with *Moods* and years later, in 1882, published a radically altered version of her first novel, reshaping it into a more wholesome, less extravagant narrative. While BYU at present lacks that revised version, it possesses not only the first edition but Loring’s unauthorized paperback reprint.

It is difficult to conceive that Alcott wrote *Moods* and *Work* almost simultaneously. She may have *observed* the failed marriages about which *Moods* revolves, but she had *lived* many of the episodes of *Work*. Begun in 1861 with a different title—*Success—Work* is an autobiographical novel “with the design,” as she wrote, “of putting some [of] my own experiences into a story illustrating the trials of young women who want employment & find it hard to get.”¹⁶ The

chapters of *Work* retrace Alcott's varied career—"Servant" recalling her deplorable experience as a domestic in Dedham, Massachusetts; "Actress" drawing from her lifelong addiction to the stage; "Governess," "Companion," "Seamstress." If the depiction of David Sterling is based upon observations of her neighbor Henry David Thoreau, the character of Christie is a self-portrait. Serialized in the *Christian Union*, *Work* was published in book form in 1873, her publisher Roberts Brothers of Boston paying the now famous author of *Little Women* \$5000 for it. The book is an important item for BYU's Alcott Collection since it encapsulates much of her life at the same time that it reflects her skill in yet another literary genre.

The third experimental novel published during Alcott's lifetime is almost totally different from the two that preceded it. *A Modern Mephistopheles* combines several of Alcott's literary selves. Here she explores the sensational horrors of the mind, accepts Goethe's intellectual affirmations, and also dispenses sweetness and light. The novel, based upon a Faustian pact between a power-hungry "modern Mephistopheles" and a young would-be poet who sells his liberty for fame, is an amalgam from many sources. Like most of Alcott's experimental work, it had a long history, and her attraction to the Goethean subject manifested itself earlier in a five-part sensational

serial published anonymously under the title “The Freak of a Genius.” In 1877, when *A Modern Mephistopheles* appeared, it too was anonymous.

Alcott’s publishers, Roberts Brothers, had launched a series of anonymous books by well-known writers as a device to attract public attention. When it was published in that “No Name Series,” few penetrated the anonymity of *A Modern Mephistopheles*, a narrative reviewed as “thrilling, weird, and intense.”¹⁷ Indeed there was little in the macabre tale to suggest the author of *Little Women*, and the guesswork proceeded gratifyingly. Toward the end of her life, Alcott resolved to acknowledge the book and, a year after her death, it was republished by Roberts Brothers with the semisensational trailer “A Whisper in the Dark.” BYU boasts both the “No Name” first edition and the augmented reprint.

Unlike the three experimental novels over which she labored long periods of time, the two parts of *Little Women* were written each in two months, sometimes at the rate of a chapter a day, and apparently without revision. There are two reasons for this: Louisa Alcott had not only lived this story—for the Marches *were* the Alcotts—she had made several previous attempts to tell it. The roots of *Little Women* can be clearly traced in short stories and sketches

adumbrating the March family long before *Little Women* was published. One of these, "A Modern Cinderella," appeared in 1860 in the *Atlantic Monthly*, its cast of characters featuring an artist sister named Laura, who copies Raphael and looks picturesque, just as Amy would in *Little Women*, and another sister Di, clearly prefiguring Jo March, who loses herself in the delights of Goethe, corks her inkstand to go "at housework as if it were a five-barred gate," and determines to write to support the family. "A Modern Cinderella" is part of the BYU collection, both as it appeared originally in the *Atlantic Monthly* and in a separate posthumous reprint.

By 1868, having successfully attempted the varieties of literature from romance to realism, from sensationalism to domesticity, Louisa Alcott was ready to produce the masterpiece that would be entitled *Little Women*. That domestic drama has become perhaps the most popular American fiction in its genre, a book that has never since its first appearance gone out of print. In its original version—that is, in the first issues of parts 1 and 2, both volumes in matching bindings—it is also the jewel in the crown of BYU's Alcott Collection.

The reluctant inception of *Little Women* is tersely recounted in Alcott's journals. In September 1867 she reported, "Niles, partner of Roberts, asked me to write a girls book. Said I'd try." In May 1868

she reiterated, "Mr. N. wants a *girls' story*, and I begin 'Little Women.' . . . I plod away, though I don't enjoy this sort of thing. Never liked girls or knew many, except my sisters; but our queer plays and experiences may prove interesting, though I doubt it."¹⁸

Having taken her cast of characters from her own family, Alcott simply allowed them to tell their own story. Here the Alcott sisters live again: Anna, simple, wholesome, loving, renamed Meg; Lizzie, the cricket on the hearth; May—Amy March—simpering, parading her little elegancies, drawing pictures; and Jo—especially Jo—Jo the rebel, with sharp eyes and long thick hair, odd blunt ways, and a fiery spirit. Jo would be called by a modern critic "a unique creation: the one young woman in nineteenth-century fiction who maintains her individual independence, who gives up no part of her autonomy as payment for being born a woman—and who gets away with it."¹⁹ Though this is an exaggeration, there is no doubt that Jo was Louisa herself. "I am 'Jo,'" she wrote years later to a reader abroad.²⁰ The family portrait was certainly dominated by a self-portrait, and the independent, rebellious Jo March is the principal reason for the perennial fascination of *Little Women*.

After publication in October 1868 of what came to be called part 1 of *Little Women*, publisher Thomas Niles of Roberts Brothers

requested a second volume for the spring. The second part of the domestic novel, published in April 1869, is set three years after part 1, and most of its major episodes are borrowings from the Alcott past: Meg's wedding, Beth's death, Amy's European voyage, Jo's sensational stories. Jo's marriage to Professor Bhaer and her Laurie's proposal to Amy round out a novel that has captivated popular imagination since its appearance. "What *can* there be in a simple little story . . . to make people praise it so?" asks Jo March in *Little Women*, and her father replies, "There is truth in it, Jo, that's the secret; humor and pathos make it alive, and you have found your style at last." Louisa Alcott, a writer inclined to many diverse styles, tried for most of the remainder of her life to sustain the style she had "found . . . at last."

Little Women, *Little Men*, and *Jo's Boys* were of course not planned as a trilogy, but in satisfying the demands of her ever-increasing reading public, the author produced what became a trilogy. She had converted the local into the universal in *Little Women*, a worldwide readership identifying with a nineteenth-century New England family. While she was not that successful with the sequel *Little Men*, she managed to portray with skill and charm a group of boys in an atypical American school modeled after her

father's innovative Temple School in Boston. *Little Men* was written while the famous author of *Little Women* was abroad on grand tour; hence the first edition was published in London in May 1871 just in advance of the American appearance. When Alcott returned home, she was greeted by her father and her publisher who "came to meet me with a great red placard of 'Little Men' pinned up in the carriage."²¹ The author's pedagogical novel proved a popular sequel to her domestic drama, and, although BYU has yet to acquire a copy of the London edition, it of course owns the Boston.

The third book of the *Little Women* trilogy was a sequel to the sequel written between 1882 and 1886 by an author weary, ill, and harassed by family responsibilities. *Jo's Boys* drew its threads from the fabric of its predecessors. The Plumfield of *Little Men* is now Laurence College, donated by the Laurie of *Little Women*, now Amy's philanthropic husband. Jo March has become the matronly Mrs. Bhaer, champion of old-fashioned virtues, who remembers her youth and identifies with her boys. Here in this novel the "wild boy" Daniel Kean of *Little Men* develops into the firebrand who dies a hero's death and vividly recalls the spirit of the rebel Jo March. Here too the curtain falls upon the March family. Alcott wrote in her final chapter, "It is a strong temptation to the weary historian to

close the present tale with an earthquake which should engulf Plumfield and its environs so deeply in the bowels of the earth that no youthful Schliemann could ever find a vestige of it. But as that somewhat melodramatic conclusion might shock my gentle readers, I will refrain. . . . And . . . having endeavoured to suit everyone by many weddings, few deaths, and as much prosperity as the eternal fitness of things will permit, let the music stop, the lights die out, and the curtain fall for ever on the March family." The treasured first edition of *Little Women* (along with numerous reprints), the first American edition of *Little Men*, and the first edition of *Jo's Boys* stand as memorials of a family saga that has become part of our literary heritage.

In sustaining the style she had found "at last" in *Little Women* Alcott became a "youth's companion," hailed as America's best-loved author of juvenile fiction. When she raised the curtain on the Marches she had been an experimenter veering from a realistic war sketch to a sensational narrative, from a flowery fable to a metaphysical novel about marriage. By the time she rang the curtain down, she had for the most part metamorphosed herself into the writer of wholesome, domestic stories for young readers. She did not always take kindly to the role, though she relished its monetary

rewards. As she wrote to a correspondent in 1878, "Though I do not enjoy writing 'moral tales' for the young, I do it because it pays well."²² Between 1872, when the first volume of *Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag* was published, and the year of her death 1888, when *A Garland for Girls* appeared, Alcott wrote dozens of short stories most of which are imbued with ethical and moral lessons. She was writing for the young at a time when the expression of sentiment was unabashed and cheerful platitudes on the eternal verities were welcomed. She served her age the fare it expected, and she served it with professional artistry. Many of "Aunt Jo's" narratives were mined from her own life, and their cast of characters includes members of her family as well as her friends. The artist of "My Girls" is clearly based upon her sister May; the lads in "My Boys" are those "kindred souls" for whom Louisa had formed attachments. A sergeant she had nursed in the Civil War, the young friend Alf Whitman, with whom she had acted Dickensian roles in Concord, the Polish boy Ladislav Wisniewski, whom she had met in 1865 when she traveled abroad as companion to an invalid—all are here in these scrapbooks woven for an ever-expanding readership.

Indeed the clamor for her stories was so great (she published twelve collections of them between 1872 and her death) that she frequently

reprinted her narratives from periodicals where they had made their initial appearance or revamped them from previously published sketches. Emerson characterized her accurately when he said of her, "She is a natural source of stories. . . . She is and is to be, the poet of children. She knows their angels."²³

The first volume of *Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag* appeared over the Roberts Brothers imprint in 1872, the sixth and last ten years later. All six volumes in mint condition with matching bindings are present in the BYU Alcott Collection. Alcott followed her *Scrap-Bag* with other collections for young readers, most of which are represented at BYU: *Proverb Stories* (1882), *Spinning-Wheel Stories* (1884) reanimating historical America, three volumes of *Lulu's Library* (1886–89) including tales told to her little niece Lulu Nieriker, May's daughter. Having married abroad, May died after childbirth on December 19, 1879, bequeathing her infant daughter to her sister Louisa. During the child's early years her aunt played the role not only of mother but of spinner of tales. The tales were written out, and the tiny books were tied up in birchbark covers before Roberts Brothers issued them in more durable style. In the final anthology—*A Garland for Girls*—prepared before her death, in 1888, Alcott returned full circle to her past. The flowery names of her *Garland* were suggested

not by flowers in the woods pointed out to the young Louisa by neighbor Thoreau but by flowers sent her by friends in the Roxbury, Massachusetts, nursing home where she would die. Now, at the end of her life, she turned back to her starting point. *A Garland for Girls* was simply a variation on *Flower Fables*, and in the author's end was her beginning. The BYU copy is especially poignant since it bears the author's inscription to a friend, dated November 1887.

Most of Alcott's writings, whether designed for children or for adults, reflect not only the morality exalted by nineteenth-century America but the reforms that fermented in that time and place. The blood of two generations of abolitionists flowed through her veins, and her family passed on to her their enthusiasm for plain living and high thinking. Cold baths, Graham bread, teetotalism, antilacing, and dress reform were all part of the Alcott canon. Louisa Alcott espoused especially antislavery and feminism. In 1881 she wrote to her publisher Thomas Niles, "I can remember when Anti slavery was in just the same state that Suffrage is now, and take more pride in the very small help we Alcotts could give than in all the books I ever wrote or ever shall write."²⁴ But it was in her books that she gave the most lasting help to those causes.

In Alcott's eyes, oppression was wrong; brotherhood and sisterhood were right. The wrongs of blacks and of women were outgrowths of a false society against which she habitually inveighed. Her revulsion to sham was deep-seated, and wherever possible she took occasion to champion the genuine against the pretentious, the honest against the false, simplicity against folderol. This attitude is clearly manifested in her stories and in several of the novels that have come to be styled the Little Women series, all of which are part of the BYU collection.

As early as 1863, Alcott contributed to the *Atlantic Monthly* a narrative, "Debby's Debut," in which the wholesome heroine is placed in an atmosphere of affectation during her first season at the beach. Debby, a young crusader against established absurdities, foreshadows the heroines of *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, *Eight Cousins*, and *Rose in Bloom*. The BYU copy of "Debby's Debut" as it appeared in the *Atlantic* in August 1863 is of special interest since it is cased in its original printed wrappers.

Like Debby, Polly in *An Old-Fashioned Girl* (1870) exposes the inanities of elegant dress and fashionable schools and becomes Alcott's mouthpiece for one of her favorite concepts: a "sisterhood" of independent girls, each with a "purpose to execute, a talent to

develop, an ambition to achieve." Five years after *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, the author published a variation on her theme in *Eight Cousins*. Here Polly reappears as Rose, the delightful object of Uncle Alec's experiment in common sense. Like Polly, Rose champions dress reform and brown bread along with the three great remedies of sun, fresh air, and cold water. The popularity of the book was so great that a sequel was in order in which, as the author wrote to a Dutch admirer, "the cousins are adults," adding, "Young girls in America do not get a good education in various respects, even though much is taught to them. They know nothing of health care, or of housekeeping, and are presented into society too early. My story is intended to encourage a better plan of child-rearing, and my heroine shows that such a plan is feasible."²⁵

The heroine of *Rose in Bloom*, the sequel to *Eight Cousins*, is the result of that "better plan." She does not lose her independence when she falls in love with Mac. Her heroes are "Garrison fighting for his chosen people; Howe restoring lost senses to the deaf, the dumb, and blind; Sumner unbribable, when other men were bought and sold." Rose becomes a philanthropist working to establish comfortable homes for poor but respectable women. When *Rose in Bloom* appeared in 1876, Alcott was ahead of her time in her general

attitude toward independent women and egalitarian marriage. Indeed the novel evoked a shocked comment from the *Nation*: "Mac's declaration and subsequent courtship take us to the utmost verge of fiction for minors."²⁶

In the last volume of the *Little Women* trilogy, Alcott endorsed not only educational reform and feminism but the rights of authors. In the chapter "Jo's Last Scrape" she vented her animosity at the autograph fiends and lion hunters who had disturbed her privacy since the publication of *Little Women*. The Jo of *Jo's Boys* is the object of requests not only for autographs but for a pair of stockings to be sewn into a rug made from a vest of Emerson's, a pair of trousers from Oliver Wendell Holmes, and a dress of Harriet Beecher Stowe's. Despite her tongue-in-cheek style, Alcott was serious. "There ought to be a law," she wrote, "to protect unfortunate authors. . . . To me it is a more vital subject than international copyright; for time is money, peace is health, and I lose both with no return but less respect for my fellow creatures and a wild desire to fly into the wilderness."

Alcott's reform preachments open a window upon the world that generated them. In addition, they are the result of her background and her upbringing, and they reflect her beliefs and her convictions.

Like so much in Alcott's fiction, they stem from the life she lived. Her autobiography pervades her fiction.

Alcott's autobiographical narratives are well represented at BYU. For literary detectives who seek to trace the factual sources of her fiction, and for critics who strive to elucidate the manner in which she transformed fact into fiction, there is abundant evidence here. Even her wildly sensational thrillers hark back to episodes in her life—her addiction to the stage, the opiates prescribed after her illness during the Civil War. Her autobiography infiltrates *Little Women*, even to the unmistakable description of *Flower Fables* in the chapter "Jo Meets Apollyon" in which Alcott writes, "Jo's book was the pride of her heart, and was regarded by her family as a literary sprout of great promise. It was only half a dozen little fairy tales, but Jo had worked over them patiently, putting her whole heart into her work, hoping to make something good enough to print." The struggle over *Moods* is also recalled in Alcott's masterpiece: "Having copied her novel for the fourth time, read it to all her confidential friends, and submitted it with fear and trembling to three publishers, she at last disposed of it, on condition that she would cut it down one third, and omit all the parts which she particularly admired."

Three Alcott sketches patently based upon episodes of her life appeared in the periodical press, two in the 1870s, the third posthumously. "Transcendental Wild Oats," first published in the *Independent* in 1873, is a mildly satirical narrative that humorously glosses over a devastating childhood experience. With the English reformer Charles Lane, Louisa's idealistic father Bronson Alcott founded the community of Fruitlands in Harvard, Massachusetts, in 1843. The family lived there for six months, enduring a harsh life of self-denial and dissension. The tragedy experienced by the so-called Consociate Family at Fruitlands is transmuted in Alcott's literary version to tragicomedy. One character in that narrative, Timon Lion, remarks: "Truth lies at the bottom of a well." The scholar who ventures to the bottom of that well must conclude that Alcott was writing not autobiography but rather autobiographical fiction.

The same holds true for another story based upon the author's early life, an experience equally devastating: her attempt at age nineteen to earn money by serving as a domestic for the Hon. James Richardson and his sister in Dedham, Massachusetts. After seven weeks of bitter hardship Alcott was given \$4 for her service. Some twenty years later she converted that harrowing episode into a narrative, also for the *Independent*. The light touch of

“How I Went Out to Service” does not entirely conceal the fury that boils beneath. As in “Transcendental Wild Oats,” Alcott makes of a painful past a “serio-comico experience.”

The brief autobiographical reminiscences Alcott wrote for the *Youth's Companion* did not appear until after her death. “Recollections of My Childhood” brings the reader back to her beginnings—that is, to what she chose to remember of her beginnings. Here too she casts a lustre upon the days at Concord, the plays in the barn, the “sentimental period” that began at fifteen with readings in Goethe and hero-worship of Emerson. The “trials of life” when the family moved to Boston are mollified. Alcott simply remarks that “money is never plentiful in a philosopher’s house,” a highly bowdlerized version of the statement in her 1851 journal, “Poor as rats & apparently quite forgotten by every one but the Lord.”²⁷

Truth is here in these sketches, but it appears by innuendo, and the omissions are eloquent. To determine more precisely how much truth lies in Alcott’s fiction, and to trace how she transmuted fact into fancy, the researcher must turn from the Alcott oeuvre to the primary and secondary sources for her life. BYU has assembled a prestigious array of those sources, covering a century of research from the first published tribute of 1888 to the most recent scholarship.

In addition to such sources, autograph materials play a vital role in the reconstruction of a life. In the case of Louisa May Alcott, the amassing of letters and manuscripts nearly a century after her death presents enormous but not insurmountable difficulties. Personal and family letters and journals, including those originally on deposit in the Orchard House in Concord, are now, for the most part, either in Harvard University's Houghton Library or the University of Virginia's Barrett Library. How feasible is it today to collect Alcott manuscripts and autograph letters? From time to time, manuscripts by Alcott do appear on the market. BYU acquired, for example, the complete manuscript of her story "A Free Bed" and published it in 1978 for the Friends of the Library.²⁸ The original manuscript of a volume in the Little Women Series, *Jack and Jill*, published in 1880, was at one time, according to legend, sold by the page at \$1 per page. It is still sold in that manner, but not at that price. Single pages of *Jack and Jill* do appear occasionally in dealers' catalogues. The most recent example was priced at \$2750. BYU was fortunate in acquiring a fine leaf of holograph manuscript from *Jack & Jill* at a more reasonable—and rational—price. The library also boasts an original manuscript fragment from *Eight Cousins* on the first page of which Mrs. Alcott wrote to an autograph seeker, "Miss Alcott is in

New York—is preparing several articles for the Hollidays [*sic*] & c and begs us not to interrupt her. I therefore send a leaf of the first draft of *8 Cousins* thinking it will please you as well as supply her autograph.”

The library has had better success with autograph letters signed. At the present time the Alcott Collection can boast twenty-four Alcott letters ranging in date from 1863 to 1887, addressed to such contemporary figures as the reformer Thomas Wentworth Higginson and the editors Mary Mapes Dodge and Horace Chandler. Even the briefer notes in the Alcott Collection throw light upon the writer's thoughts and inclinations, as when in 1864 she refers to herself as a “literary spinster,” or in 1873 requests four recent novels from a librarian, or on Christmas day in 1878 thanks for ferns “to garland the pictures of my dear mother & the home of the absent sister far away in France.”²⁹

Some of the Alcott correspondence at BYU is highly significant. The 1863 letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson reveals not only her hopes and plans but her literary self-criticism as she discusses the inaccurate dialect of the “contraband” in her *Atlantic Monthly* story “The Brothers.”³⁰ Several of the letters in the collection are addressed to her friend Mary Mapes Dodge, editor of *St. Nicholas*. In these

the author discusses such matters as illustrations of her work, copyrights and agreements in the publishers' bidding war for *Eight Cousins*, her struggle to write *Jo's Boys*.³¹ In a letter of 1886 to a correspondent Alcott openly acknowledges authorship of *A Modern Mephistopheles* and discusses her technique and the public reaction to that novel.³² A note to the editor Horace Chandler in 1884 refers delightfully and metaphorically to her little niece Lulu Nieriker when she writes that she is "so busy editing one animated copy of *Little Women*" that she has no time to contribute to Chandler's periodical.³³ A recently acquired letter of the same year refers not only to her planned guardianship of that "little woman" but to the sale of the Orchard House, where her family had lived so long, to her deceased sister May, and to her father.³⁴

Two letters in the Alcott Collection are of extraordinary significance. One, written to a young friend, Maggie Lukens, in 1884, dilates in detail upon the writer's attitudes toward immortality and the hereafter, death, life, and spiritualism. It comes as close to a religious credo as Alcott ever wrote.³⁵ A second letter, sent in 1885 to the author of an autobiographical tale about an Indian massacre in the West, is replete with fascinating advice on revision. "Rewrite it," Alcott suggests, "in the form of a child's story, & let their

impressions, words & adventures be the main thread. . . . There is enough in the facts to make a thrilling tale told briefly & dramatically. . . . Imagine you are telling it to children & the right words will come."³⁶ Surely this is a description of Alcott herself in the act of creation.

Here at BYU, Alcott in the act of creation can be viewed from distinct points of view—as author of juvenile fiction, domestic novels, and thrillers that expose the horrors of the mind. Because of her variety, she is an extraordinarily attractive target for research and study. The tools for such study have been accumulating at BYU for more than a decade. On the shelves of its Alcott Collection the materials are at hand for scholars to reconstruct a life and retrace a career.

Booksellers have played a part in the amassing of these materials. The relationship between bookseller and librarian is almost antiphonal, the former suggesting, the latter deciding. It has been a privilege for the firm of Leona Rostenberg and Madeleine Stern to share in this reciprocal connection with the Special Collections Division of BYU, a connection that has indeed proven productive.

Between 1977, when Dean Larsen informed us of his interest in building an Alcott Collection, and today, we have been on the

lookout for Alcott books and short stories, letters and manuscripts, photographs and ephemeral materials. Some unusual and desirable items were found at antiquarian book fairs, some at auction. I recall finding an entire Alcott thriller, "Behind a Mask" as serialized in *The Flag of Our Union* at one fair, and I shall never forget plowing through the snow to a country auction to bid for an Alcott letter. The hunt for Alcott rarities and for better copies of works already owned has continued through the years.

The search has resulted in a collection that reanimates a life and a lifework. Louisa May Alcott seems to be endowed with a perennial appeal to the young. That such a writer should also appeal to the graduate student of literature is a tribute both to her professional skill and to her immense variety. She touches the heart of childhood at the same time that she stimulates the mind of the scholar. Her oeuvre as assembled at BYU offers at once a source of delight and a resource for study. It is a collection that invites young and old, reader and researcher; and to the literary explorer it holds forth always the promise of discovery.

Notes

1. E. M. Broner, *Her Mothers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).
2. Judith Rossner, *His Little Women* (New York: Summit Books, 1990). See also Cyra McFadden, review of *His Little Women*, *New York Times Book Review*, 22 April 1990, p. 11.
3. Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography* (New York: Summit Books, 1990). See also Anna Quindlen, "Heroine Addiction," *New York Times*, "The Week in Review," 29 April 1990, p. 21.
4. For biographical details throughout, see Madeleine B. Stern, *Louisa May Alcott* (1950; reprint, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985).
5. 1 January and April 1855, *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott* [hereinafter *Journals*], ed. Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeleine B. Stern (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989), 73.
6. For a detailed account of *Flower Fables* and its publication, see Madeleine B. Stern, "Louisa May Alcott's Tales for Ellen E.," *AB Bookman's Weekly*, 12 November 1990, pp. 1849-60.
7. For a more detailed survey of Alcott's writings in various genres, see Madeleine B. Stern, introduction to *Louisa May Alcott: Selected Fiction*, ed. Daniel Shealy, Madeleine B. Stern, and Joel Myerson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991).
8. LMA to Abigail May Alcott, 25 December 1854, *The Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott* [hereinafter *Selected Letters*], ed. Joel Myerson, Daniel Shealy, and Madeleine B. Stern (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987), 11.
9. Leona Rostenberg, "Some Anonymous and Pseudonymous Thrillers of Louisa M. Alcott," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* (1943): 131-40.
10. LMA to Mary Elizabeth Waterman, 6 November 1863, *Selected Letters*, 95.
11. August 1863, *Journals*, 120.
12. "Notes and Memoranda" 1863, *Journals*, 122.
13. August 1860, *Journals*, 99-100.
14. LMA to Mr. Ayer, 19 March 1865, *Selected Letters*, 109.
15. *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott*, ed. Madeleine B. Stern (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), 66, 69-73.

16. LMA to James Redpath, [July? 1863], *Selected Letters*, 87.
17. *Woman's Journal*, (19 May 1877): 160.
18. September 1867, May 1868, *Journals*, 158, 165–66.
19. *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott*, 97–98.
20. LMA to Mrs. H. Koorders-Boeke, 7 August 1875, *Selected Letters*, 194.
21. June 1871, *Journals*, 178.
22. LMA to Miss Churchill, [25 December 1878?], *Selected Letters*, 232.
23. Quoted in Stern, *Louisa May Alcott*, [xv].
24. LMA to Thomas Niles, 19 February 1881, *Selected Letters*, 253.
25. LMA to Mrs. H. Koorders-Boeke, 7 August 1875, *Selected Letters*, 194.
26. *Critical Essays on Louisa May Alcott*, 170.
27. "Notes and Memoranda" 1851, *Journals*, 65.
28. Louisa May Alcott, *A Free Bed*, ed. and with intro. by Madeleine B. Stern (Provo: Friends of the Brigham Young University Library, 1978).
29. LMA to Elizur Wright (autographed letter signed), Concord, 5 January [1864?]; LMA to the Librarian at Carter's (autographed note signed), 1873; LMA to Miss Smith (autographed lettercard signed), 25 December [1878].
30. LMA to Thomas Wentworth Higginson (autographed letter signed), Concord, 12 November [1863], *Selected Letters*, 96–97.
31. For example, LMA to Mary Mapes Dodge (autographed letter signed), Boston, 2 December [1874], *Selected Letters*, 187–88; Nonquitt, 6 August [1881], *Selected Letters*, 254; 13 April [1886], *Selected Letters*, 297–98; 22 December [1887], *Selected Letters*, 327–28.
32. LMA to Miss Gosland (autographed letter signed), Boston, 12 November [1886?].
33. LMA to H. P. Chandler (autographed letter signed), 23 March [1884]. See *Selected Letters*, 276n.
34. LMA to Samuel E. Sewall (autographed letter signed), 7 June 1884.
35. LMA to Maggie Lukens (autographed letter signed), 14 February [1884], *Selected Letters*, 279–280.
36. LMA to Mrs. Jannette E. Sweet (autographed letter signed) [11 September 1885], *Selected Letters*, 291–93.



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