VERMONT HISTORY

The Proceedings of the Vermont Historical Society

FALL 1995

VOL. 63, NO. 4

Abby Hemenway's Road to Rome

By her own account it was in the course of her work as editor of the Vermont Historical Gazetteer *that other influences . . . began leading Hemenway away from the Baptist church and toward Rome.*

By DEBORAH P. CLIFFORD

On Thursday, April 28, 1864, William Henry Hoyt, a former rector of the Episcopal church in St. Albans, by then a convert to Roman Catholicism living in Burlington, made the following entry in his diary:

> Miss Hemenway here today & dined with us & at tea & to pass the night— At 6 o'clock we went up to St. Joseph's School & convent buildings, near the French Church, in the chapel of which Miss Hemenway made a profession of the Catholic Church and the Bishop gave her a conditional baptism. Anne & self standing as sponsors.[1]

Abby Maria Hemenway, the editor of the *Vermont Historical Gazetteer,* was then thirty-five and unmarried. As she tells it, the journey carrying her to this day had been a long one, dating back almost to her childhood in Ludlow. In a poem written less than a year after her Catholic baptism, Hemenway describes how as a young girl she had felt drawn to the story of the Virgin Mary as told in the Gospels and, following the

lead of "Mary-Mother," had eventually found her way into the Catholic church. What this poem does not say is that Hemenway's interest in the Virgin Mary—by no means a usual one for a member of a Baptist church—had inspired her to learn more about Jesus' mother and to write about her. *The Mystical Rose,* a book of fervent religious poetry recounting the life of the Virgin Mary, was published in 1865. In her introduction Hemenway calls it "the work of her untried pen," suggesting that it was an early literary effort, if not the earliest. There is little question that it was well under way long before she became a Catholic.[2]

As Hemenway recalls in the introduction to *The Mystical Rose,* the reading she did for the poem as well as the writing of it gradually but steadily overpowered her Protestant religious sensibility:

> In the quiet of Sabbaths it grew, in the calm before the ringing of bells, in the hush of holy eves. It was hopefully, enjoyedly written; till, threading at length the catacombs of tradition, lost in a labyrinth of beauty, pious allegory, ancient and mystic, luminous legend, lovingly warm with words that burn, shedding odors as incense from a censer, we were overwhelmed.[3]

When Hemenway began writing *The Mystical Rose,* she had supposed herself "almost alone upon the ground," drawn, as she put it, by "the charm of a subject untouched." The Virgin Mary was hardly a popular object of devotion among New England Protestants, who regarded her as symbolic of the idolatrous excesses of the Roman church. Thus the only references to Jesus' mother that Hemenway was likely to have run across as a child in Ludlow were confined to the Bible, specifically, the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke, together with a few passing mentions elsewhere in the New Testament. Yet these brief glimpses of the Virgin were apparently enough to cast their spell.

At first she wrote from the heart, using the gospel stories as her foundation. But later, when she had access to a wider range of books, she read everything she could lay her hands on, from Middle Eastern history and mythology to poetry and the writings of the early church fathers. Somehow she managed to appropriate "every coveted relic or tradition handed down by historian, Christian or pagan, from the archives of Latin Church, Hebrew or Greek." For most of her young adulthood, the writing of *The Mystical Rose* constituted Hemenway's chief literary labor, and this labor would lead her, as she later expressed it, "into the one Sovereign Fold."[4]

Born on a farm in Ludlow in 1828, Abby Hemenway from an early age had shown a literary bent. At fourteen, when she finished district school, she began teaching, with the apparent motive of earning enough money to pay the tuition at Ludlow's Black River Academy. By 1847 she

Abby Maria Hemenway, date unknown. Photograph courtesy of David Hemenway.

was enrolled there, studying principally in the classical department and dreaming of a future literary career. Hemenway remained at Black River until the spring of 1852.

With her formal education completed, Hemenway determined to try her fortune in the West. But several unhappy years of teaching in the newly settled town of St. Clair, Michigan, sent her back to Vermont filled with a heightened esteem for the traditions and culture of her native state. At home in Ludlow she was soon hard at work putting together an anthology of verse by Vermonters past and present for what became her first book, *The Poets and Poetry of Vermont.* Published in 1858, this volume proved a commercial and critical success, inspiring Hemenway to undertake another literary project that might further illuminate the character of her native state.

In the fall of 1859, Hemenway embarked on what was to become her life's work: compiling, editing, and publishing the history of every town in Vermont. By 1863 six volumes of the *Vermont Quarterly Gazetteer* had been published, comprising the histories of Addison, Bennington, Caledonia, and Chittenden Counties. Although several other volumes were ready for the printer, in August 1863 the exigencies of the Civil War called a temporary halt to further publication. It was during this hiatus in her editorial work that Hemenway made her decision to enter the Catholic church.[5]

Apart from her devotion to the Virgin Mary, little is known of Abby Hemenway's early religious life. Her father, Daniel Sheffield Hemenway, was a Methodist, while her mother, Abigail Dana Hemenway, was a Baptist. Hemenway, who enjoyed a particularly close relationship with her mother, had followed her into the Ludlow church, where she was baptized in the spring of 1843. She was fourteen at the time, had finished district school, and would begin teaching later that year. Family tradition tells us that Hemenway remained an active member of the Baptist church until her conversion to Catholicism in 1864.[6]

As a child, Hemenway would have had few opportunities to meet any Catholics. None were recorded living in Ludlow until the building of the railroad in the late 1840s. Nearby Plymouth, however, did contain an Irish settlement, including 122 Catholics, clustered near the local iron foundry.[7] The arrival in February 1848 of workmen, most of them immigrant Irish, to begin constructing the Ludlow branch of the Central Vermont Railroad probably marked Hemenway's first exposure to any significant number of Catholics. She was then a student at Black River Academy and would have noticed the small shantytown that had been built to house the families of the laborers, including a large number of children.[8]

Even if Hemenway was curious about these Irish families, as a committed Baptist she would have been discouraged from befriending them. Nor could she have learned much about their alien faith even if she had wanted to. There was as yet no Catholic church in Ludlow, and mass was said only on the rare occasions when a priest passed through town.

Ludlow was by no means the only town in Vermont to experience an influx of Roman Catholics in those years. Since the 1830s the number of Irish and French Canadian Catholics entering the state had risen markedly. At the time of Hemenway's birth in 1828, there had been somewhat more than 2,000 Catholics in Vermont (most of them concentrated in and north of Burlington); by 1850 the number had risen to 20,000. Elsewhere in New England the growth of the Catholic population had been even more dramatic. In Boston alone the number of immigrants (mostly Irish) pouring onto the city's docks was so great that by mid-century foreign-born residents outnumbered the natives. And in the nation as a whole, Roman Catholics, concentrated mainly in the Northeast, made up the single largest denomination.[9]

Protestant Vermonters, like other native-born New Englanders, felt increasingly threatened by the number of Irish and French Canadians moving into the state. Because more than half were illiterate and most were desperately poor, many of these newcomers were forced into laboring and service jobs, with little chance of bettering themselves. Looking down on these immigrants, with their strange customs and traditions, Vermonters were particularly suspicious of their loyalty to a foreign church that since colonial days had inspired distrust if not outright hostility. Indeed for many Americans, Catholicism was *the* unmitigated evil. As the historian Ralph Gabriel has phrased it, "What the capitalist was to Lenin in 1917 and the Jew to Hitler in 1935, the Catholic was to the American democrat in the middle of the nineteenth century."[10]

Yet while immigration from northern Europe and French Canada had been chiefly responsible for the country's burgeoning Catholic population, the antebellum years had also seen a wave of native-born American converts. According to one estimate, between 1815 and 1866 more than 100,000 Protestant Americans came into the Catholic church. Most of these converts, like Abby Hemenway, could trace their ancestry back to the days of early settlement. Most, too, were solidly middle class, coming from families where the women as well as the men had been well educated. These erstwhile Protestants brought to what was a largely immigrant church an infusion of educated, articulate, native-born Catholics, whose significance was reflected in the number who became priests, nuns, and even bishops. By the end of the nineteenth century, a good many

notable New England families, with names like Ripley, Dana, Hawthorne, and Bancroft, could show at least one Catholic member.[11]

Hemenway had much in common with these converts. If her family was not particularly notable, both parents could at least claim a solid phalanx of Puritan New England forebears. Her own education had been superior for a Vermont woman of her day. At Black River Academy she had studied Latin, Greek, and French, which she later put to use in her work as a poet and historian.

By her own account it was in the course of her work as editor of the *Vermont Historical Gazetteer* that other influences besides the writing of *The Mystical Rose* began leading Hemenway away from the Baptist church and toward Rome. When the first volume of the *Gazetteer* (comprising the town histories of five Vermont counties) was published in 1867, she inscribed a copy to Vermont's Catholic bishop, Louis de Goesbriand, telling him that it was "in prosecution of this work" that she "became acquainted with the Catholics and their faith."[12] Hemenway did not specify what particular aspect of her work as editor of these histories had brought her a greater knowledge of the Catholic faith, but one likely influence was her research on Ethan Allen's daughter, Fanny, an early Vermont convert to Catholicism who later became a nun.

The sketch that appears in the *Gazetteer* is based on an interview Hemenway conducted in the early 1860s with a woman who claimed her mother had visited Fanny Allen in her French Canadian convent. Although Hemenway does not name her source, the woman was almost certainly Julia Smalley, a prominent Catholic convert whom Hemenway later described as her good friend and "the most gifted lady writer in northern Vermont." Smalley was the author of a popular book entitled *The Young Converts*, which tells the story of the three Barlow sisters of Claremont, New Hampshire, all of whom became Catholics in the 1850s. It may well have been Smalley who introduced Hemenway to the close circle of Vermont Catholic converts in Burlington, including William Henry Hoyt.[13]

Whether or not Smalley influenced Hemenway's decision to enter the Catholic church, the life of Fanny Allen was unquestionably crucial, providing as it did a heroic model for her to follow. Ethan Allen's youngest daughter had inherited his rebellious spirit. Not only had she defied the wishes of her mother and stepfather (her mother had remarried following Ethan's death) by joining the Catholic church, but she had gone one step further and entered the Hôtel Dieu, a French convent just outside Montreal. Intrigued by the idea that Ethan Allen's daughter had gone over to Rome and become a nun, Fanny's friends and acquaintances journeyed north to visit her; when she took her final vows, there was standing room only in the church. In the few short years before her death in

Fanny Allen, from a portrait representing her in the habit of a religious hospitaler. Artist and date unknown. From Tenth Biennial Report of the Fanny Allen Hospital, Hôtel Dieu of St. Joseph (1911-1913).

1808, she is said to have been responsible for encouraging a more sympathetic understanding of Catholicism, not only among her Vermont friends but also among the English-speaking patients at the Hôtel Dieu hospital, where she occasionally worked as a nurse.[14]

Some years after her own conversion to Catholicism, Hemenway wrote a play about Fanny Allen that drew on French sources as well as oral tradition. *Fanny Allen, the First American Nun,* was not published until 1878, but a careful reading of this pious drama in five acts opens a window onto Hemenway's own experience as a convert and suggests some of the reasons she left the Baptist for the Catholic church. The play begins with Fanny trying to persuade her mother and stepfather to allow her to attend

a convent school in Montreal. She tells them she wants to learn French, but her real reason for going is to find out if Catholics are indeed as bad as the book she has been reading says they are. Her mother and stepfather agree to let her go on one condition: that she be baptized an Episcopalian. When Fanny objects, insisting that she is no Christian, her mother responds, "You do not know yet what you are." Fanny's next words could well have been spoken by Hemenway herself: "True, true," she readily agrees, "Who does know what they are? I do not know a man or woman whom I think does. I never met a person who appeared to know exactly what they believed. If you find them thinking one way to-day by to-morrow they will have taken another tack."[15] Later in the play, when one of Fanny's fellow pupils in the Montreal convent school suggests that she is "getting to relish Catholicism," Fanny replies: "This much I will say for Catholics: watch them close as you may, you will never detect vacillation or insincerity in their faith." Then with a note of her father's revolutionary fervor, she adds, "I can't say as much for the Yorkers."[16]

That Hemenway herself was impatient with the state of Protestant Christianity in Vermont can also be gleaned from an essay she tucked away in the *Gazetteer* chapter on St. Albans. In it she recalls a visit she made to the cemeteries sited on a hill above the town. Remarking that the names on the gravestones were more familiar and of more interest to her than those on the doorplates of the houses below, she reflects that "the men who dwell in our grave-yards seem not like the present generation." She then proceeds to extol that "noble class of old Congregational fathers of the earlier day in the State: men who did cordially hate the intrusion of the Baptists and the Methodists in the towns where they had planted their churches." To her mind this first generation of Congregational ministers "had a more honest belief in their Calvinism than the men of to-day, and a grand large-heartedness, withal to act out the part of an 'elected' child. . . . They read their own divines, kept the Sabbath-day up to the high Puritan mark—believed implicitly, or almost, the sermons preached from their tall, narrow, box-like pulpits. . . . They stood up grandly and sturdily in their moral worth, and in their patriotism."[17]

Hemenway had seen something of the current condition of the Protestant churches in Vermont on her travels around the state and in her editing of the town histories that crossed her desk in Ludlow. In her own county of Windsor, she had watched membership in the Baptist and other evangelical churches fall and Calvinist beliefs and disciplinary practices erode.[18] She had also spoken to dozens of clergymen throughout the state. No single group proved such staunch supporters of her historical efforts as the clergy. Not only had they readily provided hospitality when she

visited their towns, but as the acknowledged men of learning in many Vermont communities, they also figured prominently among the ranks of her historians.

Some of these clerical historians shared Hemenway's concern about the current condition of Protestant Christianity in Vermont. The Reverend J. H. Woodward, for one, went to considerable lengths to explain why his Congregational church in Westford, like so many others, was "wasting away." He began by describing the years from 1815 to 1832 as "a season of unusual religious interest" in Vermont, crediting a powerful succession of revivals with increasing the number and authority of the churches. Then, according to Woodward, in the mid-1830s a reaction, a period of "unhappy excitements," set in. Prominent among these excitements was the new wave of revivals that swept across Vermont and New York, employing soul-shaking conversion techniques and stressing the individual's ability to take control of his or her spiritual destiny. Then there were such issues as anti-Masonry, abolitionism, gold fever in the West, and, finally, the building of the railroads, all of which, Woodward claimed, had focused people's attention on worldly matters leading to "an absence and dearth of spirit." Writing on the eve of the Civil War, Woodward concluded that "the whole course of events for the last twenty-five years in New England, has been adverse to a state of religious prosperity."[19]

Woodward and Hemenway were not alone in their distress over the spiritual decline they saw around them. Plenty of other New Englanders lamented in particular the growing emphasis evangelical Protestants placed on the value of a felt, subjective religious experience that relied on private judgment with only the Bible for guidance. This had had the effect of freeing parishioners from ministerial authority and led to the chaos of multiplying sects. In her play about Fanny Allen, Hemenway, speaking through her heroine, rather ungrammatically articulates the dilemma facing those bewildered nineteenth-century Americans in search of a true church: "My father believed in God without a bible, when a God with a bible and no additional revelation, is not sufficient to decide amid a multitude of sects, who is right?"[20]

Some New Englanders had welcomed this movement away from dogmatic and theological conformity, declaring that churches and creeds, even the Bible, were obstacles to an intuitive knowledge of God and to those fundamental spiritual laws unbounded by time, space, or circumstance. Whereas orthodox Christians celebrated God's intervention in human history, these liberals sanctioned a redemption whereby individuals were freed from the shackles of history to achieve, as the Boston Unitarian minister Theodore Parker put it, a "clear conscience unsullied by the past."[21]

Other New Englanders, however, deplored the erosion of traditional Protestant orthodoxy and sought instead an alternative that retained traditional Christian theology and continuity with the past and endorsed an organic relationship among men and women in place of divisive individualism. Some found a satisfactory resting place in the high church branch of Episcopalianism. Influenced by the Oxford movement in England, whose leaders sought to link the Anglican church more closely to Catholic tradition, these high church Episcopalians stressed the importance of a visible church with historical continuity and called for a renewed sense of Christian discipline, worship, and holiness.[22] Other dissatisfied Christians had moved directly to the Roman Catholic church, and still others, like William Henry Hoyt, Hemenway's godfather, had passed through the Episcopal church on their way to the Roman.

Hoyt was the son of a wealthy New Hampshire banker and state legislator. Following his graduation from Dartmouth, he entered Andover Seminary in Massachusetts to train for the Congregational ministry. Dissatisfied with the Calvinism he found there, Hoyt joined the Episcopal church and continued his studies for the ministry at General Seminary in New York. Following his ordination in 1836, Hoyt came to Vermont, serving first in Burlington and Middlebury before assuming the rectorship of the Episcopal church in St. Albans.

Although the St. Albans parish flourished under Hoyt's ministry, he was never entirely comfortable with Episcopalianism. An omnivorous reader, he studied the early church fathers, the lives of the saints, and the writings of Oxford movement leaders like John Henry Newman, and thus was drawn ever closer to Catholicism. When Hoyt began introducing Catholic liturgical practices and Gregorian chant into his church services, the Episcopal bishop of Burlington, John Henry Hopkins, became genuinely alarmed. He admonished the St. Albans pastor both privately and in print, all to no avail. On July 24, 1846, Hoyt wrote the bishop resigning his rectorship; that evening he boarded a boat to Montreal, where on the following day he made his profession of the Catholic faith. A month later Hoyt's wife, Anne, also joined the church.[23]

The Hoyts continued to live in St. Albans for another ten years. During this time a number of former parishioners followed them into the church. An attendant at mass one June Sunday in 1854 noted that the communion rail "was filled with Americans, who had been converted to the Catholic faith within the last few years."[24] What influence Hoyt had on Hemenway's decision to join the Catholic church is not known, but that she chose him as her godfather shows that she shared the respect of many other Catholic Vermonters for this man, who is credited with leading a Catholic revival in the state.

The most renowned New England convert to Catholicism was the native Vermonter Orestes Brownson. Born in poverty on a farm in Stockbridge, a village in the northeast corner of Hemenway's own county, Brownson had spent the early part of his adult life moving restlessly from one church and creed to another. Highly gifted intellectually and a voracious reader, even though self-educated he could rival Theodore Parker in his mastery of European theology and philosophy. In the 1830s and early 1840s, Brownson was a recognized spokesman for the transcendentalist movement. Then in 1842 he was converted to Catholicism and quickly became one of its leading apologists. Perhaps Brownson's greatest contribution to the church in the United States was convincing his fellow believers that they could be both good Catholics and good citizens. Many letters to Brownson from other converts tell of the influence his writings had on their decision to enter the church.[25]

There is no way of knowing whether Hemenway had been influenced by Brownson in her decision to become a Catholic, but her later correspondence with him does reveal a long-standing familiarity with his writings.[26] Perhaps she had read this passage from his memoirs written in 1857, which describes so eloquently the enormous gulf that divided Protestants from Catholics:

> To pass from one Protestant sect to another is a small affair, and is little more than going from one apartment to another in the same house. We remain still in the same world, in the same general order of thought, and in the midst of the same friends and associates. We do not go from the known to the unknown; we are still within soundings, and may either return, if we choose, to the sect we have left, or press on to another, without serious loss of reputation, or any gross disturbance of our domestic and social relations. But to pass from Protestantism to Catholicity is a very different thing. We break with the whole world in which we have hitherto lived; we enter into what is to us an untried region, and we fear the discoveries we may make there, when it is too late to draw back. To the Protestant mind this old Catholic Church is veiled in mystery. . . . We enter it, and leave no bridge over which we may return. It is a committal for life, for eternity.[27]

In a poem describing her own conversion, Hemenway echoes Brownson's sentiments. "Our First Annunciation Day" pinpoints the moment she made the final break with her past as a Protestant and crossed over into a new and unfamiliar world. In Hemenway's case this moment came, appropriately enough, on the feast day commemorating the angel Gabriel's announcement to the Virgin Mary that she was to become the mother of God. The date was March 25, 1864, and the place, quite naturally, was a Catholic church, probably one of the two then in Burlington.

The poem depicts Hemenway's struggle in reaching her final decision

to become a Catholic, dwelling particularly on the powerful temptation she endured to resist the forces pulling her into the church. In what she saw as a battle for her soul between the Virgin Mary and the devil, she describes her inability to cross the threshold into the church:

> Fain would enter, fain would lose the soul's pollution;
> Could not enter! Could not enter!
> Dare not venture!

Then on the Feast of the Annunciation, "the wiles of sense," as Hemenway calls them, prevail; "the world the flesh and Satan" lose their grip on her. "The Virgin's arm is stronger," she explains, particularly on this, her feast day. Mary beats back the devil, and Hemenway falls on her knees; the struggle is behind her.[28]

Where poetic imagery leaves off in this recounting of Hemenway's conversion to Catholicism matters little. The real struggle had likely been going on in her mind and heart for some time. For most American converts, the process was both lengthy and private, marked by extensive self-examination and often painful deliberation over certain articles of faith. Furthermore, as seems likely in Hemenway's case, the decision to become a Catholic was frequently made without consulting with other church members. Often converts did not even seek out a priest until after they had made the decision to enter the church.[29]

It is not hard to understand the appeal of Catholicism for a woman like Hemenway. It satisfied her longing for moral certitude, rooting her in an authoritative church whose history she could trace back to Jesus himself, a church grounded on a firm doctrinal and theological base. The Catholic church also offered what one historian has described as "a sanctified deviance" from nineteenth-century American Protestant culture, giving Hemenway an excuse to turn her back on her Baptist heritage and embrace Catholicism, whose churches, cluttered as they were with statues, holy pictures, and stained-glass windows, seemed to her true places of worship. Their liturgies, too, contained an ancient and mysterious richness. The medieval chants, the colorful vestments, the incense, the Latin mass, and above all the sense of history and tradition all spoke to Hemenway's ardent and romantic nature.[30]

In Catholicism, with its call for submission to a nurturing mother church, Hemenway had found not only an authoritative alternative to the uncertainty and confusion of mid-nineteenth-century Protestantism but also a replacement for her own earthly mother. Abigail Dana Hemenway, by that time frail and sickly, would live for only a few more years (she died in 1866). For her eldest daughter, the church as "Holy Mother" may have been this beloved maternal figure in more enduring form.[31]

There was a very different reason as well for her attraction to Catholicism. Well-educated and ambitious, Hemenway was one of a growing number of American women who had chosen not to marry but to pursue instead "a noble work in a good cause." These single women believed they were following a sanctified path, comparing themselves to celibate nuns in a Catholic convent. Elizabeth Blackwell, for one, had spoken of "tak[ing] the veil" when she began her career in medicine. Some Protestants were even heard to speak enviously of the Catholic church for the support it gave to such women. As Hemenway had learned from Fanny Allen and other Catholic women, Catholicism also offered her a wider range of identities than the domestic feminine ideal lauded from most Protestant pulpits. Hemenway could model herself after ardent female mystics whose devotion to God came before their devotion to men. She could eschew marriage with impunity since the Catholic church regarded celibacy as a higher calling than matrimony and praised virginity as superior to maternity.[32]

That Hemenway herself shared such a reverence for the celibate life can be seen in her religious poetry. For example, in *The Mystical Rose,* she compares the chaste love between Mary and Joseph to that which the angels have for one another, "a love more deep than the love of the flesh."[33] The poem makes clear that Mary, in taking a vow of celibacy and renouncing sex, has chosen a higher calling. Whether Hemenway herself ever took such a vow is not known. Yet by embracing the single life so prized by the Catholic church, she, like other ambitious women of her day, found a justification for renouncing marriage. There was important work to be done that would be difficult to do unless she remained single.

Still, even for an independent woman like Hemenway, choosing to join the Catholic church was fraught with grave consequences. One St. Albans convert to Catholicism described being "harassed to death by people talking against the Church and against me." She claimed the whole town had given her up "as one *blinded* by *errors*" and described the Baptists in particular as harboring a bitter hatred of Catholics and "*very* strange ideas concerning them."[34]

A similar reaction in Ludlow probably greeted the news that Hemenway had defected to the Catholic church. Hemenway's friends and neighbors were unlikely to have had more than a superficial knowledge of Catholicism, and that gleaned mostly from local newspapers. Curiosity at best and at worst hostility were the predictable responses. A deacon of the Baptist church of which Hemenway had been a member for most of her life is said to have told her mother that he would rather lose his best yoke of oxen than her daughter from the fold, as she was "so full of zeal and

helpfulness."[35] When Hemenway's official ties with the Baptist church were severed on September 2, 1865, the church record book reported that a conversation Deacon Howe and Deacon Batchelder held with "Sister Abby Hemenway" gave "abundant evidence that she has withdrawn from the church by joining the Roman Catholic Church." Hemenway was then "excluded" from the Ludlow church. Had she joined another Protestant sect, she would simply have been dismissed.[36]

According to one source, Hemenway shrank from wounding her family by even mentioning her desire to become a Catholic, but finally she had "sought her mother's advice and permission, and the latter, seeing how deeply sincere she was, reluctantly consented." This account also describes the rest of the family as politely resigned to Hemenway's defection from Protestantism, claiming that no rift of any sort occurred. By contrast, another source of family lore speaks of Hemenway's reputation as a "black sheep," tracing this to her decision to become a Catholic and her failure to marry.[37]

Perhaps each version of the Hemenway family's response contains a piece of the truth. Given Abigail Dana Hemenway's intimacy with her eldest daughter, she was the most likely member of the household to plead for tolerance and acceptance of Hemenway's newfound religion. However much the other Hemenways may have disapproved, as long as Abby Hemenway's mother was alive that kindly woman would have done her best to keep the peace. The timing of Hemenway's decision to enter the Roman Catholic church may also have played a part in muting the initial reaction of family and friends. In the spring of 1864 most Vermonters were too absorbed by the horrors taking place on distant battlefields and too harassed by the exigencies of life on the homefront to have either thought or concern for much else.

Having obtained her mother's permission to join the Catholic church, Hemenway would then have sought out a member of the Catholic clergy to instruct her in church doctrine. Whether Bishop de Goesbriand himself or another priest took on this task is not known, but these instructions almost certainly took place in Burlington. By the mid-1860s Hemenway considered that town her second home, her fondness having developed while she was working there on the Burlington chapter of the *Gazetteer*.[38]

So it was that Abby Hemenway was baptized in late April 1864, taking the baptismal name of Marie Josephine. She received the sacrament in St. Joseph's Chapel, a tiny structure adjacent to St. Joseph's French church on North Prospect Street, one of two Catholic parishes in the city of Burlington. Measuring only 20 feet by 10, the chapel contained three minuscule altars as well as a profusion of statues and holy pictures. In this

same cozy sanctuary, so different from the stark meetinghouses of her childhood, Hemenway on the following morning attended her first mass and received her first Holy Communion. This was followed by a celebratory breakfast at the home of her sponsors, William and Anne Hoyt.[39]

Despite this radical change in Abby Hemenway's life, her conversion to Catholicism had remarkably little effect on her editing of the *Gazetteer.* She continued to publish town histories by Protestant historians, many of whom were clergymen. When in 1874 Orestes Brownson chided her for making her history "a channel for Protestant churches," she reminded him that Catholics, too, have the privilege of free speech. She simply printed "what they [her historians] say of themselves, [this] being allowed in our Gaz[etteer] as the Constitution of our Country allows free scope for all religions—or for the history of all."[40]

Abby Hemenway never regretted her decision to enter the Roman Catholic church. She remained a devout and loyal member until her death in 1890, her piety and devotion strengthening with the years. It seems likely that only a deep commitment to her work as editor of the *Vermont Historical Gazetteer* precluded her entering a religious order. But from the day of her baptism onwards she wore nunlike attire: an austere dark dress, in the folds of which could be glimpsed a string of rosary beads.[41]

Notes

The author would like to thank David Hemenway for the photo of Abby Hemenway, Tom Bassett for sharing his expertise on Vermont religion, the Ludlow Baptist Church for permission to quote from their records, and the University of Notre Dame Archives for permission to quote from the Orestes Brownson papers.

[1] Diary of William Henry Hoyt, 28 April 1864, Special Collections, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont.

[2] In "Our First Annunciation Day," Hemenway recalls that her devotion to Mary went back "almost to her very childhood." See *Ave Maria: A Catholic Journal* 1, 1 (1 May 1865): 4. Marion Hemenway says Abby began work on *The Mystical Rose* in the early 1850s. See Marion Hemenway, "Abby Maria Hemenway," 10, manuscript collection, Vermont Historical Society, Montpelier. Sections of the poem were published in the second edition of Abby Hemenway, *Poets and Poetry of Vermont* (Boston: Brown, Taggard & Chase, 1860), 452–458.

[3] Abby Hemenway, *The Mystical Rose: or, Mary of Nazareth* (New York: D. Appleton, 1865), vii–viii.

[4] Ibid.; Abby Hemenway, *Rosa Immaculata, or the Tower of Ivory in the House of Anna and Joachim* (New York: P. O'Shea, 1867), viii. In the preface to *Mystical Rose,* Hemenway also referred to some "olden pictures" that influenced her. A likely source for this is the first edition of the *Vermont Bible* published in Windsor in 1812. It contained seven engravings by the Vermont artist Isaac Eddy showing the Holy Family, the apostles, and disciples. See Margaret T. Smalley, "Notes on Early Vermont Artists," *Vermont History* 11 (September 1943): 146.

[5] Sources for the life of Abby Hemenway include Frances H. Babb, "Abby Maria Hemenway: Anthologist and Poet" (master's thesis, University of Maine, 1939), and Wilbur K. Jordan, "Abby Maria Hemenway," in *Notable American Women,* vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 178–179.

[6] Abby Hemenway was baptized April 2, 1843. She is listed as Abigail, not Abby Maria. See book 1 of the records of the Ludlow Baptist Church. These records also show that she officially withdrew, as Abby Maria, from the Ludlow Baptist Church on September 2, 1865. According to the historian Lee Chambers-Schiller, men and women were expected to undergo a conversion experience before leaving home for the last time. See Lee Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty a Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780–1840* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 87. For

Hemenway's reputation as an active member of the Baptist church, see Marion Hemenway, "Abby Maria Hemenway," 11.

[7] "Statement of the [Catholic] Mission in the southern part of Vermont & of a part of New Hampshire under the Care of Reverend John B. Daly," in Bishop Benedict Fenwick's Journal, 17 December 1840, Archives of the Archdiocese of Boston, 240. No Catholics are listed for Ludlow in this statement.

[8] Joseph Harris, in his *History of Ludlow* (Charlestown, N.H., 1849), 118, notes that "a great many men were employed in building the railroad" and that most of them were "Irish direct from the old country." It can be presumed that most of these were Catholic. See Tyler Adbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 7.

[9] Jay Dolan, *Catholic Revivalism: The American Experience, 1830–1900* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 5. According to Dolan, there were no Catholic churches in Vermont in 1830. Tom Bassett has informed me that the first missionary priest arrived that year.

[10] Randolph A. Roth, *The Democratic Dilemma: Religion, Reform and the Social Order in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont, 1791–1850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 273–275; Ralph Henry Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought* (New York: Ronald Press, 1940), 52.

[11] Christine M. Bochen, *The Journey to Rome: Conversion Literature by Nineteenth-Century American Catholics* (New York: Garland, 1988), 58. Bochen tells us that the largest number of these converts came from high church Episcopalianism. According to Eleanor Simpson, "probably every Catholic parish in the rural areas could speak of non-Catholics, one or more, who had come into the Church." See Eleanor Simpson, "The Conservative Heresy: Yankees and the Reaction in Favor of Roman Catholics" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1974), 12–13.

[12] See Abby Hemenway's inscription in Bishop Louis de Goesbriand's copy of the *Vermont Historical Gazetteer,* vol. 1, in his personal library in the Vermont Diocesan Archives in Burlington.

[13] Babb, "Abby Maria Hemenway," 42; *Vermont Historical Gazetteer,* vol. 1, 567; Julia C. Smalley, *The Young Converts* (Claremont, N.H., 1868).

[14] Laurita Gibson, *Some Anglo-American Converts to Catholicism Prior to 1829* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1943), 185–186. Fanny was only five years old when her father died. Her mother, Ethan's second wife, then married Dr. Jabez Penniman. Some accounts of Fanny Allen credit her with bringing numerous converts into the church, including American patients at the Hôtel Dieu. Daniel Barber, the Episcopal minister who baptized her before she went off to school in Montreal, came into the church in 1816 through Fanny Allen's influence. He was followed by his wife, two children, his sister, and all her family. See Simpson, "The Conservative Heresy," 104.

[15] Abby Hemenway, *Fanny Allen, the First American Nun* (Boston: Thomas B. Noonan, [1878]) 1.2: 6. Hemenway's French source for the play was *Mémoires particuliers pour servir à l'histoire de l'église de l'Amérique du nord,* vol. 3, pt. 2 (Paris, 1854), 294–303. Hemenway refers her readers to this account in a note accompanying the sketch of Allen in the *Gazetteer.* She also tells the story of Fanny Allen in a column she wrote for the Catholic magazine *Ave Maria* for a few months in 1865 and 1866. This account, intended for Catholic children, dwells more on a vision of St. Joseph that Fanny had as a child but also describes her conversion. See *Ave Maria* 2, 19 (12 May 1866): 303–304; 2, 26 (30 June 1866): 415–416; 2, 27 (7 July 1866): 429–430; 2, 28 (14 July 1866): 445–447.

[16] Hemenway, *Fanny Allen* 2.1: 12. Fanny's quip about Yorkers refers to the land and jurisdictional claims of New York in what is now Vermont.

[17] Abby Hemenway, "An Hour in the St. Albans Cemeteries," *Vermont Historical Gazetteer,* vol. 2, 365.

[18] Roth, *Democratic Dilemma,* 279.

[19] *Vermont Historical Gazetteer,* vol. 1, 895–896. For other references in the *Gazetteer* to division and dissension in the Protestant churches, see "Joseph Hoag's Vision," vol. 1, 740; the history of Stowe by M. N. Wilkins, vol. 2, 713–714; the history of Fletcher by Ben[jamin] A. Kinsley, vol. 2, 208–211.

[20] Simpson, "The Conservative Heresy," 25; Hemenway, *Fanny Allen,* 14.

[21] Quoted in Simpson, "The Conservative Heresy," 27.

[22] Ibid., 49; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 622.

[23] Louis de Goesbriand, *Catholic Memories of Vermont and New Hampshire* (Burlington: Louis de Goesbriand, 1886); Simpson, "The Conservative Heresy," 75; diary of William Henry Hoyt, University of Vermont.

[24] Smalley, *Young Converts,* 38–39; de Goesbriand, *Catholic Memories,* 131–133; Simpson, "The Conservative Heresy," 76.

[25] Hugh Marshall, *Orestes Brownson and the American Republic* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1971), 290–291.

[26] A half dozen letters from Hemenway to Orestes Brownson dating from the mid-1870s survive. In one of these she admits to having been critical of his "former writings," which sought "to compromise or Americanize" the Catholic church. Abby Maria Hemenway to Orestes A. Brownson, 23 December 1874, Orestes A. Brownson Papers (CBRO), University of Notre Dame Archives.

[27] Quoted from Brownson's *Convert* in Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 337–338.

[28] Hemenway, "The First Annunciation Day."

[29] Bochen, *Journey to Rome*, 66–68. For descriptions of the conversion process, see also Franchot, *Roads to Rome*.

[30] Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, 280; for a discussion of Catholicism's romantic appeal for nineteenth-century Americans, see in particular chapter 10. Smalley's *Young Converts* describes the appeal of Catholicism for a Vermont contemporary of Hemenway's: "When I glance at the Protestant world I cannot find one thing to make their religion beautiful. They have parted with those pure and lovely doctrines which the Catholic holds most sacred: those forms which render the services of our Holy Religion so sublime, so tenderly beautiful, and have taken in their stead the cold formalities of a *protesting* creed" (p. 52).

[31] For the image of the Catholic church as "Holy Mother," see T. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 197.

[32] Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty a Better Husband*, 21, 24. In *The Young Converts*, Debby Barlow describes her entry into the church as an act of defiant independence that puts the law of God above the law of parents. See Smalley, *Young Converts*, 14.

[33] Hemenway, *Mystical Rose*, 51.

[34] Smalley, *Young Converts*, 41, 45.

[35] Marion Hemenway, "Abby Maria Hemenway," 10–11.

[36] Book 1 of the records of the Ludlow Baptist Church.

[37] Babb, "Abby Maria Hemenway," 43. David Hemenway, a descendant of Hemenway's brother Charles, is the source for the family's assessment of Abby as a "black sheep."

[38] In one of her columns written for the Catholic periodical *Ave Maria* 2, 7 (17 February 1866): 111, Abby calls Burlington, "that dearest old lake town . . . my other home."

[39] Diary of William Henry Hoyt, 29 April 1864. No record survives indicating why Hemenway chose to be baptized in a French church. Was she perhaps following in Fanny Allen's footsteps? For a description of the chapel, see Hemenway's column in *Ave Maria* 2, 12 (24 March 1866): 191.

[40] Abby Maria Hemenway to Orestes A. Brownson, 15 May 1874, Orestes A. Brownson Papers (CBRO), University of Notre Dame Archives.

[41] Babb, "Abby Maria Hemenway," 44.