

REMEMBERING HER

". . . what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."
Matthew 26:13



Article 25

Retrieving Women's Histories

Mary Emma Woolley

In 1837 a woman named Mary Lyon founded Mount Holyoke College. The college was the first of the "seven sisters" – a group of seven schools dedicated to the education of women (Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Radcliffe, Smith, Wellesley, and Vassar). Although during most of the 19th century people continued to question the usefulness of higher education for women, increasing numbers of women were attending and graduating from colleges. In 1900 another Mary, Mary Emma Woolley, became the president of Mount Holyoke and led the school for thirty-seven years.

Mary Emma Woolley was born in 1863 in Connecticut. She was one of the first women to graduate with a bachelor's degree from Brown University in Providence, RI. During her years as president of Mount Holyoke she was deeply involved in her church, in peace advocacy and in promoting equality for women.

At the beginning of the First World War, in September 1914 Woolley wrote an article entitled "Woman's Voice for Peace" in the *Congregationalist*. [p.153]. She was overwhelmed with horror that civilization had reverted to "barbarism to settle its differences." She insisted that the conflict was not a people's war, nor was it a woman's war. She was especially distressed when people argued that women should have no voice in government or public policy, because they could not bear arms to defend the government. This old thinking needed to change to give women more voice, because, she insisted, "their united voices will be for peace."

Some years later, in the midst of the Depression in 1931, Woolley was asked to write about what religion meant to her. She replied:

My religion means to me courage. It takes courage to live today, courage to face the uncertainties, to meet the unexpected, to stand for the unpopular. The very breathlessness of our lives calls for this quality

Religion means to me strength to “stand against the drift.” A “drift” presents the most insidious of temptations: to be loyal to one’s conviction; to hold a position on the unpopular side; to stand squarely on one’s own two heels, and not sidestep. . . I do not enjoy recalling the times when I should have been outspoken and said nothing, the coward’s method of assent, standing aside “Till the multitude make virtue of the faith they had denied.”

My religion means to me comfort. “As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you.” How can we live without that assurance? We are very like children, we grownups, so self-assured, so confident of ourselves—until the deep waters sweep over us.

*Lastly my religion means to me confidence; confident during the life that now is, in the life that is to be. . . . [quoted in Jeanette Marks, *Life and Letters of Mary Emma Woolley* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1955), pp. 121-22]*

When the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches met at Mount Holyoke College in 1936 Mary Emma Woolley was elected the first female moderator of the Congregational Christian Churches. A year later, in an interview for the *New York Times* at the time of her retirement (which was also the Centennial Celebration of Mount Holyoke College) Woolley said that she was disturbed by recent trends and the ways in which women were still being judged more critically than men. A woman “has to do a thing a little better than a man to get equal recognition. A man can get by just because he is a man, and a woman can’t just because she is a woman.”

[September 2007]

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