# EMMA AND ELIZA AND THE STAIRS

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and Valeen Tippetts Avery

Several elements in various combinations comprise one of the most oft-told tales of Mormon biography / history. The characters involved are Joseph Smith, his wife Emma Hale Smith, and a plural wife, usually Eliza Roxcy Snow. The place is invariably Nauvoo, the scene either the Homestead residence of the Smiths or the later, roomier Mansion House. The time, if specified, is either very early morning, or night, in 1843, April or May, or in 1844. The action involves two women in or coming out of separate bedrooms. Emma discovers the other woman in the embrace of or being kissed by Joseph. A tussle follows in which Emma pulls the woman's hair, or hits her with a broom, or pushes her down stairs, causing either bruises, or a persistent limp, or, in the extreme versions, a miscarriage. There may or may not be a witness or witnesses.[1]

The anecdote is told orally more often than it is written, with details of time, scene, costume (one account has Eliza in her nightclothes), action, motivation, and results being adjusted according to the attitudes of the teller. As generally related, it takes the form of a short story, with setting, plot, and characters; and it displays the characteristics of easily defined formula fiction: the characters are "good" or "bad," their motives oversimplified, the action predictable, the results inevitable. It is the stuff of legend, a folk tradition, perpetuated orally, and likely to continue.

For the student of Mormon culture, the prevailing questions about this story are: Why was it told and why is it still told? What does the telling say about the tellers? What "truths of the human heart," their own human hearts, do people reinforce through the telling? But for the biographers of Joseph Smith, or Emma Hale Smith, or Eliza Roxcy Snow, there is a more awkward problem: How did the story get its start, and which details, if any, are based on fact?

The earliest-known published version of the story appears in the 1886 anti-Mormon polemic, *Joseph Smith the Prophet: His Family*

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Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, senior research historian for the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute of Church History, Brigham Young University, is writing a biography of Eliza R. Snow.
Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery will soon publish a biography of Emma Hale Smith.

[1]The present study is an extended investigation into a question raised by the newsletter of the Association for Mormon Letters. The response became too lengthy for that format and so was released for publication here. The authors acknowledge Lavina Fielding Anderson and James B. Allen for their interest in the question and their encouragement in the search for its resolution.

*and His Friends*, by Wilhelm Wyl. Implying as his source the universal "they say," Wyl writes:

> There is scarcely a Mormon unacquainted with the fact that Sister Emma . . . soon found out the little compromise [plural marriage] arranged between Joseph and Eliza. Feeling outraged as a wife and betrayed as a friend, Emma is currently reported as having had recourse to a vulgar broomstick as an instrument of revenge; and the harsh treatment received at Emma's hands is said to have destroyed Eliza's hopes of becoming the mother of a prophet's son.[2]

From this account, the implication of miscarriage, the suggestion of the broom as instrument, and Emma's motive remain in the story today. The veiled suggestion of a forced abortion was not included by early tellers of the oral tale; even Emma's detractors could not believe *that* of her. The detail of the stairs, the most persistent element of the story as it is now told, is missing here.

There is, however, an interesting juxtaposition in the Wyl book. The page immediately before the Eliza Snow account just cited tells this story of another Eliza: "Eliza Partridge, one of the many girls sealed to the Prophet, used to sew in Emma's room. Once, while Joseph was absent, Emma got to fighting with Eliza and threw her down the stairs."[3]

That the two stories and the two Elizas later became merged in the popular mind is possible, but obviously impossible to prove. An account recorded by a diarist at the time of the alleged incident, however, may, in a similar manner, have promoted the replacement in the story of the relatively obscure Eliza Partridge with the more public Eliza Snow. In May 1843, William Clayton, clerk and intimate friend of the Prophet, wrote:

> Prest [Smith] stated to me that he had had a little trouble with sis. E[mma]. he was asking E[liza] Partridge concerning Jackson conduct during Prest. absence & E[mma] came up stairs. he shut to the door not knowing who it was and held it. She came to the door & called Eliza 4 times & tried to force open the door. Prest. opened it & told her the cause etc. She seemed much irritated.[4]

In this case, the possibility of the reader's interchanging Eliza Snow for Eliza Partridge is as feasible as in the earlier juxtaposition. More to the point, however, is the likelihood in this case of that error creeping into the realm of folk history: in the 1850s the William

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[2]Wilhelm Wyl [Wilhelm Ritter Von Wymetal], *Joseph Smith the Prophet, His Family and His Friends* (Salt Lake City: Tribune Printing and Publishing Company, 1886), p. 58.

[3]Ibid., p. 57.

[4]Notes on the diary of William Clayton, 23 May 1843, in the files of, and by courtesy of, James B. Allen.

Clayton diary was being used as a source in compiling the official History of the Church, at which time not only George A. Smith, under whose direction the work was carried on, but also his colleagues and office staff would have had access to the diary. From any of them the story could have been told, or mistold, in an environment which either ignored Emma Smith or denigrated her. Brigham Young's own antipathy towards the Prophet's widow would be reason enough, consciously admitted or otherwise, to read into neutral documents evidence against her. Whether or not the incident as William Clayton wrote it has any bearing on the story as it developed, the Clayton account remains the only known contemporary version of any such event involving Emma and an Eliza.

Recently there was discovered one other contemporary record which could have solved the whole issue: Eliza Snow's own journal and notebook containing sporadic entries dated between 29 June 1842 and 14 April 1844. However, there is no mention of any such event as that described in the lore. Remembering that no evidence is not evidence, the reader cannot conclude that the event did not take place. A woman as aware as Eliza Snow was of the Victorian proprieties would hardly have described such an event, even in her diary. So careful was she in her journal keeping, lest the volume fall into enemy hands, that she did not even mention in so many words the event with which her diary began—her marriage to Joseph Smith.[5]

Eliza's Nauvoo journal, having surfaced just a few years ago, was not available to most writers of this century's histories and biographies. The most direct connection scholars have had with Eliza Snow's Nauvoo years has been through one of her nephews, the last of Lorenzo Snow's sons, LeRoi C. Snow, who in his mature years researched materials for biographies of his illustrious aunt and father. Considering his sources, he had, as one judges from his notes, a remarkably accurate picture of the Snow family at the time in question. From several reports eagerly shared with fellow researchers in the Church Historian's Office, where he worked from 1926 to his retirement in 1950, it is apparent that the supposed incident of the stairs loomed large in his mind. A search through his papers, including his notes for the planned but never-written biographies, reveals one account written around the time he told the story to such people as Fawn Brodie. Details of that account and indications from

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[5]Eliza R. Snow Journal and Notebook, 1842 ff., photocopy of holograph, Library–Archives, Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited as Church Archives). The journal parts are published as "Eliza R. Snow's Nauvoo Journal," ed. Maureen Ursenbach, *BYU Studies* 15 (Summer 1975): 391–416.

his outline that it was the version he intended using suggest he gave it more credence than his own verbally transmitted version. He wrote:

> Charles C. Rich called at the Mansion House, Nauvoo, to go with the Prophet on some appointment they had together. As he waited in the main lobby or parlor, he saw the Prophet and Emma come out of a room upstairs and walk together toward the stairway which apparently came down center. Almost at the same time, a door opposite opened and dainty, little, dark haired Eliza R. Snow (she was "heavy with child") came out and walked toward the center stairway. When Joseph saw her, he turned and kissed Emma goodbye, and she remained standing at the bannister. Joseph then walked on to the stairway, where he tenderly kissed Eliza, and then came on down stairs toward Brother Rich. Just as he reached the bottom step, there was a commotion on the stairway, and both Joseph and Brother Rich turned quickly to see Eliza come tumbling down the stairs. Emma had pushed her, in a fit of rage and jealousy; she stood at the top of the stairs, glowering, her countenance a picture of hell. Joseph quickly picked up the little lady, and with her in his arms, he turned and looked up at Emma, who then burst into tears and ran to her room. Joseph carried the hurt and bruised Eliza up the stairs and to her room. "Her hip was injured and that is why she always afterward favored that leg," said Charles C. Rich. "She lost the unborn babe."[6]

That Charles C. Rich would be privy to the intimacies suggested by this account, unless it occurred within a month of the Prophet's death, is unlikely. By his own affidavit sworn in 1869, he was first introduced to the principle of plural marriage in May 1844, just prior to his leaving on a mission. Had he indeed witnessed such an incident in the presence of Joseph Smith, surely something of that principle would have been explained to him then. The possible times during which the incident might have occurred will be dealt with later, but May 1844 is not a likely one.[7]

In his notes LeRoi Snow attributes this account to Charles C. Rich, giving as source a letter from W. Aird Macdonald dated 11 August 1944. That letter has not yet been found, but from Macdonald's son we learn that his father, who would not have known Apostle Rich, did serve a mission in 1906–1908 under the presidency of Ben E. Rich, Charles Rich's son. If that is the connection, the account is at best fourth-hand; in any case the event is separated from the writing by a century.

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[6]LeRoi C. Snow, Notes, in possession of Cynthia Snow Banner, whose cooperation is warmly appreciated. Interesting here is the perpetuation of the stereotypical views of the two women. Granted, Eliza was shorter than Emma by about three inches; still she was tall for the times, about five feet six inches, and, as photographs present her, hardly "little" or "dainty" then. In later years, at the time that LeRoi Snow knew her, she had become smaller-seeming in height and certainly lighter in weight. The idea of the larger, angry woman attacking the smaller, defenseless one persists in many of the accounts.

[7]Joseph F. Smith Affidavit Book 1, p. 54, Church Archives.

But LeRoi Snow was telling the story before he received Macdonald's letter. And although family traditions are notoriously unreliable, LeRoi's lifetime overlapped Eliza's by eleven years and his father Lorenzo's by twenty-five years. However unlikely it may be that the eighty-year-old Aunt Eliza would have told the story to her eleven-year-old nephew, it could be assumed that if the incident happened, his father knew it, considering the familial closeness of the brother and sister. Then it would not be inconceivable that Lorenzo could have told his son when LeRoi was older. If such be the case, unless Lorenzo Snow were guilty of covering up a family scandal with an outright lie, the miscarriage element of the story must be discounted. In May 1899, he addressed a group of Saints in St. George, Utah, assuring them that their eternal salvation was not lost if in this life they failed to marry and have children: "My sister Eliza R. Snow, I believe," he said, "was just as good a woman as any Latter-day Saint woman that ever lived, and she lived in an unmarried state until she was beyond the condition of raising a family." He then acknowledged Eliza's sealing to Joseph Smith, an event which occurred when she was thirty-eight years old.[8] Had LeRoi Snow learned even part of the Eliza–Emma story directly from his father, he would himself have been the historically better source, leaving us to ponder why he would have preferred a further-removed version of the story to his own.

About the time of the Macdonald letter, Fawn Brodie was finishing her manuscript of *No Man Knows My History*, first published in November 1945. In documenting the story she says simply that the tradition "was stated to me as fact by Eliza's nephew."[9] She, however, mixes into her account other suggestions of violence, forcing all her details to fit into one coherent event. She tells the pushed-down-the-stairs-with-a-broomstick story, complete with miscarriage, and tacks onto that the scene related in 1931 by John R. Young to Vesta P. Crawford. John Young recounts having heard Solon Foster, once coachman to the Prophet, tell of a night when Emma "turned Eliza R. Snow outdoors in her night clothes" and the Smith children "stood out in the street crying." Young's account, written first in his journal in 1928, then later in the letter to Crawford, is difficult to date. Foster, he said, told the story in sacrament meeting in St. George "at the time Joseph [Smith III] and Alexander, the prophet's sons, visited S.L. City."[10] The diary of

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[8]*LDS Millennial Star* 61 (31 August 1899): 548. Courtesy David J. Whittaker.

[9]Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, 2d ed. rev. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), p. 470.

[10]John Ray Young, Scrapbook, 1928–1930, holograph, and John R. Young to Vesta P. Crawford, April 1931, holograph, both in Church Archives.

Charles L. Walker, contemporary of John R. Young, reveals that in 1876 Solon Foster did preach in St. George, where he reported his visit with young Joseph[11]—again, a thirdhand telling, separated from the incident by nearly a century. There is verification in Joseph Smith III's biography that Solon Foster in his later years did have conversation with young Joseph on the subject of the possible plural marriage of young Joseph's father, the context in which John Young said he gave his witness of the Eliza incident; however, the incident itself is, understandably, not included there.[12]

In her re-creation of the alleged Nauvoo incident, Fawn Brodie dates it in the spring of 1844. We cannot, of course, fault Brodie for not having had access to a diary that had not as yet come to light, but we can now determine that such an episode, if it indeed happened, had to have occurred at least a year earlier. Eliza's Nauvoo diary clearly spells out the period during which she lived with the Smith family, an essential to the story in every version. On 18 August 1842, she moved into either the Homestead or the Mansion House[13] and stayed there until 11 February 1843.[14] LeRoi Snow, in his notes, gives the probable time of the incident as May 1843, but her own journal shows that Eliza was living with other friends by then. However, LeRoi Snow did not have Eliza's journal either.

The journal itself gives not a hint of either a pregnancy (unless "delicate constitution" be construed to mean "delicate condition," a nineteenth-century euphemism for pregnancy) or an altercation with Emma at any time during that six-month stay. One cannot read anything into Eliza's terse note of her departure: "Took board and had my lodging removed to the residence of br. J[onathan] Holmes." The next entry, dated 17 March 1843, shows Eliza ceremonially closing the school she had taught since 12 December 1842, "having the pleasure of the presence of Prest. J. Smith [and] his lady."[15] During the period of Victorian prudery, no woman would have ventured forth unnecessarily, much less have taught school, once her pregnancy

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[11]Charles L. Walker Diary, 17 December 1876, holograph, Church Archives.

[12]Mary Audentia Smith Anderson, ed., *Joseph Smith III and the Restoration* (Independence, Mo.: Herald House, 1952), pp. 360–61.

[13]Eliza R. Snow Journal and Notebook, under date; Ursenbach, ed., "Eliza R. Snow's Nauvoo Journal," p. 397. The date of the move of the Smith family from the Homestead, where they had lived since 1839, to the newly constructed Mansion House across the street is uncertain. There is evidence that Joseph moved his office into the new quarters in November 1842 and that the family was well settled there by September 1843 (Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. [Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1932–1951], 5:183, 5:556, and 6:33). Other evidence suggests the move may have been earlier.

[14]Eliza R. Snow Journal and Notebook, under date; Ursenbach, ed., "Eliza R. Snow's Nauvoo Journal," p. 402.

[15]Ibid., pp. 402–03.

was evident. Certainly the account attributed to Charles Rich does not square with the dates in the journal: either Eliza would have to have been pregnant when she moved in with the Smiths, allowing her to have become "big with child" by the close of her sojourn there so that she could not have taught school, or she would have to have conceived afterward, allowing her to teach school for the few early months but not giving her time to become "big with child" before she left the Smiths'. In any case, the report she kept of her class shows her own perfect attendance during her school, a record she could hardly have maintained had she miscarried during that time.[16] And, as has been noted, her school continued a month after Eliza moved in with Jonathan and Elvira Holmes.

One other account of an altercation between Emma and Eliza must be introduced, mainly because it has as much—or as little—claim to credibility as do the other documents here cited, with the exception, of course, of the Eliza Snow and William Clayton diaries. In an undated entry in her husband's book of patriarchal blessings, Mary Ann Barzee Boice wrote her own witness to some events of the Church's past, along with some accounts she had from other members. Among these she gives one of Aidah Clements, mother of Mary Ann's son-in-law. Aidah, she says, was a member of the first Relief Society in Nauvoo (the listing in the minutes of that society does not include her name, however) and "worked for the Prophets family." Mary Ann tells that Aidah "said he [Joseph Smith] was going from home one day when she saw Emma go up to him and she was in a Passion jirked him by the collar and talked to him about going after other Women." Continuing her report of Aidah's story, Mary Ann writes that "she says once when she was at her work Emma went up stairs pulled Eliza R Snow down stairs by the hair of her head as she was staying there." At the bottom of the page containing the above, Mary Ann wrote, "This is the testimony of Aidah Clements," then crossed it out and wrote after it, "but this I give as a rumer only."[17]

What of the two women themselves, Emma Smith and Eliza Snow? In the view of those who have studied their lives, could such an event have occurred had there been opportunity? Eliza R. Snow had known Emma Smith since Kirtland days; they may even have met as early as 1831 in Hiram, Ohio, four years before Eliza joined the Church, when Joseph and Emma lived there as guests of the

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[16]Eliza R. Snow School Schedule, Nauvoo School Records, Church Archives.
[17]John Boice, Blessing Book, 1884–1885, Church Archives.

Johnsons, and the Snows lived in nearby Mantua. In 1836–1837 Eliza lived twice in the Smith household in Kirtland, the second time as governess for the Smith children. She remained with the Smiths even after she became owner of a two-family dwelling in Kirtland.

Eliza and Emma had much in common. They were the same age. Both were articulate, educated, self-confident, and attractive. By 1842, when Eliza was married to Joseph Smith, it was clear that they also loved the same man. Fawn Brodie goes so far as to say that Emma "apparently . . . trusted Eliza above all other women,"[18] an assumption for which she provides no evidence. The Eliza journal refers to Emma in cordial, though not in intimate terms, not unusual for a reserved New England lady in the 1840s. Three months before the marriage of Eliza to Joseph, Eliza had been chosen Emma's secretary in the newly formed Relief Society; in July they traveled together to Quincy to petition the governor in Joseph's behalf; Eliza served as amanuensis to Emma in her correspondence with Carlin. Because Eliza's own arrangements required her to move, by the end of August 1842, Emma had invited her to live in the Smith home. The invitation was not unusual for the charitable Emma—the 1842 census shows eleven people, besides the Smiths, living on their property, in or about the home. But the spring of 1843 was a trying one for Emma. Her acceptance of plural marriage, as much as she knew of it, was tenuous, verging on rebellion. Eliza, meanwhile, convinced though she was about polygamy, was herself insecure, afraid, and, for most of the time, bereft of family. Unaccustomed to facing conflict, Eliza was more likely to "go into a brown study," silently sulking until the sources of the conflict disappeared, or to assume an attitude of superiority that precluded possibilities of resolution.[19] Emma, under the stress of the time, could have reacted with a physical outburst to a threat as easily as the then less forward Eliza could with her very silence have presented that threat. These responses are all possible; the question remains, did they occur?

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[18]Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, p. 470.

[19]An entry in the Eliza Snow Journal reads: "Sister [*blank in original*] call'd to see me. Her appearance very mainly manifested the perturbation of her mind. How strangely is the human countenance changed when the powers of darkness reign over the empire of the heart! Scarcely, if ever in my life had I come in contact with such forbidding and angry looks; yet I felt as calm as the summer eve, and received her as smilingly as the playful infant; and my heart as sweetly reposed upon the bosom of conscious innocence, as infancy reposes in the arms of paternal tenderness and love. It is better to suffer than do wrong, and it is sometimes better to submit to injustice rather than contend; it is certainly better to wait the retribution of Jehovah than to contend where effort will be unavailable." (Eliza R. Snow Journal and Notebook, 20 July 1843; Ursenbach, ed., "Eliza R. Snow's Nauvoo Journal," pp. 408–409.) Some scholars would suggest that Emma Smith must be the "Sister " of the entry; however, there is no evidence to support the supposition. The entry does, however, suggest Eliza's pride in her own self-control, and her unwillingness to ascribe conflict as being anything less than the "powers of darkness." The visitor so received as Eliza describes it might justifiably resent the patronizing superior attitude reflected here.

The Utah years brought from Eliza Snow little recorded comment about Emma Smith; the continuing Nauvoo years none from Emma about Eliza. Brigham Young, to whom Eliza was then married, publicly condemned Joseph's wife Emma, yet no word of agreement came from the usually compliant Eliza. The same John Young who recounted Solon Foster's talk wrote of his own experience as a boy living for a year in "Uncle Brigham's family." "Every day I met with, and listened to the conversations of Eliza R. Snow, Zina D. Huntington, Emily Partridge, Precilla [Presendia] Buel Kimball, the wives of the Prophet Joseph Smith," and others, women who had known Emma Smith in Nauvoo. "During that year," John Young concluded, "I never heard one of those noble women say an unkind word against Emma Smith."[20]

During the defenses of plural marriage occasioned by the visits to Utah of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints representatives, and later by the federal prosecutions, Eliza in her public discourses never stated that Emma knew of Eliza's marriage to Joseph, though she did say, and that publicly, that Emma did know of his sealings to four women, two of whom were still alive and able to testify, referring apparently to the Partridge sisters, Eliza and Emily.[21] After his mother's death, Joseph Smith III published her deathbed denial of her husband's polygamy. To that statement, Eliza responded, in part, that

> I once dearly loved "Sister Emma," and now, for me to believe that she, once honored woman, should have sunk so low, even in her own estimation, as to deny what she *knew* to be true, seemes [*sic*] a palpable absurdity.[22]

She concluded by blaming Emma's "misguided son" for fastening onto his mother's character "a stigma . . . that can never be erased." But not until the 1880s, and then in the characteristic metaphor with which she sometimes veiled her answers, do extant documents reveal Eliza as acknowledging that Emma knew of Eliza's own marriage to the Prophet. David McKay, then a bishop in Ogden Valley, driving the Presidentess Eliza in his buggy from Huntsville to Eden, took the opportunity to ask her outright, "Did Emma Hale Smith know that you were married to her husband, Joseph Smith?" He recorded her reply: "Just as well as you know that you are sitting by my side in this Buggy." He did not ask, nor did she volunteer, at

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[20]John R. Young to Vesta Crawford, April 1931.
[21]*Woman's Exponent* 8 (1 November 1879): 85.
[22]Ibid.

what point in time Emma might have been told of the marriage. But we must remind ourselves that this document, like so many others we have used, is imperfect, a faded photocopy of a 1916 letter reflecting an elderly man's memory of a conversation that took place more than thirty years earlier.[23]

So there we are. But where are we? Faced with a folk legend, with genuine documents that tell no tales, and dubious ones that contradict themselves and the contemporary accounts, perhaps it is best for us to respond as we must to many paradoxes of our history: consider thoughtfully and then place all the evidence carefully on the shelf, awaiting further documentation, or the Millennium, whichever should come first.

## LICENSING IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Donald Q. Cannon

Even in its infant stages The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints instituted various procedures which would allow its members to be organized and regulated more effectively. One such procedure was the practice of licensing. Church leaders issued licenses to all men holding priesthood offices and also to all missionaries called to preach the gospel.

Licenses provided a means of regulating the conduct of Church members. Only those with a bona fide license could serve in the Church or engage in missionary work. This custom, however, served another important purpose. The license of an elder provided him with appropriate credentials so that Mormons and non-Mormons could rest assured that he represented the Church.

At first, the licenses consisted of a handwritten statement signed by the appropriate Church authority. Joseph Smith Sr.'s earliest license serves as an appropriate example. (See Joseph Smith Sr. license on page 97.)

Later the Church began to use a printed form which included a space for the elder's name, the date, the place, the clerk's name, etc. An example of the early form is the license of Charles C. Rich. (See Charles C. Rich license on page 98.)

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[23]David McKay to Mrs. James Hood, 16 March 1916, photocopy of holograph, Church Archives. David McKay is the father of LDS Church President David O. McKay.