

Allowed Irregularities: Women Preachers in the Early 19th-Century Maritimes

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[See table of contents](#)

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Allowed Irregularities: Women Preachers in the Early 19th-Century Maritimes

WHEN BRITISH AMERICA'S FIRST NOVELIST published *Tonnewonte, or the Adopted Son of America* (1825), one of the "scenes from REAL LIFE" that Fredericton's Julia Beckwith Hart chose for depiction was a religious meeting conducted by an itinerant Quakeress:

The deepest silence reigned in the apartment, when the female preacher arose, and delivered a sensible discourse, strictly scriptural. By degrees, warmed with the importance of the subject, she kindled into enthusiasm. The hearts of her audience were affected, their consciences awakened, and many retired with a resolution to amend their future lives, and endeavour to make their peace with Heaven.¹

Commercial considerations led Hart to set her tale in New York rather than New Brunswick, but the figure of the female preacher was one with which colonists of the 1820s were becoming familiar. She was less true-to-life in representing "Hannah Reeves" as an elderly exemplar of a famously earnest sect delivering a "sensible discourse, strictly scriptural". In Hart's day scenes of preaching by women were often ones of spectacle, sensation and controversy.

This study draws on the experience of four women whose preaching labours in the Maritime colonies overlapped in the early 19th century, the point when Protestants were most open to the experiment. Of the preachers as individuals it offers only bare biographical details. Even so, the little group can seem to resist generalization, for it includes married and single, itinerant and settled, a woman of means and a domestic servant. We follow the ministry of two only briefly, in early womanhood; the others laboured for decades. From two preachers there is hardly an authentic word surviving, but another blazed before the world in a lengthy autobiography. Yet these often spare, often contrasting stories, when read together and supplemented by scenes from the experience of other Maritime women, offer instruction. Situating preachers and their hearers within particular Protestant traditions refines understanding of the topography

1 [Julia Beckwith Hart], *Tonnewonte, or the Adopted Son of America* (Watertown, N.Y., 1825) [Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions (CIHM) 44190], pp. 60-70. The research in this study draws on sources volunteered by fellow labourers over many years, particularly Beryl Biefer (on Mary Bond), Rusty Bittermann and Bruce Elliott (Martha Jago), Allen Robertson (Susannah McCurdy) and Patricia Townsend (ad infinitum). It originated as a George Rawlyk Memorial Lecture in the Acadia Centre for Baptist and Anabaptist Studies. Readers acquainted personally with G.A. Rawlyk (1935-95) will recognize how apt was such a subject by way of memorial.

of colonial religion at large. In organized religion often the male/female division intersects with perceptions of order and disorder, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, formalism and sectarianism. Colonists willing to attend female preaching included those marginalized by mainstream religion, in the case of the Maritimes by poverty, remoteness of location and colour. Equally, however, receptivity to these women was not confined to the poor and neglected. Even the necessity of viewing their labours mostly through the eyes of detractors yields advantage. In the controversy over preaching, some protagonists found that consideration of the role of females in the church led on to the question of women's place generally.

The first half of this study makes an extended attempt to locate the preachers and their work within a number of contexts, varying in focus from one girl's persistent call to preach to the broad religious concerns of an era. The impulse that some women felt to become spiritual guides, of which preaching was the most contested example, and the willingness of many Protestants to attend them, was one facet of a half-century of intense religious experimentation in North America that extended from the 1780s to the 1830s. In particular, this study shows how the women who preached in the early 19th-century Maritimes were direct products of the English Wesleyan or New England Newlight traditions. The study also examines reactions to the preachers. Articulate observers, generally male and generally hostile, were transfixed by the spectacle of females pushing forward into the public sphere. For such critics, far more was at stake than a right understanding of the Bible: either such women must be bad as preachers or they must be bad as women, probably both. By close attention to signs – the way they dressed, where they stood in the preaching room, how they gestured, what was worn on the head, coherence in discourse, their domestic situation – commentators built a case, pro or con. The study concludes by taking an 1850s debate on “women's sphere in religion” as a context for speculating on declining popular acceptance of female preaching.

This study uncovers no *tradition* of female preaching in Maritime Protestantism, but the findings suggest that female preaching was not uncommon. As such, it parallels investigations of England, Upper Canada and the United States in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.² In light of this and other evidence one can say that assertions of religious leadership by women have not been uncommon in the English-speaking world at any point since the 17th century. The Reformation had abolished autonomous communities of religious women but it also democratized pursuit of salvation, emphasizing the individual's role in spiritual preparation. Protestants

2 Deborah Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters: Female Preaching and Popular Religion in Industrial England* (Princeton, 1985); Elizabeth Muir, *Petticoats in the Pulpit: The Story of Early Nineteenth-Century Methodist Women Preachers in Upper Canada* (Toronto, 1991); Catherine Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998). Also of particular value are Earl Brown, *Women of Mr. Wesley's Methodism* (Lewiston, N.Y., 1983), Leonard Sweet, *Minister's Wife: Her Role in Nineteenth-Century American Evangelicalism* (Philadelphia, 1983), chapter 5 and Louis Billington, ““Female Laborers in the Church’: Women Preachers in the Northeastern United States, 1790-1840”, *Journal of American Studies*, 19 (1985), p. 369. Brekus's benchmark expansion of Billington's work, drawing on the experience of a wide spectrum of non-Quaker preachers collected from obscure printed sources, is a triumph of sedulous research and well-considered analysis. Despite the breadth of its title, it does not include “Canadian” colonies.

understood grace as derived not through priestly intercession or formulas of human tradition but by faith alone. God's salvific scheme was accessible personally. In theory these insights empowered all penitents equally. In practice reformers resisted their anti-clerical implications, retaining intolerant religious establishments and restricting direction of public worship to ordained males. Only with the collapse of Protestant consensus in 17th-century England and the surge of religious speculation accompanying resistance to the Stuarts did assertions of spiritual leadership by women become quite evident in writings of individual women and their critics and in the practice of radical sects, notably Quakers.³

The evangelical revival of the 18th century, associated in Britain with the work of George Whitefield and John Wesley and in America with the Great Awakening, invigorated this trend, especially in England. Samuel Johnson's dismissive analogy of females preaching and dogs walking on hind legs reacted against a perception that women as public religious guides were gaining acceptance.⁴ By the 1770s exhorters, even preachers, found an initially reluctant champion in John Wesley, the presiding influence in the largest Methodist party, whose mother had been a religious teacher of local eminence. In the well-publicized pantheon of Wesleyan saints, Susannah Annesley Wesley (1669-1742) joined itinerants Sarah Crosby (1729-1804) and Mary Bosanquet Fletcher (1739-1816) as the best-remembered among many women who preached.⁵ Concurrently, the evangelical awakening brought trans-Atlantic renown to three women who, while not preachers, demonstrated that females might be influential religious leaders: Selena Hastings (1707-91), the dowager Countess of Huntingdon and organizer of a party of Calvinistic Methodists on the fringe of Anglicanism; Hannah More (1745-1833), saluted as a "bishop in petticoats" for the wide influence of her moralistic tract-writing and fiction of social and political concern; and the millenarian visionary Joanna Southcott (1750-1814).⁶

In 18th-century America there was no authorization of women preaching comparable to Wesley's in England. Few came out as preachers, with only two controversial sect leaders becoming known widely.⁷ Nova Scotia's Henry Alline was one of many Newlights whose ministry inspired young men, but not women, to turn

3 Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley, 1992). Mack's study reflects the fact that, in 17th-century usage, preaching might refer to a range of spiritual utterances, including communication of impulses and visions, especially among Quakers. The term was not confined to expounding a biblical text, as it would be later.

4 "Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprized a find it done at all" (1763): James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, Christopher Hibbert, ed. (London, 1979), p. 116.

5 Overviews are provided in Christine Krueger, *Reader's Repentance: Women Preachers, Women Writers, and Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse* (Chicago, 1992), chapters 1-3 and Muir, *Petticoats in the Pulpit*, chapter 2.

6 Michael Watts, *Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 400-1, 447-8; Krueger, *Reader's Repentance*, chapter 6; John Harrison, *Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850* (London, 1979), chapter 5.

7 Brekus finds perhaps a dozen 18th-century female "public evangelists" who did more than exhort in their local church: *Strangers & Pilgrims*, p. 52. To this number would be added the singular cases of Jemima Wilkinson (1752-1819) of Rhode Island, the sect leader who claimed to be neither male nor female but a Public Universal Friend, and of the English immigrant Ann Lee (1736-84), ruler of the

preacher. While leaders of the Great Awakening did not embrace, and often opposed, preaching by women, the remarkable Methodist/Newlight success in redefining conversion in terms of a personal “event” – dramatic, instantaneous reception of the Holy Spirit – weakened the authority of all church hierarchy and tradition. Once penitents became attuned to immediate communications of the Spirit, it was a natural step to feel impelled to rise in the meeting and share their Christian experience and even to heed an inner call to come out as a preacher. “Whatever may be said against a female speaking, or praying in public, I care not”, vaunted the Calais exhorter Fanny Butterfield Newell (1793-1824), “for when I feel confident, that the Lord calls me to speak, I dare not refuse”. Boston’s Charles Chauncy captured perfectly the novel empowerment of those who voiced interior illuminations: “Sometimes they are *Children, Boys and Girls*, sometimes *Women*; but most commonly *raw, illiterate, weak and conceited young Men, or Lads*”. If Newlights accepted males lacking college degrees or ordination as qualified to preach by immediate call from God, then how could they foreclose the privilege to females professing similar authorization?⁸

A uniquely-documented instance of how sensitivity to spiritual impulses might lead a serious girl to hear a call to preach is that of Mary Coy (1771-1859) of Gage, a New England planter township in the central St. John River Valley. Even before her religious new birth Coy heard spiritual “whisper[s]”. Following conversion, an interior babel of contesting divine and satanic impressions absorbed much of her waking hours and invaded dreams. As was usual with converts, the teenaged Coy seemed to read the Scriptures with new eyes, assisted by bibliomancy, the practice of letting her Bible fall open “promiscuously”. With God “directing and enlightening my mind”, she made “discoveries . . . out of my power to write”, amounting to a comprehensive theory of “past, present, and future events – religious and political” to make sense of a world turned upside down by civil and intellectual revolutions in America and France. Twice she recorded expectation of the millennium. All of these impressions occurred to an adolescent of “very timid make” who kept her religious development nearly secret, who lived so far from the Congregationalist meeting that she could attend seldom and whose attempt to tell her Christian experience to the “grave, aged men” of the church broke down in bashful confusion.⁹ This was the young woman who, in 1788 at age 16, was “astonished beyond measure” by a sudden,

“shaking” Quakers. Their notoriety must have highlighted the issue of female spiritual leadership, but their radical heterodoxy would more probably have discouraged than encouraged the notion that women were meant to preach.

8 Fanny [Butterfield] Newell, *Memoirs of Fanny Newell, Written by Herself* (Hallowell, Maine, 1824), pp. 221-2 (Newell exhorted, and her ordained Methodist Episcopal husband preached, in Charlotte County in 1818); Charles Chauncy, *Letter from a Gentleman in Boston, to Mr. George Wishart* (1742), reprinted in Richard Bushman, ed., *Great Awakening: Documents on the Revival of Religion, 1740-1745* (New York, 1970), p. 119; Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics & Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994), pp. 82-8. Chauncy’s famous denunciation of “the suffering, much more the encouraging WOMEN, yea, GIRLS to speak in the assemblies for religious worship” is reprinted in Alan Heimert and Perry Miller, eds., *Great Awakening: Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences* (New York, 1967), p. 241.

9 Mary [Coy] Bradley, *Narrative of the Life and Christian Experience of Mrs. Mary Bradley, of Saint John, New Brunswick* (Boston, 1849) [CIHM 43009], pp. 23, 35, 41, 46, 49, 55, 56, 59, 60, 119, 169. As a 12-page “Reminiscences of Mrs. Mary Bradley” manuscript at the New England Historic and Genealogical Society, Boston, illustrates, Coy was literate but no writer; one wonders whether the

forceful impression that God was calling her to preach: "Even for this cause have I raised thee up". As with nearly every woman to whom such an idea occurred, Coy's instinct was to resist: "How can these things be? A female to be called of God!" Significantly, she adds, "I always heard that women had nothing to do in public, respecting religious exercises, and that it was absolutely forbidden in the Scriptures for a woman to pray in public, or to have anything to say in the church of God".¹⁰ As she would not hear a female speak in a religious meeting until years later, this consensus ("always heard") against women's role in the public exercise of religion probably had not arisen out of any local episode and Coy does not write of it as a matter of controversy. Even though the Congregationalist meeting was in unity on the issue, Coy's neighbours had articulated the question within her hearing, evidently more than once.¹¹ It appears, then, that by the 1780s in northeastern North America the idea of female religious leadership was in the air.

For 15 years, and even after marriage, Coy wrestled with her call to preach, returning to the subject repeatedly in her lengthy, disjointed autobiography. She knew that convention was against her:

No, it is never allowed for females to go on such errands. . . . I knew that female exertions in a public way, were counted unscriptural. . . . I thought, if it were customary for females to preach the gospel, how gladly would I engage in the employment. . . . I thought if I had been a man, nothing could hinder me from going abroad to proclaim salvation to a dying world.¹²

But whenever she turned to the Bible to discover whether God authorized women to do more than was "customary" she found encouragement. She came first to the story of Miriam, a prophetess. Then it occurred to her that Moses' intercession with Pharaoh was "something figurative" of her own conjectured mission on behalf of sinners. Concerning St. Paul's admonition to silence, she reasoned that "Though the apostle undoubtedly meant that they should not dictate or rule in the church, yet he could not have intended their exclusion from usefulness in the church, for in the apostolic age women prophesied".¹³ Coy was able, then, to reason her way through Scripture-based objections to public ministry by women. One comes to suspect that her disquiet over the issue was protracted not because she doubted her understanding of the Bible but because she lacked courage to go out as the first female evangelist in the Maritime colonies.

Coy did insist on opportunity to speak and pray in her own church's meetings.

Narrative was edited for publication by the Wesleyan minister Sampson Busby. Her recollection of events in early youth is demonstrably incorrect on a few particulars, but there is no reason to doubt the account of her religious travel, which she commenced writing in her teenage years. She refers to her religious upbringing as "Presbyterian"; she means Congregationalist.

10 Ibid., pp. 46-7, 76.

11 About the time that Coy thought first of "discoursing", one of Lady Huntingdon's missionaries became pastor of her church. Possibly this sparked local conversation on the topic of women's ministry, though Huntingdon herself was not a preacher and did not employ females.

12 [Coy] Bradley, *Life and Christian Experience*, pp. 58, 80, 83, 150.

13 Ibid., pp. 57-9, 80.

When Congregationalist elders refused to let her pray aloud because she was a woman, she withdrew. Before joining the Saint John Wesleyans in 1803, she and the meeting entered into a written compact by which the church agreed to “allo[w] her all the liberties, and privileges, our Heavenly Father doth allow to the female sex, by the mouth of his prophets and apostles . . . ; also, to improve her talents and bring her gifts into the sanctuary, as the Lord shall direct her, by his word, and Holy Spirit”. The document is a remarkable one, but almost equally so is the fact that, having secured consent to exhort and pray in public worship, Coy records not a single occasion when she did so. In the mixed male and female class meeting that she attended for a time, only the men were invited to pray. What Wesleyan polity did offer Coy was the opportunity to lead all-female prayer and class meetings. Here she delighted to “direct, encourage, and urge on my Christian sisters, in their heavenly journey”.¹⁴ Wesleyanism’s reliance on single-sex classes permitted her to fulfill a powerful urge to spread the news of what Christ had done for her and to labour quietly for the salvation of others.

Mary Coy’s case is that of an obscure girl in an obscure place at the close of the 18th century whose acute harkening to spiritual impulses led her to sense repeated calls to preach, who was then able to work out a biblical justification for religious leadership by females and to do so in the face of what she had “always heard”. Ultimately, however, she did not turn preacher, so it is only by the accident of a memoir that we know of her theory that women might exercise public gifts. For every woman whose labours made her visible to contemporaries and to history, there may have been a score of Mary Coys who heard the call and located authorization in Scripture but whose circumstances held them back.¹⁵ Coy’s example is instructive in a second sense. In it a Protestant woman exercises leadership, in all-female class and prayer meetings, of such low visibility that an historian might not detect it or be sure that it involved significant spiritual direction. Though focused study of the exceptional figure of the preacher is warranted by the unique level of commentary that preaching provoked, it should not overshadow these other forms of public religious

14 Ibid., pp. 88-9, 160-1, 163, 209-10. Coy’s disjointed memoir depicts her first as a class leader in 1830, but probably she exercised her gifts in that capacity much earlier. On the potential importance of the position as class leader, see Linda Wilson, *Constrained by Zeal: Female Spirituality Amongst Nonconformists, 1825-75* (Carlisle, U.K., 2000), pp. 200-4, Muir, *Petticoats in the Pulpit*, pp. 12-16, Hannah Lane, “‘Wife, Mother, Sister, Friend’: Methodist Women in St. Stephen, New Brunswick, 1861-1881”, in Janet Guildford and Suzanne Morton, eds., *Separate Spheres: Women’s Worlds in the 19th-Century Maritimes* (Fredericton, 1994), pp. 98, 102, 116 and, generally, Marilyn Westerkamp, *Women and Religion in Early America, 1600-1850: The Puritan and Evangelical Traditions* (London, 1999), pp. 114-15, Nancy Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, 1977), pp. 134-5.

15 Something of a parallel instance, again kept secret and disclosed only through the happenstance of a published journal, is that of Eliza Chipman of Cornwallis Township. On three occasions between 1825 and 1828 Chipman recorded a desire to preach, albeit always as a missionary in foreign parts, caught up by the Judsons’ inspiring example. On the idea of foreign mission as “vocational fantasy” for evangelical women, see Sweet, *Minister’s Wife*, p. 91. Chipman’s scruple was over the authenticity of her call; she did not even consider that there might be biblical objection. Curiously, when she was asked, some years later and as a Calvinist Baptist pastor’s wife, to join in establishing a female prayer meeting, she felt no vocation whatever: Allen Robertson and Carolene Robertson, eds., *Memoir of Mrs. Eliza Ann Chipman, Wife of the Rev. William Chipman, of Pleasant Valley, Cornwallis* (Hantsport, N.S., 1989), pp. 45, 70, 83, 95-6, 130.

authority asserted occasionally by women and girls.¹⁶ Some, such as the Newlight Mary MacKinnon Fletcher (b. 1773) of Argyle, wrote religious poetry or hymns.¹⁷ Some, such as the Calvinist Baptist Eliza Chipman (1807-53) of Cornwallis and the Wesleyan Abigail Perkins Newton (1776-1819) of Liverpool, paralleled Coy in keeping journals of their spiritual travel for posthumous circulation locally or in print.¹⁸ Some, such as the Wesleyans Mary Gay Black (ca. 1755-1827) of Cumberland and Elizabeth Channel M'Coll (d. 1819) of St. Stephen and the Free Baptist Ann Kenney Knowles (1813-45) of Chebogue, helped construct conventions surrounding the role of pastor's wife.¹⁹ Some, such as the Wesleyan Mary Boderick Scott (d. ca. 1796) of Windsor, engaged in deathbed exhortation of family and friends, that self-conscious evangelical convention known as "holy dying".²⁰ In the disordered generation following Henry Alline's death, some young Newlight women, such as Sarah Bancroft (d. 1793) of Granville and Sarah Cornwall and Mary Babcock of Shediac, declared themselves prophets and voiced spiritual communications.²¹ By the

- 16 The permutations of spiritual leadership noted here are merely illustrative. Brown offers a nuanced discussion of other roles, including visitor (e.g. of the sick) and patron: *Women of Mr. Wesley's Methodism*, pp. 20, 23-4, 31, 50, 67, 71-2, 74, 99, 107. Krueger focuses on evangelical women as authors of fiction but includes useful comment on the genre of letters of spiritual advice: *Reader's Repentance*, pp. 70-4. While I have seen no evidence that England's mid-century "Biblewoman" movement spread to the Maritimes, it was noticed in the *Provincial Wesleyan* (Halifax), 15 January 1862 and the *Christian Messenger* (Halifax), 6 March 1867, and a substantial book promoting its work sponsoring women to sell cheap Scriptures among the poor was reprinted locally: L[ouise] R[anyard], *Missing Link, or, Bible-Women in the Homes of the London Poor* (1859) (Fredericton, 1861) [CIHM 36982].
- 17 George Levy, ed., *Diary and Related Writings of the Reverend Joseph Dimock* (Hantsport, N.S., 1979), pp. 73-82; John Campbell, *History of the County of Yarmouth, Nova Scotia* (Saint John, 1876) [CIHM 00389], pp. 169-71; George Brown, *Yarmouth, Nova Scotia: A Sequel to Campbell's History* (Boston, 1888) [CIHM 00974], pp. 270-1, 498-500, 502-3.
- 18 Robertson and Robertson, *Memoir of Eliza Ann Chipman*, pp. 3, 6; James Knowlan, *Sermon, Preached . . . at the Funeral of the Late Mrs. Abigail Newton . . .* (Halifax, 1819) [CIHM 36156], pp. 12-13; Elizabeth Grammar, "'A Pen in His Hand': A Pen in Her Hand: Autobiographies by Female Itinerant Evangelists in 19th-Century America", Ph.D. thesis, University of Virginia, 1995, pp. 67, 231. Chipman herself had "enjoyed much comfort in reading christian Diaries" and, while she kept her own as a secret in life, she contemplated that "her friends and the public" would have the benefit of it after death.
- 19 Stephen Humbert, *Rise and Progress of Methodism, in the Province of New Brunswick . . . until about the Year 1805* (Saint John, 1836) [CIHM 57341], pp. 28-9; Charles Knowles, *Brief Sketch of the Life of Mrs. Ann Knowles* (Boston, 1846), pp. 8-11; Robertson and Robertson, *Memoir of Eliza Ann Chipman*, pp. 182, 185-6.
- 20 William Black, *Short Account of the Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Scott, of Windsor Nova Scotia* (Boston, 1796) [CIHM 54009], pp. 10-16; Robertson and Robertson, *Memoir of Eliza Ann Chipman*, p. 178 et seq. It was Wesleyans who emphasized "holy dying" and the genre of obituary that publicized it, but this is also found among Baptists and evangelical Anglicans.
- 21 These cases are outlined in D.G. Bell, ed., *Newlight Baptist Journals of James Manning and James Innis* (Saint John, 1984), pp. 183-4, 258-9, 334-7. Note also the sharp-eyed Jacob Bailey's portrait of a "holy maid" who "turns prophetess" and falls into "ecstasies and trances" in his "Verse against the New Lights" (ca. 1785), printed in George Rawlyk, ed., *New Light Letters and Spiritual Songs, 1778-1793* (Hantsport, N.S., 1983), p. 303. The term "prophesying", which means communicating a message from God, has two related usages. One is simply as a synonym for preaching; this usage was common among defenders of female preaching because some of the most serviceable Old Testament precedents are described conventionally as "prophetesses". The other sense of prophesying – communicating a revelation of some future – is the one manipulated by the teenagers mentioned here.

10 *Acadiensis*

1810s women taught in newly-established Sabbath schools.²² At mid-century the first married (1845) and single (1867) Maritime women were missioning in Southeast Asia.²³

The most common channel of public religious assertion offered by Maritime females in the late 18th and perhaps first half of the 19th centuries was speaking by way of exhortation.²⁴ “Exhorter” was the label applied to those who, in the course of a religious meeting, stood up and related what God had done for them and urged others to secure an interest in Christ’s atonement; offering public prayer was also often called exhorting or considered as equivalent.²⁵ When a meeting involved preaching (not always the case), exhortation followed the sermon, typically in response to an invitation to the auditory to pray or share Christian experiences. Preachers themselves would exhort but exhortation was not preaching; by definition the latter involved expounding a biblical text whereas exhortation was a personal witness. That much said, one must add that in the extraordinary post-Alline “New Dispensationalist” generation – roughly the 25 years beginning in 1785 – the usual

22 Watson Smith, *History of the Methodist Church . . . of Eastern British America* (Halifax, 1877) [CIHM 13754], I, p. 425 (Fredericton); Knowlan, *Late Mrs. Abigail Newton*, p. 16 (Liverpool); T.W. Acheson, *Saint John: The Making of a Colonial Urban Community* (Toronto, 1985), pp. 162-3.

23 Robert Alder, *Sermon, Delivered . . . on Occasion of the Death of Mrs. Elizabeth Bennett . . .* (Saint John, 1825), p. 10; Miriam Ross, “Shaping a Vision of Mission: Early Influences on the United Baptist Woman’s Missionary Union”, in Robert Wilson, ed., *Abiding Conviction: Maritime Baptists and Their World* (Saint John, 1988), pp. 89-90.

24 Evidence collected as yet does not allow the conclusion that exhortation by women was commonplace, even in the period under discussion, but it was far more common than preaching. In some religious meetings it may have been habitual (note the memoir of exhortation in early 19th-century Liverpool and Barrington in the *Provincial Wesleyan*, 11 May, 1 June 1864) but in others it died out or was never allowed. For example, in 1821 Edward Manning, the Newlight preacher turned Baptist, was horrified by extravagant female exhorters in John Payzant’s Newlight meeting at Liverpool: quoted in Brian Cuthbertson, ed., *Journal of the Reverend John Payzant (1749-1834)* (Hantsport, N.S., 1981), pp. 101-2. On the other hand, during her Maritime tour a few years later, Nancy Towle expressed satisfaction that “both male and female engaged in prayer and exhortation” at a German Baptist meeting in Lunenburg and that there were “both male and female, who were bold advocates of the truth” at Yarmouth, perhaps implying that she had not seen much evidence of female exhortation in other places: *Vicissitudes Illustrated, in the Experience of Nancy Towle, in Europe and America* (Charleston, 1832), pp. 44, 47.

25 Half a dozen New Testament passages employ “exhort” in this sense. The term has fallen from usage; its closest equivalent is testify. A vivid account of exhortation in one of Nancy Towle’s meetings (by “one, who looked for all the world like an eel in a consumption, or the skeleton of a starved gaspereau”, by a “sailor, with a pair of whiskers, sufficient to furnish a Regiment of Calmuck Tartars”, whose “three great principles seemed to be Hell, Hell, and Hellfire!”, and by “*Sport, the strolling Barber*”) is offered in the *Acadian* (Halifax), 2 January 1829. It is a matter for nice judgement whether preachers and exhorters are more usefully lumped together for study (as Brekus does in *Strangers & Pilgrims*), because both involved women speaking in religious meetings, or treated distinctly. The present offering segregates the two functions and focuses on preachers. Preachers were few, comparatively conspicuous (so that there can be some attempt at comprehensive treatment) and mainly itinerant, while exhorters were more numerous and usually local (hence difficult to detect). It was the activity of preachers rather than exhorters that generated the print commentary forming the basis of this study. Moreover, while exhorters, equally with preachers, may be said to have transgressed St. Paul’s injunction to silence in church, preachers (as teachers of the Bible) also might be said to violate the injunction against arrogating authority over men. Accordingly, the role of preachers raises in more acute form the biblical and social issues highlighted here.

distinction between preaching and exhortation collapsed for many Maritime Newlights, a religious sensibility then shared by most Congregationalists, Wesleyans and Baptists.²⁶ In the 1790s especially, many Newlights embraced the antinomian conceit that a convert need obey only the impulses of the Holy Spirit; church forms, ordinances and hierarchies, and indeed the moral law, bound them no longer. Among church forms jettisoned was the distinction between ordained and lay, preaching and exhorting. While one finds evidence of exhortation by women as late as the 1860s, and probably much later, most instances noticed by commentators are clustered in the “disordered” 1790s and early years of the 19th century, when critics considered spiritual assertion by women as prime evidence of Newlight folly.

Among women of this generation who exhorted, or preached in circumstances in which the distinction between the two was cast aside, are several who entered the historical record through confrontations with ordained men.

[I]n general they [Newlights] are as deluded a people as I ever saw. Almost all of them preach [*sic*: exhort] in public. I was conversing with one who seems to be a principal person among them. . . . “As for sin”, said she, “it cannot hurt me: not even adultery, murder, swearing, drunkenness, nor any other sin, can break the union between me and Christ”.²⁷

The Sacond Sabbath of May . . . Mrs. R [Lydia Rand Randall] rose against all the orders of the Church, and [said] that they were but outward forms and Contrary to the Spirit of God. These novelties in the Church caused many to follow the same examples. . . . She told me that she had seen by the Spirit of God, that Baptism and the Lord[’s] Supper . . . was contrary to the Spirit of God and his Gospel, and that Marriage was from the Divil.²⁸

So soon as I finished my sermon, Mrs. P. who was a very stout woman, arose and took me by the collar, saying “where hast thou gleaned to-day?” She kept knocking with her fist on my breast, and saying, “where hast thou gleaned to-day?” and a number of such questions.²⁹

26 Henry Alline’s ministry (1776-84) and the religious ferment that followed his death are an important context for understanding the rise of female exhorting and preaching in the Maritimes but too well known to warrant discussion here. An overview is offered in D.G. Bell, *Henry Alline and Maritime Religion* (Ottawa, 1993).

27 Nathan Bangs, *Life of the Rev. Freeborn Garrettson* (New York, 1845), p. 144. The incident occurred in Nova Scotia in 1785.

28 Cuthbertson, *Payzant’s Journal*, p. 44. The incident occurred at Wolfville in 1791. Further particulars of Randall’s antinomianism and Shakeristic rejection of sexuality are collected in Rawlyk, *New Light Letters*, pp. 339-41.

29 “Memoir of the Rev. Duncan M’Coll”, *British North American Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* (May 1841), p. 334. The incident occurred at Sheffield, ca. 1792-93.

Similarly, of converts at Yarmouth, Harris Harding's biographer recorded that "They attacked their minister in public, and openly contradicted him. They ascended the pulpit, – even the sisters, in the heat of their inspiration, – stood at his side – and commanded him to hold his peace".³⁰

More benign accounts from the same period include notice of an 1801 Newlight or Baptist meeting near Woodstock in which there were "plenty of preachers [i.e., exhorters], Male & Female". This observation accords with an itinerant Quaker's account of the same time and area, reporting female local "preachers" in each of the Kingsclear Baptist, Prince William Baptist and Bear Island Newlight meetings. Other intriguing trace evidence of female religious leadership is disclosed in an 1806 account of a religious meeting at New Canaan. It was held by two Baptist ministers, but among those attending was a "Sister Stokes", who gave a word of exhortation. Afterwards the Baptist pastor at nearby Wolfville made an appeal to her: "Mr H[arding] & Sister Stokes begon to talk and he asked her and her young Convarts to Come to the [Baptist] Meeting house for God Knows Said he there is much Need". From this it appears that Stokes was supporting a separate meeting, probably Newlight in character, and had been instrumental in a number of conversions ("her young Convarts"). Apart from this stray reference in a traveller's journal, Stokes and her work are unknown. Another such woman – once prominent locally, now nearly invisible – is Elizabeth Godfrey Dolliver (ca. 1773-1856). For some years after the gathering of the Milton Calvinist Baptist church in 1821, she was its mainstay; her home became its meeting-house. Widow Dolliver would "give out the hymns, pitch the tunes, exhort and pray, and urge the other sisters to do likewise". Thereby she sustained a small, mostly female church lacking a pastor by enlarging the role of exhorter to become leader of the worship. However, after the church became "efficiently supplied" with a (male) pastor, "Sister Dolivar did not occupy so conspicuous a place". As her role was marginalized within the church, so even historical remembrance of it half a century later became controversial, qualified by repeated assurances that female leadership such as Dolliver's had been unscriptural.³¹

It cannot be surprising, then, that the extensive historiography of Maritime evangelical Protestantism has left the story of preaching by women practically unknown.³² Responsibility for this omission rests less with scholarly historians, who

30 John Davis, *Patriarch of Western Nova Scotia: Life and Times of the Late Rev. Harris Harding* (Charlottetown, 1866) [CIHM 35059], p. 102. The period described was probably the first decade of the 19th century.

31 Jarvis Ring memoir (Philip Griffin-Allwood, transcriber), 31, Atlantic Baptist Archives, Acadia University [ABA], Wolfville, Nova Scotia (I am grateful to Dr. Griffin-Allwood for this reference); Christopher Densmore, ed., "The Journal of Joseph Hoag: A Quaker in Atlantic Canada", *Canadian Quaker History Journal*, 39 (1986), p. 7; Bell, *Newlight Baptist Journals*, pp. 233-4; *Christian Messenger*, 21 January 1857, 2 January, 6 February 1867, 9 December 1868; James More, *History of Queens County, N.S.* (Halifax, 1873) [CIHM 11212], pp. 175-6. Frederick Burnett speculates that Stokes was mother of the Free Baptist preacher Henry Allen (Alline) Stokes: *Biographical Directory of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick Free Baptist Ministers and Preachers* (Hantsport, N.S., 1996), p. 57.

32 The presence of preaching women among Bible Christians is noted briefly in John Harris, *Life of the Rev. Francis Metherall, and the History of the Bible Christian Church in Prince Edward Island* (London, 1883) [CIHM 08413], pp. 32, 34, 49-50, 75 (although Harris's "Alphabetical List of

began working in the 1940s, as with their 19th-century Baptist and Wesleyan denominational predecessors. Was their silence on the record of female preachers occasioned by mere ignorance? The answer, it may be, is just the contrary. One instance is the Wesleyan minister Robert Cooney. At mid-century Cooney became one of the first Maritime males to publish an autobiography, a book strangely silent on an especially vivid episode of his early life: a spectacular run-in with a female preacher at Newcastle in 1828. Not only was he instrumental in driving her from the town but *Female Preacher Nonpluss'd*, his triumphalist account of that event, was one of the continent's early imprints on the propriety of women preaching. Yet a quarter-century later, when he might have revisited this exciting public debut in his autobiography, the voluble Cooney fell silent.³³ Similar is the case of the author of the first great volume of Maritime Baptist historiography, Ingram Bill. His 800-page history of the Calvinist Baptists contains not one word on the subject of female preaching. As with Cooney, this absence calls for explanation, for in 1854 Bill had spoken at the funeral of the leading female preacher in the history of the Maritimes, served as pallbearer and penned a tribute to her in the *Christian Visitor*. Even as he eulogized, however, Bill signalled that attitude that would dispose him later to omit mention of her and others like her from his Baptist history. Nowhere does his 600-word obituary mention that for more than 30 years she had preached.³⁴

Cooney's selective silence and Bill's disingenuity were not personal eccentricities. They were the same techniques used by denominational historians in England, Upper Canada and the United States to deny the record of women preachers.³⁵ Literally, then, the experience of the first female preachers in the Maritimes was not forgotten; remembrance was suppressed. The chief reason we know nothing of these women is that we were intended to know nothing. Nineteenth-century Wesleyan and Baptist historians jettisoned from collective memory many particulars that they thought detracted from denominational ascent into Victorian respectability. Among episodes

Preachers" includes none of them) and in Muir, *Petticoats in the Pulpit*. A preaching Quakeress, whom I have not been able to verify, is noted in Grace Aiton, *History of Sussex and Vicinity* (Sussex, N.B., 1967), p. 84. In 1931 a New Brunswick newspaper printed lengthy excerpts from the autobiography of the "great American woman evangelist" Nancy Towle without mentioning that she had laboured in the Maritimes: SB 18/186, New Brunswick Museum, Saint John. The portion republished dealt with Mormonism, Towle's being one of the earliest accounts; printing it locally appears to have been prompted by anti-Mormon sentiment, not familiarity with Towle herself. There is a knowledgeable, but deliberately vague, allusion to female preachers in Joseph McLeod's reference to "both men and women" as "proclaimers of the message" among early Free Baptists: Edward Saunders, *History of the Baptists of the Maritime Provinces* (Halifax, 1902) [CIHM 76046], p. 411.

33 Robert Cooney, *Autobiography of a Wesleyan Methodist Missionary, (Formerly a Roman Catholic)* (Montreal, 1856) [CIHM 33336] mentions only "the monstrous delusion palmed upon the English public by Johanna Southcote [*sic*]" and the "ludicrous" ordination of a female pastor in the United States, pp. 118, 188.

34 Ingram Bill, *Fifty Years with the Baptist Ministers and Churches of the Maritime Provinces of Canada* (Saint John, 1880) [CIHM 00137]; *Christian Visitor* (Saint John), 4 August 1854.

35 Krueger, *Reader's Repentance*, pp. 74-80; Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters*, pp. 63-4; Olive Anderson, "Women Preachers in Mid-Victorian Britain: Some Reflexions on Feminism, Popular Religion and Social Class", *Historical Journal*, 12 (1969), pp. 467, 469; Muir, *Petticoats in the Pulpit*, pp. 5-6, 26, 66, 100-1, 134-5, 172-8; Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, pp. 6-8, 15-16, 296-8.

suppressed rather than commemorated was the example of women who preached.

The woman whom Ingram Bill memorialized at length while omitting mention of her preaching was Mary Narraway Bond (1779-1854). Born at or near Exeter, Mary Narraway was converted at about age 18 when living near Plymouth; at the same time she married a soldier. She worshipped with Wesleyans occasionally, but at age 21 she joined the congregation led by Robert Hawker, a gifted leader among calvinistic evangelical Anglicans, perhaps offering occasional exhortations herself ("came out publicly and spoke of the Lord's goodness to a poor unworthy sinner"). In 1804 she remarried, to a dockyard labourer and "village preacher", and in 1816 she married a third time, to George Bond, labourer. Two or three years later the Bonds immigrated to Saint John. Disappointed in the character of religion prevailing at Trinity Church, they withdrew ca. 1820 to set up what became their own religious meeting. From 1821 onwards they conducted it from Sand Point, a district of the rather poor Carleton peninsula on the west side of Saint John Harbour. In this neighbourhood George Bond prospered and became the local patriarch. He managed, then owned, a tide mill and general store and served for 24 years on Common Council. Here, as well, he and his wife built the meeting-house ("Bond's Bethel", "Seamen's Bethel", "Eldad Meeting Hall", "Sand Point Meeting House") known eventually as "Mrs Bond's Chapel".³⁶ In connection with their religious meeting they conducted a mixed-race Sabbath school, the aspect of their work noticed in the press. Of the Christmas Eve exhibition of scholars in 1836, the *New Brunswick Courier* recorded that proceedings were managed by Mrs. Bond, "the zealous and disinterested conductor of the School. . . . This worthy Woman appears to have a superior faculty in communicating knowledge to the Young. The earnest and affectionate manner in which she addresses them wins their attention, and the simplicity of her questions renders her perfectly intelligible to them all". Two years later, after another occasion when the school was exhibited publicly, it was said that:

The questioning which . . . was conducted by Mrs. BOND with her characteristic energy, gave a full development of the excellence of her system. The questions were formed, with some degree of method, from every part of Scripture, including historical narrative, typical representation, prophetic allusion and doctrinal truth, and

36 The principal sources for her early life are two similar, but not identical, biographical sketches by George Sealy in the *Religious Intelligencer* (Saint John), 11 August 1854 and the *Christian Visitor*, 18 August 1854 and excerpts from the Stoke Damarel (Devon) parish register supplied by Beryl Biefer. For Alderman Bond, see *New Brunswick Courier* (Saint John), 10 January 1852, "Lines on the Death of Geo. Bond, Esq.", *Weekly Chronicle* (Saint John), 9 January 1852, G. Bond, *Remembrancer: A Poem, Descriptive of the Eventful Scenes which Occurred on Tuesday the 8th of August, 1837* . . . (Saint John, 1837) [CIHM 54536], Acheson, *Saint John*, pp. 83-5, 179, 191 ("populist conservativ[e]"), "Book-plates", *Acadiensis*, 1, 2 (April 1901), pp. 90, 102-3. Bond's chapel was on what became known as Protection Street, near the harbour. A two-storey structure with external stair, evidently it was intended both for meetings and a Sabbath school: John Ford, *Jubilee Souvenir of the Carleton Baptist Church, 1841-1891* (Saint John, 1891) [CIHM 25573], pp. 6-8 and Gerald Keith, ed., *West Side Kirk of the United Church of Canada: A Century of Service, 1857-1957* (Saint John, 1957), pp. 25-7. It existed by the mid-1830s, but may have been built a decade earlier. It is unclear how long after Mrs. Bond's 1854 death that it continued in religious use; it was demolished in 1897.

were answered with wonderful promptitude by the simultaneous voice of the pupils.³⁷

In addition to leading the Sabbath school, Mary Bond preached regularly for upwards of three decades. There is no detailed description of her preaching, but several accounts leave no doubt that it was she rather than her husband who exercised the gift of spiritual teaching; one obituary said for 36 years, another for 40. In addition to services for her Sand Point neighbours and the Sabbath school, Bond preached on Sunday afternoons, at least towards the end of her life, at Temperance Hall in Portland. There was also a ministry to sailors; services directed at them were advertised by hoisting a special flag over the bethel. As well, she seems to have preached with some regularity to both men and women on board harbour vessels, including the newly-launched *Guiding Star*, one of the largest ships built in Saint John to that time.³⁸

The Bonds began their Saint John career holding that variant of evangelical Anglicanism best described as calvinistic methodism.³⁹ It was a theological tendency of the utmost respectability but one to which the optimistic, sentimental 19th century proved uncongenial. Even so-called Calvinist Baptist ministers, writing in the obituaries published at Mary Bond's death, considered that her once-conventional theological views required explanation now. One characterized her, somewhat disdainfully, as "strongly attached to what may be termed the Hypercalvin school in sentiment". Another thought it necessary to recite that "her principal topics were the sovereignty of Jehovah, the depravity of Adam's race, God's eternal electing love, redemption by Jesus Christ, justification according to the riches of grace [and] sanctification by his precious blood and spirit". One respect in which the Bonds'

37 *New Brunswick Courier*, 7 January 1837, 29 December 1838. Prominent citizens, including the mayor and the speaker of the House of Assembly, attended these exhibitions. Saint John's interdenominational evangelical Religious Tract Society distributed literature to the school. Nancy Towle, Susannah Lynds McCurdy and Abigail Messer Mussey also preached to "coloured" or "mixed" audiences. See also Billington, "Female Laborers in the Church", p. 383.

38 Bond's obituaries (apart from I.E. Bill's) make it clear that she preached regularly rather than occasionally: *Chronicle* (Saint John), 28 July 1854 and *Religious Intelligencer*, 4, 11 August 1854. Her gravestone calls her a "zealous advocate for the truths of the Gospel for fifty years": Daniel Johnson, *Old Cedar Hill Cemetery and Carleton Burial Ground of Saint John West, N.B. Canada* (Saint John, 1990), p. 93. Apart from the obituaries and the Towle reference noted below, I have found only two contemporary notices of her ministry, both at its close. On 10 May 1851 the *New Brunswick Courier* mentioned her first mission to seamen of the spring season (she was then 72), and on 16 July 1853 came notice of services in Portland (a separate city lying between the two Saint John peninsulas) and on ship. However, while the latter engagements were in connection with "Bond's Bethel", it is not clear that it was Mrs. Bond who was to preach. By 1853 her health was failing and she may have engaged George Sealy already, the assistant working with her at her death. Floating bethels offering ministry to seamen, such as Mrs. Bond used in Saint John Harbour, were well known in the great ports of England but a novelty in America: Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated*, pp. 51-4. Hoisting a "bethel flag" to attract sailors to special shore services was another English practice that the Bonds used in Saint John.

39 Robert Hawker, under whose ministry at King Charles's Church Bond passed her Plymouth years, was "one of the highest of Calvinists": George Balleine, *History of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England* (London, 1933), p. 93. Interestingly in view of the Bonds' work in Saint John, he opened some of the earliest Sabbath schools in southern England. Hawker was grandfather to the famous clergyman of the same name.

views did change was over the proper subjects for baptism, for at some point in the mid-1830s both were immersed by the Saint John Calvinist Baptist minister Frederick Miles. However, it was only in 1854, after her husband's death and at the end of her own life, that anxiety over the future of her work led Bond and her flock to be gathered into a Calvinist Baptist church. At her funeral, three months later, seven evangelical clergymen joined in the procession. Having preached for upwards of 30 years, occupying her own meeting-house, hailed at her death (albeit mistakenly) as founder of the Sabbath school movement in New Brunswick, Mary Narraway Bond must be accounted the most successful woman preacher in the entire history of the Maritimes.

One reason we know that Bond's obituaries are correct in asserting that she actually preached from an early date is that she was encountered doing so at Carleton in mid-1828 by Anna (Nancy) Towle.⁴⁰ A New Hampshire native and sometime local school teacher, Towle (1796-1876) was aged 32 and in about the eighth year of her public ministry when she arrived at the Passamaquoddy Bay islands early that year. Her stay in New Brunswick – in and around St. Andrews and Saint John – was seven months. Her subsequent Nova Scotia campaign was about eight months, closing when she sailed from Liverpool for England and Ireland in mid-1829. In her own account, her preaching met with some extravagant successes, especially among Wesleyan and Church of England people. Following a three-day sojourn on Deer Island, 50 or more people professed conversion. On the mainland of Charlotte County she spoke to “thousands” at peril of her life. At Saint John, of which she had been warned that “they will kill you if you go there”, “hundreds” achieved salvation under her labours; even the army commissary and his wife bowed under conviction.

For western and southern Nova Scotia, Towle made no such implausible claims, but her reception among former Allinites at Argyle, Yarmouth, Barrington and Liverpool was unmistakably warm. Her longest stay was four winter months at Halifax and Dartmouth. Of this period she is uncharacteristically taciturn, but a hostile Calvinist Baptist source reports that her preaching produced “great excitement”. She drew “many weak persons from more sober instruction, & most of all some of our young members have left [–] that is[,] but seldom attend our meetings & are always with her”. Another observer, likening her to Joanna Southcott, denounced the “blasphemous mummery” of a meeting marked by “such sobbing, grunting, and groaning [as] I never before heard”.⁴¹ While Mary Bond preached in one place for a third of a century and yet her only surviving writing is her will, Towle's itinerant labours are known in detail because, with characteristic panache, she wrote them up for a New England religious magazine and, at age 36, put out a substantial volume of autobiography.⁴²

Only one Maritime newspaper is known to have commented on the work of Towle,

40 “There [Carleton], I met with a ‘female preacher’, for the first time, who was a rigid Calvinist”: Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated*, p. 41. Towle means that Bond was the first female preacher of calvinistic rather than arminian views whom she had encountered, not the first female preacher.

41 John Ferguson to Edward Manning, 9 January 1829, Manning Collection, ABA (I am grateful to Daniel Goodwin for this reference); *Acadian*, 2 January 1829. Examination of one Eastport, seven Halifax and three Saint John newspapers discloses this single notice of Towle, who is not actually named.

42 *Christian Herald* (Portsmouth, N.H.), 11 (October 1828); Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated*, pp. 39-40, 44-5, 48-9. Towle's claim regarding Deer Island is corroborated by the fact that a Christian

but extensive print controversy attended the contemporaneous labours of Susannah Lynds McCurdy (1776-1862). She was born, as she would die, in Onslow, offspring of Irish planters who immigrated to New Hampshire before arriving in Nova Scotia early in the 1760s. Her family were presumably among Onslow residents who heard Alline preach during a ten-day stay in 1782. Her own religious awakening came in early adolescence, when the township attracted the labours of many New Dispensationalist preachers. That strange collection of epistolary exhortations known as *New Light Letters and Spiritual Songs* includes a cluster of contributions from her grandfather Blair, her zealous aunt Betsy Blair, her father and Lynds herself. In September 1790, the month of her 14th birthday, "Susy" wrote to the preacher Joseph Dimock that her "Dear Brothers And Sisters" were "yet in the Gaul of Bitterness and Bond[s] of Iniquity", implying that her own soul had found salvation already. Although her father became deacon of the Onslow Newlight church at its gathering in 1791, the church-book gives no indication of when his eldest daughter joined.⁴³

In 1794 Lynds married Robert McCurdy, another Irish descendant, and gave birth to a son the year following. She first appears in what survives of the Onslow records in 1804, when the church investigated her accusation that another member had "wasted or made away with her cloth" in making her husband a coat; the complaint was not sustained. In this same year the church went onto an open communion Baptist constitution, and McCurdy herself was immersed. In 1809, when the church divided bitterly over whether to adopt close communion, she was one who joined in the move. For a time in 1819 the church enjoyed a considerable reformation, but this ended in fiasco when it became evident that "certain of the Young Females who had professed

Connexion church was gathered there on 14 June 1828. The *Christian Herald* account of her New Brunswick labours contains details and nuances not found in the comparable section of her autobiography; in the second edition (1833) of *Vicissitudes* the Maritime material is unchanged. Towle (pronounced *toll*) lived for more than 40 years after the autobiography appeared but little is known of her further adventures, although some information is offered in Judith Bailey, "Nancy Towle, 1796-1876: Faithful Child of God", M.A. thesis, College of William and Mary, 2000, chapter 4, Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, p. 201 and Joseph Dow, *History of the Town of Hampton, New Hampshire* (Salem, Mass., 1893), II, pp. 1011-12. In 1831 she sponsored the American reprint of Henry Freeman, *Memoir of the Life and Ministry of Ann Freeman . . .* (1826) (Exeter, N.H., 1831): *Vicissitudes Illustrated*, p. 110. Ann Mason Freeman (1791-1826) of Devon was an early Bible Christian preacher who withdrew from the connexion to labour where she felt called rather than where assigned: Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters*, pp. 140-58. In 1833 Towle was in Lower Canada, where she published *Some of the Writings, and Last Sentences of Adolphus Dewey, Executed at Montreal, Aug. 30th 1833* (Montreal, 1833) [CIHM 89115]. The pamphlet includes material suggesting that she may have been en route home from another visit to Ireland. In 1834 she was in New York City, where she founded the short-lived *Female Religious Advocate*, about which I have been able to learn nothing. After the tour of 1828-29 there is no indication of a second visit to the Maritimes, but she corresponded with Halifax and Saint John friends: *Vicissitudes Illustrated*, pp. 97, 112-13.

43 James Beverley and Barry Moody, eds., *Life and Journal of the Rev. Mr. Henry Alline* ([1806] Hantsport, N.S., 1982), pp. 203-4; Rawlyk, *New Light Letters*, pp. 101-2, 104-9, 111-12, 122, 334; Onslow Newlight [later Baptist] church-book, ABA. The church-book has no list of early members but it may be that Robert McCurdy, her husband, never joined. Possibly he adhered to ancestral Presbyterianism, as Onslow's McCurdys produced several Presbyterian ministers. Rawlyk notes that most of the Blairs, the family of Susannah Lynds McCurdy's mother, were known for spiritual gifts. Of them the most prominent in the *New Light Letters* is Elizabeth (Betsy) Blair (1768-1848) who, though an aunt, was little older than Susannah herself.

Religion . . . were Pregnant". Perhaps it was in connection with the resulting scandal that McCurdy was in the next year excluded from the church for "slander".

There is reason to think that McCurdy heard her call to preach in 1824, but she became visible in the historical record in that character first in August 1827 at Fredericton, in circumstances suggesting that her public labours had begun during the previous two years. After Fredericton, the 51-year-old itinerant moved up the Nashwaak Valley, where she appears in the journal of a local woman as holding meetings. Then she portaged over to the southwest Miramichi, preaching for six months in remote, unchurched settlements. Her labours in Ludlow parish, where inhabitants had suffered as a result of the Great Fire of 1825, achieved particular success. Admirers declared that many were converted. Even bitter critics acknowledged that she came to exercise "a sort of talismanic influence on the minds of the people". However, when she moved downriver to Newcastle, early in 1828, her religious meeting at the King's Arms was disrupted by Robert Cooney, then some sort of candidate for Roman Catholic orders. Within a week he published in pamphlet form the tirade with which he had interrupted her service. In turn, this provoked a local woman to reply, first with an oration defending McCurdy and then with a pamphlet asserting women's right to preach, though it was a further year before this production found a printer. Evidently McCurdy herself gave way and returned up the Miramichi, for the Nashwaak diarist hosted her for the night in March 1828. Research has located her subsequently at Pictou in 1830 or 1831, in Liverpool in 1840, where her labours incited open opposition from the Anglican rector of Lunenburg, and at Pictou again in 1842, when she was said to have laboured in nearly every part of the Maritimes and "lately in Canada and the United States". In 1848 a Calvinist Baptist minister found himself sharing a stagecoach with her between Saint John and Hampton, when she was more than 70 years of age. This is the final reference located to McCurdy's public labour, though she lived for another 14 years.

Physically, McCurdy was already "matronly-looking" by the time of her preaching debut. A Liverpool observer gratified public curiosity by noting that, at age 64, the "Rev. Mrs. McCurdy" was "somewhat diminutive [in size], although when standing on her legs, in preaching attitude, apparently stout and masculine". Her wrinkled face and silver gray hair, such of it as could be glimpsed behind white fillet and black bonnet, formed a not "unprepossessing countenance". With the added gravity of reading spectacles, her right hand gesturing while the left clutched a Bible, McCurdy appeared an "unnatural being, as if dead to every thing earthly", or so thought a writer intending sarcasm who found himself drawn in nevertheless by the "most irresistible effect" of her preaching.⁴⁴

44 It is curious to note that, when McCurdy left New Brunswick via (presumably) Saint John in the spring of 1828, she would have been preaching in the same town as both Bond and Towle: *Royal Gazette* (Fredericton), 28 August 1827; Anne Campbell journal, 7, 12 September 1827, 4 March 1828, MC 300, ms 23/1, Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, Fredericton (I am grateful to D.M. Young for this reference); *Mercury* ("Miramichi"), 26 February, 27 May 1828; Robert Cooney, *Female Preacher Nonpluss'd: A Discourse Delivered at Newcastle, on Sunday the 24th February, 1828* ("Miramichi", N.B., 1828), pp. 4-5; [anon.], *Discourse on Female Prophecy, or Preaching* (Halifax, 1829) (no copy of this 18-page Joseph Howe imprint is known to survive but the New Brunswick Museum holds Louise Manny's careful typescript; I am grateful to E.C. Rosevear for drawing it to my attention); *Novascotian* (Halifax), 15 October 1840 (I am grateful to an anonymous

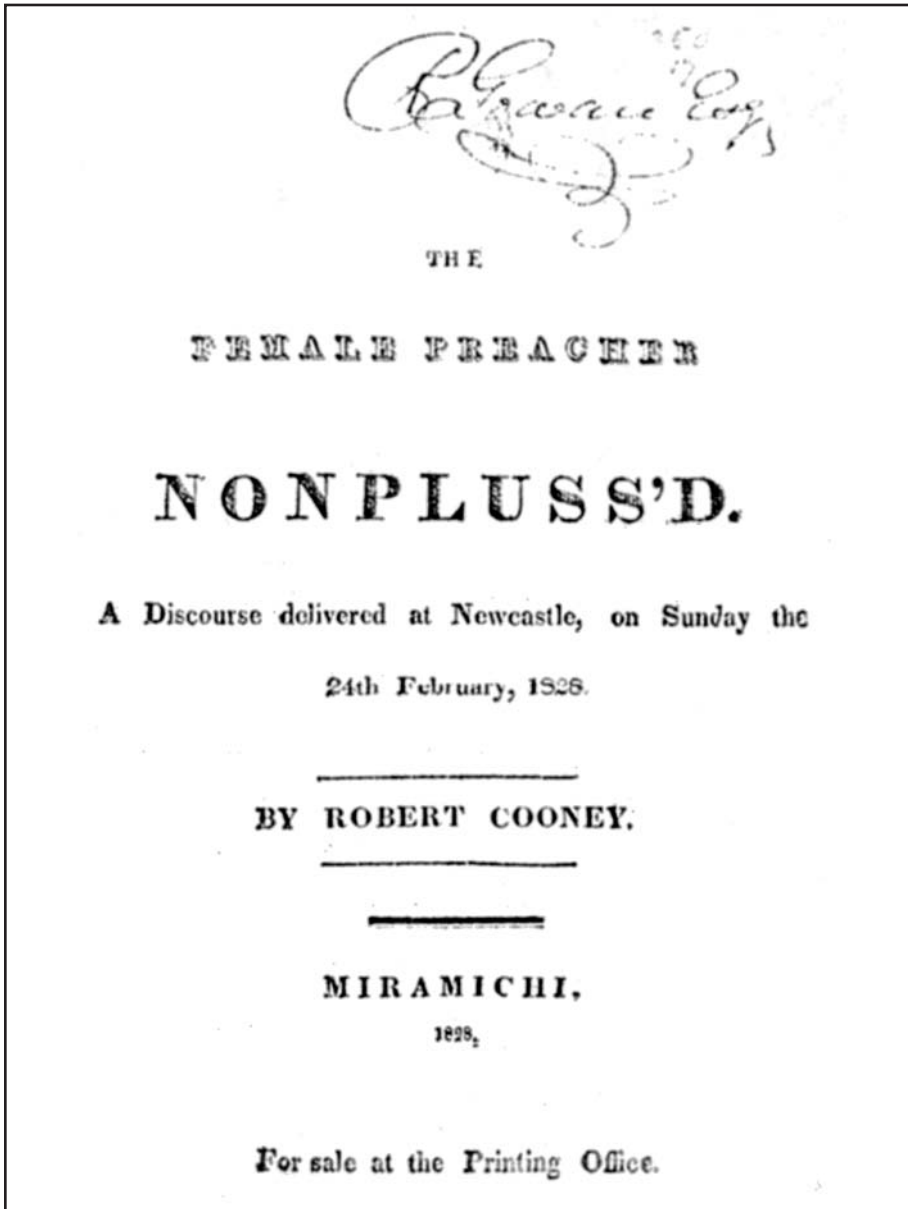


Figure One
Robert Cooney, *The Female Preacher Nonpluss'd* (1828), one of North America's earliest imprints on the question of women preachers.
Source: Legislative Library, Fredericton, New Brunswick and Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

In the spring of 1828, just as McCurdy was retreating from Newcastle, Martha Jago (1807-75) was debarking in Prince Edward Island. Reared at Jacobstow (Cornwall), she worked as a domestic servant, first at Bedeque and then at Tryon. In England she had been a local preacher among the Bible Christians, a Wesleyan breakaway sect. Such a history helps explain how a newly-arrived domestic had the self-confidence to mark her 23rd birthday by taking up preaching in Charlottetown in February 1829. Saluting her as the “marve[l] of the week” though a disappointingly “ordinary looking personage”, the town press gave her efforts distinctly more favourable notice than McCurdy ever generated. However, the paper was soon so occupied with letters debating the general issue of female preaching that further notice of Jago’s own “most extraordinary talents” was crowded out. A year later the press announced that this “celebrated female preacher” had married. Over many years Martha Jago Sabine and her husband opened their Sturgeon Bay home for religious services, but she was known as an exemplary, useful Christian rather than as one who still preached.⁴⁵

Martha Jago and the other preachers noted above fall more evidently into two particular denominational traditions than Catherine Brekus concluded in her study of the contemporary United States. Perhaps this clarity is the product of the small Maritime sample size, but the pattern is unmistakable. One of these traditions is west of England Wesleyan Methodism. Although Wesley himself became favourable to preaching by women where the gift was clear, as the denomination formalized after his 1791 death, female preaching prospered only in purist breakaway sects, notably Bible Christians, and then only for a time. Within Wesleyanism itself one centre of female preaching had been southwestern England, and this area – Devon and Cornwall in particular – was just where the Bible Christians had their greatest strength. As a Cornwall native and unordained local preacher among Bible Christians, Jago was a direct export of this tradition.⁴⁶ Large-scale west-country immigration to

reader for this reference); *Islander* (Charlottetown), 27 January 1843 (I am grateful to Rusty Bittermann for this reference); *Morning Herald* (Halifax), 4 January, 24 February 1843; *Yarmouth Herald*, 13 January 1843; *Mechanic & Farmer* (Pictou), 1 February 1843; *Christian Messenger*, 11 August 1848 (I am grateful to Barry Moody for this reference). In 1841 McCurdy sent Joseph Dimock a poem commemorating the 50th anniversary of some event connected presumably with the rise of the Newlights at Onslow. A mis-transcribed version is printed in Levy, *Diary of Joseph Dimock*, p. 99. Extensive searching has failed to turn up published obituaries for either McCurdy or her husband.

45 *Bible Christian Magazine* (Shebbear, U.K.), 11 (August 1845), p. 275 (source of the datum that Jago was already a local preacher when she arrived on Prince Edward Island); *Prince Edward Island Register* (Charlottetown), 24 February 1829, 30 March 1830; *Provincial Wesleyan*, 6 April 1864 (obituary of Henry Baker Sabine, her husband; I am grateful to Nathan Mair for this reference); *Island Argus* (Charlottetown), 2 March 1875. *Bible Christian Magazine* prints so many missionary reports from the vicinity of Sturgeon Bay and Murray Harbour that absence of reference to Sabine preaching implies strongly that she gave it up about the time of her marriage. Comment to the contrary in Albert Burnside, “Bible Christians in Canada, 1832-1884”, D.Th. thesis, Victoria University, 1969, p. 371, is based on misreading the cited source. The Sabine family history file at the Prince Edward Island Public Archives and Records Office, Charlottetown includes a memoir of the preacher by one of her daughters. Jago was the great-great-grandmother of the poet Milton Acorn.

46 As the *Prince Edward Island Register*, 24 February 1829, explained, “The distinguishing name of the sect to which she belongs is ‘Brienites’, so called after their founder [William O’ Bryan], and are said to be very numerous in the Counties of Devon and Cornwall. . . . [F]emale preachers are by no means rare among them”. Nancy Towle met O’ Bryan and some of his itinerant female preachers in Devon and Cornwall in 1829. He later commended two of his daughters to her care in the United States: *Vicissitudes Illustrated*, pp. 61, 85, 153, 155, 194.

the Maritimes (mostly Prince Edward Island) began only in 1831, well after Jago's preaching, explaining why she laboured in Charlottetown rather than among her own people. Between that date and the 1860s many other Bible Christian missionaries were active for a time in the Island's west-country immigrant population. Within their ranks were several female preachers. Unlike Jago, most – probably all – were part of a husband/wife mission team, ensuring that information on the women themselves remains scanty.⁴⁷

Mary Narraway Bond was also influenced by west-country Wesleyanism. In Devon, before her emigration, she attended a Wesleyan meeting and, although she came to reject the arminianism of the Wesleys, evidently she and George Bond embraced the idea that a woman might preach. Stoke Damarel, the Devonshire parish that produced Mrs. Bond, was also the native place of Elizabeth Venner (b. ca. 1809), a woman who figures on the periphery of this story. As a child she immigrated with her parents to New York City, where she embraced Wesleyanism. Then the Venners moved to Saint John, where 19-year-old Elizabeth was living in 1828 when she fell under the spell of Nancy Towle. Impressed that she should accompany Towle on her preaching tours, Venner became her companion for the next two years.⁴⁸ She did not preach but, like most such preacher companions, she exhorted.

Although official Wesleyanism rejected woman preachers in practical terms by the beginning of the 19th century, Nancy Towle was allowed to preach for eight weeks at the Saint John chapel (where Mary Coy Bradley worshipped) in 1828, until the local minister discountenanced the work; the next year Martha Jago preached at the chapel in Charlottetown. Not by coincidence, it was shortly after this second episode that a Maritime Wesleyan journal thought it useful to reprint the English conference's resolution against female preaching from a quarter-century earlier.⁴⁹ A parallel instance of disjuncture in attitude between local practice and denominational policy is highlighted by the case of Joshua Newton, the most prominent of Liverpool's Wesleys. Although an active local preacher himself, Newton had been zealous in exposing itinerant "impostors" during the New Dispensationalist crisis of the 1790s; he disdained "any thing like fanaticism, or a want of a judicious and sedate conformity

47 Paul Chilcote, *John Wesley and the Woman Preachers of Early Methodism* (Metuchen, N.J., 1991); Muir, *Petticoats in the Pulpit*, pp. 73-5, 210-11, 213; Burnside, "Bible Christians in Canada", pp. 369-75; Basil Greenhill and Ann Giffard, *Westcountrymen in Prince Edward's Isle: A Fragment of the Great Migration* ([1967] Toronto, 1975), chapter 6. Muir names seven women besides Jago: Mrs. Abbott, Elizabeth Adams, Mrs. John Adams, Isabella Armstrong Harris, Mrs. Bryenton, Sister Buxton and Frances Calloway. Useful details about Calloway are collected in Una Beer, "An Astonishing Sisterhood: Women in the Bible Christian Ministry and Their Debt to Quakerism", *Canadian Quaker History Journal*, 63 (1998), pp. 41, 50.

48 Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated*, pp. 50, 54, 60, 83, 89, 113-14, 137-8, 153. Itinerants often had travel companions, as a close reading of Henry Alline's autobiography illustrates. Towle was loath to part with Venner, who was literally lured away in the night by her family. Her next companion was Thomasine O'Bryan, daughter of the founder of the Bible Christians: *Vicissitudes Illustrated*, pp. 156, 167, 170, 173.

49 *Christian Herald*, 11 (October 1828); *New-Brunswick Religious and Literary Journal* (Saint John), 2 and 9 May 1829 (I am grateful to Hannah Lane for this reference). The resolution's position was not that female preaching was unscriptural but that it had become inopportune. A few Wesleyan women preachers did continue to labour, including Mary Barritt Taft, whose work had provoked the 1803 resolution and whose example was invoked in the Charlottetown press debate on female preaching.

to sobriety and propriety". In 1819 he heard his late wife eulogized as possessing "all that softness, all that tenderness, all that modesty" that became females. Surveying the life of such a woman, the Wesleyan minister James Knowlan averred that "we do not seek, nor would we wish to find, those masculine virtues so necessary and useful in man, and by which he is fitted for the more active and laborous [sic] duties of life, and at the same time distinguished from the softer sex". Yet a decade later, after he heard Nancy Towle preach in the place for four weeks, the "judicious", "sedate" Newton thought so highly of this bold female's itinerant mission that he commended her to the Wesleyan class leader at Port Mouton as "an elect lady, whom we love in the LORD! not only I, but all those who love the truth in Liverpool!" When Towle and Venner embarked for Britain, Newton escorted them to the wharf.⁵⁰ Hence, it is fair to say that, while denominational hierarchy turned its back on female preachers, the response of the laity might have been quite different, and that the Wesleyan tradition, particularly as exported from England's west country, is a vital link accounting for the incidence of female preaching in the early 19th-century Maritimes.

The other religious tradition contributing to emergence of, and receptivity to, female preaching is that of the New England/Maritime Newlights. Unlike English Wesleyanism and its offshoots, the Newlights – in the Maritimes often called "Allinites" although not all were admirers of Henry Alline – were not an organization. "Newlight" expresses an attitude or sensibility stressing the importance of the transforming new birth experience. Newlights downplayed radically the role of hierarchy and formality in the church. Conversely, they were likely to be open to a range of spiritual novelties. Those gaining a currency in the Maritimes in the New Dispensationalist generation included bibliomancy, dream interpretation, visions, millennial expectation, celibacy, free love, glossolalia, plain dress, holy dance and immersion. Perhaps it is not surprising that preaching by women was not among the innovations promoted by a generation that disdained the very idea of formal preaching. However, as noted above, there is evidence of female exhortation beginning in the mid-1780s, and all known episodes of young women turning prophetess occurred during these two decades.

Less alluring than the spectacle of teenage prophetesses but more interesting to historians are the exhortation-like compositions by, or addressed to, women and girls in the literary genre that has become known as the "Newlight Letters". Exchanged among a number Alline's followers – most of them either females or preachers – between 1785 and 1793, they were collected by Thomas Bennett in the Minas Basin area and preserved as remarkable specimens of spiritual fervour. When George Rawlyk edited these ecstatic, difficult compositions for publication in 1983, even he was uncertain what to make of them; conspicuously, his introduction to the volume avoids assessing or analysing the letters themselves. However, by the time of his powerful *Canada Fire* essay collection a decade later, Rawlyk had made these zealous outpourings central to his understanding of the post-Alline generation. Now he

50 Goldwin French, ed., "Papers of Daniel Fidler, Methodist Missionary in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, 1792-1798", *Bulletin: Records and Proceedings of the Committee on Archives of the United Church of Canada*, 13 (1960), pp. 29-30, 32-3, 41-3; Smith, *History of the Methodist Church*, I, pp. 316-20; *Provincial Wesleyan*, 11 May 1864; Knowlan, *Late Mrs. Abigail Newton*, p. 9; Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated*, pp. 48-9, 51.

discerned in this exchange of spiritual confidences between subsequently well-known male itinerants and subsequently obscure female converts a radical downplaying of distinction between preachers and hearers. In particular, he thought that they offered unique evidence of assertion by women of spiritual equality and of willingness by men to accept this. Conversely, in the emergence out of this Newlight movement of a distinctive Baptist religious party, emphasizing comparative order and discipline, he saw the former Newlight, now Baptist, male preachers as embracing the advantages of hierarchy. A characteristic feature of order, discipline and hierarchy in the church is a leading role for males and a subordinate role for females. A key aspect of reining in Newlight disorder was reining in assertive women. This *resubordination*, Rawlyk thought, took place earliest in the Annapolis Valley in the mid to late 1790s, elsewhere somewhat later.⁵¹

In the main Rawlyk's analysis of this aspect of the Newlight-to-Baptist transition seems correct. The journal of an American Quaker itinerating among the St. John Valley parishes above Fredericton in 1801 offers remarkable corroborating evidence. Of three religious communities where he found a welcome, Joseph Hoag recorded that "[T]hey had three women, one at each meeting[,] who preached and . . . they were the ablest ministers they had and . . . all the travelling ministers that came along before us had opposed women's preaching". A few months later, revisiting the same remote area, he recounted: "There came in a New Light preacher [who] stayed around several months and had got a number of them into the water and forbid women preaching. [He] had silenced one woman, the other two somewhat stood their ground. . . . I believed it right to encourage the women to stand their ground".⁵² Here, then, is reference to an itinerant "New Light" preacher who tries to get people "into the water" – in other words, a *Baptist* preacher – and who forbids women from "preaching" (i.e. exhorting), an illustration of the very link between the rise of Baptist discipline and subordination of women in the church that Rawlyk posited. The preacher in question was Horton's Theodore Harding, the Calvinist Baptist pastor who would soon be endeavouring to persuade "Sister Stokes" and her "convarts" at New Canaan to give up their separate religious meeting.

Rawlyk's concern in *Canada Fire* was to imagine a largely successful (re)subordination of women in that part of the Newlight movement which, by the early 19th century, was being channeled by its male leadership into Calvinist Baptist churches. To this story there is a partial converse: the comparative openness to female spiritual leadership among those in the Newlight tradition who, in a variety of ways, resisted incorporation into the Calvinist Baptists. Some of them continued in Newlight societies for a time; eventually most formed churches that embraced baptism by immersion but resisted calvinist doctrine, retaining both open communion and a discernible measure of the anti-formalist Newlight sensibility. By the end of the 1820s

51 George Rawlyk, *Canada Fire: Radical Evangelicalism in British North America, 1775-1812* (Montreal and Kingston, 1994), pp. 95-6, 129-30.

52 Densmore, "Journal of Joseph Hoag", pp. 7, 20. As a Quaker, Hoag belonged to the persuasion most receptive to spiritual direction from women, so it is not surprising that he would notice favourably the role of women in these three religious meetings. On the other hand, Quakers used the term "preaching" more loosely than other religious groups. What he means here is exhorting, although he was encountering these remote Newlights and Newlight Baptists at a time when they, also, would have downplayed the distinction between the two gifts.

one can label this religious alignment somewhat loosely as Free Baptist, although it was another generation before that term came into use.⁵³ One Free Baptist distinctive, for a time, was the comparatively prominent role females assumed in exhortation and public prayer. In 1819, for example, the Calvinist Baptist pastor at St. George criticized them for “pretend[ing] to be moved to speak by the spirit, and their *Females* are generally the most active in this part of worship”. In the 1830s a stranger attracted to a Free Baptist meeting in Richmond parish “heard a woman’s voice speaking of God, and our rage was excited to such a degree that we could have skinned the woman alive”. As late as the 1860s a visitor to the Free Baptist meeting at Woodstock was startled to witness a “young lady” pray aloud.⁵⁴

Susannah McCurdy’s religious sensibilities were those of a Newlight. As a child she likely heard Aline preach. As an adolescent she caught the antinomian contagion of the 1790s, imitating her aunt Betsy Blair in corresponding with male itinerant preachers as comrades in a cause. When she herself turned preacher, her spectacular success on the Miramichi was in the Ludlow-Boiestown-Doaktown stretch, where many had settled either directly from New England or from New England planter townships in the central St. John Valley.⁵⁵ In other words, her labours were fruitful among those attuned culturally to the Newlight impulse. The little that is known of her preaching exhibits characteristic Newlight idiosyncrasies. At Fredericton she prophesied death for someone who left the meeting during her sermon, and she issued “denunciations” against that place and Saint John. The Newcastle press reported her as claiming that God had commanded her four years earlier to preach there: “She declares that she was sent to Miramichi by the express command of God, to warn the people of their sins, and by their repentance to avert another dreadful judgment” (i.e.

53 The story of the disintegration of the Newlight impulse of the 1780s and 1790s into Wesleyan, Calvinist Baptist and Free Baptist streams resists easy summary. The overview attempted in Bell, *Newlight Baptist Journals*, pp. 8-36 can be read in light of Rawlyk, “Freeborn Garrettson (1752-1827): A Methodist New Light”, in Rawlyk, *Canada Fire*, p. 44, Burnett, *Free Baptist Ministers*, passim, Bell, “The Allinite Tradition and the New Brunswick Free Christian Baptists, 1830-1875”, in Wilson, *Abiding Conviction*, p. 55 and D.G. Bell, “Yankee Preachers and the Struggle for the New Brunswick Christian Conference, 1828-38”, in Daniel Goodwin, ed., *Revivals, Baptists, and George Rawlyk: A Memorial Volume* (Wolfville, N.S., 2000), p. 93. Ultimately these Free Baptists, the religious alignment that distanced itself least quickly from its Newlight origin, was strongest in the Yarmouth shore of Nova Scotia and in the Kennebecasis, Oromocto and central St. John Valleys of New Brunswick. Prince Edward Island, in contrast, had no Newlight presence and, hence, no subsequent Free Baptists. However, it would be a distortion to think of the continuing Newlight impulse solely in terms of Free Baptists, the group that retained the sensibility the longest. In the 1820s there were still Newlight sympathizers in all Protestant alignments in the two mainland colonies.

54 Duncan Dunbar, *Concise View of the Origin and Principles of the Several Religious Denominations Existing at Present in the Province of New Brunswick* (Eastport, Maine, 1819) [CIHM 94357], p. 82; Alexander Taylor, “Semi-Centennial Sermon”, in *Minutes of the Fiftieth Annual Session of the Free Christian Baptist General Conference of New Brunswick* (Saint John, 1882), p. 46; *Religious Intelligencer*, 9 March 1887; [anon.], *Voyage and Journey of the 2nd Batt. Scots Fusilier Guards, from Southampton to Montreal, during the Winter of 1861-2* (Montreal, 1862) [CIHM 91380], p. 16 (I am grateful to Ernest Clarke for this source).

55 Abraham Pryor, *Interesting Description of British America, from Personal Knowledge and Observation* (Providence, R.I., 1819) [CIHM 91172], p. 12 (“In the year 1815 there came 3000 persons into it [Miramichi] from the state of Massachusetts . . . to cut tuntimber [sic].”); William MacKinnon, *Over the Portage: Early History of the Upper Miramichi* (Fredericton, 1984), pp. 25-8.

a second Great Fire) to the “modern Ninevah”. Reciting this vision of fire and destruction, Robert Cooney pronounced McCurdy as “one of those newlights, properly speaking noliths” who preyed on the credulous.⁵⁶

Nancy Towle was another product of the Newlight tradition. Although she had a grammar school education, she paralleled McCurdy in boasting of reliance on the Bible alone, with occasional assistance from a dictionary. A “violent” believer in the doctrine of free will, she was prepared to guide hearers from conviction to conversion in the space of half an hour. Disdaining the “*systematical mode* of procedure” associated with college-educated male ministers, she preached according to her “spiritual light”; “her discourse”, reported a critic, “was an unconnected rhapsody – such as might have been expected from an enthusiastic person”. Immersed by a minister of the Christian Connexion, the most anti-formal of New England alignments, she did not join that or any other denominational group. Predictably, her reception in Nova Scotia was warmest in those religious meetings closest to the Allinite tradition – arminian Baptists (as she identified them) in Yarmouth, Christian Connexion congregations at Argyle and Barrington, and Congregationalists at Liverpool, all permutations of the Newlight impulse. The agile Towle even managed to identify herself with Alline himself, by then dead 40 years. By happy coincidence she could boast of growing up in the same New Hampshire town where lay the grave of that “indefatigable servant of GOD, Henry Allen”. At Liverpool, as she was well aware, she preached in the meeting-house of Alline’s brother-in-law.⁵⁷

Towle’s autobiography is careful to mention use of the meeting-house of Liverpool’s venerable John Payzant for its implication that a man in authority had accepted her mission as credible. In this respect her Maritime memoir records impressive success, for she was afforded use of not only the Congregational house at Liverpool and Wesleyan chapel at Saint John but also an Anglican structure at Beaver Harbour, the Calvinist Baptist meeting-house at Lunenburg, the union house at Tusket and all of the meeting-houses in Yarmouth and Barrington. To be shut out of local meeting-houses savoured of persecution and could be put to a sort of advantage,⁵⁸ but to be accorded their use suggested, however faintly, the sort of recognition that an itinerant valued greatly. Sensitivity to preaching venue as gauge of respectability was not peculiar to Towle. The Charlottetown press understood the symbolic difference between Martha Jago preaching in the public market and at the Wesleyan chapel. At Fredericton the press noted that Susannah McCurdy held forth at the “Tank House”, evidently an unusual scene for religious exercises. Detractors at Newcastle did not fail to mention that her preaching station was a tavern, leaving it for a supporter to clarify that it was a *former* tavern. Willingness by even Church of England people to welcome a preacher such as Towle is instructive in a second sense. Although

56 *Royal Gazette*, 28 August 1827; *Mercury*, 26 February 1828; Cooney, *Female Preacher Nonpluss’d*, p. 7.

57 Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated*, pp. 7-8, 11, 48; *Acadian*, 2 January 1829; Ferguson to Manning, 9 January 1829, Manning Collection, ABA; Michael Casey, “The First Female Public Speakers in America (1630-1840): Searching for Egalitarian Christian Primitivism”, *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 23, 1 (2000), pp. 1, 17-20.

58 For example, Abigail [Messer] Mussey, *Life Sketches and Experience* (Cambridge, Mass., 1865), pp. 163-4 (incident at Clarence, 1861), p. 168 (Smith’s Cove).

“marginal” in multiple ways, she and the other women of the 1820s and 1830s laboured at a time of unique fluidity in North American Protestantism, when religious speculation flourished, denominational allegiance was tentative and hierarchies were weak. A preacher, male or female, without credentials or affiliation was far more apt to win a hearing and use of a building in the early 19th century than would be so even a generation later, when the great age of Protestant experiment had closed, denominational orthodoxies were better marked and even itinerant woman preachers were aligned with some particular sect.

All itinerant preachers were subject to the vicissitudes of an uncertain welcome, especially on an initial visit, and all were subject to an age-old suspicion of those who detached themselves from the constraints of their native place and moved through the world as strangers. Travellers might be anonymous, freed from their past, their values foreign, prey to rumours concerning antecedents.⁵⁹ In the late 18th and early 19th-century Maritimes, detractors depicted the itinerant male preacher as a seducer whose emotion-charged evening meetings were fraught with carnal possibility.⁶⁰ Similarly, a female preacher moving about without husband or other male protector might be disdained as a sexually available adventuress, her morals akin to those of an actress. Even the audacious Towle knew that an unmarried woman far from home, in another country, shifting from place to place, was at the very margin of respectability. Though reared in modest prosperity, in a house so substantial that it stands today, she had become a “solitary wanderer through the earth, far, far, from every friend, . . . a slender female . . . to face a frowning world, exposed to ten thousand snares!” Utmost personal rectitude did not exempt a female outsider from sexual scrutiny (“the lady was dressed in black, and was remarkably pale”) or lewd implication (“there was not a word said about the manufacture of Bastard Children”). When Elizabeth Venner volunteered as a companion, Towle saw it as an answer to years of prayer; travelling with a friend, even an unmarried teenager, would lessen moral vulnerability. Early in her career she had spurned an offer of letters from male preachers attesting to her bona fides; now she collected testimonials to ease her way. Moral concern was also implicit in the *Prince Edward Island Register*’s account of Martha Jago as “decently but plainly dressed in a napt cloak and black bonnet” and “altogether rather an ordinary looking personage”. It signalled to readers that the female preacher’s outward aspect evinced no inner irregularity.⁶¹

By travelling while her husband remained behind in Onslow, Susannah McCurdy’s affront to patriarchal expectation was pronounced. So far as one can tell, her public ministry began when she was not younger than 49 and when the only child

59 John Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580 to 1845* (New Haven, 1985), pp. 21-3; Christopher Hill, *World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* ([1972] London, 1985), pp. 316-17; Grammar, “Autobiographies by Female Itinerant Evangelists”, pp. 28-38.

60 Portrayal of Newlight “disorder” in terms of sexual licence, access and seduction is ubiquitous in the late 18th-century Maritimes and would afford material for a study in itself. The witness of several former Newlights suggests that it was a critique founded in fact as well as prejudice. See for example citations in Bell, *Newlight Baptist Journals*, pp. 14-16. Note also Cecilia Morgan, *Public Men and Virtuous Women: The Gendered Languages of Religion and Law in Upper Canada, 1791-1850* (Toronto, 1996), pp. 106-10.

61 *Acadian*, 2 January 1829; Bailey, “Nancy Towle”, chapter 2; Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated*, pp. 12, 23, 38, 46-9; *Prince Edward Island Register*, 24 February 1829 (the interest in clothing is ironic, as

genealogists have attributed to her was already 30. Both were two years older when Fredericton's *Royal Gazette* admonished her to return to husband, family and "domestic duties". In the lurid imagination of Newcastle's Robert Cooney, the 51-year-old McCurdy was one who, "unmindful of the calls or sympathy of nature, abandons the offspring of her own womb, the children of her own bosom, tears herself from the fond embraces of a loving husband, [and] flies from the conjugal bed". What was a latent suspicion of any female travelling "unprotected" was made explicit of McCurdy. She was a jezebel of "tainted reputation" whose preaching was "seductive groaning", the "syren song of the seducer". So sharp was this attack that an anonymous defender was moved to emphasize that McCurdy was a "respectable female", and 13 of her Ludlow admirers advertised publicly that she was of "unblemished reputation", her deportment "unexceptionably fair", her conduct "correct", her family "respectable", her circumstances "comfortable". Still, even when she was aged 67, Pictou's *Mechanic* was admonishing McCurdy to return to her "domestic affairs", while the *Yarmouth Herald* depicted her as one who had "abandoned her husband and a large family of children, the youngest only a few months old" to go out preaching. She was 72 when a Calvinist Baptist minister found reason to note that she had "left her family" to preach.⁶²

The journalist who detailed Martha Jago's costume in a way never done for a male preacher also noticed that she ascended the Wesleyan chapel's pulpit with "the greatest composure" and "without betraying the least appearance of embarrassment". In similar vein, a Fredericton report has Susannah McCurdy standing on a platform behind a small table with hands folded, commencing her discourse "in an easy and *unembarrassed* manner". By the vivid act of "rising" in a religious meeting, as John Payzant recalled of Lydia Rand Randall in 1791 and as Duncan M'Coll wrote of Sheffield's "Mrs. P." the year following, or by climbing up into a pulpit or by standing on a platform, a woman acted out an uncustomary public claim to be heard. In doing so she invited commentary as to what was fitting behaviour for the female classification. One need not take the notion of separate male and female spheres as accurate descriptively of early 19th-century Maritime society to recognize ideological force in the notion that a decent woman "recoils at the idea of having her Person constantly exposed to the publick", thereby preserving that "modest reserve, that retiring delicacy which is generally thought a distinguishing Characteristick of an

Bible Christian women became known for studied plainness in dress); Timothy Hall, *Contested Boundaries: Itinerancy and the Reshaping of the Colonial American Religious World* (Durham, N.C., 1994), pp. 57-8.

- 62 Percy Blanchard, *Genealogical Record & Biographical Sketches of the McCurdys of Nova Scotia* (London, 1930), p. 195; *Royal Gazette*, 28 August 1827; Cooney, *Female Preacher Nonpluss'd*, pp. 4, 5, 7; [anon.], *Discourse on Female Prophesying*, p. 1; *Mercury*, 27 May 1828; *Yarmouth Herald*, 13 January 1843; *Mechanic & Farmer*, 1 February 1843; *Christian Messenger*, 11 August 1848. Note also Mussey, *Life Sketches*, pp. 153, 166-7, 183, Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters*, pp. 92-3, 131, Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, pp. 30, 51, 59, 65, 81, 129, 167, 271-2, Billington, "Female Laborers in the Church", pp. 382, 387-8. Charlottetown press reference to Jago's black bonnet and the fact that she "kept [it] on during the service" let readers understand that, unlike some other preachers, she did not challenge St. Paul's injunction that females cover their head in church: see Billington, p. 388. McCurdy, Jago, Towle, the Newcastle pamphleteer and Charlottetown's "Moderate Churchman" all agreed that women preachers must submit to the bonnet; McCurdy added a black veil, which she drew back when preaching.

amiable Female". Women, urged the Wesleyan preacher James Knowlan in eulogizing Abigail Perkins Newton, must "retain all that softness, all that tenderness, all that modesty, which is the peculiar beauty and ornament of the sex". They must not cast aside the "modest deportment of the[ir] sex", lectured Halifax printer Joseph Howe, and become "reckless and daring apostles of the rights of women". At Fredericton a newspaper writer thought that female preachers represented "manifest disorder", and the Calvinist Baptist pastor could never be reconciled to women who "go boldly out to public observation, and seem to remove that veil of retirement which forms the graceful covering of the sex". A woman transgressing this "imprescriptable law" of retiring delicacy "inverts the order of nature . . . outraging all modesty and decorum", affirmed Robert Cooney.⁶³ Against the backdrop of such assumptions, the symbolism of a female casting off the "veil of retirement" to make herself the cynosure of a public forum, occupying without embarrassment the segregated male preaching space, was too extraordinary to escape comment.

Having ascended the pulpit unembarrassed, Jago proceeded to speak with an "astonishing volubility of utterance and with considerable energy and effect". "Exposed to the publick" she proved not abashed and stammering but as fluent as the typical male divine, or so an "astonished" press suggested. Likewise, the novelist Julia Beckwith Hart emphasized that her "Hannah Reeves" character preached a "sensible discourse, strictly scriptural", rather implying that this was not taken for granted. Although the cases of Jago and this fictional Quakeress underline the low expectations of a female public speaker by confounding them, the less attractive figure of Susannah McCurdy allowed commentators to embellish the general rule of inability. One observer acknowledged that her preaching voice was "clear, distinct, and euphonious", to the "admiration and astonishment" of her auditory, but more typical was the Pictou *Mechanic's* characterization of her platform presence as a "perfect steam engine in petticoats". At Fredericton her discourse commenced acceptably, but soon she occasioned "painful" feelings in observers by "moving from side to side not much unlike the action of a rocking-horse". In the "singular agitation of her body" and loud respiration she "forcibly remind[ed] one of a person in fits". To Robert Cooney she seemed a "loquacious and immodest female" of "stentorian lungs" and "contaminated tongue". She was an "impudent babblers", "wretched babblers", "whining crocodile" and "whining fanatic". She punctuated her preaching with "horrid contortions . . . baboon grimaces, and deafening groans". Hers was a "trade, not of preaching, but of groaning".⁶⁴ In the early 19th century, education in rhetoric and elocution was the province of aspiring "gentlemen". While unlettered male

63 Rebecca Byles (Halifax), 1785, quoted in Margaret Conrad, Toni Laidlaw and Donna Smyth, eds., *No Place Like Home: Diaries and Letters of Nova Scotia Women, 1771-1938* (Halifax, 1988), p. 56; Knowlan, *Late Mrs. Abigail Newton*, p. 9; Howe, "The Moral Influence of Women" (1836), in M.G. Parks, ed., *Poems and Essays: Joseph Howe* (Toronto, 1973), pp. 252, 271; *Royal Gazette*, 4 September 1827; Samuel Elder journal, 13 December 1848, as quoted in Daniel Goodwin, "'The Faith of the Fathers': Evangelical Piety of Maritime Regular Baptist Patriarchs and Preachers, 1790-1855", Ph.D. thesis, Queen's University, 1997, p. 331; Cooney, *Female Preacher Nonpluss'd*, p. 5; Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, p. 188. On the tendency to address or assess women as a "class", note Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, p. 148.

64 *Novascotian*, 15 October 1840; *Islander*, 27 January 1843; *Royal Gazette*, 28 August 1827; Cooney, *Female Preacher Nonpluss'd*, pp. 5, 6, 8. The "petticoats" of women preachers excited recurring

evangelical preachers were no more exempt than McCurdy from the charge of babbling and groaning on pretence of religious zeal, by the 1820s it was only the infelicities of a “female preacher” that provoked indignation in pamphlet and press.

Overt opposition was not confined to print, for feminine “frailty” gave no exemption from male harassment. Twice Nancy Towle was annoyed by discharge of firearms at Lubec (opposite Deer Island and Campobello). At St. Andrews she was threatened by a mob and by a naval officer. During her extended stay in Saint John, meetings were “frequently saluted of guns, drums, stones, powder, fire, threats, &c. &c.”. At Halifax she faced “considerable persecution”. Susannah McCurdy, also, was no stranger to the “frowns and persecutions of an ungrateful and an ungodly world”. The *Miramichi Mercury* urged her prosecution under New Brunswick’s law against unlicensed preaching. What proved her final meeting at Newcastle was disrupted physically by the vitriolic Cooney.⁶⁵

In this, as in many respects, the mission of Saint John’s Mary Narraway Bond was markedly different. She did not itinerate but laboured fixedly in her own meeting-house for more than three decades. Robert McCurdy, one infers, did not endorse his wife’s travelling ministry, but George Bond laboured with his wife jointly in everything except actual preaching, and in this she had his warm support. Married to a long-time city father, Mrs. Bond was an improbable target for missiles, gunfire or official prosecution. Unlike the case of her preaching sisters, moral respectability and economic security were probably not in question. No one asked jokingly of her, as did the Halifax press of McCurdy, whether she preached the gospel of Frances Wright (1795-1852), the Scotch-American defender of divorce, interracial marriage, birth control and equality of the sexes.⁶⁶ Detailed press notice of Bond’s work – admittedly the Sabbath school rather than the pulpit ministry – was congratulatory, not sensational, condescending or hostile. No description of her preaching style has been located yet, but the earlier-quoted account of teaching biblical history, typology, prophesy and doctrine to the poor children of Sand Point implies method and argument rather than whining and groaning. McCurdy and Towle boasted of taking the Bible alone for their guide and of preaching extempore, but Bond, had she been male, could have passed as a scholarly Anglican or New England cleric:

She studied continually the Bible; she became fully acquainted with its historical, doctrinal, practical, and experimental parts; her mind was richly stored with religious and other useful knowledge, which she gathered from her extensive and valuable library, perhaps the largest private library in the Province, including the voluminous works of the greatest Divines, and other writers, from the sixteenth century to the present.⁶⁷

notice. McCurdy’s underskirts were invoked to trivialize her not just in Pictou but also in Newcastle, where Robert Cooney stigmatized her as the “petticoat-Apostle”.

65 Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated*, pp. 39-41, 43, 46; *Mercury*, 26 February, 27 May 1828; D.G. Bell, “Religious Liberty and Protestant Dissent in Loyalist New Brunswick”, *University of New Brunswick Law Journal*, 36 (1987), p. 146.

66 *Morning Herald*, 4 January 1843.

67 *Religious Intelligencer*, 11 August 1854.

Yet, as with other female preachers, Bond worked at the margin. She may not have travelled to remote Miramichi or laboured among Pictou's colliers, but she made her primary field at Sand Point, among those who were in economic and racial terms Saint John's marginal residents and for whom she began what was remembered as the colony's first Sabbath school. Her secondary work was among transient sailors, for missioning to whom she used the technique of the floating bethel. Although probably as close to a "pastor" as any North American woman of the 19th century, no more than other female preachers of the day did she seek ordination over a church or undertake to perform baptisms or administer the Lord's Supper.⁶⁸

With her sisters, too, Bond found that the very marginality of female preachers brought an element of advantage. As a class they were "self-created", just as Cooney charged of McCurdy, but in self-authorization came a measure of freedom. It exempted their labours from the authority of men. With satisfaction Nancy Towle wrote that she was "accountable to no mortal, for my procedure – nor hath any human being, any control over me". After twice considering joining the Christian Connexion, she resolved finally to adhere to no denomination. Susannah McCurdy was not simply the "Baptist" that family history recalls but an excommunicate Baptist.⁶⁹ Mary Bond preached for more than 30 years but chose to join a Calvinist Baptist church only when she was literally on her deathbed, anxious to secure a future for her religious meeting. During her active preaching years she agreed with Towle and perhaps McCurdy in prizing marginality because it freed her from accounting for her work to a male ministerial hierarchy which, in the case of the Maritime Calvinist Baptists, would have discountenanced it.

Denominational leaders aside, many English-speaking Protestants were willing to attend women's preaching, though evidence is uneven. Surviving sources detail more of two religious meetings held by Martha Jago in 1829 than about Mary Bond's preaching across three decades. In the age of itinerancy, a fresh face could always draw a throng of young and curious for a time, so that a long, settled ministry like that of Bond is more impressive than a travelling preacher's few weeks of crowded meetings. Yet for the three itinerants identified here there were crowds indeed. The Charlottetown press pronounced Jago's success "remarkable". When she preached in the Market House on Sunday, the adjacent Church of England was nearly deserted. When she preached in the Methodist chapel "such crowds continued to pour in that in a short time all the passages were blocked up, and several persons alarmed for the stability of the building went out". Many of these people, it was emphasized, had scarcely ever been known to enter a place of worship. One may suspect hyperbole in Nancy Towle's account of the great numbers attending her ministry, but even detractors bore witness to her success in drawing away people from the Halifax Calvinist Baptist meeting. Once, at Saint John, the foundation of the preaching house nearly collapsed from weight of the "hundreds" attending her, and once it did collapse, precipitating a "great number" into the cellar. Success still more impressive

68 On the ordination issue note Almond Davis, *Female Preacher, or Memoir of Salome Lincoln, afterwards the Wife of Elder Junia S. Mowry* (Providence, R.I., 1843), p. 13 and Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, pp. 7, 136, 224, 278. It is thought that the New York Congregationalist Antoinette Louisa Brown (1825-1921) was the first woman ordained in North America, in 1853.

69 Cooney, *Female Preacher Nonpluss'd*, p. 7; Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated*, p. 232; Blanchard, *Biographical Sketches of the McCurdys*, p. 201.

marked the labours of Susannah McCurdy on the Miramichi. Bitter enemies acknowledged her “talismanic” influence and the “visible improvement in the morals and conduct of the people” that her ministry produced. At Liverpool her auditory included “every rank, grade, and color”.⁷⁰

No one could attend, or consider attending, a woman’s religious meeting, or even hear of such a meeting or notice it in the press, without addressing in some sense whether it was proper for women to preach. The idea of the female preacher and the issue of propriety were inseparable. Probably most colonists, having conjured the idea, dismissed it unequivocally, and some did so demonstratively. But for others, particularly those sympathetic to the Newlight or Wesleyan traditions, there would have to be mental evaluation of the question. In that sense, “debate” over female preaching occurred far beyond the confines of literary evidence.⁷¹

A woman could not go out preaching without herself having worked through the question, anticipating calls to justify her conduct. Three newspapers give accounts of Susannah McCurdy’s sermonizing and, significantly, all mention her defence of female preaching, as if that were standard in her presentations. Unlike Mary Coy, Nancy Towle doubted not for a moment that biblical precedents authorized her ministry. Herself converted under the labours of Clarissa Danforth (b. 1792), a Freewill Baptist evangelist, she took pride in listing nearly two dozen women preachers she had encountered in her travels, who “strengthened my hands much, in the LORD, and exhorted me, to patient continuance in doing well”. Female preachers, she thought, were more useful than males, who were often formalist, place-hungry “hirlings” and “idle shepherds”. Towle gave the world her autobiography “especially, for the encouragement of my *own sex*”. Its narrative closes with a sentence pledging “vindication of the [religious] rights of woman!” – an invocation of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) that cannot have been accidental.⁷² At personal expense Towle reprinted the biography of an English woman preacher; her own venture into the periodical press bore the significant title *Female Religious Advocate*. The other thread, apart from the Bible, in the female preacher’s standard apologia is reflected in Martha Jago’s decision to open one of her Charlottetown meetings with the Wesleyan hymn beginning:

Shall I, for fear of feeble man
The Spirit’s course in me restrain? –
Or undismay’d, in deed and word,
Be a true witness for my Lord?⁷³

70 *Prince Edward Island Register*, 24 February 1829; Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated*, p. 41; *Mercury*, 26 February 1828; *Novascotian*, 15 October 1840. Despite such evidence of popular stir, one cannot assume that curiosity to hear a female preacher was community-wide, even in a small place. A case in point is Eastport, where Towle preached extensively towards the close of the 1820s. In the detailed journal of a local woman with marked sympathy for evangelical preachers, Towle’s labours go wholly unmentioned: M.H. Jewell, ed., *Diary of Sarah Connell Ayer* (Portland, 1910).

71 The first Maritime reference I have noticed to female preaching dates from a decade earlier: *New Brunswick Courier*, 15 November 1817; but only with the conjunction of four preachers active towards the end of the 1820s was there debate of the question.

72 Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated*, pp. 7, 241; Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792).

73 *Royal Gazette*, 28 August 1827; *Novascotian*, 15 October 1840; *Yarmouth Herald*, 13 January 1843; Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated*, pp. 7-9, 14-16, 21, 81; Dow, *History of the Town of Hampton*, p.

Here the preacher preempts her critics by professing to labour in obedience to the Spirit, at the same time making a witty play on feeble “man” that observers would not miss.

The stir caused by the almost simultaneous labours of four women preachers in the Maritimes towards the end of the 1820s prompted three writers – two in Charlottetown and the Newcastle pamphleteer – to articulate not just sympathy for the cause but a reasoned defence. The principal defender was an anonymous Miramichi woman so identified (as an exhorter?) with Susannah McCurdy’s work that Robert Cooney denounced her by name in the course of his speech interrupting McCurdy’s meeting at the King’s Arms. When Cooney issued a version in pamphlet form, this woman set out to examine the question for herself. Within days she produced a *Discourse on Female Prophesying, or Preaching*, first as her own public oration and then for the press, one of the earliest distinct imprints on the subject. Her conclusion was that preaching by women was an “*allowed irregularity*”, prohibited in general but permitted in extraordinary cases, as illustrated in both Old and New Testaments. She argued that what the Bible sometimes calls “prophesying” means preaching, cites various notable biblical women and distinguishes as inapplicable St. Paul’s injunctions to silence and submission. By allowing that “the stronger sex are appointed by God as the *general public* Teachers of Religion and morals, arts and sciences” but subject to “an exception in favor of some females” who might “pray and prophesy in public”, she makes the narrowest of cases for women’s preaching. Conceding to Cooney that “much disorder would ensue to families and to society” if women generally were called to preach, she concludes nevertheless that in every age God has “allowed and countenanced” certain extraordinary women to mission publicly, as witness “a female named *Nan* [St. Nina]”, who carried Christianity to ancient Georgia. Moreover, history showed that many queens had reigned with success although, from “the nature of things”, woman were better suited to the preaching office than to politics.⁷⁴

As might be supposed of a work turned out on the spur of the moment by a writer lacking college education and access to a useful library, the pamphlet has an unpolished, homemade character. In this lies its interest. Apart from strictures on Cooney’s “unmanly and shameful” conduct towards McCurdy and on the “beardless boys” of the local press, it consists of biblical analysis; reference to other authority (Anglican liturgy, Quaker practice, history) is glancing. Here, then, is a writer who observes that McCurdy’s preaching on the Miramichi has accomplished good, who is faced with an argument that female preaching is unscriptural and who wants to sort out the matter for herself. All she can draw on is her Bible and her reason. Within a week she produces 18 pages of argument that God does call some women to preach. In doing so she invented a defence of women’s preaching that had been invented

1012; *Prince Edward Island Register*, 24 February 1829. McCurdy’s argument – that males had betrayed and crucified Christ but (only) women wept at the cross and were first to proclaim the resurrection – was standard in the apology for female preaching, albeit easily lampooned in the press. McCurdy was also represented as arguing that women taught religion in nunneries and that biblical commentators did not rule out women preachers altogether.

74 Note remarks on the surviving text at note 44 above. Cooney’s pamphlet is dated 26 February 1828 (i.e. two days after it was delivered in speech form); hers is dated 3 March. I have no idea of the author’s identity except that there seems no doubt that she was a woman. Possibly she was among members of the Miramichi Ladies Bible Society: *Mercury*, 21 November 1826.

many times before. No doubt the writer suspected as much, but she had no access to such a resource.⁷⁵ Faced with this difficulty, she was able to use her Bible to create a justification for McCurdy's preaching, just as 35 years earlier a young, untutored Mary Coy found that she could sift biblical texts and examples and conclude that God had authorized some women to preach, despite what she had "always heard".

In the same year that *Discourse on Female Prophesying* appeared, the "unusual sensation" created by Martha Jago's Charlottetown meetings prompted seven letters to the local press from four writers airing the issue of female preaching, two of whom expressed a degree of openness on the issue.⁷⁶ Argument on the question – weighing the biblical precedents, sifting the Pauline texts – is predictable. Even so, "Lover of Truth" made a case so similar to that of the anonymous Miramichi pamphleteer that one might suspect them of being the same person were not the Charlottetown author a markedly more fluent, educated writer. The argument runs that female preaching "at least to a certain extent, is not indefensible". The Bible shows these to be cases "where the Almighty, either by an immediate appointment to some extraordinary office, or by an endowment of extraordinary qualifications, together with concurrent and peculiar providential circumstances, has called them to it, and testified his approbation by 'signs following'". The piece invokes a key passage from the best-known apologist of the day for female preaching, the Irish Wesleyan biblical scholar Adam Clarke.⁷⁷ Lover of Truth concludes with reference to the "numerous instances, both ancient and modern", when women's preaching had good effect, citing the missionary to the ancient Georgians and the Latvian Barbara Juliane von Krudener (1764-1824), whom the writer calls the Whitefield of Europe.

Lover of Truth joined the press controversy because "Moderate Churchman", the writer whose initial openness to female preaching had provoked the Charlottetown debate, appeared to draw back. Apparently the latter's position was complicated by personal regard for Jago (said to have "bewitched" him) and by animus towards another writer, "FNM". While professing preference that women *not* preach, Moderate Churchman constructs a more daring apology for it than either the Miramichi pamphleteer or Lover of Truth was willing to venture. His analysis appealed not to the Bible only but also to the "common sense of the thing". Society

75 The point is not that her precise argument had been invented before (although there are a number of instances) but that many other women, in mutual ignorance, had worked their way through the biblical arguments for and against female preaching to conclude that it was permitted. Instructive historical discussion of discontinuity and reinvention in such "feminist" Bible criticism is offered in Gerda Lerner, *Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York, 1993), pp. 138-66. On tradition or lack of it among generations of female preachers, note Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, pp. 15-16, 169.

76 *Prince Edward Island Register*, pp. 3, 17, 24 March, 21, 28 April 1829. More is going on between two of these writers than a debate over women preaching, but it is beside the point of this study to explore the personal rivalries exposed. There are hints that "Moderate Churchman" (three letters) may have become in some degree a supporter of Jago at one of her meetings. From his sneers at the priggish "FNM" (two letters) one infers that the latter was a non-Anglican clergyman who had lately achieved that status after earlier association with the trade of shoemaking. "Philotaxis" and "Lover of Truth" (one letter each) did not join in the personal attacks.

77 *Prince Edward Island Register*, 21 April 1829; *Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography, 1730-1860* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 225-6. The same famous Clarke passage is quoted in Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated*, p. 9. It is a telling reflection of the intellectual isolation of the Miramichi pamphleteer that she was not in a position to invoke it.

allowed women to “spout and harangue” on the stage and applauded them. It accorded fame to Hannah More and Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849) for their uplifting fiction. Similarly then, if a Martha Jago had “talents, zeal and confidence”, why should she not preach? Women, the writer thought, are “pretty much on a level with us in point of capability”. Only “educate them . . . and perhaps they would be but little inferior to men in every qualification, where mind is concerned”.⁷⁸ If the sight of Martha Jago or the English Wesleyan Mary Barritt Taft (1772-1851) in a pulpit seemed “unnatural”, then it was only because it was uncommon. Such a shift in the debate over female preaching – from biblical authority to an argument based on natural ability – anticipated the soon-to-be widespread 19th-century plea for female education and, ultimately, civic equality. In the Maritime context its first public articulation appears here in the 1820s in the controversy over equal privileges in the pulpit.

Of two Charlottetown writers who opposed female preaching, “Philotaxis” offered polished but standard textual analysis: examples of the activity of various biblical women might be ambiguous but St. Paul’s meaning is plain. More instructive is FNM’s willingness to engage Moderate Churchman’s argument from ability. If women could preach merely because they were able to do so in some cases, reasoned FNM, then, equally, they would have a claim to “the honours of the Bar and of the Bench – to the occupancy of Professorships in our Universities – and to seats in the Imperial Parliament”. If women could preach, then why could they not be ordained; why could they not be priests of the altar and bishops? To FNM, the true qualification for Christian ministry was not ability and talent, however great, but divine appointment, and that, the Bible reveals, was never directed at females. For the same reason, appeal to changing times and the “march of intellect in the 19th century” was beside the point.⁷⁹

The most extended attack on the idea of women preachers, Cooney’s *Female Preacher Nonpluss’d*, is ostensibly a discourse on 1 Corinthians 14 (“Let your Women keep silence in the Churches”). It understands St. Paul’s central message as commending to women the “heaven-born virtue of silence” and its “inseperable [*sic*] companion modesty”. But the pamphlet merely glances at St. Paul. Mainly it is a eulogium to “Woman, lovely woman, the silent, the modest woman” and an excoriation of her “loquacious and immodest” antithesis, Susannah McCurdy. Cooney fills up his pages not with argument but with a breathless torrent of epithets: “deluded and deluding wretch”, “wretched fugitive”, “wretched fanatic”, “disgracing her own sex”, “the frantic, the Anti-Christian, the ignorant, the arrogant wretch”, “brass-faced impudence”, “vomit . . . insolence”, “mushroom Preacher”, “female pirate of souls”, “possessed by the devil”, “ambassador of satan”, “female impostor” (and many others). As noted earlier, however, Cooney’s agitated defence of women’s “precious pearl of modesty and silence” differed only in extravagance from views held by other Maritime intellectuals. Such writers reflected an articulate consensus that, by “the law, both of Moses and of Nature”, women were not permitted to preach. Women were unable constitutionally to withstand the focus of public attention, and there was something brazen and unnatural in a woman who did not feel such discomfiture.⁸⁰

78 *Prince Edward Island Register*, 3 March 1829.

79 *Ibid.*, 17 March 1829.

80 *Ibid.*, 24 March 1829, and citations at note 63 above.

In time it was the rejectionist view of female preaching that prevailed. This is reflected not merely in the selective recollections of 19th-century denominational historians but in the stories of the preachers themselves. As noted earlier, Martha Jago ceased gospel labours on marrying in 1830; her 1875 obituary made no mention of preaching. When death came to the aged Susannah Lynds McCurdy in 1862, there was no obituary at all. Mary Narraway Bond's successor in 1854 was male. Nancy Towle, that most engaged advocate of women's special preaching mission, retired from the field in 1840; the long years until her death in 1876 were marked by bitterness and disappointment. A shift in attitude towards preaching by women is also evident in the press. In 1828 McCurdy's arrival in Newcastle had created what the local newspaper called "an extraordinary sensation", and in 1829 Jago's advent at Charlottetown was headlined as a "marvel". Forty years later, when another itinerant woman arrived to preach, this time at Saint John, it rated briefest mention in the public prints: "SERMON.— We are requested to say that Catherine Schertz will preach a sermon on the ingathering of Israel, on King Square, to-morrow, Sunday, at 3 o'clock, P.M."⁸¹ By the 1860s, it might seem, even a sermon on signs of the approaching millennium preached by a female in a public square was regarded casually, noticed in the press by way of favour rather than sensation.

In examining the fate of female preaching one begins by acknowledging that the reporting agenda of the press is an unreliable index of the incidence of preaching by women. What was treated as sensational in the 1820s was of markedly less interest in the 1860s, but a generation later reportage on the "Hallelujah lasses" of the Salvation Army was excited and relentless.⁸² Moreover, at mid-century the issue of women preachers, far from forgotten, received conspicuous airing when the New York city Wesleyan Phoebe Worrall Palmer (1807-74) and her husband made a triumphant 1858 tour of the three Maritime colonies, launching their period of trans-Atlantic renown.⁸³ For her roles in fostering the "prayer meeting" revival of the 1850s and explaining the old Wesleyan notions of Christian "perfection" and "entire sanctification" in a way that made them popular, Palmer rivals the founder of Christian Science as the most influential woman in American religion. Although it was she who was the celebrated platform presence, Palmer worked in tandem with her physician husband and by invitation from local clergy, not as an intruder like Towle or McCurdy. Genteel, the focus of an extensive publication machine, and an ally of rather than rival to the male ministerial hierarchy, she seems to have regarded her role as unique rather than one to which other women should aspire. Far from a straight-ahead feminist in religion, she professed to exhort rather than preach. Yet, even as the intended fortnight near Fredericton turned into a six-month tour, Palmer was preparing a book asserting biblical justification for female preaching, albeit in extraordinary circumstances and

81 *Morning Telegraph* (Saint John), 22 June 1867; *Morning Journal* (Saint John), 21 July 1867. Note apparent reference to Schertz ("woman lecturer speaking on Palestine") in Dorothy Lovesay, *To Be a Pilgrim: A Biography of Silas Tertius Rand, 1810-1889* . . . (Hantsport, N.S., 1992), p. 165.

82 Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto, 1996), chapter 7.

83 *Provincial Wesleyan*, 5 August (Wakefield, Fredericton), 26 August (Saint John), 16 September (Halifax), 30 September (Truro), 5 November (River John, Charlottetown), 2 December (Moncton) 1858; Phoebe Palmer, *Promise of the Father; or, A Neglected Speciality of the Last Days* (Boston, 1859), pp. 274-306; Henry Degen and Barlow Gorham, eds., *Guide to Holiness*, 34 (Boston, 1858), pp. 82-5, 124, 174-8. On the Palmers' famous camp meeting at Pownal 20 years later, see *Provincial*

without ordination.⁸⁴ Moreover, as a celebrity appearing on the same platform as scores of clergymen of several denominations and before tens of thousands of hearers, her work could not fail to highlight the question of female religious leadership, whatever the personal rationalization. On her arrival in the Maritimes the *Provincial Wesleyan's* Woodstock correspondent sought to pre-empt an issue evidently on some minds by noting parenthetically that "Mrs. Palmer has a pleasing manner in her style of address, and cannot offend by her simple, lady-like manners". Soon after, a Wesleyan minister at Truro challenged the "strong prejudice [in some minds] against females being at all employed in any prominent capacity in the Church". Conceding that the Bible did not authorize female preachers or exhorters "ordinarily", he thought that there was both scriptural and experiential reason to believe that God called them "occasionally". "Of the Divine choice of this unusual instrumentality in the case of sister Palmer", he concluded, "there have not been wanting abundant and most signal attestations". From Pictou, a Presbyterian clergyman wrote Palmer privately to regret the "prejudices of the church in relation to woman's exercising her gift in speaking" but looking to a day when "love" (woman) would join "wisdom" (man) in the "service of the sanctuary".⁸⁵ In view of Palmer's triumphant progress through the Maritimes, highlighting indirectly and sometimes directly the issue of female preaching, one concludes that, if the claims of women preachers had lost momentum by mid-19th century, it cannot have been because the idea was unfamiliar.

While it is premature to offer a positive statement concerning any change in incidence of female preaching, important evidence suggests that the role of women in worship was *perceived* as in decline or to have declined already. In 1855 Calvinist Baptist ministers Charles Tupper and Silas Rand led a debate on "Women's Sphere in Religion" across ten issues of the denominational *Christian Messenger*.⁸⁶ As both protagonists assumed that Maritime Baptists regarded female preaching as unscriptural, that subject was hardly mentioned.⁸⁷ Impetus for debate was a diversity of views among believers and churches as to whether the Scriptures permitted women to exhort. This Tupper affirmed and Rand denied. Tupper's practical concern,

Wesleyan, 21, 28 July, 4 August 1869.

84 Nancy Hardesty, *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Revivalism and Feminism in the Age of Finney* (Brooklyn, 1991), pp. 102-3; Ruth Tucker and Walter Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present* (Grand Rapids, 1987), pp. 262-3; Charles White, *Beauty of Holiness: Phæbe Palmer as Theologian, Revivalist, Feminist, and Humanitarian* (Grand Rapids, 1986), pp. xvi, 171-3, 191-3; Timothy Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* ([1957] Gloucester, Mass., 1976), pp. 123-4.

85 *Provincial Wesleyan*, 5 August, 30 September (John McMurray) 1858; Palmer, *Promise of the Father*, p. vii (Alexander McArthur).

86 *Christian Messenger*, (Tupper) 10 April, 5 June, 31 July, 11 September 1855, (Rand) 15 May, 22 May, 3 July 1855. The anonymous letter, evidently from a minister, that sparked the debate is in 15 March; correspondence from others and an additional Rand letter are in 24 July (Sarah Ann Taylor) and 14 August (Bertha Lewellyn). Tupper (father of the politician) was a seasoned denominational biblical expositor. His nephew Rand was the Mi'kmaq linguist and missionary. Other Calvinist Baptist commentary on female preaching or exhorting is found in *Christian Messenger*, 12 June 1840, and *Christian Visitor*, 30 May 1849, 27 August 1863.

87 An example of a mid-century Calvinist Baptist minister, apparently near Clarence, who opposed women preaching, is given in Mussey, *Life Sketches*, p. 163. On the other hand, in 1861 the denominational organ in Nova Scotia noted without disdain the presence of a preaching Quakeress at Bridgetown: *Christian Messenger*, 7 August 1861. However, it was conventional to affect respect for Quakers, who were not considered serious rivals.

suggested more than once, was the link between female exhortation in local churches and revivalism, both of which he appeared to view as threatened. Now that every “prosperous” church had a “majority of pious females” the idea of suppressing exhortation by women, particularly in prayer and conference meetings, jeopardized the vitality of the denomination. What Tupper implied, one of the paper’s lay correspondents affirmed. Bertha Lewellyn [sic] recalled heroic “former years” of denominational expansion, when often “some sister or sisters have arisen and delivered a powerful exhortation”. Now, she lamented, “these lights are sinking into obscurity!”: “Alas! Alas! for our ministry, where are the grandmothers Lois, the mothers Eunice, who with unfeigned faith, and humble prayers succoured the Lord’s host; they could point to more than one Priscilla who instructed them in theology”.⁸⁸ Note that Lewellyn’s New Testament exempla are not the “prophetesses” cited by proponents of female preaching. The Book of Acts credits Lois and Eunice, the grandmother and mother of the apostle Timothy, with rearing him in the faith; Priscilla tutored another early apostle in Christian beliefs. The point Lewellyn sought to underscore was that even such Bible-authorized “helps” to male ministry were fading into history and that the Calvinist Baptist cause would suffer further if Rand’s views discouraging female exhortation were to prevail.

If Maritime evidence suggests that the practice of exhorting, let alone preaching, by women did not build to become a feature of major Protestant denominations in the course of the 19th century and actually declined in acceptance, then this would parallel developments elsewhere. Elizabeth Muir’s study of various Methodist alignments in 19th-century Upper Canada concludes that preaching by women, and acceptance of women’s preaching, met with resistance as early as the 1830s and was nearly extinct at mid-century. Pondering why this occurred among Upper Canadian Methodists but not those in the adjacent United States, she suggests that the close links that Canadian Methodists cultivated with English Wesleyans led them to emulate the English stance against women preaching. In a province tending ever towards an American cultural orbit and polarized between reformers and conservatives, Methodist leaders threw their weight against the republican lure by embracing English rather than American denominational ties, one aspect of which was suppressing the “disorderly” practice of female preaching. In view of Upper Canada’s peculiar demographic and political history, Muir’s speculation makes sense. However, the attempted contrast between this scenario and the persistence of female preaching in a more democratic, diverse United States must be read in the light of Catherine Brekus’s careful research. While female preaching did continue in the United States at a higher level of visibility than in the colonies to the northward, Brekus discovers a largely successful “backlash” against its influence beginning in the 1830s. By mid-century it was clear that the promise of female preaching, rather than being embraced progressively by mainstream Protestantism, had been rejected. Even once-radical religious groups, such as Freewill Baptists and Methodists, turned away

88 *Christian Messenger*, 14 August 1855 (I am grateful to Daniel Goodwin for this reference). In 1863 the retired Calvinist Baptist minister Jarvis Ring attended Fredericton prayer meetings at which a number of women – in one case 11 – exhorted or prayed aloud. He thought this a “deth Blow to All those that did not Believe that Females Should take a Part in Prayer metings, But Be silent”: Ring Memoir (Griffin-Allwood transcription), p. 168, ABA. While there may be more than one way to understand this passage, it suggests that the propriety of female speaking in religious meetings was not established in sentiment or in fact; otherwise, Ring would not have found it a subject for remark.

from earlier experiments with female preaching as they filtered their reading of the New Testament through an ever denser ideology demarcating women's concerns as home and family. It appears, then, that preaching by women in North America was at its apogee in terms of popular acceptance in the 1820s and that, by mid-century or somewhat earlier, its potential had been closed off. When Abigail Messer Mussey (1811-91), an Adventist exhorter (later preacher) at Clements, lamented in 1862 that "female preachers are but few, and they are persecuted and opposed by the clergy of our day", part of her discouragement may have been the contrast she felt between "our day" and the larger possibilities open to women of an earlier time.⁸⁹

In the context of an ever more homogeneous 19th-century evangelical Protestantism, the reasons that Brekus, Muir and other historians assign for this "failure" of women's preaching are likely to be true of northeastern North America generally. In the first decades of the century, regular access to religious worship was confined to towns and villages, so that itinerant ministry by both men and women was more likely to attract acceptance in such venues as the unchurched southwest Miramichi or a poor neighbourhood of Saint John than would be the case a generation later, when denominational machinery was less primitive and the male ministry had taken root widely. Moreover, by mid-century the great age of Protestant adventurism had closed. Back in the era of the American and French Revolutions, religious as well as political first principles had been in question. A generation prepared to abandon calvinism, to re-imagine God as the universe's watchmaker or a convert's personalized saviour, to restore the church's primitive simplicity or to accept as divinely-appointed the mission of myriad unlettered itinerants had kept an equally open mind in some cases to gospel labour by females. In contrast, by the middle of the 19th century – Brekus points to the symbolism of 1844, when the prophesied end of the world led to the "Great Disappointment" – this speculative impulse was spent, and Protestant sects were headed towards either bourgeois propriety or extinction. Displacing the soul-winning, riches-disdaining, knight errant evangelist as ministerial paradigm was the figure of the settled pastor, chairman of a pious bureaucracy in which regular fundraising for benevolent enterprise was as pressing a concern as occasional conversions.⁹⁰ Now prestige-hungry congregants joined denominational hierarchy in expecting pastors to be "professionals" possessing social graces, one credential of which was college education. In the 1820s the Newlight approach to ministerial qualification had been accepted widely: if God called one to ministry, then God would supply the needful. A generation later even denominational descendants of Henry Alline felt the claims of liberal education.⁹¹ The combination of these developments – competition from males,⁹² rise of a pastoral model of ministry,

89 Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters*, pp. 11, 181-2, 277-80; Burnside, "Bible Christians in Canada", p. 26; Beer, "Astonishing Sisterhood", p. 51; Muir, *Petticoats in the Pulpit*, pp. 3-4, 8, 33-5, 40-1, 46-8, 70-1, 98-101, 122-6, 132-4, 180-209; Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims*, chapter 7; Billington, "Female Laborers in the Church", pp. 390-4; Mussey, *Life Sketches*, pp. 160, 163. Note also Davis, *Salome Lincoln*: "I am aware, that female preaching at the present day [1843], among a large and respectable body of christians, has become very unpopular", pp. 9, 36.

90 For example, in leaving the Calvinist Baptists for the Plymouth Brethren in 1872, Hantsport minister Silas Rand excoriated the bourgeois priorities of the former: Rand, *Short Account of the Lord's Work among the Micmac Indians. With Some Reasons for His Seceding from the Baptist Denomination* (Halifax, 1873), pp. 26, 28-9.

91 The rise of genteel evangelicalism and professionalized pastoral ministry is a principal motif of Goodwin, "Faith of the Fathers" and Bell, "Allinite Tradition and the New Brunswick Free Christian

educational requisite – extinguished in a practical sense any room for pulpit ministry by a woman. Conversely, proliferation of women's organizations both within and without the church (mission societies, temperance organizations and, especially in the United States, the abolitionist movement) offered women novel channels for important, autonomous action of a sort that much of society applauded and that did not transgress the injunctions of St. Paul.

That mid-19th-century Protestants in the English-speaking world had come to equate the preaching gift with the pastoral office and could not “imagine” women as pastors reflects the triumph of an ideology of distinct male and female natures operating in distinct spheres. The Pictou clergyman who encouraged Phœbe Palmer to look hopefully to a time when the different but complementary male and female types would minister together in the “service of the sanctuary” was exceptional. Most contemporaries who reflected on the natures of men and women accepted, with a correspondent of the *Christian Messenger*, that while “religion was designed for woman” and more women than men “adorn the profession of godliness”, yet the formal and public functions of the church “pertain to *males* only”. By mid-century this way of understanding the world was embraced by women hardly less than by men. When Bertha Lewellyn lamented that female spiritual gifts were “falling into obscurity”, her critique focused not on male interpreters of St. Paul but on her own sex. The reason churches could not point to modern Priscillas was that “our sisters” were paralyzed spiritually by “worldly mindedness, worldly conformity and carnal security”.⁹² Women themselves had become comfortable with the idea that the public exercises of religion should be led by men. Isolated episodes of female preaching in the Maritimes continued throughout the remainder of the century and after, notably among Salvationists and in early Pentecostalism, but the moment for acceptance of women preachers into the mainstream of Protestantism had passed.

Baptists”, pp. 64-71. I do not mean that evangelical denominations required college education for ministerial aspirants in the 19th century, merely that they began to accept this as the desirable norm.

92 Overt evidence is necessarily uncommon but one notes that in 1838 the American anti-slavery publicist Sarah Grimké (1792-1873) published mordant commentary on the anti-competitive anxiety of ministerial males: quoted in Hardesty, *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy*, pp. 105-6. The English Wesleyans' 1803 resolve against female preaching was framed in terms of sufficiency of males: *New-Brunswick Religious and Literary Journal*, 2 May 1829. However, Valenze explains the move in terms of class and respectability: *Prophetic Sons and Daughters*, pp. 92-3.

93 Palmer, *Promise of the Father*, p. vii; *Christian Messenger*, 15 March, 14 August 1855.