

The Sherman Letters  
A Window into a Father and Daughter Relationship  
In Nineteenth-Century America

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Families have existed throughout the course of history. The structures and relationships formed in a family are endemic to all cultures and societies. As historian, Carl Degler points out in his seminal work, *At Odds*, which analyzes the emergence of the American family: "In every branch of written history, whether that of ancient Egypt, ancient China, medieval Europe, or modern America, the record shows that the family has been the vehicle through which men and women have entered upon life."<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on one particular family, the Sherman Family, and how they revealed themselves through several years of correspondence. In particular, this work looks at the relationship between the father, General William Tecumseh Sherman of Civil War fame and his daughter Eleanor (Ellie). An examination of the epistolary art, which formally conveyed their thoughts and feelings from Ellie's adolescence through the first decade of her marriage to Alexander Montgomery Thackara (Mont), will also show how she checked her personal growth and development into womanhood against the advice of her famous father.

The correspondence between Ellie and General Sherman was written during the Victorian period of the nineteenth-century. This was a time of uncertainty "where fortunes rose and fell with frightening rapidity, where social and economic mobility provided instability as well as hope."<sup>2</sup> It was a time when men ventured out of the home and women remained hostage in it. Generated by popular ladies magazines and literature, the women of this time found their solace in the Cult of Domesticity or the Cult of True-

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Degler: *At Odds*. Oxford University Press, New York 1980, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Welter: "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860." *American Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No.2 Part 1, (Summer, 1966) p. 152.

womanhood. Throughout the myriad of letters between Ellie and her father, the question arises whether Ellie had resented or was resigned to the cult of true womanhood?

The Cult of Domesticity or the Cult of True Womanhood was built out of the paradigm of the middle-class WASP family that emerged during the nineteenth-century industrial period. There were four basic virtues that represented the Cult: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. These virtues were fostered in popular culture and reflected in society. The creation of ladies magazines help to maintain these virtues, such as Sarah Hale's publications. To the Sherman Family living at this time, the Cult was very much a reality. The notion of the Cult becomes quite apparent in the correspondence between Ellie and her father.<sup>3</sup>

From the available sources of the Sherman-Thackara Collection housed at Villanova University, the extant correspondence between Ellie and her father began in 1869 and lasted until his death in 1891. As a child, Ellie felt comfortable in communicating with her father. Even though he was often away from home serving his country as both a soldier and a diplomat, a playful banter existed between them. For the purposes of this paper, however, emphasis will be placed on the letters written from 1872 to 1891, as Ellie matured into a woman.

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<sup>3</sup> There is a sea of scholarship that supports the notion of the Cult of Domesticity or the Cult of True Womanhood as an important paradigm in nineteenth-century America. Barbara Welter in her seminal article "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" saw the presence of the Cult in her examination of the emerging ladies magazines during this time. Likewise, historian Nancy Woloch asserted the reality of the Cult, as the promotion of the Woman's sphere. See: Chapter 5 and 6, pp.103-153, in *Woman and the American Experience*, Third Edition, McGraw Hill Co, 2000. On the other hand, some recent scholars are very skeptical of the Cult, because it is not clearly present across the board among race and class. Historians, such as Elizabeth R. Varon have challenged the notion of separate spheres by claiming that it did not exist among white women in the Antebellum South. She stated: "both the major historians of antebellum southern politics and the major practitioners of southern women's history have neglected the subject of female partisanship." For more information see: Chapter 5, pp.101-13, "White Women and Party Politics in Antebellum Virginia" in Norton and Alexander's *Major Problems in American Women's History*, Third Edition, Houghton Mifflin Co, 2003.

In 1872 at the age of thirteen Ellie wrote to her father quite often. At first glance, one might say that Ellie's letters were much like a journal or a diary, because of how little time there was in between her letters. One letter dated June 7, 1872, she stated: "We have received three letters and the beautiful lava sets since I last wrote."<sup>4</sup> The tone was excitable for the young girl, for she had written her father several letters and finally received an equal number in return. Ellie continued the letter with details of what was occurring with the family while he was away on duty. One of the most compelling features in this letter regarding the nature of their relationship rests in Ellie's discussion of her siblings. She did not hesitate in telling her father about her brother's and sister's activities. At the end of this particular letter, she stated: "But I must not close without telling you that Cumpy is well, and goes out riding everyday in front of Pat and he enjoys it so much."<sup>5</sup> This feature presents itself in almost every letter Ellie wrote to her father for the next twenty years. In a sense, it shows a little bit of anxiousness on the part of Ellie. By detailing accounts of her siblings to her father she assumed a motherly role.

The Shermans were part of the new middle class which emerged in nineteenth century industrialized America. Ellie and her siblings grew up with privileges, as result of the status, which they held due to their father's prominent military position. By September 1872, Ellie had begun private schooling at the Mt. Notre Dame Academy, a Catholic school for girls. While there, Ellie continued writing her frequent and lengthy letters to her father. Her progression in education was quite noteworthy, and it showed in her writing. As her school days passed, both her grammar and writing style dramatically improved. Ellie also had continued to fill her letters with information regarding details of

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<sup>4</sup> Sherman-Thackara Collection, Villanova University, Box II, Folder 1, June 7, 1872, Ellie to William Tecumseh.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

the family and her life. And even though her schedule was busy with school activities and studies, she remained committed to her regular communication with her father. On April 13 1874, she wrote: "My Darling Papa... Several times have I started to write to you but as often have failed; but now indeed I must finish."<sup>6</sup> While she worked to produce a well-crafted letter, her attempt at sophistication did not diminish her freedom of expression. The bond which they had established obviously was based on openness and trust. She even felt comfortable in scolding her father:

In your last letter which we with warmest welcome received you speak of your neglecting writing to us but indeed it is that you should be ashamed. I know well that you have business to attend to and it is in this way I have always accounted for any silence.

This pointed account established a focal point in their relationship. At the time she wrote this letter, Ellie was comfortable enough with her father to tell him exactly what she felt and thought about his neglecting to write. In addition, this letter exhibits Ellie's development in her knowledge of larger society. She was cognizant of her father's very important and time-consuming job. Yet, she also knew how important the family was to the nineteenth-century middle-class society, and wanted her father to be mindful of his own.

Ellie's pseudo-maternal role to her siblings and her vigilant observance of her father's position as head of their family is evident in her concern for her brother, Tom's, vocational choice in 1878. William Tecumseh Sherman was born and raised a Protestant

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<sup>6</sup> S-TC, Villanova University, Box II, Folder 2, April 13, 1874, Ellie to William

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

and remained so his entire life.<sup>8</sup> His wife, Ellen Ewing Sherman was Roman Catholic and insisted in raising all of their children in her faith. Until the late 1870s, their difference in religion did not prove an obstacle for Ellie in her relationship with her father. But by the summer of 1878, however, that latitude was tested.

In early June, Ellie wrote to her father asking him about her brother Tom: "Please write to me about Tom. I am anxious to know how he is doing."<sup>9</sup> Indeed General Sherman replied to his daughter's request regarding her brother, albeit his letter was not exactly happy news:

I have your loving letter of June 7<sup>th</sup> and hasten to assure you that it is of infinite more pain to me to afflict you than it can possibly be to hear the truth. Tom may have once loved me but has done me fatal wrong. The vocation which he may have supposed came from God proceeded from another quarter. God commanded the son to honor his Father as well as his Mother and how can he possibly reconcile his conduct to this simple rule passes my comprehension. No inspiration or call of the Lord can justify a neglect of a positive duty. Tom knew that his going away utterly wrecked the only plan in life that held out to us the remotest hope of a common home. He might have married and still been accessible to me and to us all but now he has put himself voluntarily in an order alien and hostile to me.<sup>10</sup>

At the time Tom was studying to be a military lawyer, a profession his father deeply wanted for him. However, that summer Tom, for some reason, had changed his mind and decided to enter the study of the Catholic priesthood. General Sherman's devoted Protestant background, coupled with his honorable service in the U.S. Army left him less than pleased by Tom's sudden change of heart.

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<sup>8</sup> Actually William Tecumseh Sherman was baptized Catholic when he was adopted by the Ewing Family, after the death of his father. However, Sherman rejected Catholicism throughout his entire life. See: Micheal Fellman: *Citizen Sherman* Random House, Toronto, 1995. pp. 5-11 and 371-380.

<sup>9</sup> S-TC, Villanova University, Box II, Folder 2, June 3, 1878, Ellie to William.

<sup>10</sup> S-TC, Villanova University, Box I, Folder 1, June 1878, William to Ellie.

The General was devastated and told as much, in the second half of the letter. He stated: "What wounds me to the quick is that Tom by no word, look, or sign gave me a hint of this heavenly vocation till he had finally resolved—had engaged his passage and arranged with strangers for the means to enable him to carry into effect his purpose."

Ellie, moreover, felt the letter to be important enough to re-write it on a typewriter.<sup>11</sup>

Above all else, this letter displays the true nature of the bond which Sherman had with his daughter. His ability to be perfectly candid with her was in this grave instance, even with his realization her devotion to her Catholic faith, a sign of respect and trust. Additionally, Ellie's response to her father, regarding Tom was filled with the utmost sincerity and compassion. She wrote: "Yesterday, I received your letter about Tom and have been in a state of anxiety to know the issue. While your anger is certainly justifiable, please remember that Tom is still your son."<sup>12</sup>

As the drama of Tom's vocational choice settled somewhat, Ellie returned to her recounting of mundane family news. In the summer of 1879, the Sherman's vacationed up and down the Mid-Atlantic coast. They began in Atlantic City, New Jersey in June and by August they had reached Maryland. During this time, Ellie continued to write to her father in Washington. As usual, the letters tell the tale of Ellie's daily adventures, from riding horses with her brothers and sisters, to bathing in the ocean and, of course, there were her reflections about the weather. She shared with her father detailed accounts of her daily life with little inhibition. A few of the letters discuss and critique the Gilbert and Sullivan opera *Pinafore*, which premiered in the United States, during January of that

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<sup>11</sup> This letter was the only one in the collection retyped.

<sup>12</sup> S-TC, Villanova University, Box II, Folder 2, June 17, 1878, Ellie to William.

year. This sort of dialogue provides evidence into Ellie's knowledge of current society. Furthermore, it shows Ellie's ability to have a cultural conversation with her father.

As the year came to an end, however, Ellie's news became more serious. By mid-September, Ellie had accepted the engagement promise of A.M. Thackara. In a letter dated September 19, 1879, she shared with her father the good news of her happiness. She displayed her emotions about Mont in the opening paragraph: "Each moment my heart contains the love that is growing there, a love as strong and true as such a one as my Mont deserves, a love that will always be true and strong."<sup>13</sup> It is evident, from the special collection of the Sherman Family Letters that Ellie wrote just as much if not more, to her fiancé Mont Thackara. In many ways, the relationship she had with Mont spun out of the nurturing bond which had developed with her father since her childhood. In addition, she employed many of the same phrases in her letters to Mont, as she had done with her father. For example she constantly reminded Mont to write to her, just as she did with her father. In examining the repetition of certain sentences and phrases, one could say that the relationship with her father served as a springboard for that with her future husband.

In many significant ways Mont Thackara and General Sherman were very similar. To begin, both were members of the Presbyterian faith. The difference in faith did not, however, pose a problem for Ellie who was raised Catholic. Apart from the religious similarity, Mont was also a military man, serving in the U.S. Navy at Annapolis. Adding together all of these factors, the General was very approving of his daughter's engagement to Mr. Thackara. Moreover, from her letters Ellie seemed to be quite aware of her father's support and approval. She wrote: "I shall begin and continue with Mr.

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<sup>13</sup> S-TC, Villanova University, Box II, Folder 3, Sept. 14, 1879, Ellie to William.



Thackara just as you say.”<sup>14</sup> The bond with her father was even further revealed, in the months leading up to the wedding. Later on in that same very letter, she concluded: “I read to Mr. Thackara all that you said about his duty and mine, but I did not care to let him see the whole. I will tell you why sometime.”<sup>15</sup> The most compelling and powerful sentence in the letter was when Ellie wrote: “I will tell you why sometime”. Despite Ellie’s strong and kindred relationship with Mont, it did not take away from the special bond she had with her father, and on May 5, 1880, Eleanor Sherman and Alexander Montgomery Thackara were married.

General Sherman subscribed to the gentlemanly ideal that patrimony was the indispensable corollary to matrimony. One of the basic and essential purposes of life was to raise, nurture, and send successful children out into the world to carry forward larger familial purposes. In that regard, one can see why Tom’s obstinate choice to defy his father, utterly displeased the old war hero. Additionally, in regards to the position of woman, the General held a view that was very much in sync with societal norms of nineteenth-century America. In a newspaper clipping, preserved in the collection entitled “What the Old Warrior said to some sweet New York Graduates” the General revealed to the world, his idea of a woman’s duty, which echoes the virtues in the cult of true womanhood:

You have a mission in life aside from educating the young—motherhood. Don’t make the mistake of trying to do a man’s work in the world. God made us different, and we shouldn’t try to have it otherwise. When you become wives and mothers, and grandmothers, many of you I hope, will remember that once a played out old soldier, who rejoiced that it had been his lot to do some service for his country, stood here under this flag that when he first knew it, it had but 20 stars, where it had 42 now, and told you that this was the greatest nation in the

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<sup>14</sup> S-TC, Villanova University, Box II, Folder 3, Sept. 28, 1879, Ellie to William.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

world, and that its destiny rests largely in the hands of you, the teachers and the mothers of the coming generations.<sup>16</sup>

This newspaper clipping opens the door to a plethora of issues. If one were to juxtapose this article to the letters written to Ellie, then one can begin to see the irony that the speech presents. The correspondence between Ellie and General Sherman was one built on mutual love, trust, and openness—all of which are present in the cavalcade of letters that exist in this collection. The speech recorded in the newspaper clipping, on the other hand, emphasized more traditional values. It would appear from the content of this speech, however, that General Sherman publicly adhered to the tenets of nineteenth-century “true womanhood”, but privately encouraged his daughter to exhibit more bold characteristics.

The contradiction between the father-daughter bond, presented in the letters, and the General’s speech warrants further analysis. Ellie’s marriage to Mont Thackara supports her father’s position in the speech on a woman’s duty to family. Yet, during this time “the American woman had her choice—she could define her rights in the way of the women’s magazines and insure them by the practice of the requisite virtues, or she could go outside the home, seeking other rewards than love.”<sup>17</sup> With the availability of some choice, Ellie’s decision to get married can be seen as one of the ways she submitted her resignation to the cult of true womanhood.

In examining the letters, however, Ellie’s position to the dilemma—should women get married and stay in the home or reject that situation—would appear to be rather ambiguous. On the one hand, numerous letters written by Ellie show how

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<sup>16</sup> S-TC, Villanova University, Box 1, Folder 2, June 1880.

<sup>17</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood” p. 173.

intrigued she was by her famous father's active public life. Her interest makes it possible to surmise that she wanted such a life for herself. On the other hand, there exists a myriad of letters, which view her, just as anxious to assume the traditional roles of wife and mother. The former view presented itself more clearly in the letters she wrote while she was in school. She made frequent references to public events and personalities, such as her discussion of *Pinafore*. In contrary, the latter view cannot be pinpointed to such a precise time. Ellie's thoughts on the roles of traditional wife and mother existed throughout all of her letters. This view was first introduced in the earlier letters when Ellie would write to her father about the health and well-being of the family. To this end, one could say she was pretending to be the mother. Secondly, one certainly can tell how much she wanted to please her father by marrying the right man.

The final part in this view resides in the letters just before the General died. By this time, Ellie had become a wife and a mother, but the interesting part was how she conveyed this role to her father in the letters. In letter dated Jan 1, 1890 she wrote: "Having skipped Christmas and not having written since then, you must think I have entirely forgotten how to write, but the state of my household ever since Christmas is perplexing."<sup>18</sup> Here she mentioned one of the most crucial elements concerning womanhood in the nineteenth century...the household, which required her attention. She told her father the reason for her lack in correspondence was due to the condition of her home. Domesticity was one of the chief virtues in the Cult of True womanhood. As portrayed in a variety of ladies magazines, during this time the home was "not only the highest adornment of civilization," but also kept them "busy at morally uplifting tasks."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> S-TC, Villanova University, Box II, Folder 3, Jan 1, 1890, Ellie to William.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Welter; "The Cult of True Womanhood" p.164.

While her duties never kept her from writing to her father completely they did, however, prevent her from writing as often as she did in the past.

The correspondence between William Tecumseh and Ellie concluded a year later when the General died on February 14, 1891. The letters tell the story of a father and daughter who had maintained and fostered a special relationship for more than twenty years. Their story, moreover, provides a window into the course of father and daughter relationships of the nineteenth century. In that regard, it accounts for the status of women, such as Ellie. The intimate thoughts and feelings that Ellie conveyed in her letters to her father, truly sheds insight on the position of women during this time. Lastly, the letters reflect on the nature of family relationships, in this case one of a father and a daughter.

The nineteenth-century middle-class family, such as the Sherman's appealed to the values of the Victorian era, as well as the Cult of True womanhood. The letters have shown that from a very early age, Ellie had developed a maternal role, in such events as recounting the daily activities of siblings. Yet, the letters also reveal Ellie as strong-minded and independent woman—one who engaged in highly intellectual discussions with her father about culture and society. Nevertheless, Ellie still did what her father expected of her when she married and raised a family of her own. In that regard, one could say that despite Ellie's awareness of the world, she ultimately resigned to the Cult of True Womanhood.

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