

INTRODUCTION TO WATCHWORDS

The life and ministry of Mary Bosanquet-Fletcher (1739-1815) represents an excellent example of someone whose standing in evangelical circles has gone through peaks and troughs since first coming to prominence in the early 1760s. Regarded during her lifetime as a paragon of female spirituality, Mary's fame reached its peak in the generation after her death in 1815. Her spiritual autobiography¹ edited by Henry Moore went through 20 editions between 1817 and 1890, and she was the subject of published articles and testimonials on both sides of the Atlantic. This comparatively high level of interest faded during the second half of the 19th century and virtually died out by 1900. Mary started to attract attention again in the 1980s, as part of an upsurge of interest in the feminine contribution to the Evangelical Revival. Works by Paul Chilcote² and Earl Kent Brown³ made particular mention of Mary as one of the leading Methodist women of her day and this increased level of awareness has continued, with particular regard to postgraduate research.

The recent flurry of interest in the life of Mary Bosanquet-Fletcher remains low key. She has not been the sole subject of a major published work since the early 19th century and outside of academic circles, her name remains unknown to the wider evangelical community. Even at those times when her standing within Methodism was at its height, the resulting biographical treatment was entirely hagiographical and based on meager secondary sources. With the exception of her spiritual autobiography and a small number of tracts, virtually nothing of Mary's extensive writings have been published. This comparative neglect of one of the Revival's most remarkable figures represents a weakness in evangelical studies as is shown by even a brief overview of the chief facts of her life.

Mary Bosanquet-Fletcher was born in 1739 in Leytonstone, Essex, the daughter of Samuel Bosanquet, a wealthy banker of Huguenot extraction.

She was converted at an early age and was soon showing indications of what became a lifelong commitment to a spirituality that placed emphasis on dreams and other mystical impressions. Her eccentric leanings caused a partial alienation from her family and at the age of 22 she left home and settled in London where she came to the approving notice of John Wesley.

In 1762 Mary moved back to Leytonstone and founded a Christian community orphanage and school with two other prominent Methodist women, Sarah Crosby and Sarah Ryan. Mary's detailed account of the running of the community is contained in *A Letter to Mr. John Wesley* by "A Gentlewoman," published in 1764. At the time this piece was written, Mary was aged just 25 but was already projecting a personality that was as powerful as it was charismatic.

After experiencing financial difficulties, the community moved to Cross Hall in Yorkshire where Wesley was a frequent visitor. Mary was accustomed to 'exhort and to read and expound the scriptures' and by 1771 with Wesley's reluctant approval, she had begun to preach, one of the first Methodist women to do so. In November 1781 she married the Anglican evangelical John Fletcher. Ignoring traditional gender roles, the couple pursued a joint ministry in Fletcher's parish of Madeley in Shropshire. The local tithe barn was converted into a chapel, and Mary preached there regularly in addition to acting as a class leader.

Mary continued her ministry after her husband's death in 1785. She was allowed by the new Rector to remain at the vicarage and to nominate the curate who was to have charge of the parish. At the same time, she controlled the appointment of trustees to the Madeley chapel, which meant that preachers spoke there with her sanction not that of the Wesleyan Conference. This oversight by a woman of both Methodism and the Church of England in one parish should be regarded as unique. Mary continued to preach and lead meetings several times a week until shortly before her death in December 1815. She also maintained an extensive correspondence with Methodists and Anglicans of both sexes and was a particular source of encouragement to the younger generation of female preachers like Mary Taft.

After Mary's death, her long-time companion and confidant Mary Tooth continued her Anglican-Methodist ministry until 1843 but with diminishing success as women were increasingly marginalized and Methodism completed its de facto separation from the Anglican Church.

The significance of Mary Bosanquet-Fletcher rests on a number of secure foundations. John Wesley regarded her as a true "Mother in Israel" and this status, as well as her association with the saintly John Fletcher, shielded her from attempts by the Wesleyan Conference to minimize the role of women after Wesley's death. Mary's powerful connections within

the government and higher reaches of society helped to further safeguard her position as a symbol of the feminine contribution to the Revival.⁴ She also possessed outstanding gifts as a preacher and pastor and had she been born a man, she would in all probability have been one of the evangelical movement's paramount leaders. Mary made an indelible impression on the men and women with whom she came into contact. One of the many fascinating aspects of her life was the fact that the people of Madeley, far from feeling uncomfortable with a woman as their spiritual leader, fiercely resisted attempts from outside the parish to undermine her ministry.

We are fortunate that the detail of Mary's life is preserved in sources that complement and correct the inaccurate work of 19th century biographers. The personal papers of the Fletchers and Mary Tooth are preserved at the John Rylands University Library, The University of Manchester, where they comprise the largest single collection of personal papers in the Methodist Archives and Research Centre. The archive consists of thousands of letters, sermons, diaries, spiritual reflections, and miscellaneous manuscripts dating from the 1750s to the 1840s.

One of the most important parts of the archive is the extensive series of discourses on a spiritual theme known as the "Watchwords" and it is this body of work that is published in part here for the first time. The "Watchwords" consists of two series of addresses based on a list of "Names of Christ" and "The Names of the Church." For reasons of space, only the "Names of Christ" is included in this volume, although it is hoped that the second series will be published separately. The manuscript exists in several complete drafts in the hand of Bosanquet-Fletcher and Mary Tooth, although it is clear that they are principally the work of the former and that Tooth acted mainly as a scribe and editor. The several versions were revised over a period of about 30 years from 1797, although the exact chronology is uncertain. This constant process of re-working was a reflection of the regular and continued use of the "Watchwords," even after Mary's death, and also because they were intended for publication.⁵

The editorial process, despite its lengthy duration, represented a comparatively light touch and the fundamental nature of the "Watchwords" does not appear to have changed a great deal over the years. The circumstances behind their introduction were recorded in Mary Tooth's journal in July 1797:

[Bosanquet-Fletcher] has begun to give the society a watchword for the ensuing fortnight. The first was Adam Cor. 15 v.45. The last fortnight it was Advocate (1 John 2 v.1). Tonight's was Alpha and Omega, the beginner and the finisher. Rev. 1. v.3. Heb. 12.

v.2. The circumstance that led to her doing so was this, Mr Hughes one day mentioned that Mr Fletcher at one time took the name of our Lord, and afterwards of the Church, and preached from them, but was not able to give her anything of the substance of them — it was pressed upon her mind to write a few lines on each and entitle it a watchword ⁶

It is clear that Mary viewed her “Watchwords” as part of her call to preach and this conclusion is supported by the fact that they were based on a scriptural text, which characteristic in the 18th century was regarded as the defining mark of a sermon. Even though the “Watchwords” were written from 1797, they probably represent the culmination of Mary’s significant preaching and teaching ministry conducted at Leytonstone and Cross Hall, a vocation explicitly affirmed by John Fletcher three years before their marriage.

The idea that a woman could preach was highly controversial, and it was probably no accident that Mary publicly linked the “Watchwords” with sermons delivered by her husband, even to the extent of using the same themes. By making this association with a man regarded with universal respect, Mary was discreetly validating her own call to preach, but at the same time, explicitly stating that the “Watchwords” were her own work. The fact that they could easily be regarded as sermons may account for their failure to appear in print during the early 19th century.

The “Watchwords” were employed in weekly meetings of the Madeley Society for many years. They did not represent the entirety of Mary’s public ministry — surviving in the Fletcher-Tooth collection are extensive scripture notes and catechetical material used in the instruction of both children and adults, but the “Watchwords” should be considered as the crowning glory of this public work. The meticulous care with which they were preserved and updated indicates that Mary herself viewed them in this light.

It is not hard to see why Mary and her associates attached particular importance to this body of writings — as devotional literature the “Watchwords” stand comparison with the best work of Mary’s male contemporaries. They are full of spiritual insight expressed in a beautifully lyric yet economic style. Despite their rich texture, the “Watchwords” are so simply and clearly written that they are more accessible to the modern reader than the published sermons of either John or Charles Wesley.

The “Watchwords” have additional significance as a rare survival of the female contribution to the Revival. Women formed a clear majority in the Methodist societies and were extremely active as class and band leaders, exhorters and, in a few cases, as preachers, but this public work has left

virtually no trace in the way of surviving sermons or expositions.⁷ The influence that women had on early Methodism is undeniable, but what they brought to the table in terms of teaching and spiritual perspective is not so easily recovered. This first publication of the public discourses of a leading female participant in the Revival represents a landmark for anyone wishing to study the wider context of early Methodism and the evangelical movement within the Church of England.

One final editorial point needs to be made. The “Watchwords” were transcribed by David Frudd as part of his ground-breaking research into the life and ministry of Mary Bosanquet-Fletcher. I am uncomfortably aware that David is the best qualified person to have written this introduction and it is deeply regrettable that other commitments prevented him from doing so.

I am also indebted to David Wilson of Manchester University for sharing his knowledge of religious life in Madeley.

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1. Henry Moore, *The Life of Mrs. Mary Fletcher, Consort and Relict of the Rev. John Fletcher, Vicar of Madeley, Salop*, 2 vols. (Birmingham: J. Peart and Son, 1817).

2. Paul Chilcote, *She Offered Them Christ: The Legacy of Women Preachers in Early Methodism* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1993).

3. Earl Kent Brown, *Women of Mr. Wesley's Methodism*, Studies in Women and Religion Volume 11 (Edwin Mellen Press: Lewiston/Queenston, 1983).

4. Mary's brother Samuel, with whom she remained on friendly terms, was a governor of the Bank of England and an economic advisor to the British government. She was also a friend of the evangelical member of the government Lord Dartmouth, who appears to have asked for Mary's advice with regard to appointing deserving clergymen to Anglican benefices.

5. Mary states in a manuscript annotation that she was often asked for copies of the “Watchwords” by parishioners and that she did plan to publish them due to their usefulness and obvious popularity.

6. Manuscript journal of Mary Tooth, 30 July 1796 (MCA: MAM Fl. 14/2B)

7. The writings of Susanna Wesley have received wide circulation, but they were not written in the first instance with dissemination in mind.