

Rebecca Buffum Spring and the Carlyles

BRENT E. KINSER

REBECA BUFFUM SPRING WAS BORN IN RHODE ISLAND ON 8 June 1811 to Quaker parents Arnold and Rebecca Buffum. She spent a great portion of her childhood engaged in what Marie Marmo Mullaney describes as the two central concerns of her youth: “education and abolition” (166). Her father, the first president of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, encouraged his daughters to participate in the abolition movement, and they did so enthusiastically, in spite of local resistance and persecution. On 26 October 1836, Buffum married a man of similar political interests, a Unitarian dry-good salesman, Marcus Spring (1810–74). According to Mullaney, they “shared a romantic, companionate, and egalitarian union” (167). They also shared a common interest in the condition of the working classes. They owned stock in Brook Farm, for example, and in 1843, along with fellow socialist utopians Albert Brisbane (1809–90) and Horace Greeley (1811–72), the Springs became chief stockholders in the North American Phalanx, a Fourierist commune that experienced initial success but eventually disbanded largely because of internal pressures in 1855.

In 1853, the Springs founded the Raritan Bay Union by inviting a group of disenchanting families to split from the increasingly factional North American Phalanx. Although this new commune lasted only until 1857, one of the institutions that arose within it had greater success, the progressive school Eagleswood, also founded by the Springs. The brightest lights of the American intellectual community, including Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Sarah

and Angelina Grimké, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, and Henry David Thoreau gave lectures at Eagleswood. In 1859, Rebecca Spring visited an imprisoned John Brown at Harper's Ferry and eventually had the last two of his "boys" to be hanged buried on their property near Eagleswood (Spring 124). The Springs remained active social activists throughout the Civil War years, supporting a school for the children of slaves as well as a soup kitchen for refugees displaced from the South by the Emancipation Proclamation (Mullaney 171). The motivations for the Springs' activism were not always ideal, as Mullaney admits: "Wealthy, Yankee, white, Republican, Protestant, and self-indulgent, theirs was a life of breeding, gentility, and comfort" (172). And the ideology at the heart of Rebecca Spring's social vision was politically loaded: "What we dreamed of . . . is the way people ought to live" (qtd. in Mullaney 177). However, the progressive ventures that she and her husband pursued as equal partners make them an extraordinary couple and her one of the significant female activists of nineteenth-century America. When she died in 1911, having moved to California in 1874 after her husband's death and having lost her fortune, she no longer enjoyed the fame she once held.

Mullaney contends that "Spring was a woman who consciously defined herself in terms of her relationship with other people" (177). One of those people was the renowned feminist Margaret Fuller (1810–50), who traveled to Europe in 1846 by invitation and apparently under the patronage of the Springs. Although their friendship seems to have been conflicted because of the strength of their personalities (see Mullaney 176), the fact that it was the Springs who enabled Fuller to make the trip that played such a central role in her own destiny is of no mean consequence. One of the most significant events of the trip was Fuller's first encounter the Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini (1805–72), one of her heroes. It is also important to remember that she met Mazzini at 5 Cheyne Row, Chelsea, of course the home of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle. In attendance at this historic occasion were Rebecca and Marcus Spring, although Carlyle, perhaps understandably, later would take special note only of Fuller: "Yesternight there came a bevy of Americans from Emerson;

one Margaret Fuller the chief figure of them: a strange *lilting* lean old-maid, not nearly such a bore as I expected: we are to see them again" (*CLO*: TC to John A. Carlyle, 8 October 1846). And they did see them again, apparently more than once, for as Spring later recalled the first meeting: "All that evening Carlyle was gentle and genial. When we came away, Margaret said: 'I went to see a lion and I found a lamb.' We saw him in different moods at other times" (*Remembrance* 50; see also Hudspeth 208 and *CLO*: TC to John A. Carlyle, 8 October 1846, n5).

The Rebecca Spring Papers are now in the Special Collections Department of Stanford University Libraries. This important archive includes a wide variety of material of interest to scholars, including letters from Frederika Bremer, Lydia Maria Child, Emerson, Fuller, Henry James, Charles Kingsley, and many others, as well as the pencil drawings Spring made during her 1859 visit to John Brown's cell. Also in the collection is a corrected, unpublished 180 pp. typescript, a reminiscence entitled *A Book of Remembrance*. In chapter five, she recounts her time in London, including her meetings with the Carlyles. The narratives of her confrontation with the volcanic Carlyle on the issue of slavery in the presence of Mazzini and Fuller, in which she apparently retained command of the field, and a tender encounter between the Carlyles and the Springs' young, doted-upon son Edward, are both astonishing to behold.

Of equal interest are Carlyle's comments on Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. One can imagine the embarrassingly funny silence when Carlyle and George Henry Lewes are asked if Robert Browning will make a good husband. "No!" they reply, simultaneously and emphatically. Carlyle also recalls to the assembly his early exchange of letters with Barrett Browning, in which he told the young poet, "if she had anything to say, she had better say it in plain prose, so that a body could understand it, and not trouble herself to put it into rhyme." Carlyle's bravado leads to an attempt at belittling humor that rings rather hollow in the context of both Barrett Browning's fame and her early worship of Carlyle: "The woman felt so badly about it that I had to write her again" (qtd. in *Remembrance* 50–51). Although the clear attempt at

humor falls flat apart from its context, the narrative certainly affirms an important aspect of the philosophical differences in worldview at the center of Barrett Browning and Carlyle's relationship. Of great interest also in Spring's reminiscence are Carlyle's comments on Robert Burns, who clearly retains a poignant place in Carlyle's memory as "the greatest man who ever lived" (qtd. in *Remembrance* 51).

In addition, the Spring collection contains four letters to the Springs from Carlyle's assistant, Joseph Neuberg, who at the time of their writing (1862–1863) was in the process of translating *Frederick the Great* into German. Neuberg's pronouncements on the Civil War and his record of a gift of Carlyle's corrected proof to the Springs provide both compelling and intriguing insights. Finally, of crowning importance to Carlyle scholars, is a previously unknown letter from Jane Carlyle to Rebecca Spring, probably written in 1853, during the Spring's second trip to Europe, during which the Springs spent time in Hampstead near the home of Neuberg. These materials—a selection from Spring's *Book of Remembrance*, a letter to her from Joseph Neuberg (2 June 1863), and a letter to her from Jane Welsh Carlyle ([Aug. 1853]), all here published for the first time, serve as dramatic witnesses to both the Carlyles and their immediate surroundings in the period after 1850.

Western Carolina University

From Rebecca Spring's *A Book of Remembrance*

Chapter V. / London

Harriet Martineau gave a reception the evening of the day we reached London. The next morning she was to start for Jerusalem, and other parts of the Holy Land. She was delighted with the prospect before her. She showed us the dresses she was to wear when riding on camels across the desert.

The Carlyles we first saw at their home in Chelsea. They had called when we were out and had left an invitation for the evening. Emerson in his letter had mentioned our son, a child of nine years. While Margaret [Fuller] and I were taken to a room to leave our wraps, the Carlyles had opened the parlor door, and seeing Mr. Spring in the hall-way, they supposed that he was the son, and had asked him into the bright room where a wood fire was blazing on the hearth. When we came in they saw the mistake and Mrs. Carlyle said: "We thought you were elderly people." She told me afterwards that she was glad we were not, for that they needed all the freshness and brightness they could get.

Standing on the hearthstone, I asked Mr. Carlyle if the portrait over the mantle-piece was his mother? He answered, "Yes. It is me auld mither." He told us about a visit he and Mrs. Carlyle had lately made to "My auld Hame." "It was sadly changed, they had even made a railroad near it." He said that while making this road, in filling up a low place, a cart-full of earth had fallen back and killed a man[.] When he said: "They got their railroad, but poor Jamie Johnson lost his life," he made us feel that a man's life was worth more than a railroad.¹

He said he went to see the widow of Robbie Burns, and "She was na a verra canny bodie."²

Returning home from the Highlands, he said they stopped in Liverpool and attended one of Father Mathew's temperance meetings; and he told of his wonderful power over his audience, and how he drew people to sign the pledge. He told of one old sinner drawn from her seat out into the aisle, then how the old evil drew her back. "Salvation on one side, damnation on the other; when the powerful word from Father Mathews touched her, she sprang forward—and saved her soul."³

He mentioned Americans who had visited him, and he and Margaret told stories about them. He said of Emerson: "He came to us as an angel." All that evening Carlyle was gentle and genial. When we came away, Margaret said: "I went to see a lion and I found a lamb." We saw him in different moods at other times. Once at a dinner in his house when George Lewes was one of the guests Carlyle was ridiculing poetry and poets; saying that Elizabeth Barrett sent him her first two volumes, and "I wrote to her, that if she had anything to say, she had better say it in plain prose, so that a body could understand it, and not trouble herself to put it into rhyme." Then putting up his chin, in his way, he laughing said: "The woman felt so badly about it that I had to write her again."

After some general talk, Carlyle went on, making a good deal of fun of Petrarch and Laura, getting nice bright answers from Margaret and others, and laughing heartily himself. Those long English dinners need all the brightness they can get; this one was five hours long, and yet too short. Carlyle, among other things, said: "There was Robbie Burns—the greatest man who ever lived, he sat, and sang, bothered his head over his poor excise accounts, drank whiskey;—and broke his heart at last." When we were drinking coffee in the drawing room, Carlyle said he had some news to tell us,—that he had just heard of the engagement of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning. I asked if Browning would make a good husband? Mr. Carlyle and George Lewes both said emphatically, "No."

Years afterwards, Mr. Spring saw something of the Brownings' happy home in Florence. Margaret was their friend and neighbor in Italy. When, on our second visit abroad we were living in the South of France, Mrs. Martin, an English lady at Pau,⁴ frequently received letters from Mrs. Browning

(which Mrs. Martin read to us) telling of their home life. Also, she gave the baby talk of their little boy. This same baby talk Mrs. Browning put in her "Aurora Leigh." So graphic was the picture of their daily home life in Mrs. Browning's letters, that it was like looking into "Casa Guidi Windows." It certainly was a lovely view of a harmonious, happy home.

One evening the Carlyles and Mazzini came to tea with us. Carlyle was in a new mood, more like a bear than a lion. Mrs. Carlyle and I were on a sofa talking, on one side of the large room, when I heard a sort of growl, and looked about. Margaret was standing before the open fire, looking amused, Mazzini was walking, with his hands behind him, looking annoyed, others were grouped about. I heard Carlyle say: "If people consent to be slaves; I have no pity for them." As I started towards him, Margaret laughed, and said: "I have been wondering how long Rebecca would bear it." I told him of the severe slave laws against teaching slaves to read, and yet they continued to learn; and what wit and skill they used in escaping, often running a long way on the railroad track until they saw a train approaching, which passing over would obliterate the scent, and thus they would escape the bloodhounds. I told him of many things that the slaves did, and suffered for freedom. Carlyle listened, frequently saying, heartily, "I am glad to hear it; I'm glad to hear it!" He became so gentle, that when our Eddie had said to the others "Good night," and drew near the strange man, seeming both attracted and repelled, Carlyle took him in his arms and kissed him, and Mrs. Carlyle said low to me: "I wish we had such a child in our house."

The rest of the evening he was charming, and we all sat round him and were delighted listeners to his picture-talk.

On the tenth anniversary of our wedding day I proposed that,

"All in a chaise and a pair,"⁵

We should go and dine at "The Bell at Edmonton," if there were such a place.

On our way we stopped at Carlyle's but found only Mrs. Carlyle. She was amused at our Gilpin frolic, and said: "Only Americans would have thought of it." She wished we had come before Carlyle went out. She said he was not well and that she

was anxious about him, and they needed cheerful influences; and she added, "We have looked for you many evenings and wished that you would come." [48–54] . . .

The Carlyles and Mazzini visited us, and Carlyle charged his wife not let me leave London without teaching her how to make a "Jonney" cake. [91]

Notes

1. In a letter to his brother Alexander, 2 September 1846, Carlyle mentions the railway construction going on in the Dumfries area: "All thro' Annandale, this year, there are such wages as were never seen before; the great Railway rapidly in progress, 3 and 6 pence a-day for a spademan: but the poor wretches only drink more whiskey with it, make themselves greater brutes with it!" (*CLO*).

2. In 1879 Carlyle related the story of his visit to Jean Armour Burns (1765–1834) to William Allingham: "I was once brought to see Mrs. Burns in her old age—she said little, nor did I (say much). I had unspeakable feelings in looking upon her, as tho' it were one of the Greek tragic heroines—Clytemnestra herself!—Bonnie Jean!—She was a quiet grave person, no good looks left" (qtd. in Wilson 216). David Alec Wilson dates Carlyle's visit to Burns's widow 22 July 1831.

3. Father Theobald Mathew (1790–1856; *ODNB*), Capuchin friar and enormously successful temperance campaigner. Welsh Carlyle describes her first meeting with him in a letter to her cousin Jeannie Welsh, 6 August 1843 (*CLO*) and to Carlyle on 9 August 1843 (*CLO*). Carlyle had seen Mathew in Liverpool in July 1843 (see *CLO*: TC to JWC, 24 [25] July 1843). There is no mention of Mathews in the Carlyles' letters of 1846.

4. Julia Martin, Elizabeth Barrett's old friend and frequent correspondent. According to Philip Kelley and Ronald Hudson, Martin received 12 letters from EBB during 1852 and 1853, when she and her husband resided in Pau.

5. William Cowper's popular comic ballad, "The Diverting History of John Gilpin" (1782), l. 12. Cowper based his poem on John Gilpin, an actual eighteenth-century London draper who became separated from his family on their way to the Bell Inn, Edmonton, near Cowper's home.

Joseph Neuberg to Rebecca Spring

2 June 1863

London NW
2 June 1863

Dear M^{rs} Spring,

I am honoured by your note of the 19th of April, and am pleased to hear that you engaged Carlyle's *Frederick*. To American readers, to whom this section of History is for the most part new, this book must have a quite particular value.— I am just finishing my translation of the 3^d volume, and will send you the 'sheets' from which I translated.¹ You will excuse their marks, here and there, of having been used; but as you like the English print and paper, you will perhaps think no worse of it for that.— The concluding two vols of the work will probably be finished by the end of the year.

The "great work" which, as you say, is going on in your country, may, if it really is such, do very well without the acknowledgement of English or other strangers, and wait for the verdict of history, and of its own results. To speak candidly, to us at this distance, the only really ~~good~~ noble and historically memorable thing that has, hitherto, come out of your war is—the Life and Death of Stonewall-Jackson. A ~~true~~ man of truly heroic stuff, whom to have produced America may well be proud. But can a cause, for which such men fight and die cheerfully, be quite as mean as some of your best people believe.

With kind regards to Edward, believe me, dear Madam,

Yours truly
J. Neuberg

A shall add to my parcel some printed Articles by Mrs Bodichon—²

Notes

1. These corrected “sheets” of *Frederick* remain unlocated.
2. Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon (1827–91), educationist, artist, feminist, and founder of the *English Woman’s Journal* (1858–64).

Jane Welsh Carlyle to Rebecca Spring
[Early August 1853]

5 Cheyne Row
Thursday
[early August 1853]¹

No, dear Mrs Spring I had not lost your address; but my own address has been missing these many weeks I have been in Scotland and moving from place to place with compromising rapidity—and only returned the day of your kind note— Ever since I reached home I have done nothing earthly but have my teeth drawn!!—three teeth, great strong grinders, one of them with a *crooked prong*, have been torn out of my devoted head before the toothache that had tormented me all the time of my absence was removed. And all this pain has now brought on a bilious fit which makes it impossible for me to go to Hampstead just now— Please tell me what day you leave— If I am well enough before then it would give me pleasure to go to you for an hour or two

Yours Truly
Jane Carlyle

I have not seen Mazzini nor anyone since my return

Notes

1. Although it is possible that this letter was written in 1846, when the Springs met both the Carlyles and Mazzini, it seems to make more sense to date it early August 1853, after a rather unsuccessful trip to Scotland, made so in part because of toothache. In addition, on 2 August, Welsh Carlyle reports to her uncle John Welsh in Liverpool that she has had three teeth pulled by 3 August (*CLO*).

Works Cited

The materials from the Rebecca Spring Papers (M0541) are published courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

The Carlyle Letters Online [*CLO*]. 2007. 11 Oct. 2007. <<http://carlyleletters.org/>>.

Fuller, Margaret. *"My Heart is a Large Kingdom": Selected Letters of Margaret Fuller*. Ed. Robert N. Hudspeth. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2001.

Kelley, Philip, and Ronald Hudson. *The Brownings' Correspondence: A Checklist*. New York: Browning Institute, 1978.

Mullaney, Marie Marmo. "Feminism, Utopianism, and Domesticity: The Career of Rebecca Buffum Spring, 1811–1911." *A New Jersey Anthology*. Ed. Maxine N. Lurie. Newark, NJ: New Jersey Historical Society, 1994. 161–84.

Spring, Rebecca. "A Visit to John Brown." *Virtuous Lives: Four Quaker Sisters Remember Family Life, Abolitionism, and Women's Suffrage*. Ed. Lucille Salitan and Eve Lewis Perera. New York: Continuum, 1994.

Wilson, David Alec. *Carlyle to the "French Revolution" (1826–1837)*. London: Kegan Paul, 1924.

Wyman, Lillie Buffum Chace. *American Chivalry*. Boston, MA: W. B. Clarke, 1913.