My Happiest Mission: Madeleva in Ogden, 1919-26

When Sister Madeleva Wolff died in July 1964, the *New York Times* noted that she was an outstanding Catholic teacher and president of St. Mary's College, whose "reputation as an educator was frequently overshadowed by her great outpouring of verse and essays."[1] A much smaller obituary–yet equally pertinent–appeared in the *Intermountain Catholic Register*, which noted that Madeleva's career included a stop in Utah, and that her work "whether in poetry or prose had a strong vitality and mystic insight."[2] Indeed, Madeleva was the author of a dozen books and scores of articles, essays, and poems. What is little known today, however, is that the career of this important Catholic educator and writer was very much influenced by fourteen years, 1919-1933, spent mostly residing in Utah. While some of her writings had been published before coming to Utah, during this period Madeleva's literary output increased dramatically. The first three of these years–1919-1922–were spent as an English teacher and the principal of Sacred Heart Academy in Ogden. It is this period that serves as the focus of my remarks today.

In later life, Madeleva would describe herself as "by birth, a loyal Wisconsin Badger, by transplanting a Utah Beehiver."[3] This paper will examine three aspects of Sister Madeleva's years in Utah; first, her experiences and impact on Sacred Heart and the Utah Catholic community; second, contact with Bernard DeVoto, an important local literary figure who would become a major twentieth century American writer; and third Madeleva's own literary career and the way it influenced, and in turn was influenced by, Ogden and Utah. As part of that examination, I will include examples of her poetry with themes obviously influenced by her residence in this area. A fuller understanding of these aspects of her Ogden years, however, requires some discussion of her early life.

Sister Madeleva was born Mary Evaline Wolff on May 24, 1887, in Cumberland, Wisconsin, located in the northwest corner of the state, not far from the Minnesota border. The second child and first daughter of August and Lucy Wolff, she was the product "of a mixed marriage, born to a devout Lutheran father and a militant Catholic mother."[4] Eva as her family called her, was attracted at an early age to nature and the outdoors; and was taught by her parents on "long drives in the country on summer Sunday afternoons," about the plants and flowers of the "woods, blue lakes, and rollicking rivers" of Wisconsin.[5] Moreover, she loved Beaver Dam Lake which surrounded Cumberland, a small community that 1500 residents called home.

In addition to her exposure to nature and the outdoors during her idyllic childhood, Eva encountered several important teachers. Initially her father and mother read to her from newspapers and magazines. Another important influence came in the seventh and eighth grades when her teacher, Mrs. Kavanaugh, by all accounts a "remarkable" woman who left a lifetime impression, rewarded Eva for "completing the normal grade work" by giving her volumes of Shakespeare and Latin. Later, in remembering the modest circumstances of her childhood, Eva observed: "We lived to learn, so learning to live richly."[6]

Eva graduated from high school in June 1904. Both of her parents had hoped for more education for themselves and were committed to it for their children.[7] That fall she enrolled at the University of Wisconsin in Madison where she studied at the library, finding "books, the reason and the leisure to use them."[8] At the same time, she also enjoyed concerts and plays while taking an active part in Catholic student life. But Eva was not totally happy at Wisconsin.[9] The summer after her first year in school, she saw an ad in *McClure's* magazine for St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana, and the smaller school appealed to her. Eventually she would find St.

Mary's a hospitable place.[10] There she discovered two things that would dramatically influence her life – another important teacher, and a sense of female community.[11]

As her biographer Gail Porter Mandell has noted, Madeleva

> idolized one of her teachers, Sister Rita, who was not only talented and beautiful, but good. Under her influence, Eva changed her major to English and began to use her reason to analyze human feelings and capture them in poetry and prose.[12]

In class, Sister Rita assigned her to write a poem. Eva responded by translating a lyric of Goethe. Though the translation was less than precise, the "idea of poetry as a translation not just of language but of personal experience into language occurred to her for the first time and excited her." This exhilarating discovery caused her to "lie awake at nights trying to fashion every lovely thing that I knew into verse."[13] More importantly, Eva also came into contact with the power of female community, and for the first time "enjoyed the liberating experience of a community designed by and for women." As someone who had "grown up without sisters," she discovered "the power of female friendship at St. Mary's."

Eventually Eva came to realize that, like her mentor, she too wanted to be a Sister of Holy Cross. Though she had doubts at first, and her father was deeply opposed, Eva entered the convent in 1908 and transformed her name–and herself–to Madeleva, combining "the names of the Mother of God, Magdalene, the friend of Christ, and Eve, the Mother of Mankind."[14]

While still in the convent, Madeleva taught at St. Mary's from 1910-1919. At first she began with introductory English courses for new students. Eventually her assignments expanded to upper level English and philosophy classes and finally to scripture and contemporary fiction. She took her final vows in 1914 and started graduate studies at Notre Dame in 1918. As a teacher and student she was happy and fulfilled, and she assumed her career would be spent teaching at

her beloved St. Mary's.

In August 1919, however, Madeleva was sent to Sacred Heart Academy, a high school operated by the order in Ogden, Utah. Though questioning the move at first, she came to regard Sacred Heart as her "happiest mission." She arrived in Ogden with little fanfare either in the local press, or the community, where the records simply say she replaced Sr. Delorosa.[15] Madeleva came to Sacred Heart at an important time. The 1919 school year opened with the "largest enrollment of its history,"[16] and during the three years she was there the school continued to maintain a high enrollment. By the time she left to pursue a graduate degree at Berkeley in the summer of 1922, Sacred Heart had an enrollment of 240, with onr third of the students registered as boarders.[17]

The record of Madeleva's activities at Sacred Heart Academy in these years is sketchy. What is clear, however, is that she brought to the school the commitment to the importance of excellent teachers, and the power of female community she had learned at St. Mary's. The records suggest a happy and collegial atmosphere. For her part, Madeleva simply noted that the theory of religious life is guided by the proverb that "the happiness of a convent depends on the superior and the cooks." At Sacred Heart, she observed, Sisters Celsus, Anicetus, and Felicitas occupied these "key positions," and put "halos around this proverb."[18]

Because neither the extant archival records nor the local newspapers offer much information on Madeleva's teaching activities, one can only speculate as to her impact on the students. Still, there are clues. In the coverage of the 1920 commencement, for example, the *Ogden Standard* reported several student essays with topics that might indicate Madeleva's influence in combining prose, poetry, and history. These presentations include examinations of

"Valiant Women," "An Academic Training for Life," and "Joan of Arc in Prose and Poetry." Moreover, in the class essay, "Women and the West," Pauline Sparks, a student from American Falls, Idaho, who was enrolled in the academic rather than the commercial course, paid homage to the academy and its teachers. Similarly, class valedictorian Margery Mullen–also an academic course graduate–identified the school and teachers as "the secret of our future success." Coverage of the week-long commencement activities in future years was no more specific, but suggests the possibility of Madeleva's influence.[19]

Upon her arrival in Ogden, Madeleva exuberantly exclaimed, "I was elated. Mountains at last! Deserts, Sagebrush, and the West! Oh, Pioneers!"[20] As she would later recall, however, she found more than mountains and sagebrush.[21] Among the things she also found was a group of young people with great promise, especially a young resident who would rise to national prominence–Bernard DeVoto.

The young writer would make a lifetime impression on Madeleva. And the ties between the DeVoto family and the Sisters of Holy Cross were close. In 1865, Mother Augusta brought two young children, Florian and Rose DeVoto, orphans of the Civil War, to live with the sisters at Notre Dame, Indiana. Eventually Florian relocated in Ogden, gained an education, married and became the father of Bernard.[22] In her autobiography Madeleva recalled:

> On my first errand downtown I stopped at Spargo's Drug and Bookstore. Bernard DeVoto, a junior at Harvard, was working there for the summer . . . . The first eight years of his school life he spent at Sacred Heart Academy. He had the questionable distinction of being the only little boy admitted to this select academy for young ladies. I cannot say that Bernard relished the privilege. When I met him he was in the process of achieving Harvard's intellectual maturity and writing the first of his novels....
>
> The plans of more than one of his projected books we took apart and put together again across the bookstore counter at different times in Ogden....[23]

In June 1925, DeVoto renewed his friendship with Madeleva, writing her that his "good friend Gen. McNulty, who once introduced me to you," had given him Madeleva's "most recent book and I have read it." (DeVoto was referring to *Chaucer's Nuns and Other Essays*.) Writing from Ogden on a summer break from his teaching responsibilities at Northwestern, DeVoto noted that it had given him "great pleasure," not only because of its "charming essays," but because "the Wasatch may have played a part." DeVoto then responded to the work in detail

> I scarcely know what pleases me the more, the lightness with which you bring great learning to the service of enlightened criticism, as in the Chaucer essay, or the wide tolerance and clear judgment of the others. Professionally, I admire the Chaucer essay; it is so winning and crisp without forfeiting genuine scholarship .... If all scholars were capable of your aliveness, there would be more honor than there is in teaching literature.[24]

After complimenting her on the other essays in the collection, DeVoto noted that ordinarily he never read "Catholic criticism of Catholic writers" because it was often "uninspired glorification" and "undiscriminating praise." Madeleva's work, he argued, "demonstrated" that such a policy was needless. "Ordinarily," he said, such criticism "accomplishes nothing for either literature or piety: you do a great deal for both." DeVoto concluded by praising the collection as a "brilliant piece of work," adding "I congratulate and envy you." [25]

Indeed *Chaucer's Nuns and Other Essays* is one of Madeleva's most important and long lasting books. First published in 1925, it was reissued forty years later. In the preface, Madeleva's advisor and friend at Berkeley, B.H. Lehman, observed that what "most readers will value . . . is the poet's gifts with those of the scholar so richly manifested." [26]

At the same time, DeVoto's letter to Madeleva was also significant for what it revealed about the younger Utahn, as well. Calling himself a "renegade Catholic," DeVoto told Madeleva

that "in thanks for the pleasure you have given me," he asked his publisher to send her a copy "of my first (I trust not my last) novel." Admonishing Madeleva to "feel absolved of any obligation to read any more of it than interests you," DeVoto took the opportunity to describe his work, titled *The Crooked Mile*,[27] in some detail:

> You will find my novel depressingly unpleasant in some places, and you will find one or two gratuitous . . . slurs on the Church. You will find, too, a blend of various philosophies I can imagine no protestant pietist even listening to. But I know the Church and its great tolerance, its understanding that there are many pathways to heaven and not the least noble of them is the one that completely embraces the world as it seems to be.[28]

Assuring Madeleva that he holds "no brief for the book's literary merits," DeVoto admited he could make it "four times" better if he were writing it again. Still, in very personal terms, DeVoto hoped his literary friend would find

> something else as well, something I am not sure more than a dozen readers have found there . . . . I believe it to be the honest record of a typical mind that is mired and bogged down in the life of contemporary America. And, I think, you will find that the central figure is one of that lost and pitiful class to which I myself belong: those whose spiritual has been and always will be Rome and whose intellects are set irrevocably against Rome. For, as you say in your book, all mystics come home to the Church, and this class is made up of the lonely minds who see through one veil but not the others, who are not at home ever in the world and are nostalgic for the lost country their hearts and intellects deny . . . .[29]

In the years ahead, DeVoto and Madeleva would be separated by both geography and circumstance. Still, they would remain friends and continue to stay in contact until DeVoto's death thirty years later.[30]

As DeVoto realized, the Wasatch did indeed play a part in influencing Madeleva's literary works. In the poems published during her Utah period, two important themes stand out—mountains and deserts–which in the words of one critic suggest "the power of God to sow

with beauty the waste places of human life and character."[31] Time and time again Madeleva returned to these two images. For example:

Mountain Tops

Mountains and resting clouds and climbing trees,
The Higher climbing sun, you show me these.
O, if I saw but Mountains and clouds and trees
I think perhaps my heart could bear the thing;
The autumn would not burn me, and the spring -
I might not so much dread the Miracle thing![32]

A similar theme is found in:

A Snow-Capped Mountain in Summer

The white hours of your maidenhood are past;
Your passive morning wakes into life's young noon;
The virgin coronal slips from your brow at last;
Your first love waits, asking yourself for a boon.
See where before your motionless feet is cast
The burning and unquenchable heart of June.[33]

At the same time, Madeleva chose as recurring themes the geography, flora, and fauna of the high desert plains. The following two poems are good examples of the way Madeleva uses desert imagery:

Desert Sunset

Sunset stood at the edge of the world, apart in the west,
Virginal, calm, aloof, in garden austerity dressed.

Soft little twilight winds and birds and clouds had flown;
Sunset stood on the lone horizon, wistful, alone.

Clad in dispassionate amber from foot to beautiful head,
When all the shining, shimmering glamour of life had
fled.

Almost I thought her a queen, so splendidly simple she
stood;
Almost I thought her a poet in the arms of an elate

mood,

Until I saw the day look down at her from the blue
In vain, and the night look up in vain; then I knew

That virginal, consecrate, lone must sunset forever be –
Taking her mystic way to the heart of eternity.

Aye, and my soul stood there, too, at the utter edge of
the world,
Plighted, like her, and elate in golden wonder furled.[34]

In Desert Places

God has a way of making flowers grow.
He is both daring and direct about it.
If you know half the flowers that I know,
You do not doubt it.

He chooses some gray rock, austere and high,
For garden-plot, traffics with sun and weather;
Then lifts an Indian paintbrush to the sky,
Half flame, half feather.

In desert places it is quite the same;
He delves at petal-plans, divinely, surely
Until a bud too shy to have a name
Blossoms demurely.

He dares to sow the waste, to plow the rock.
Though Eden knew His beauty and His power.
He could not plant in it a yucca stalk,
A cactus flower.[35]

As noted, in the summer of 1922, Madeleva left Ogden to pursue doctoral studies at the University of California, Berkeley. While there, she worked closely with Professor B. H. Lehman. They remained close friends for the rest of their lives, though Madeleva would typically address him as "Professor," and Lehman likewise called her "Sister," in their correspondence. When Madeleva returned to Ogden in December, 1925, (the order records simply state that "at

Christmas time Sister Madeleva exchanged places with Sister Helen"),[36] she seemed happy and content. While missing the intellectual stimulation of Berkeley, by spring she told Lehman she had a garden with "forget me nots and pansies, larkspur and snapdragons and baby breath in it. I had just finished writing [in the garden] when a meadowlark found himself a pulpit in an apple tree ... and I immediately became his congregation."[37]

Even the winter weather didn't seem to be the challenge–especially in terms of her health–that it was in earlier times. She told Lehman, she found the snow

> more soothing and restful than a long and dreamless sleep. It is falling now, profound white peace, deliberate and encompassing as eternity, but you participate vicariously in the benedictions of such tranquility.[38]

At the same time, Madeleva attracted more attention in Ogden after her return from Berkeley than previously. As school resumed in January 1926, Madeleva was leading the English class in its discussion of the *Merchant of Venice* with a debate topic of "Resolved, that the Treatment of Shylock was Unjust." In May, the local paper reported that Madeleva would give "the people of Ogden ... an opportunity to hear one of the most interesting literary discussions of the year," when she presented a lecture, "Poetry at the Making," at the academy. The paper noted that Madeleva had recently returned with the recognition of "one of the leading writers and scholars of the west," who was attracting "world-wide attention" through her books and poems published in such places as the *Saturday Review*. After the lecture, the paper reported that the "audience was charmed by the simplicity of manner, the directness of thought, and the rare quality of humor," that Madeleva exhibited. An "enthusiastic" audience, it noted, filled the academy's "large auditorium." On another occasion, the paper also called attention to the fact that Madeleva had recently been elected to membership in the Medieval Academy of America,

which was composed of "some of the most eminent scholars" in Europe and America.[39]

But an important change was around the corner. In September 1926, Madeleva was appointed Principal of St Mary's of the Wasatch in Salt Lake City, ending her time at Sacred Heart. Over the next few years, however, she would frequently visit and lecture in Ogden.[40] Madeleva's experiences at Utah's St. Mary's were significant, and are the subject for another paper. In May 1933, she said her "farewells" to "seven of the best years of my life," to return to Indiana to assume the presidency of her alma mater, St. Mary's College, where she would spend the rest of her life. Yet even thirty years after leaving Utah Madeleva could still vividly recall—typically in terms of the out-of-doors—when she used to "listen for and watch the birds in Ogden."[41]

While describing her years in Utah in positive terms, it is clear that she was not completely happy. Often she felt isolated from her friends, the environs of St. Mary's, and the atmosphere of culture and literature. "Zion resists culture rather stubbornly," she wrote Mother Vincentia, her General Superior.[42] Moreover, as she told a former student, Della Walton, "If there is one thing that I regretted leaving at St. Mary's it was the . . . library. So when some of my book friends find their way to me through the mail I am in a mild ecstasy for days."[43] Finally, despite what she had told Lehman, she explained her isolation as somewhat related to her health which, while never robust, was greatly affected by the cold Utah winters:

> "I am safely beyond the reach of even the most popular rumors from the east. I keep up with the *Bookman* and the *Atlantic Monthly* but have foregone novels as this climate has taken all kinds of revenge on me and I don't stay well for very long at a time."[44]

From 1919 to 1933, this transplanted Utah "Beehiver" was very much a part of the local

Catholic community -- first in Ogden and later in Salt Lake City. Madeleva greatly influenced those she taught and guided. She helped to move Utah Catholic education forward, and her time in Utah left its mark on her literary career. Despite the above quoted reservations, she always remembered the "west and all that it [meant] in friendships, and profound understanding, those great sacraments of majesty and power and peace, the mountains...." The West she told Lehman, was "my physical world too long to make this tame and ordered landscape [of Indiana] surpassingly attractive." One never recovered, she wrote, from having that "nostalgia for the west ... and, better still one never wants to."[45] That being the case, any understanding of Madeleva's later life, especially her time as president of St. Mary's, must take into account the period of her "happiest mission."

NOTES

1. *New York Times*, 26 July 1964, p. 57.

2. *Intermountain Catholic Register*, 31 July 1964.

3. M. Madeleva Wolff, *My First Seventy Years* (New York: MacMillan, 1959), p. 53.

4. Gail Porter Mandell, *Madeleva, One Woman's Life* (New Yorl: Paulist Press, 1994), p. 3. (Hereinafter cited as Mandell). Along with *My First Seventy Years*, Mandell's succinct study is an essential starting point for understanding Madeleva's life. A fuller biography can be found in Mandell's *Madeleva: A Biography* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).

5. *My First Seventy Years*, p. 11-12.

6. Ibid., p. 7.

7. Mandell, p. 5.

8. *My First Seventy Years*, Ibid., p. 23.

9. Ibid., p. 24. As Madeleva noted, the first summer back from college meant "settling back" into her old routines. Moreover, she recognized that the University of Wisconsin had "not become a conviction with me."

10. Ibid., p. 25. Madeleva recalled that when she told her mother of her decision she was concerned about her husband's reaction. Ultimately, once admitted to St. Mary's her father "proudly displayed the beautiful letters from St. Mary's to his most intelligent customers. He never lost that overwhelming pride in the college and the sisters."

11.Mandell, pp. 8-9.

12. Mandell, p. 8.

13. Ibid., p. 9.

14. *My First Seventy Years*, p. 18.

15. Sacred Heart Academy, "Narrative and Sister Service Record 1919-20," Sisters of the Holy Cross Archives, St. Mary's Archives, Notre Dame, Indiana. Hereafter called "Narrative Record."

16. *Intermountain Catholic*, 6 September 1919.

17. Narrative Record 1919-20. See also Sacred Heart Academy, *Golden Yearbook of the Class of 1928* (Ogden: Sacred Heart, 1928).

18. *My First Seventy Years*, p. 47.

19. *Ogden Standard Examiner*, 12 June, 18 June 1920.

20. *My First Seventy Years*, p. 46.

21. Ibid., p. 47.

22. See Marion McCandless, *Family Portraits: A History of the Holy Cross Alumnae Association of St. Mary's College, 1879-1949* (Notre Dame: Saint Mary's College, 1952), pp. 17-18.

23. *My First Seventy Years*, p. 48. A great deal of scholarly attention has been given to DeVoto and his works. A good starting place is Russell Burrows, *Bernard DeVoto* (Boise, ID: Boise State University, Western Writers Series, 12, 1997).

24. DeVoto to Madeleva, 30 June 1925, St. Mary's College Archives, Notre Dame, Indiana. Hereafter cited as SMCA.

25.Ibid. Madeleva agreed with this notion. As she would write at about the same time, criticisms of religious poetry "must be double-barreled in character to strike a double mark, spiritual and literary. It must also reach ... that diffuse and difficult thing, the spirit of the age." See Sister M. Madeleva, "The Religious Poetry of the Nineteenth Century." *Catholic World*, November 1920, pp 212-24.

26.B. H. Lehman, "Forward," in Sister M. Madeleva, *Chaucer's Nuns and Other Essays* (New York: Appleton, 1925), p. x.

27.Bernard DeVoto, *The Crooked Mile* (New York: Minton, 1924).

28. DeVoto to Madeleva, 30 June 1925, SCMA

29. Ibid.

30. "Through all his turbulence of mind and soul we remained friends. He wrote me once, 'I am one of that unhappy band whose minds refuse the allegiance without which their hearts will never be at rest.' His last letter came a matter of weeks before his death." *My First Seventy Years*, p. 48.

31. Ruth Mary Weeks, "Sister M. Madeleva," *Scholastic*, 4 December 1939, p. 27E.

32. M. Madeleva Wolff, *Collected Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 13.

33. Ibid., p. 15.

34. Ibid., p. 69.

35. Ibid., p. 104.

36. Narrative Record, 1925-26.

37. Madeleva to Benjamin H. Lehman, 19 April 1926, B. H. Lehman Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California. Hereafter cited as Lehman Papers.

38. Ibid., undated.

39. *Ogden Standard Examiner*, 9 May, 16 May, 26 May 1926.

40. Ibid., 10 April 1927.

41. Madeleva to Marion Newcomb, 20 December 1963, SMCA.

42. Madeleva to Mother Vincentia, 30 April 1933, SMCA.

43. Madeleva to Della Walton, 17 February 1920, SMCA.

44. Ibid.

45. Lehman Papers, 2 January 1935, 24 March 1937.