Editor's Notebook: Being Toddy

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Being Toddy

Sarah Wiggins

I cannot stop thinking about Hilda M. Todd. I first encountered her last summer when I brought my students to the BSU archives. Sitting on the table was a scrapbook produced by Todd that covered the years 1909 to 1917. This scrapbook was not the usual type with photos, newspaper clippings, and dance cards. It was filled with beautifully crafted illustrations indicative of the time period. These illustrations were arranged by Todd to tell her story, as well as for her own edification and amusement. The scrapbook functions twofold as an illustrated storybook and a woman’s personal journal. While I am not one to turn down a good dance card, nothing quite compares to Hilda Todd’s scrapbook. Since spending time with it, I have contemplated just what it is that makes the book so special. In the end, I think that her artwork, writing, humor, and honesty produced something that still feels alive over 100 years later.

Hilda Todd attended Bridgewater State Normal School from 1903 until 1905. After leaving Bridgewater, she maintained a long teaching career, including years at Brockton High School. When opening up the scrapbook, we find her situated in Torrington, Connecticut, in the early stages of her teaching career and living in a boarding house with a cast of characters that she vividly illustrates. Todd introduces an insurance salesman, a lawyer, and her principal, who was “constitutionally cursed with fly-away, untidy hair,” and thus “spoiled her DISPOSITION.” She calls herself “Toddy” and, in a third-person narrative format, promises the reader that more will be revealed about her. In fact, a few more pages in, she announces: “THIS BOOK, as may be perceived by the Discerning, is somewhat devoted to the MEN. This Book has shocked a great many people. GET READY.” Who can walk away from that invitation?

Toddy does not disappoint. She goes into detail about her romantic interests. One that stands out is a courtship with a curate. From the outset, a tension between the two parties exists. Her illustration of them sitting together on a bench shows different personalities that may not be suited for each other (Image 1). Toddy reveals that the curate finds her love of producing illustrative art inappropriate in certain circumstances and unladylike in general. The tipping point comes when Toddy draws an unflattering picture of the curate and “To make matters worse, it looked just like him.” She admits that she “has yet to meet a man who can stand seeing himself as Toddy makes him look in her
sketches,” and faces the consequences of the curate distancing himself from her (Image 2). With humor, she added, “However he bought a higher collar, and some shoulder braces. All things work together for grace,” and titled the accompanying drawing, “See the Improvement.” By the next page she drew another woman with a dour face who would win the curate’s affections.

Throughout the book we see the story of an independent and creative woman who was unlucky in love at this stage in her life. She positions herself often on the sidelines observing other couples and losing potential lovers to rivals. One can speculate that her “artistic” personality may not have been considered suitable for marriage by some men. Did Toddy’s ability to produce art give her a certain power that the curate felt he could not control? Her vivacious spirit may have been too much for the starched churchman. Though he did try. One set of illustrations tells the story of the curate and crucifer (another boarding house resident) offering Toddy books such as Pilgrim’s Progress, and Lives of the Saints. The result was a stack of improving books left neglected on the floor while she instead delved into Elinor Glyn’s controversial romance novel, Three Weeks (Image 3). Out of curiosity, I, too, decided to give Three Weeks a read and bypassed Lives of the Saints. I admit that I am on “Team Toddy.”

Hilda Todd embodied more than a young woman’s romantic interests. She was also a woman forging a career. Her commentary focuses on the anxieties of teaching that anyone who has conducted a classroom can understand. She captures the hurried attempts and panic to make it to school on time and get everything ready in her room, from preparing the chalkboard to filling the inkwells. A personal favorite is an illustration of a dancing woman coupled with the adage: “‘Look not on the wine when it is red’ – on Monday, when you’ve got to teach on Tuesday!” A sentiment upon which I believe that we can all agree.

Serious issues relating to work and marriage also arose in the book. It was difficult to decipher, but it appears that Todd was consoling a female colleague who endured unwanted advances from a male coworker. She also listened to a woman lament about her marital difficulties and explain how she and her husband were not an ideal match and that he “Crushed her Soul.”

In fact, many of life’s difficulties can be found in Toddy’s work. The final pages detailed a trying day that started on a cold morning with frozen pipes, a bundled-up walk to school not knowing that school was canceled due to the weather, and thoughts of “Why should any sane person live in New England?” She sits in the freezing cold and waits for the late running East Bridgewater trolley; she comes home to care for her parents; and then opens a letter revealing, “… that the ‘Only Man You Ever Loved’ has bestowed Himself on ANOTHER!” The next page shows Toddy going to bed with a ham dangling above her head that her mother repeatedly asked her to hang. “I hope this Ham drops on me and kills me Dead!” That was the last page of her scrapbook and “The End of That PERFECT DAY.” Though it may be an odd image with which to end a substantial creative project, it is in many ways symbolic of the dutiful daughter whose attempts to balance work, caretaking, and relationships sometimes fail.

Why does Hilda Todd continue to haunt my thoughts? Maybe the richness of her artwork made me feel that I knew her. Part of me wished that I could be her friend. And that is why this scrapbook feels alive in my hands. Toddy takes us into her personal life and shows us the humor, hope, fear, frustration, and heartache that we all endure, regardless of who we are or in what age we live. It is not a fairy tale with a “happily ever after” message. It is day-to-day reality that we recognize.

Now when I look out upon my classrooms filled with students who are future teachers carrying on the BSU tradition, I can see a direct line to Hilda Todd. I am grateful that the BSU archives hold this piece in their collection. The scrapbook will soon be digitized, allowing greater access to the public. If you are ever on campus and/or having a trying day, I encourage a trip to the archives to pay Hilda Todd a visit so that you can see her full body of work. I guarantee that you will not be able to walk away either. GET READY.

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