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"FAITHFUL CHILD OF GOD"

NANCY TOWLE, 1796-1876

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of American Studies

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

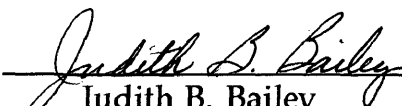
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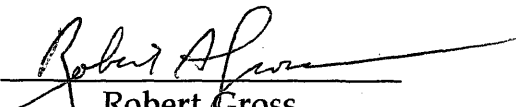
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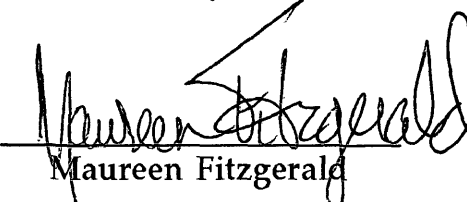
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts


Judith B. Bailey

Approved, April 2000


Robert Gross


Maureen Fitzgerald


Christopher Grasso

DEDICATION

To my mother,
Gladys McKnight Bledsoe

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The author expresses gratitude for the unfailing, loving support of my husband and children throughout the long process of study and writing.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an attempt to understand the shifting attitudes toward ordained female leadership through the study of one of the over one hundred women who were preaching in America between 1740-1845. Nancy Towle (1796-1876) found her identity and vocation in the revivals of evangelical Christianity. Between 1821-1832 she was an itinerant evangelist, traveling more than twenty thousand miles in twelve states, Canada, England and Ireland, preaching among many different Christian communities in a variety of settings.

An educated woman from an elite Hampton, New Hampshire revolutionary family, Nancy Towle began preaching when dissenting sects welcomed the participation of female preachers. As the sects became established denominations and excluded female preachers, Nancy Towle entered a publishing campaign to protest and defend the role of women in the evangelical enterprise. She published three books and a newspaper.

This thesis examines Towle's memoirs in comparison with those of other evangelicals, traces her biography in historical context and analyzes each of her publications to see how they are a defense of female piety and preaching. Her publications provide valuable information not only about herself, but also about the community of female preachers who were active in the revivals of the early nineteenth century. As if aware that female preachers would be forgotten, Towle was determined to preserve their lives in print.

Nancy Towle was not only a theologically conservative evangelical preacher, but also an advocate for female equality. Just as her itinerancy spanned the fluid historical period of welcome then exclusion for female preachers, Towle bridged the ideological gap between the evangelicals and the woman's rights activists.

"FAITHFUL CHILD OF GOD"

NANCY TOWLE, 1796-1876

INTRODUCTION

This thesis grows out of a personal interest in the role of ordained women in the contemporary church. As a seminary student in the 1960s I benefitted from the social, political and religious liberalism of that era. Protestant churches then welcomed initiatives in all aspects of their life, from encouraging social activism, innovating in worship and opening up clerical leadership to women. In recent decades, however, I have seen a retreat. A resurgence of religious fundamentalism, particularly in the Southern Baptist convention, seeks to restore women to a subordinate place in a patriarchal order, and that means excluding them from the pastorate of churches. Issues of biblical authority and interpretation are focal points for debate.

On August 9, 1964 Addie Davis became the first woman to be ordained by a Southern Baptist church, Watts Street Baptist church in Durham, North Carolina. By 1982 the Reverend Davis had at least 175 female colleagues in the ministry. I was one of them. In 1982 I became the first woman to be ordained by Four Mile Creek Baptist Church, Richmond, and the first in the Dover Baptist Association, both over two hundred years old. My ordination was a harbinger of change, one sign among many of a new era at hand, where the church would recognize the spiritual gifts of everyone, regardless of race,

sex or status.

Unfortunately, a backlash was growing. In 1984 at a meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in Dallas, Texas, the delegates from local congregations, known as “messengers,” adopted a resolution opposing the ordination of women. The justification was an interpretation of the Bible which holds that Adam, first in creation, must be first in society; Eve, the first to fall away from God’s will, must endure second place on this earth. Fortunately, that resolution was merely advisory; Southern Baptist churches are autonomous bodies, free to adopt policies on their own.

Many thus continued to ordain women. By 1996, notwithstanding the convention vote, the ranks of ordained women among Southern Baptists had expanded ten-fold, to some 1,160. Sixty-five of them were pastors. Nevertheless, such changes had made no dent in Southern Baptist thinking on the national level. SBC publications insist on hierarchy in family and church. Policies for Southern Baptist Convention agencies, boards and seminaries maintain fundamentalist theology, putting women in a supposedly traditional and subordinate place.

In my attempt to understand and deal with shifting attitudes toward ordained female leadership, especially in the Baptist church, I have asked many questions. What historical, religious and social realities create a climate of openness and then reversal? Why a resurgence of religious fundamentalism following the liberalism of the 1960s and 1970s? Why does

the history of female leadership in the church follow a pattern of progress and decline? I delved into the past and sought out instances of female preaching and leadership in Protestant churches.

As I began research in 1995 I was amazed to learn from Catherine Brekus, who had just completed a Ph.D dissertation at Yale University on this subject, that there was a significant group of women preaching in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Her book, Strangers and Pilgrims, Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845, has recently been published. In both dissertation and book, Brekus documents the involvement of females in the revivals of the First Great Awakening and has discovered at least one hundred women who were preaching in revivals of dissenting denominations in America between 1790 and 1845. These white and African American women provide a rich heritage of courageous women whose strength of motivation and personal authority challenged religious and societal barriers of their day.

In spite of this record, evident in numerous publications, and notwithstanding their tireless efforts to create a tradition of female religious leadership in America, female preachers have disappeared from the historical record. The explanation lies in their distinctive world view, which separates them sharply from women in our own time. These female preachers, Brekus argues, were "biblical" rather than secular feminists. Like the Southern Baptists who oppose the ordination of women in the church, the female

preachers in the past based their claims to female equality in the Bible. Their arguments were grounded in scriptural revelation, not natural rights. Such justification set strict limits on their leadership. Though the women brought hundreds of new converts into evangelical churches, they did not baptize them, never presided over a Lord's Supper, and did not seek to be ordained. For all their preaching, they were resigned to serving as men's helpmates or assistants.

Why then, were such "biblical" feminists forgotten? Brekus concludes that they were left out of history because no one wanted to preserve their memory. They were revolutionary in their defense of female preaching, but orthodox in their theology. They were too conservative to be remembered by women's rights activists, but too radical to be remembered by the evangelicals. Yet, because these women's lives were not entirely radical or entirely traditional, they offer a revealing glimpse of early American culture. Like many other women of their time, they participated in the public sphere, but they "did not challenge the political structures that enforced their inequality in the family, church and state."¹

Even so, as Brekus points out, the spiritual activism of these women demands attention. They give us a new view of the religious landscape of early America, and they challenge common notions of cultural, political,

¹Catherine A. Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 7.

economic and religious change. First, when seen through the eyes of women as well as men the revivals of the Great Awakening were “surprisingly ephemeral.”² Though for the first time in history large numbers of evangelical women spoke publicly in their churches, within a decade most evangelical churches in New England and the South were intent on putting the genie of change back in the bottle. During the American Revolution, the era of the “common man,” fewer women were allowed to preach, testify or witness in public. Sharper lines were drawn between masculine and feminine, public and private.

Second, according to Brekus, in addition to illuminating the short-lived radicalism of the Great Awakening, the stories of female preachers reveal the populist conservatism of nineteenth century revivalism (the Second Great Awakening 1790-1845). The rhetoric of equality espoused by dynamic preachers was accompanied by distrust of the changes in American life accompanying the market revolution. Even when they allowed women to preach, denominational leaders set firm limits on female religious authority

Third, information about the female preachers further challenges the concept of “separate spheres,” the dominant paradigm in scholarship on women and gender in the nineteenth century. The emergence of female preaching in the early nineteenth century was connected to the expansion of

²Ibid., 11.

the vast middle ground between public and private, the arena of “civil society” shared both by men and women. After disestablishment, churches became voluntary associations competing for members and encouraging female participation.

Finally, Brekus argues that the nineteenth century notion of a “two-sex” model of gender helped to expand women’s opportunities for religious leadership. Under the previous “one-sex model,” female preachers had to transcend their feminine nature in order to assume a public role. In a major reversal, evangelicals affirmed that women had the right to preach as *women*. They described women not only as instruments of God who had transcended their gender, but as “Mothers in Israel” and “Sisters in Christ” who could claim divine inspiration for preaching the gospel. The “two-sex” model stereotyping women had its disadvantages, yet many women used the language of female difference to justify their participation in civil society.

In light of these historical arguments, Nancy Towle (1796-1876) of Hampton, New Hampshire deserves further study. Towle was one of the female evangelists who found her identity and vocation in the nineteenth century revivals of evangelical Christianity. During the years 1821-1832, she was an itinerant evangelist, traveling more than twenty thousand miles, preaching among many different Christian communities, in a variety of settings. An educated woman from an elite family, Nancy Towle published her memoirs in 1832. Vicissitudes Illustrated in the Experience of Nancy

Towle in Europe and America, drawn from the journals she kept during her itineracy, is the account of her conversion and call to preach and the record of her itinerant ministry.

My research on Nancy Towle's life supports some of Brekus' historical arguments and expands others. For example, Nancy Towle's extensive travel and public speaking strengthen the argument that female preachers were quite active in civil society, thus challenging the concept of "separate spheres." Second, Nancy Towle's two-fold argument for female preaching based upon spiritual equality (Galatians 3:28) and biblical female role models, reflects the "two-sex" model that Brekus described. But it should be emphasized that Towle did not argue for the inherent spirituality of women. She avoided gender stereotyping both through her arguments for preaching and by evaluating the women and men of her acquaintance as individuals.

Third, Nancy Towle's experience of being first welcomed then excluded from preaching bears out Brekus' description of the populist conservatism of the Second Great Awakening. However, Nancy Towle did not accept the limits upon female authority, the patriarchal domination of the evangelical community and the eventual exclusion of females from preaching. Her response was a publishing campaign to defend the role of female preachers in the evangelical enterprise. In 1831 Towle published The Life and Ministry of Ann Freeman, a radical English evangelist. In 1832, after eleven years of preaching she completed Vicissitudes with a second printing in 1833. She

published Some of the Writings and Last Sentences of Adolphus Dewey, Executed at Montreal in 1833, and in 1834 she began publishing a religious journal, The Female Religious Advocate, in New York City.

In my evaluation, Nancy Towle's publications are her most important contribution to current scholarship and to the history of female preaching. As if aware that female preachers would be forgotten, Towle was determined to preserve their lives in print. More than other evangelists who published, Towle included the stories of other women as well as her own. She resolved to leave a printed record "for the encouragement of my own sex, that may succeed me in the Lord's Vineyard. . . ." Significantly, about one hundred and sixty years later, it was her book, Vicissitudes, that stimulated Catherine Brekus' extensive research and discovery of preaching women who had been left out of history.³

Finally, Catherine Brekus describes Nancy Towle as "one of the most radical female preachers"⁴ because of her stand for woman's rights in Vicissitudes. From my study, I expand Brekus' assessment to argue that Nancy Towle was so radical that she bridged the gap between the theological orthodox female preachers and the woman's rights activists. Forced by her experience to recognize the importance of gender in her life, Towle changed the focus of her life from preaching for spiritual salvation to preaching and

³Ibid., 5.

⁴Ibid., 224.

writing to save women from social and religious subjugation.

In the following pages I describe Nancy Towle's publication of Vicissitudes in 1832, placing her work in the context of other evangelical publications. My second chapter will detail her biography in historical context, asking the question, "what brought her to the point of publication of Vicissitudes?" I will demonstrate how both the influence and importance of family, her sense of being called by God, and her experience of preaching in the evangelical revivals brought her to publish her memoirs. In the third chapter I will analyze Towle's publications to determine how each is a defense of female preaching and a protest against exclusion. In conclusion I will discuss Nancy Towle as a "bridge person" between periods of history, as well as between theological conservatism and woman's rights. I will also discuss her life after 1834.

CHAPTER ONE

MEMOIRS

*Faces from the past linger about the table
Hanging there still as the full moon
against the dark sky of memory.
Sister, brother, parent, child,
Singing in the blood, singing in the bone,
Remember me, remember me.¹*

In July of 1832, Nancy Towle traveled to Charleston, South Carolina where her brother Philip, while on a cruise to improve his health, had died of consumption seven months before. In this election year she traveled alone, the only woman aboard the schooner *President Jackson*. Her accommodations were miserable, hardly worth the “extravagant” sum of fifteen dollars charged for the passage from Richmond, Virginia. Her shipboard quarters teemed with insects. If she reached the “port of destination with my life, it would be as much as I could expect to do.”² Unable to sleep in the filthy quarters, she spent the six nights of the voyage on deck under a makeshift tent.

By the time she arrived in Charleston, Towle was sick and exhausted.

¹Michael E. Williams, “Voices from Unseen Rooms: Storytelling and Community,” *Weavings* 5, no. 4 (July/August 1990), 18.

²Nancy Towle, *Vicissitudes Illustrated in the Life and Experience of Nancy Towle in Europe and America* (Charleston, S.C.: James L. Burges, 1832), 217.

Grief, overwhelming heat, ubiquitous mosquitoes, loss of appetite and acute loneliness made her feel that she would soon join her bother in the grave. She longed for the cool breezes of her Hampton, New Hampshire home, and for the family who had chosen her to investigate Philip's death and erect a tombstone in his memory.

Towle was creating other memorials as well. Stuck in Charleston waiting for the tombstone, the thirty-six year old Nancy Towle took a pause in her life. Unable to preach, barred from the pulpit by southern clergymen, she anticipated her own imminent death. A cholera epidemic seemed to accompany her journey south, first in Norfolk, then in Richmond, Virginia.³ It was time to complete and publish writing she had begun in diaries and letters years before. Put in print, after all, her words would reach a much larger audience than her preaching had ever claimed.⁴

³Ibid., 235. See also Charles E. Rosenberg, The Cholera Years (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), 46. Deaths from cholera were reported in the Christian Sentinel (September, 1832). A man died of cholera in Richmond, Virginia on September 7, 1832. Four deaths in Suffolk, Va., 206 deaths in New York, 127 deaths in Philadelphia were reported in the August 10, 1832 issue.

⁴Nathan O. Hatch. The Democratization of American Christianity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 141. American presses were publishing books and periodicals on an unprecedented scale. The religious press alone was printing millions of tracts, pamphlets, hymnbooks, and devotional books, as well as journals, magazines and newspapers of every description. In 1830 the American Bible Society and the American Tract Society were producing over one million Bibles and six million tracts, respectively. See David Paul Nord, "The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815-1834," Journalism Monographs 88 (1984): 1-30.

Nancy Towle oversaw the production of her memoirs from composition to publication following a pattern common in the early republic. For her the work was critical. She had to find an outlet of her own since she was not part of a denomination that would print for her. Her duty to God and obligation to others, particularly women, compelled her to tell her story.⁵

Though most memoirs, especially of pious women, were published posthumously,⁶ Nancy Towle was among twenty female preachers of the early nineteenth century who published memoirs during their lifetimes.⁷ These memoirs described their personal struggles and conversion

⁵Towle, 7.

⁶Joanna Bowen Gillespie, "'The Clear Leadings of Providence': Pious Memoirs and The Problems of Self-Realization for Women in the Early Nineteenth Century," Journal of the Early Republic 5 (Summer 1985), 197.

⁷Brekus, 167. Among the most familiar are: Deborah Peirce, A Spiritual Vindication of Female Preaching (Carmel, N.Y.: E. Burrough, 1820); Harriet Livermore, A Narration of Religious Experience (Concord: N.H., Jacob B. Moore, 1826); Eleanor Knight, A Narrative of the Christian Experience, Life and Adventures, Trials and Labours of Eleanor Knight. Written by Herself, (1839); Ellen Stewart, Life of Mrs. Ellen Stewart, Together with Biographical Sketches of Other Individuals (Akron, Ohio: Beebe and Elkins, 1858); Laura Smith Haviland, A Woman's Life Work: Labours and Experiences of Laura S. Haviland, 4th ed. (Chicago: Publishing Association of Friends, 1889); Lydia Sexton, Autobiography of Lydia Sexton (Dayton, Ohio: United Brethren Publishing House, 1882); Jarena Lee, The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel. Written by Herself. (1836); Zilpha Elaw, An American Female of Colour, 1846; Julia A. J. Foote, A Brand Plucked From the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch (Cleveland: W. F. Schneider, 1879). The writings of Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw and Julia Foote were reprinted in Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: University of Indiana, 1986). For a complete list, see Brekus, 385-386.

experiences, their call to preach and their public successes in converting sinners and instigating revivals. In scriptural language, themes of divine grace and prophetic inspiration permeate their writings.⁸

Models for spiritual autobiography, including those of pious women, and religious books like Pilgrim's Progress and the Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul were available for these women.⁹ The particular format they used, however, most closely resembles that used by male clergymen of their own sects. After all, these female preachers shared the same evangelical vision and methods as their male counterparts. In 1826, when Harriet Livermore became the first female preacher to publish her memoirs, ministers such as John Colby, Levi Hathaway, and Billy Hibbard had already told their spiritual stories in print.¹⁰ Other nineteenth-century male preachers who published their memoirs included Lorenzo Dow, Elias Smith, Ephraim Stinchfield and David Marks. Evangelicals, male and female, were the first to "exploit the potential of mass media, recognizing the press as a

⁸Ibid., 170.

⁹Ibid., 168-169. Among women's spiritual autobiographies published in the eighteenth century were Mary Clarke Lloyd's Meditations on Divine Subjects, Elizabeth Lawrence Bury's An Account of the Life and Death of Mrs. Elizabeth Bury, Chiefly Collected out of Her own Diary; Elizabeth White's Experience of God's Gracious Dealing; and Elizabeth Singer Rowe's Devout Exercises of the Heart in Meditation and Soliloquy, Prayer and Praise. Quaker memoirs of Patience Brayton, Elizabeth Ashbirdge, and Jane Hoskens were published in the early 1800s. Harriet Livermore reflected on the writing of Jeanne Marie Guyon (1648-1717).

¹⁰Ibid.,170.

valuable partner in the struggle to make new converts and gain public acceptance.”¹¹

Nancy Towle published a letter of endorsement from Lorenzo Dow in the preface to her book.¹² Her decision to do so indicates the dilemma of women who dared to be public figures. She felt a need for “introduction” from a famous person. Lorenzo Dow was one of the best known Methodist evangelists¹³ and one of the most prolific writers of the time. Dow published over seventy editions of twenty different works between 1800 and 1835.¹⁴ However, in terms of the content of her book Towle wanted to be independent. She resisted offers of her friends in Baltimore to help publish

¹¹David Paul Nord, “The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815-1835,” Journalism Monographs 88 (1984), 1-30.

¹²Towle, 4. In his letter Dow acknowledges his long acquaintance with Nancy Towle, and supports female preaching on the basis of Old Testament women who were chosen instruments of God - Miriam, Huldah, Deborah, and the daughters of Philip. He includes Phoebe from the New Testament. He encourages people to give up their prejudices, and not “obstruct, the way of those who follow not our whims: lest by folly we grieve those, whom God would not have grieved I feel, to bid Nancy Towle, God speed: and wish her success, - in the Name of the Lord.” May 21, 1832.

¹³Jon Butler, Awash In A Sea of Faith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 241. It is said that parents named more children after Dow than any other figure except Washington.

¹⁴Lorenzo Dow is described by Nathan Hatch as the Methodist itinerant who “preached to more people, traveled more miles, and consistently attracted larger audiences to camp meetings than any preacher of his day.” The Democratization of American Christianity. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 36.

Vicissitudes in July of 1832¹⁵ because she did not want to be overly influenced by anyone. Alone in Charleston she wrote, "The work, therefore, is now my own. . . And from the truth in any one instance, I am not appraised of having swerved."¹⁶

Nancy Towle enjoyed writing and regretted she had waited so long to publish her story.¹⁷ The review of her life and "self-construction"¹⁸ in print helped her identify a new direction for the future in 1832. Confident in God's providential leadership, she decided to write more. She would continue to preach but travel alone. She would embody the power of religious women and the struggle for women's rights. "I will deliver up my life, a sacrifice, for one, . . . And seal my testimony, as with my blood, in vindication of the rights of woman."¹⁹

Approximately two months after her arrival in Charleston, printer James A. Burges completed work on Vicissitudes Illustrated in the Experiences of Nancy Towle in Europe and America, two hundred ninety

¹⁵Towle, 214.

¹⁶Ibid., 6.

¹⁷Ibid., 5.

¹⁸Gillespie, 197.

¹⁹Towle, 241. In this final sentence of her book, Nancy Towle aligns herself with Mary Wollstonecraft, a highly controversial woman whose book, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, published in 1792, was a strong argument for woman's rights.

three pages. But the volume was more than Towle's spiritual autobiography. Vicissitudes is a major statement of the case for female preaching and the power of female piety.

Why Vicissitudes? In Noah Webster's dictionary of 1828, "vicissitude" is defined as "regular change or succession of one thing to another; or change; revolution; as in human affairs."²⁰ In popular usage, "vicissitudes" suggests hardship and trials. Indeed, life as a female evangelist was very difficult and challenging, despite the joy of following God's leading. Towle's use of the phrase "Vicissitudes Illustrated" suggests a lack of control over the events of her life. However, though she believed she was a messenger of God and even though she suffered because of it, Nancy Towle was not the passive agent of divine Providence. Just as she braved shipboard mosquitoes and slept on the deck, she took on all the forces that stood in the way.

The publication of her book was the culmination of eleven years of itinerant preaching, years of personal change and growth. During these years the journal that she kept served as a kind of "life-buoy, . . . Both upon this land and on the sea."²¹ It served as a "memory assist," providing structure as she traveled in various places, among strangers.²² Her journal became

²⁰Noah Webster, An American Dictionary of the English Language (New York: S. Converse, 1828).

²¹Towle, 105.

²²Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, The Meaning of Things (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 22.

increasingly important to her during her last three years of itineracy, not only sustaining her, but also providing the medium to protest the exclusion of women from preaching.

With her book printed in Philip's memory, and the tombstone erected, Nancy Towle's work in Charleston was completed. She left for home, claiming her place in history, not only in her book, but also on Philip's gravestone:

IN MEMORY
of
Dr. Philip Towle,

A native of Hampton, N.H. - who died in Charleston, S.C. March 20th, 1832:- aged 34 years, and 6 months. Long - will his affectionate RELATIVES, and admiring FRIENDS, cherish, the remembrance of his VIRTUES; - at whose request, this MONUMENT is erected, as the last tribute of their tender LOVE, by his sister, NANCY TOWLE.

Beneath this stone, - this circling bough,
Strangers, - the *body*, rests with you:
But far on high, the *spirit's* soar'd,
To dwell, forever, with the Lord.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FEMALE EVANGELIST

In contrast with the vicissitudes of her life, Towle's home and family, journal and faith were elements of permanence and stability. Facing an uncertain future in 1832, she created two memorials to herself: she published her book and she had her name engraved on Philip's tombstone. What brought Nancy Towle to write and publish her book at this time? Why did she dedicate her book to Philip? Why was it so important to be remembered? Why was it necessary to identify a new direction for her life in the closing pages of Vicissitudes? Originally called to preach spiritual salvation, she would now preach and write to save women from social and religious subjugation.

Nancy Towle, born February 13, 1796, was the daughter of Colonel Philip Towle and Betsey Nudd Towle of Hampton, New Hampshire. The third of nine children, six girls and three boys, Towle was born in the house built by her grandfather, Ensign Philip Towle, in 1763. To this house she returned between her travels and in retirement from itineracy. She died in the front bedroom on January 1, 1876. Still occupied in Hampton, the Towle house remained in the family until 1937. It is an imposing structure, a symbol of stability and of the power of family in the life of Nancy Towle. The size of the house, 38' x 28,' two stories, two chimneys, with center stairs, plus

kitchen and cellar, is indicative of the Towle family wealth. In 1798 only one in a hundred lived in a similar house, it was valued at an exceptional \$3,000.¹

The Towles and the Nudds, two of the oldest families of Hampton, had been landowners since 1644 and 1643 respectively. The original Philip Towle came to Hampton in 1637 from northern England. Thomas Nudd, also of England, came to Hampton in 1643.² Land was passed down from father to son for generations.

Originally named "Winnacunnet," Hampton was organized by the Rev. Steven Bachiler and followers in 1638.³ Bachiler, a Dissenter who came to Boston from England in 1632, was pastor of churches at Lynn and Ipswich, Massachusetts before coming to Hampton. The original settlers were bound together by a church covenant, and the town history is inextricably linked to the history of the Congregational Church of Hampton, the oldest church in continuous existence in New Hampshire.⁴

Ministers of the church, whose salaries were paid by the town, were

¹Jack Larkin, The Reshaping of Everyday Life, 1740-1840, (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 113. The layout and dimensions of the Towle house are from the family records of Virginia Taylor, Hampton, New Hampshire.

²George Thomas Little, ed., Genealogical and Family History of the State of Maine 4 (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1909), 4.

³Joseph Dow, History of the Town of Hampton vol. 1 (Portsmouth: Peter E. Randall, Publisher, 1988), 343.

⁴Charles A. Hazlett, History of Rockingham County New Hampshire and Representative Citizens (Chicago: Richmond-Arnold Publishing Co., 1915), 450.

chosen in a town meeting as well as by vote of the congregation. Some ministers were more orthodox than others, and there was always a diversity of theological opinions within the congregation. Consequently, the selection of ministers was challenging and at times divisive. One incident in particular involved Nancy Towle's great grandfather, Philip Towle and her grandfather Ensign Philip Towle.

Following the dismissal of the Reverend Ward Cotton in 1765, there were three ministers considered by the town for employment: John Marsh, Ebenezer Thayer, and Jeremy Belknap, author of the History of New Hampshire. In a process of voting after hearing these candidates preach, Belknap received the largest number of votes. Supporters of Marsh, fearful that Belknap would be chosen, joined with the supporters of Thayer. In the final vote, Thayer, a theological "moderate" won. A letter of protest signed by twenty-two persons, among whom were Philip Towle and Ensign Philip Towle, noted that the meetings to choose a minister had been carried on without "love and unity" and that many of those who voted for Thayer only did so to prevent Jeremy Belknap from being chosen. The protesters also found the proposed salary to be exorbitant.⁵

In supporting Belknap, the Towles seemed to back the more orthodox candidate. Though Jeremy Belknap's theology shifted toward the Arminianism of liberal theologians later in life, when he preached for the

⁵Dow, 408-410.

Hampton Church in 1766 Belknap embraced the traditional Calvinist view on original sin and predestination. Furthermore, he rejected the custom of the Half-Way Covenant. According to the half-way covenant persons even though uncertain of their conversion, were allowed to declare their faith in God and their support for the church's covenant. By "owning the covenant" these persons became half-way members. They were allowed the important privilege of baptism for their children but were barred from Holy Communion. Belknap felt that this custom turned people away from the most important ordinance and the whole question of salvation. He thought the visible church should include only those who gave "credible evidence of faith and repentance."⁶ Limiting baptism to those whose parents were full communicants would reinforce the distinction between the pure and visible church and the world.

The Hampton Church had endorsed the practice of the half-way covenant in 1662 when Seaborn Cotton was minister. Perhaps the majority voted against Belknap because a reversal of the practice would not only prevent them from baptizing their children, but would also limit the ability of the church to add members.⁷

Thayer evidently won over the Towles and others, because he became

⁶George B. Kirsch, Jeremy Belknap (New York: Arno Press, 1982), 26-28.

⁷Robert G. Pope, The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 37-38.

greatly beloved by the people of Hampton.⁸ It was difficult to find a minister to replace him. Following his death in September, 1792, the church at Hampton experienced a schism, resulting in the formation of a Presbyterian congregation and a Congregational Society. Nancy Towle's grandfathers, Simon Nudd and Philip Towle, both selectmen, sided with the Presbyterians. Both the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists ordained ministers, in 1795 and 1797 respectively. Fortunately for the small town struggling to support two ministers, the division did not last long. In 1808 the Presbyterians and Congregationalists reunited into one church and called Josiah Webster to be minister of the town.⁹ Webster was minister during Nancy Towle's most formative years and throughout her itineracy.

Josiah Webster is described by historian Joseph Dow as a sincere pastor who labored "assiduously for the spiritual welfare of the people of his charge."¹⁰ Since Webster's ordination sermon was preached by the "decidedly Calvinist"¹¹ Samuel Worcester, Webster was probably orthodox in his theology. The church did not grow greatly in numbers under Webster's

⁸Dow, 444-45. In the winter of 1792 when Philip Towle, Nancy's father, became depressed, the family sent for Mr. Thayer to come and talk with him. Towle, Vicissitudes, 127.

⁹Dow, 419-439.

¹⁰Dow, 444-445.

¹¹William B. Sprague, Annals of the American Pulpit (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1859), 399.

ministry. However, the 170 persons who were brought into the full communion of the church during his tenure of twenty-nine years (1808-1837) is significant in consideration of what "full communion" implies.

Partly because of his popularity and stature in the community, it was not until 1835 that the town voted to cease tax support of the Congregational minister, sixteen years after the New Hampshire Legislature had passed the 1819 Toleration Act.¹²

No doubt the religious controversy and the slow change in the town/church structure were factors in Nancy Towle's parents' challenge to the church's authority in spiritual and cultural matters. Standing in the "fault line" of the American Revolution, their generation experienced first-hand the turmoil over the meaning of freedom as it affected not only authority but organization and leadership as well.¹³ In years of economic uncertainty, massive migration and concern that the Republic would not survive, the Towles asserted their freedom and independence through the decisions they made. In several ways, Betsey and Philip broke with the older pre-revolutionary world "premised on standards of deference, patronage, and ordered succession."¹⁴

¹²John A. Ross, History and Manual of the Congregational Church in Hampton, N. H. (Hampton: Printed for the Parish, 1902), 20.

¹³Hatch, 6.

¹⁴Ibid.

First, they challenged the sexual norms of the past. When they were married in the parlor of the Towle home on August 16, 1792, Betsey was six months pregnant. In the 1780s and 1790s there was an “epidemic” of premarital pregnancies in which nearly one third of rural New England’s brides were already with child.¹⁵ Maybe Philip and Betsy simply made a mistake in a fit of passion. Or, Betsey Nudd Towle was perhaps asserting her independence and Philip defying his father. According to family legend, though Ensign Philip Towle and Simon Nudd, Betsey’s father, were friends and fellow selectmen, Ensign Philip did not want his son to marry Betsey. She was considered a “tomboy,” helping her brothers get in the salt hay from the beach in Hampton, riding horses astraddle. She was not “ladylike” enough for his son Philip.¹⁶ In addition, age 22 was young for men to marry.

Not only did Philip and Betsey challenge the sexual norms, they challenged the religious establishment by not being involved in the town church. Though they were both baptized into the Congregational Church (Philip on April 8, 1770 and Betsey on February 28, 1770), and their marriage is recorded, there is no evidence in the church records that their children were

¹⁵Larkin, 193. Premarital pregnancies were common partially because they represented an act of self-determination on the part of women. See Robert Gross, The Minutemen and Their World (New York; Hill and Wang, 1976), 184.

¹⁶Virginia Taylor, “A History of the Ensign Philip Towle House on Lafayette Road in Hampton, N.H.,” 2.

baptized.¹⁷ Furthermore, when Philip's concern about his salvation (perhaps related to Betsey's pregnancy) reached a state of depression in 1792, he rejected the counsel of the Congregational minister, Ebenezer Thayer, to "join the church; and go into lively company; and ward off your dejection." Instead, he went outside to the barn, outside the "sacred space" of the organized church, to pray for forgiveness. Twenty years later in the revivals of itinerant evangelists he "found some, for the first time, that understood what I had felt." After that he "took great delight" in going to meeting.¹⁸

Finally, when Betsey and Philip entered religious life in Hampton, they chose the Freewill Baptists, not the established Congregational church. Philip began attending services with the Freewill Baptists in 1812, but he was not baptized until 1829, three years before his death in 1831.¹⁹ Betsey was one of the founding members of the (Freewill) Baptist Church in Hampton, in 1817.

Philip Towle began attending the meetings of the Freewill Baptists during the War of 1812, when he commanded the local militia in preparation for an anticipated British attack on Portsmouth. For a person who had grown

¹⁷The Records of the Church at Hampton, Vol. 2, 252. Since Philip and Betsey were married in 1792, and the church split in 1794, there is a possibility that they may have worshipped with the Presbyterians. However, their children were born in 1792, 1794, 1796, 1798, 1800, 1803, 1805, 1807, and 1811, ample opportunities for baptism if they so desired.

¹⁸Towle, 128.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 130.

up during the Revolution, in a town whose culture was dominated by the Congregationalists, the Freewill Baptists provided a personal challenge to Calvinism. The “freewill” message championed the ability of each individual, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to have an undeniable, immediate experience with God.²⁰ Salvation was attainable by everyone who would respond. With the Freewill Baptists Towle could express his spiritual autonomy as he fought for political and economic independence.

In contrast, though there was diversity among Congregational ministers and congregations, in Calvinism the experience of conversion was removed from individual agency. Even though the unregenerate would participate in the usual means of grace, such as prayer, self-examination, attending public worship and participating in revivals, they would ultimately discover that after all their efforts they were utterly helpless before God. The wide distance between humans and God was spanned only by the grace of God, and conversion experiences had to be evaluated in light of doctrinal qualifications by the church community. Calvinist theology posed an untenable dilemma: each person was born a sinner, depraved by human nature, yet the atonement of Jesus Christ was limited to the those predestined by a sovereign God who ordained everything that happened.²¹

²⁰Stephen A. Marini, Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 142.

²¹Ibid., 137.

The Freewill Baptists, Universalists and Shakers were the first to challenge Calvinist orthodoxy directly.²² These groups appeared in the hill country of New Hampshire, Vermont and northern Massachusetts during years of massive migration (1770s and 1780s) in the era of the American Revolution. It was a time of social, economic and political crisis as diverse populations were thrown together in new configurations of settlement unlike the old New England town and church model. In contrast with southern New England, the northern economy was underdeveloped and dependent upon raw materials rather than shipping and commercial farming. The social structure was egalitarian and the family the basic economic, social and cultural unit. Consequently, the new institutions these settlers established over a period of time reflected their "localist, egalitarian and tribal world view."²³ In this context, the new gospels addressed religious problems confronting people of all ranks: free grace, freedom from sin, and the coming end of the world.²⁴

Previously, there were other agents of religious dissent in New England, The Great Awakening of 1736-1745, the Separate movement of the 1740s and 1750s, and the Baptists. The 1767 Warren Association of Baptists in Rhode Island was the first "stable institutional structure of Calvinist

²²Ibid., 7.

²³Ibid., 39.

²⁴Ibid., 100.

dissenters.”²⁵ However, in the colonial era, dissenters concentrated their fire on the institutional means of religion, on arrangements for church governance, on the links between church and state, and on the experience of faith, that is, bringing souls to Christ. For the most part, they sidestepped questions of theology. Then the Freewill Baptists stepped on the scene.

Emerging a few years later than the Freewill Baptists,²⁶ the Christian sect, founded by Elias Smith in 1802, also offered an alternative to Calvinist theology. Smith advocated a simple evangelical Christianity with democratic church government, based upon a “hermeneutic premised on the inalienable right of every person to understand the New Testament for him or herself.”²⁷ This message of individual authority appealed to Betsey Towle who was thirty-eight when she was converted. Betsey (along with her brother Samuel Nudd and daughter Sally Bartlett Towle) was converted in one of Smith revivals in 1808.²⁸

²⁵Ibid., 136.

²⁶Ibid., 117. Benjamin Randal, a convert of George Whitfield, began meetings in 1773, withdrew from the Congregational Church in 1775 and established the Freewill Baptists in 1780. In 1792, Randal initiated the organizational structure, a model of community based on moral action and spiritual growth. Churches met weekly for worship and monthly for discipline and conference.

²⁷Hatch, 73. See also Robert T. Handy, A History of the Church in the United States and Canada (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 169.

²⁸Elias Smith published the first religious newspaper in the United States, The Herald of Gospel Liberty, which he edited from 1808-1818. Hatch, 70.

Smith's revival in Hampton prompted direct confrontation with members of the Congregational Church. The Hampton men broke up the meeting in defense of their new minister Josiah Webster, whose previous pastorate had been plagued by followers of Smith. No one was hurt, but the men turned the preachers out of the ox cart in which they were standing, and threw clods of dirt at them.²⁹ Some of the followers of Smith took refuge in the Towle house.³⁰

The Christians did not organize a congregation in Hampton. However, among their revival converts who organized the Freewill Baptist Church in Hampton in 1817 were Betsey Towle and daughter Sally Bartlett Towle. Nancy Towle was also among the twenty-seven founding members, though she dates her conversion to 1818.³¹

With parents involved in the Freewill Baptist and Christian meetings, Nancy Towle attended revivals and knew visiting preachers who stayed in their home. She was comfortable with the dissenters. However, during her

²⁹Dow, 289.

³⁰Virginia Taylor, "The Ensign Philip Towle House," 4. In 1831, Nancy Towle visited "Dr. Elias Smith" in Boston. He showed her "much kindness." Towle, 96. Apparently, Smith, who had long since left the Christian Connection, remembered the Towles and still supported female preaching.

³¹Hazlett, 456. Hazlett's list, published in 1915, lists 27 founding members. Of that number 14 were women. Ironically, in his 1989 publication, Peter Randall does not include all names, but in shortening the list, he leaves out the names of all the women! See Peter Randall, Hampton, A Century of Town and Beach, 1888-1988, vol. 3 (Portsmouth: Peter E. Randall, Publisher, 1989), 781.

teenage years, she was more interested in school and socializing than in praying.³²

One of Nancy Towle's strengths for ministry was her education. She was among the first generation of American women to enjoy the benefits of an advanced education, not in a female academy, but in a co-educational setting.³³ Her schooling, however, was interrupted and somewhat erratic. She studied for two years when she was sixteen and seventeen (1812, 1813). Four years later, when she was twenty-one (1817) she again attended the "Proprietary School in Hampton," organized in 1810 and one of the oldest coeducational secondary institutions in New Hampshire. Her brother Philip and sister Sally also attended the school. There was no differentiation along gender lines in enrollment or curriculum in the Proprietary School. The number of females was substantial: during the first year of operation there were 36 females and 55 males in attendance.³⁴ Later, in 1821, the school was

³²Towle, 9.

³³Mary Beth Norton, Liberty's Daughters. The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800 (Boston: Little, Brown and company, 1980), 247.

³⁴Dow, 489-491. According to the Constitution of the Academy, students were to be taught "English, Latin and Greek Languages, Writing, Arithmetic, Music and Arts of Speaking; also practical Geometry, Logic, Geography and any of the liberal Arts and Sciences or Languages as opportunity and ability may hereafter admit, and as the corporation shall direct." Students were also to be given religious instruction which included the doctrines of the Trinity, depravity of human nature, necessity of atonement, repentance and faith, sanctification and justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

reorganized as the Hampton Academy.³⁵

Nancy Towle enjoyed learning, public speaking and the dramatic performances of “exhibition days” at the Academy.³⁶ In other words, she enjoyed being on stage! In 1814 she began teaching school in the adjoining town, Northampton, New Hampshire, fewer than five miles from her home. Apparently she continued to live at home. Teaching school was one of the few options for work available to unmarried women of the time. Still, short sessions and low pay made teaching less a means of essential support than a way for daughters of established families to fulfill their duty to the community.³⁷

Still teaching school, on September 3, 1818, Nancy Towle went to a revival meeting at the Inn at Northampton. That night, when she heard the preaching of Clarissa H. Danforth, a Freewill Baptist itinerant, she experienced the “converting grace” that radically changed her life. In Danforth Nancy Towle experienced the persuasive power of an outstanding speaker, as well as a dynamic role model. Clarissa Danforth, the “preaching sensation of the decade,” was also “of good family and well educated . . .

³⁵Randall, 739.

³⁶Towle, 6.

³⁷Nancy Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 32.

dignified in appearance and easy in manner.”³⁸ Towle had been in revivals before, she had even helped organize the Baptist Church at Hampton, but it was not until she heard Danforth preach that she, like her father, heard the Christian message in ways that brought “gospel liberty.”³⁹

Soon after her conversion and baptism, Towle dreamed that she would “one day preach the gospel” and interpreted the dream as a call to preach. According to her memoirs, she struggled with the call for two years of intense emotional and spiritual conflict. She felt God was giving her something to say that would benefit people, but she was also afraid of failure and of bringing “shame and disgrace upon herself and her family.”⁴⁰ Nancy Towle did not have to exaggerate the fear of “shame and disgrace” in her decision to preach. In comparison to teaching school, an acceptable vocation for single women, becoming an itinerant evangelist was a marked departure from convention. To be a female preacher, traveling far from home to strange places and speaking in public before “mixed” audiences, was an unusual vocation for a woman in the early 1820s. Yet she was finally convinced that her own salvation depended upon the appropriate use of her “time, talents

³⁸Louis Billington, “Female Laborers in the Church”: Women Preachers in the Northeastern United States, 1790-1840, Journal of American Studies, vol. 19, no. 3, December 1985, 373.

³⁹Hatch, 172.

⁴⁰Towle, 11.

and privileges."⁴¹ She accepted the call to be an evangelist.

Nancy Towle's decision to preach implied a life of itineracy. Although there were local women who exhorted and led prayer meetings, women could not be pastors of local congregations in any Protestant denomination.⁴² Even though female members predominated in the Congregational Churches of New England, neither Nancy Towle nor any other woman was allowed to preach.⁴³ The newly organized Baptist Church welcomed evangelist Towle in later years, but even in dissenting groups, where a woman could pray, exhort and even preach, women could not administer the sacraments, could not be ordained, and therefore could not minister to a local congregation.⁴⁴

Towle left home to travel and preach, but she returned often during the first six years of her itineracy before going to England. The family did not disown her nor is there any evidence they tried to stop her from preaching and traveling. In contrast, other female itinerants were disowned or

⁴¹Ibid., 14.

⁴²Brekus, Strangers and Pilgrims, 255.

⁴³Richard D. Shiels, "The Feminization of American Congregationalism, 1730-1835," American Quarterly, vol. 33 no. 1 (Spring 1981), 47.

⁴⁴In Charles A. Hazlett, History of Rockingham County New Hampshire and Representative Citizens (Chicago: Richmond-Arnold Publishing co., 1915), 682, it is noted that during the early years of the Baptist Church at Hampton, "Messrs. Danforth, Prescott and Towle repeatedly occupied the pulpit as preachers." (Clarissa Danforth, Judith Pescott and Nancy Towle)

forbidden to preach by family members. Susan Humes, Judith Mathers and Sally Parsons were disowned.⁴⁵ African American female preacher Zilpha Elaw was ridiculed and forbidden to preach by her husband.⁴⁶ Other women postponed their careers for years before finding the courage to act.

Though challenging conventional role expectations was difficult, Nancy Towle was also eager to leave her family and local community to join the new community of itinerant evangelists. With a family history of local leadership, Towle could exercise her own ambitions in the role of itinerant preacher. Just as her parents in their early years challenged prevailing authority, Nancy Towle carried the “revolution of choices”⁴⁷ even further. She began preaching in 1821, the decade when the democratic potential of the Revolution was being fully realized. Educated, unmarried, and confident of her God-given authority, Nancy Towle joined the ranks of outstanding preachers through whose power of persuasion and dynamic leadership American Christianity was “democratized” during the transitional years of 1780 and 1830.⁴⁸ She immersed herself in the cause, sparing no effort, always

⁴⁵Brekus, 221.

⁴⁶Elizabeth Elkin Grammar, “A Pen In His Hand”: A Pen In Her Hand, *Autobiographies by Female Itinerant Evangelists In 19th Century America* (Ph.D dissertation, University of Virginia, 1995), 14.

⁴⁷Robert H. Wiebe, *The Opening of American Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 267.

⁴⁸Hatch, 6.

looking forward to new challenges and to new occasions to “save sinners.”

Usually accompanied by a female companion, which was safer and more acceptable than traveling alone, evangelist Nancy Towle joined the hundreds of other itinerants in the 1820s, peddlers, and tinkers, itinerant singing masters, dancing teachers, portrait painters, handwriting instructors and others who were following the migration of Americans into newer areas of the country.⁴⁹ Americans were “remarkably, even uniquely prone to moving about.”⁵⁰ Their travels were facilitated by the intensive effort to build a comprehensive system of transportation to meet the needs of a commercial economy breaking out across the continent.⁵¹ Towle traveled by stagecoach, on canal boats and ocean vessels, as well as by railroad. On one occasion she rode on an open sled in a snowstorm. And, after arriving in town, she usually walked from her lodgings to the places she preached. In one exception, the people of Baltimore always sent a carriage to convey her to preaching engagements.

Travel was difficult, dirty and unpredictable at times, but Nancy Towle was exhilarated by the challenge of new places and new audiences for her evangelistic message. Itineracy was the means for her work just as a network of people was the method for fulfilling her mission. She developed an

⁴⁹Larkin, 68.

⁵⁰Ibid., 69.

⁵¹Wiebe, 70.

extensive network of at least twenty-three female preachers⁵² as well as male itinerants and local pastors. In St. John's, New Brunswick, Towle met Elizabeth Venner who shared her ministry for a total of four years. In England she joined female preachers of the Bible Christians⁵³ and continued relationships with the daughters of founder William O'Bryan when they visited in the United States. Lorenzo Dow, William O' Bryan and John Winebrenner, leading male evangelists supported her work. Local pastors engaged her services in revivals, and she carried letters of recommendation to their friends. She maintained contacts through extensive letter writing, religious journals and sharing books. Initially, Towle's primary contacts were with the Freewill Baptists and Christians. However, during her career she preached among Methodists (Protestant, Bible Christians, Wesleyan), Lutherans, Swedenborgians, Moravians, Universalists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Arminian Baptists, Quakers, Roman Catholics and

⁵²Nine of the women were Freewill Baptist: Clarissa Danforth, Susan Humes, Almira bullock, Judith Prescott, Mrs. Quimby, Martha Spalding, Hannah Fogg, Sarah Thornton, Betsey Stuart. Two were with the Christian Connection: Ann Rexford and Mrs. Thompson. Elice Smith and Eliza Barns were Methodist. M. Batty and Hannah Andrews were Quaker. Mrs. O'Bryan and Thomasine O' Bryan were Bible Christians. Ruth Watkins was Primitive Methodist. Denominational affiliations are unknown for Ann Warren, Judith Mathers, Dorothy Ripley and Jane Perry. Harriet Livermore was not affiliated with any one group.

⁵³The Bible Christians, also known as Bryanites, were organized in 1815 in England, by William O'Bryan and James Thorne, dissenters from the Wesleyan Methodists. Both Mrs. O'Bryan and daughter Thomasine were preachers. See Deborah M. Valenze, Prophetic Sons and Daughters (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 92.

Episcopalians. A charismatic revivalist preacher, Towle was welcomed by a multitude of diverse groups.

Nancy Towle's network carried her, both literally and figuratively, farther from home as she developed her public and private identity. She traveled in an ever-widening circle: 1821-27, New England; 1827-29, eastern Maine, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia; 1829-30, England and Ireland; 1830-32 mainly Middle States and upper South. In all she visited twelve states, Canada, England and Ireland.

During the first six years (1821-1827) she was part of a substantial community of female evangelists, traveling and preaching in small towns of New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Connecticut and Massachusetts.⁵⁴ Though aware of controversy over female preaching, Towle experienced little opposition during this time.⁵⁵ In these years of millennial expectations, recognition of spiritual gifts and desire to erect distinct religious communities or "islands of holiness" apart from society,⁵⁶ female preachers with an

⁵⁴At least twenty-nine women began exhorting during love feasts and class meetings, and preaching as itinerants during the 1820s. At least five women began preaching during the 1790s, six from 1800 to 1809, ten from 1810 to 1819. Brekus, 271.

⁵⁵Nancy Towle and Susan Humes preached together in a successful revival in Rhode Island in 1827. Twenty to thirty persons were converted. Freewill Baptist Magazine (Providence, RI), vol 1., no. 4 (February, 1827), 113.

⁵⁶Brekus, 155.

authoritative call from God were unusual but not “aberrant.”⁵⁷ Nancy Towle was so confident in 1822 when she traveled to Rhode Island that she refused letters of recommendation from local ministers in Hampton, depending upon God alone for her support: “If the God of Heaven, in whose name I venture forth, refuses me redress, I will never seek, or expect, any degree of clemency from fellow-worms.”⁵⁸

In 1827 during a revival in Hampton, all the remaining members of Towle’s family, with the exception of her brother Philip, made professions of faith. With the salvation of her family ensured, Nancy Towle felt freed of her sense of responsibility for their spiritual welfare.⁵⁹ She could now travel farther from home. Indeed, Nancy Towle began to use a new name. She became known as “Ann” or “Anna” in letters of reference written during the next three years. Perhaps Towle chose to honor her paternal grandmother, Anna Page. Or, did Nancy Towle identify with the prophet Anna, who was the first to proclaim that the child Jesus was the Messiah?⁶⁰

Towle set out into new territory assisted by a network of people who invited her to hold revival meetings in their towns. For the first time in her itineracy she traveled alone -- to eastern Maine, then to small towns in New

⁵⁷Grammar, 57.

⁵⁸Towle, 23.

⁵⁹Towle, 36-37.

⁶⁰Luke 2:36-38.

Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Her first contacts were among the Christians, but she also met and worked with various other groups. Mixed among her supporters were detractors who tried to frighten her with verbal threats and by firing cannons upon her departure from their town. In Nova Scotia, in 1829, the opposition became so serious that in contrast to her refusal to carry letters of recommendation seven years earlier, she began to carry a letter from Richard Foster, editor of the Christian Herald, in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. His letter of endorsement dated January 21, 1829, along with several subsequent letters, is printed in her memoirs.⁶¹

Nancy Towle's travel farthest from home was her trip to England in 1829. She dreamed of being a missionary, part of the transatlantic revival effort. She also knew about the many women who were evangelists in the dissenting Methodist sects in England. She seemed to think she would find a new home there. In fact, before she sailed from Nova Scotia in June of 1829, she wrote to her family that she might never see them again.⁶² Towle was accompanied on her journey by Elizabeth Venner, a native of Portsmouth, England. Their passage was paid by friends who wanted to support their missionary endeavors.

For eight months Towle invested herself in a broad range of new

⁶¹Towle, 46. The Christian Herald, formerly Herald of Gospel Liberty established by Elias Smith in 1808 was the first religious newspaper published in the United States. Hatch, 70.

⁶²Ibid., 50.

experiences. Much of her schedule was guided by ministers with the Christians and Methodist dissenters who planned services in a variety of settings, including a "floating chapel," which was a ship converted to a chapel, churches, schools and Ratcliff Square where John Wesley preached. At other times preaching was impromptu, on the street or in public squares. One street meeting was interrupted when Towle was arrested, though not detained, for public disturbance.⁶³ Towle and Venner made brief visits to Kingston and Dublin in Ireland, then returned to England.⁶⁴

In England Towle witnessed problems of industrialization she had not previously encountered. Shocked by widespread poverty, Towle visited almshouses and manufacturing towns as well as prisons. In an unsuccessful attempt to help, Towle wrote a letter to affluent acquaintances requesting money to take the willing poor back to America.⁶⁵ Towle was convinced that the wrath of God would befall the "tyrants" of industry and politics who exploited the poor. Money spent, discouraged and repelled by the massive social ills, the women returned to their "loved country America," arriving in

⁶³Ibid., 63.

⁶⁴Towle, 58. The two women stayed very briefly in Kingston before going to Dublin for several days. Identified as followers of Dow, they were not invited to preach in public. However, they were treated so well by persons who invited them into their homes for private prayer meetings that Towle remembered the Irish as being the most hospitable she encountered. See Vicissitudes, 10.

⁶⁵Ibid., 77.

Philadelphia on March 30, 1830.⁶⁶

Having traveled far, maturing in competence and experience, Nancy Towle returned to a world different from the one she left in 1827. The year 1830 became a turning point in Towle's life. Both professionally and personally, the years between 1830 and 1832 when she published Vicissitudes, were a time of challenge, grief and change. At first, all seemed to be going well. Flush with the excitement and experience of foreign travel, she joined with three famous preachers, Dorothy Ripley, Ann Rexford and Ruth Watkins in a revival in New York. She traveled to Philadelphia and preached with Hannah Andrews. But in Philadelphia, Elizabeth Venner, her beloved companion and professional partner, left to visit her parents and to keep house for her brother. Elizabeth's departure was the most "bitter trial," she had ever experienced.⁶⁷ Towle was left alone to face the changing religious and cultural landscape.

During the 1830s and 1840s the sects that had encouraged and promoted women as evangelists, particularly the Methodist, Freewill Baptist and Christian, began to withdraw their support. The change did not happen suddenly, nor did every congregation bar female preachers. For some preachers, however, the change was dramatic. Rachel Thompson, a capable Methodist preacher for nine years, was excommunicated from her church in

⁶⁶Ibid., 78.

⁶⁷Ibid., 83.

August of 1830 on the grounds of insubordination - she had refused to stop preaching.⁶⁸ During the 1830s and 1840s the other dissenting groups "traded their tradition of female evangelism for greater power and respectability."⁶⁹

As these new denominations became increasingly successful they distanced themselves from the revival "enthusiasm" that marked their early histories. The Freewill Baptists founded their first church in 1780 with only seven members, but by 1830 they had more than 21,000 members. The Methodists grew into the largest religious denomination in America by 1830, numbering 500,000. The Christians estimated their membership at 50,000.⁷⁰

Instead of championing direct inspiration from God for preaching, the growing denominations insisted upon an educated clergy. They protested "disorderly" meetings and abandoned their earlier support for female preaching.⁷¹ The very women they depended upon in earlier years when there was a shortage of preachers were no longer welcomed. In those early years, the dissenting sects were eager to set themselves apart from an increasingly individualistic, materialistic and secular society. But with success came greater interest in "respectability." These sects moved into a second stage in institutional life, from the "charismatic" first stage into the

⁶⁸Brekus, 270.

⁶⁹Ibid., 271.

⁷⁰Ibid., 132.

⁷¹Hatch, 201-206.

second stage of consolidation and organization.⁷² The groups who initially promoted egalitarian communities were now returning to old patterns of order and ritual with males in charge. Within a short period of time, approximately twenty years, women were not able to “permanently restructure female-male power relations” to insure their place.⁷³

Nancy Towle responded to denominational changes and personal disappointments in her characteristic way. She kept moving. She continued to travel, using her network, determined to preach. Unfortunately, the task became more difficult. For example, with Thomasine O’ Bryan (from England) she travelled to Hartford, Connecticut in the fall of 1830, where she called on an old acquaintance. “H. G.” was a former itinerant preacher who had been a frequent guest in her family home. Expecting reciprocal hospitality and an invitation to preach, she was surprised by his greeting: “I do not believe in the preaching of females, neither can I, conscientiously, afford you any aid.” Refusing to give up, Towle turned to the Methodist and Baptist ministers but to no avail. Finally, a Universalist pastor was prevailed upon to let her in his church.⁷⁴

⁷²Jackson W. Carroll, Barbara Hargrove and Adair T. Lummis, Women of the Cloth (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 20.

⁷³Carroll Smith Rosenberg. “Women and Religious Revivals: Anti-Ritualism, Liminality, and the Emergence of the American Bourgeoisie.” The Evangelical Tradition in America, ed. Leonard I. Sweet (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1984), 216.

⁷⁴Towle, 88, 100.

On another occasion, in Salem, Massachusetts, Towle's offer to preach in a Christian church was turned down by a minister who had in former years baptized scores of people "brought to the Lord" by her words.⁷⁵ Undaunted, she gave notice in the paper that she would preach in the Methodist chapel where she was welcomed by the minister. Two weeks of passionate preaching followed.

There were successes as well as disappointments during the next two years. In Baltimore, February 1832, she preached to her largest congregation, 1,600 worshippers on Sunday morning during a "Protestant Methodist" revival. These were "some of the happiest days" of her life. There were other positive experiences. With the United Brethren in Carlisle, Pennsylvania she felt she could "live and die." And with the Christians in Norfolk, Virginia, her soul was so "cemented with theirs" she could have "staid and there with them, been buried."⁷⁶

Nancy Towle's frenetic schedule of travel and preaching took its toll on her health. In the spring of 1831 at age 35, she became seriously ill for the first time and returned home to Hampton, to a tearful welcome. While at home she published The Life and Ministry of Ann Freeman, a radical evangelist with the Bible Christians in England.⁷⁷ Acknowledging the changing

⁷⁵Ibid., 119.

⁷⁶Ibid., 172, 166, 189.

⁷⁷Towle, 110.

religious scene, uncertain of her future as an evangelist and feeling that her life was ending, she focused upon getting her journals ready for publication.

When she began to feel better, Towle was eager to resume her itinerant life, though still somewhat unclear about the future. After finding the “doors closed” to her preaching in Boston and in Salem, she was called home, where her father was dying of cancer. During his last days she prayed and talked with him, learning of his spiritual journey and struggles, his final assurance of salvation. She received his words of blessing upon the unconventional life she lived.⁷⁸

After her father’s death in September, 1831, Nancy Towle declared that her work in New England “was done,” and looked for other venues for her preaching.⁷⁹ During the next year, before her trip to Charleston and the publication of Vicissitudes, she traveled at an intense pace, going west into New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania, south into Maryland, Washington, D.C. and Virginia. However, her life had changed considerably. Though she still had a network of friends, she was often forced to go into a town where “all were strange” to preach. Indeed, dissent was moving in unfamiliar directions.

⁷⁸Ibid., 123. Her father’s reply to her question of whether she should “settle” or continue in her work: “I have no choice about that. I don’t know, but that I am as willing, you should live as you do, as in any other way. I have never doubted that it was your duty so to do; and it is evident, the Lord has been with you; or you never would have prospered - as it is plain that you have done.”

⁷⁹Towle, 134.

The new groups like the Mormons and the pentecostals who were organizing the Church of God, differed widely from Towle in theology and worship.

Towle visited the Mormons in Ohio after reading the Book of Mormon in order to see for herself what they were about. Usually, it was with the dissenting groups that female evangelists were welcome. But Towle found herself in opposition to one of the newest “prophets,” Joseph Smith. Because they did not depend exclusively upon the Bible for their beliefs, and possibly because of their “egregious patriarchalism,”⁸⁰ Towle deemed Mormonism “one of the most deep-concerted plots of Hell to deceive the hearts of the simple that had ever come with the limits of my acquaintance.”⁸¹ Towle’s identity as a preacher was challenged by some of Smith’s followers, and she was disturbed by the dissolution of families in which either husbands, wives or children wanted to join the group while the others did not.⁸² An educated woman from a substantial New England family, Towle called Smith, who had grown up in poverty, an “ignorant plough-boy.” Smith replied, “The gift has returned back again, as in former times, to illiterate fishermen.” Towle dismissed him as “a good-natured, low-bred, sort of chap; and that seemed to have force enough, to do no one any

⁸⁰Charles Sellers, The Market Revolution, Jacksonian America 1815-1846 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 224.

⁸¹Towle, 143.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 141-144.

harm.”⁸³

With the United Brethren, Moravians and other groups in Pennsylvania, Nancy Towle found a great deal more in common. Along with William O’ Bryan, who was visiting from England, and John Winebrenner, one of the founders of the emerging Church of God, she spent several weeks preaching and exhorting in revivals.⁸⁴ However, the emotionalism and physical expressions of spiritual ecstasy were too exuberant for New Englander Towle, who could also be very emotional and dramatic in her preaching.⁸⁵

Still drawn to other places, Nancy Towle left Pennsylvania and journeyed to Maryland, Washington, D.C. and Norfolk.⁸⁶ In most of the cities she visited, Towle found a place to preach or lead a prayer meeting, in private homes, churches or town halls. But in others, Frederick City, Maryland, for instance, her offer to preach was refused by clergy she

⁸³Ibid., 145.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 163. Nancy Towle had the highest praise for John Winebrenner, who had left the Dutch Reformed Church. He was truly a “servant of Jesus Christ.” He welcomed all who had faith, including female preachers. Bigotry and party zeal had no place in his meetings.

⁸⁵Ibid., 165.

⁸⁶Ibid., 214. Though Towle visited Washington and held meetings she did not preach before Congress, as Jon Butler states in Awash in a Sea of Faith, 281. She did preach at the Capital in Richmond on a Sunday night in the summer of 1832.

considered jealous of her superior ability.⁸⁷ Revival enthusiasm had waned, and she was more than ever a stranger and a pilgrim.

Nancy Towle was struggling to continue as an itinerant evangelist in a time when a theologically uneducated woman, defying the emerging “cult of true womanhood,” was becoming an anachronism. Her impassioned style of preaching and her emotional prayers were unacceptable to those with a more restrained style. Towle was mortified when a group of religion professors ran out during her fervent prayer in Alexandria, Virginia.⁸⁸ Having grown up during a fluid time in history, when openness and experimentation were the norm, she found herself in a new, difficult era. Towle was experiencing cultural displacement at a depth previously unknown to her but common among those who began preaching after 1830.⁸⁹ Thirty-six years old, a veteran in the pulpit, she felt more capable than ever before, and itinerant evangelism was her life.⁹⁰ It was a time of professional and personal crisis.

When in May of 1832 on a preaching tour in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania Towle learned of the death of her younger brother Philip, only eight months after the death of her father, the professional and personal converged. Nancy Towle, the female evangelist, had failed to convince her favorite brother of

⁸⁷Ibid., 170.

⁸⁸Ibid., 181.

⁸⁹Grammar, 57.

⁹⁰Towle, 239.

his need for conversion. Furthermore, Philip's death, among strangers and far from home, dramatized her own loneliness and vulnerability. She was extremely lonely after Elizabeth Venner decided to leave itineracy in 1830. Towle had managed to keep going, but became very ill in the winter of 1831. Then her father died in September of 1831. Added to her personal struggles were the sometimes harsh treatment by local ministers and the uncertainty of her future as an evangelist.

Philip Towle's death so far from home hardly seemed possible. Philip was an established, affluent physician in Ambsbury, Massachusetts. Just sixteen months younger than Nancy, he was the first in the family to affirm her decision to preach. Yet he did not share her spiritual intensity. Though he was a Presbyterian and led an exemplary life, in her opinion he was not "saved" and was therefore eternally separated from God. Many times she had talked with him and written to him, but to no avail.⁹¹

Upon learning of Philip's death, Nancy Towle took a midnight stage to Baltimore, where she was comforted by her friends, Lorenzo Dow among them. Philip's death caused Nancy Towle to question her faith in God and her vocation as an evangelist. She agonized over the state of Philip's soul, questioning God, who had not interceded on Philip's behalf in spite of all her prayers and the prayers of the family. She felt that if Philip were condemned to hell, then all of her work had been fruitless.

⁹¹Ibid., 274-275.

At the same time, she believed that the power of God was available to everyone, including Philip. Over a period of time, with the encouragement of her sister Sally B. Towle and others, she convinced herself that on his solitary ocean voyage Philip had renounced all for Christ and that “the Saviour doubtless took him to himself in Paradise.”⁹² Rather than believe her brother was lost, she made his actions fit into her understanding of salvation, imposing upon him an interpretation for which she had no real evidence.

For six weeks after learning of Philip’s death Towle could not preach. The only thing she could do was try to make sense of it all and regain her “vivacity” by writing.⁹³ It was time to publish her book.

Her family asked her to go to Charleston and investigate Philip’s death. She wanted her sister Mary Towle to accompany her, but that did not work out. Nancy Towle had to go to Charleston alone, and she made her plans to do so. Hearing enroute that cholera had broken out in Canada, she felt an urgent call to warn the people of Baltimore, Norfolk and Richmond of impending doom. However, preoccupied with Philip’s death and her own exhaustion, she accepted with a new passivity the disinclination of the people in these cities to heed her warnings. She argued only briefly with the conservative Southern clergymen who refused her preaching offers in

⁹²Ibid., 207.

⁹³Ibid., 206.

Charleston.

During her time in the South Carolina port, obliged to wait for the tombstone, Towle faced the conflicting realities of her life. After eleven years of extensive travel and experience, feeling more at one with God than ever before, she now had to fight for recognition as an evangelist. Though she had become a “citizen of the world”⁹⁴ moving from place to place, she now felt terribly alone. She disdained sectarian rivalry, believing that the genuine Christian community would be free from “party spirit.”⁹⁵ She had been a founding member of the Freewill Baptist Church in Hampton before her conversion, but did not regard that as binding. The pain of persecution had driven her to approach the Christians to become one of them, but her “terms,” probably to be formally recognized as a preacher, were never met. She remained unattached to any group, proudly so.⁹⁶ Yet, how could she continue to preach without a supportive network?

Towle had been an integral part of an fairly egalitarian evangelical effort in her years of itineracy. Now she recognized that her male contemporaries were becoming more interested in preserving their own power and building new denominations than in renewing the New Testament church. She found some of the chief leaders of the Christian

⁹⁴Ibid., 232.

⁹⁵Ibid., 231.

⁹⁶Ibid., 232.

Connexion, the group she prized the most, to be “like many others, aspiring too much for human applause and popularity. . . .⁹⁷ As a female preacher, she was no longer a part of their vision of community and was being excluded. She recognized and identified gender as the “the essential determinant” in her life.⁹⁸

In the concluding pages of Vicissitudes, Towle articulated the inequities of being a female evangelist. She had traveled thousands of miles, often without money, preaching “from six to eight times a week, for months in succession; and seldom, less than one hour upon the stretch.”⁹⁹ She had kept a diary, written hundreds of letters, provided for her own clothing, and then helped with the household chores in the homes she stayed. Unsalaries, dependent upon friends and limited publishing for support, after all these years she did not have “one single farthing laid up in store.”¹⁰⁰

In contrast, male evangelists always had their clothing, transportation and financial needs provided.¹⁰¹ Towle decried the iniquity: “Of the other sex, though three-fold the natural vigor, whereof to boast, it is seldom expected

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Cott, 123.

⁹⁹Towle, 227.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 320.

¹⁰¹Butler, 237. Methodist itinerants, like Lorenzo Dow, rested at “Methodist taverns” where they could their clothes washed and mended and get “refitted.”

that they will go without some suitable mode of conveyance or without purse and script at hand. Nor is it expected that after their strength is quite exhausted, for the good of souls that they then, to appear decent must make, clean or repair some article of apparel for themselves before renewing again the heavy struggle."¹⁰² Male itinerants did not have to contend daily with clergy who objected to their preaching. They were not asked to help with chores; they were not "left alone, destitute, no house, no home, no friend, that dares to advocate their cause. . . ." ¹⁰³

Why would a woman endure such hardship - unless moved by a powerful faith in God? "My conversion has been to me as much a reality as my existence: and my call to public testimony, equally as sure."¹⁰⁴ How could one so faithful and capable be denied a future career in the Christian community?

Regaining physical and spiritual strength, Towle realized the only way out of her personal *cul de sac* was the same as the way in. Originally called to preach spiritual salvation, she would now preach and write to save women from social and religious subjugation. She would exercise her gifts and abilities to fight the "evil" that excluded her and other women. She would stand up against injustice like her Revolutionary forebears. Like her brother

¹⁰²Towle, 228.

¹⁰³Ibid., 229.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 239.

Philip, she would exercise an independent conscience. She would ally herself with controversial women like Mary Wollstonecraft, who championed woman's rights. Towle vowed to protest the exclusion of women from preaching and to "deliver up my life, a sacrifice, for one, towards remedying these evils: and seal my testimony, as with my blood, in vindication of the rights of woman."¹⁰⁵

Having identified a new direction for her life and published Vicissitudes, Nancy Towle dedicated the work to Philip, who was proud of her to the end. During his last day of life Philip asked the person attending him if she had ever heard of his sister Nancy Towle, "the preacher."¹⁰⁶

With one more gesture Towle affirmed her connection with Philip. Aware that she might die alone in a strange place, Nancy Towle included her name on Philip's tombstone. It became a memorial to her as well. Just as Philip's son might visit the grave in the future, someone who had heard her preach might see her name and remember her.¹⁰⁷ She claimed her kinship with Philip as both human and spiritual brother. Whatever her ministry was worth, however effective her prayers, she would invest all in the salvation of Philip Towle.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 241.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 276.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 284.

CHAPTER THREE

PUBLISHING CAMPAIGN

In the closing pages of Vicissitudes Nancy Towle vowed to protest the exclusion of women from preaching. But that campaign required a new venue: print. Itineracy would take second place to writing. In fact, she had already begun her campaign in print. In 1831 she had felt it her “duty” to reprint and make available The Life and Ministry of Ann Freeman, an evangelist with the Bible Christians in England. After publishing Vicissitudes in Charleston in 1832, she published a second edition in Portsmouth, New Hampshire the next year. Later in 1833 she traveled to Canada and published Some of the Writings and Last Sentences of Adolphus Dewey, Executed at Montreal. Then in 1834, in New York city, Towle began publishing a religious journal, The Female Religious Advocate, which “did not survive very long.”¹ All of Towle’s publications served to protest the treatment of female evangelists by presenting in one way or another justification for women in spiritual leadership.

Perhaps the defining characteristic of dissenting sects in the first two

¹Dow, History of the Town of Hampton, 1012. There is no specific record of how long The Female Religions Advocate was published.

decades of the nineteenth century was the “spiritual democracy” that insisted upon the Holy Spirit’s authorization of preachers regardless of sex, class, race, education or theological training.² It was divine inspiration that led individuals outside the confines of institutional religion to freedom of expression and spiritual rebirth. By publishing The Life and Ministry of Ann Freeman, Nancy Towle celebrated one of the most radical believers in the idea of divine inspiration, ministerial freedom and liberty of conscience.³

Ann Mason Freeman (1791-1826), whose diary was first published in London 1828 by her husband Henry Freeman,⁴ was a preacher with the Bible Christians, the “Bryanites.” In October, 1815, the first Bible Christian Society was organized in Shebbear, Devon in England by William O’ Bryan and James Thorne. The group split from Wesleyan Methodists over the issue of ministerial freedom and developed a distinctly anti-establishment tone. The name “Bible Christians” pointed to the contrast between believers who gathered for worship in consecrated churches and used both the Bible and the Prayer Book for worship and those who used only the Bible during worship outdoors, in farm sheds and in private homes. The Bible Christians not only

²Deborah M. Valenze, Prophetic Sons and Daughters (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 92.

³*Ibid.*, 140.

⁴Henry Freeman, A Memoir of the Life and Ministry of Ann Freeman, A Faithful Servant of Jesus Christ, compiled from her Diary and Letters (London: Bagster and Thoms, Printers, 1828).

encouraged women but supported their call by appointing them to preach in specific geographic districts. By 1823 there were as many as 100 women preaching among the Bible Christians in England.⁵

Ann Mason and her sister joined the Bible Christians when they began meeting in a barn near their new home in Northcutt, Sutcombe parish. Drawn by their powerful preaching and attempts to revitalize religious belief and practice, Mason was converted under the influence of James Thorne in 1817.⁶

When her friends opposed her decision, Ann's response was that the Bible Christians represented the true church. "I found my safety was in obeying the truth; for I must obey God rather than man . . . and therefore the only safe way was to follow Christ. I was convinced it was my duty to join the Bryanites."⁷ This determination to follow only divine leadership would grow stronger in a preaching career that began less than a month after joining the group in 1817.⁸

Ann Mason was a popular preacher, always with a free, instinctual style that never failed to see results.⁹ She became increasingly radical, even

⁵Valenze, 140.

⁶Ibid., 145.

⁷Ibid., 9.

⁸Ibid., 146.

⁹Ibid., 147.

antinomian in her view of individual authority. She advised other female preachers to “be faithful. To attend the inward whisper, and follow the Lord fully we must be often, as it were, deaf to the voice of many professors. . . .”¹⁰ In a letter to her parents who were worried about her health Ann wrote, “I have but one guide; that is the unerring one the spirit of truth, that guides into all the will of God concerning me, and gives me power to perform it; so it matters not when, where, or how I die, for heaven is my inheritance.”¹¹

A confrontation in an East London home further exemplifies Ann Mason’s style and belief. She visited a woman who was apparently near death, “without a knowledge of God.” The Anglican minister arrived while Ann was there. He asked the woman “what place of worship she attended” and if she had “attended the Sacraments.” At this point an indignant Mason interrupted the conversation, “What she wants is the Holy Spirit, to bear witness with her spirit, that she is a child of God.”¹² The clergyman turned to her in apology. He then “read over many prayers.” When he finished she offered an extemporaneous prayer, calling “upon the Lord mightily.”¹³ In this encounter “salvation through faith challenged salvation through sacraments; cottage candor challenged urban church protocol; and female

¹⁰Freeman, 148.

¹¹Ibid., 149.

¹²Ibid., 62.

¹³Ibid., 63.

preachers challenged male clergymen.”¹⁴

Not only was Ann Mason willing to challenge individuals, she took on all the ministers in her Connexion. Mason sensed a departure from their original purpose when the Bible Christians, who were organized in networks of societies and preachers, held their first Conference in August 1819 to discuss administrative and doctrinal issues.¹⁵ At the Conference, Bible Christians adopted a more typical Methodist organization of districts, circuits, and societies, presided over by superintendents, pastors and elders (or leaders). But, unlike other Methodist groups, the Bible Christians used the term “pastors” instead of “preachers.” And the term “elder” was typical of Presbyterian nomenclature. In addition, William O’ Bryan assumed the title of General Superintendent of the Conference in 1819, presiding over twelve itinerant preachers in a position that accrued more power than in other Methodist sects.¹⁶

Mason, unable to attend because of illness, sent a circular letter of concern to the Conference urging her “brethren” and “fathers” to “use every effort in their power to pull down Satan’s kingdom; leave no opportunity

¹⁴Valenze, 155.

¹⁵Freeman, 26. The meeting took place in Baddish, near Launceton, Cornwall.

¹⁶Valenze, 155.

unimproved.”¹⁷ In other words, she reminded them of their original purpose and evangelistic efforts among the poor of northern England. Her letter did not directly confront the new Bible Christian church polity. However, Ann Mason, a female, assumed a great deal of authority in directing her concerns to the seat of power occupied by men.¹⁸

Ann Mason’s confident challenges to her ministerial colleagues also included her supervisor. William O’ Bryan visited shortly after her letter to question her theology. He asked, “Ann, do you believe there is a greater blessing to be attained to here than sanctification? (meaning the being cleansed from all sin.)” In a stunning statement Ann Mason declared “I do. . . . I know I have a blessing far superior to the being only cleansed from all sin; this I call being sealed to the day of redemption, or wholly restored to the image of God, which all that enter heaven must receive here; and if it is our privilege to enjoy it one moment, why not all our remaining days?”¹⁹ William O’ Bryan responded, “Well, Ann, if it be attainable, pray that I may receive it.” According to her diary, William O’ Bryan turned to her during a meeting later that year with the words, “Now I have the blessing

¹⁷Freeman, 28.

¹⁸Valenze, 151.

¹⁹Freeman, 30.

you speak of.”²⁰

Following her “inner guide” Ann Mason moved away from the Bible Christians and closer to the Quakers. She did not believe in or practice water baptism or the Lord’s Supper.²¹ Her belief in a second anointing by the Holy Spirit grew stronger as her health failed and she spent increasing amount of time alone in prayer.

After a long struggle with the question of whether marriage would threaten her independence, Ann Mason married Henry Freeman in 1824. The two agreed on the issues of the sacraments and complete ministerial freedom. They both resigned from the Bible Christian ministerial network in 1824 to pursue their “calling” to be missionaries to Ireland.²² They remained unaffiliated with any particular group. The couple continued their evangelical efforts in Ireland, often traveling apart, before Ann was forced by illness to return to England where she died of consumption in 1826.²³

²⁰Ibid., 32. When describing his experience O’Bryan said he was “not ashamed to acknowledge that a feeble female had been the means of bringing his soul into this liberty.”

²¹Ibid., 44, 78. Part of the controversy over water baptism was the belief of some that it was essential for salvation. For Mason, the only essential baptism was of the Holy Spirit.

²²Ibid., 90. Leaving the connection and the “people I love” was not easy for Mason. However, she concluded that “If I cannot be permitted to live in full gospel liberty with them, I must leave; for the will of God is dearer to me than all things beside, and if men now turn away from hearing the voice of God, they will know it hereafter.”

²³Ibid., 136.

Ann Freeman, with her personal piety, charismatic style, rejection of hierarchical controls and assurance of authority from God was the epitome of strong female leadership. By publishing the story of her life at the very moment when American denominations were excluding women, Nancy Towle offered a dramatic role model for beleaguered female evangelists.

The most personal and extensive defense of female preaching is Nancy Towle's own life story, Vicissitudes Illustrated in the Experiences of Nancy Towle in Europe and America. Written from her journal, the book was intended to be a pamphlet of about twenty pages, with another more complete book to follow. However, Towle found it impossible to limit herself. The words poured forth, especially when she came to her fight to continue preaching.²⁴ The division of the book is telling. Towle dispensed with the first twenty-six years of her life in a mere thirty-eight pages. The early years of itineracy, from 1822 until her return from England in 1830, occupy only forty-one pages. The last one hundred and fifty-eight pages of the book cover but two years, 1830-1832, the years of greatest opposition to female preaching.

In several other ways, Vicissitudes is both a testimony to her faithfulness in ministry and a protest against exclusion from preaching. Her accounts of conversion, call to preach and ministry convey the fundamental belief that spiritual authority came to her directly from the God who

²⁴Towle, Vicissitudes, 6.

intervened in her life. In describing the events of that life, she identified with biblical figures. The diary account of travel, preaching schedules and numbers of people encountered documents her itinerancy. She carefully named female itinerants and told their stories. Towle wrote arguments for female preaching based on scriptural references. By including texts for her sermons, she further established her credentials. Finally, her faith endured to the end, through all the personal pain, loneliness, rejection, arduous travel and even doubt in the aftermath of Philip's death.

Nancy Towle believed that she was entrusted by God with a message of salvation to the "lost sinners" of the world, that her purpose was to "edify, exhort and comfort." Like other evangelical preachers, she established her authority by describing her experience of conversion in terms of joy, thanksgiving and victory over "sin and Hell" through faith in Jesus. Similar to other preaching women and men, she described feelings of uncertainty, reluctance and unworthiness when called to preach.²⁵

But the description of her traumatic struggle to accept the call to "bear a public testimony" was also a defense of her decision. She emphasized the length of time she had held back, two years, and enumerated many of the

²⁵Brekus, 186. Men also struggled with the call to preach. Lorenzo Dow spent almost three years resisting the urge to preach because of his youth and lack of training. See Lorenzo Dow, History of Cosmopolite: or the Writings of Rev. Lorenzo Dow: Containing His Experience and Travels, in Europe and America Up to Near His Fiftieth Year (Philadelphia: James B. Smith & co., 1859) 19.

arguments against female preaching. She was theologically uneducated, a single woman who had no desire to leave her family for travel in the “wastehowling desert of a sinful world.” She was inexperienced in public speaking and would probably fail, bringing shame and disgrace upon her family.²⁶ On the other hand, as a new convert she was concerned about the salvation of other people, she loved “the Lord Jesus,” and the message burned like “fire” within her. She became ill and depressed to the point that her friends accused her of doing more harm than good to the cause of religion. She was tormented and could find no peace. She had time, talents and responsibility to God to use them in helping other people:

By rejecting the impression of preaching the gospel to a ruined world, I always found my hell of soul to increase: consequently, I looked no longer from that source to reap the least consolation. Yet it seemed at times, that even the regions of darkness contained no fiercer pain for me, than the sense that I had of the abuse of my time, talents and privileges, while precious souls were daily hurled into destruction.²⁷

In her ultimate acceptance of the call to preach, Towle quoted the Apostle

²⁶Towle, 12-13.

²⁷Ibid., 14. Nancy Towle referenced British Methodist scholar Adam Clarke’s commentary in her defense of female preaching in the introduction to Vicissitudes. Here, the phrase “times, talents and privileges” is similar to his exposition of Galatians 3:28: “Under the blessed spirit of Christianity, (women) have equal rights, equal privileges and equal blessings, and let me add, they are equally useful.” quoted in Nancy Hardesty, Lucille Sider Dayton and Donald W. Dayton “Women in the Holiness Movement: Feminism in the Evangelical Tradition,” in Women of Spirit, eds. Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 245.

Paul: "Necessity is laid upon me, and woe is me if I preach not the Gospel."²⁸

Towle's description of the call to preach made clear to would-be detractors that it was not her idea, but God's initiative. No amount of education, biblical study or sincere piety could qualify a person for ministry. Divine inspiration was all.²⁹

From her initial identification with Paul, the preeminent New Testament missionary, evangelist and author, Nancy Towle interpreted the events of her life in biblical terms. Not only was she so versed in scripture that she thought in biblical language, Towle understood her struggles to be characteristic of faithful disciples. She connected her life with the lives of inspired biblical leaders known and revered by the Christian community.

Towle identified with figures in the Bible who had suffered for their faith (Elijah, Job, Paul, Jesus) and she likened herself to Christ at the moment of his crucifixion. For example, during one of the most painful times of Towle's life, the fall of 1830, Towle felt like the Hebrew prophet Elijah, "I am left alone, and they seek my life."³⁰ Elizabeth Venner, her traveling companion of two years had departed to be with her family. Elizabeth was "a tender and sympathizing friend" as well as a gifted speaker who had exhorted after Towle's sermons. Their relationship was so strong that Towle feared

²⁸Ibid., 18. I Corinthians 9:16.

²⁹Brekus, 163.

³⁰Towle, 93.

“setting her up as an idol in my affections”and consequently losing her.³¹

In Geneva, New York, a place of “great and various trials,” Towle compared herself with others who had suffered for their faith. “They wandered in sheep-skins. . . . In deserts, in mountains Destitute, afflicted and tormented: of whom the world was not worthy.”³²

Compounding her misery of 1830, a minister opposed to female preaching walked out during her sermon at the Methodist Quarterly Meeting. Her only consolation was the thought that this embarrassing interruption and painful rejection could be used by God for good. This example of her suffering would serve as an “encouragement to all others, of my own sex, that might come after me.”³³

Sick and lonely in Charleston in 1832, Nancy Towle identified the with the long-suffering Job: “I will trust in the Lord, although He slay me.”³⁴ Reflecting upon the dangers she had confronted in her travel, especially in England, she recalled Psalm 23: “Though I pass through the dark valley, of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for even there also thy rod, and thy staff, they shall comfort me.”³⁵ She compared herself with the Apostle Paul

³¹Towle, 50.

³²Ibid., 94. Hebrews 11:37-38.

³³Ibid., 95.

³⁴Ibid., 226. Job 13:15.

³⁵Ibid., 107.

in describing the hardship of travel,³⁶ when leaving her mother after her father's death ("What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart?")³⁷ and in her aloneness: "I wish to know nothing, but Christ and Him crucified; and trust in Him alone, for every needed good."³⁸

Towle identified with Jesus when threatened by a mob in St. Johns.³⁹ In the winter of 1831 Methodists of Easton, Pennsylvania refused their chapel to her, others failed give financial support for preaching at the Court House, and members of the Christian Connection demanded proof she was not a Unitarian. Feeling like a person that is "every where spoken against"⁴⁰ Towle invoked the words of a dying Jesus: "Father, forgive them, for they know what they do;"⁴¹ and his words of judgment upon those who did not recognize him in each other: "I was an hungered and ye gave me not meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink; I was a stranger and ye took me not in; I

³⁶Ibid., 106. "I have been in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren: in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness - and unto this present hour, I have no certain dwelling-place."

³⁷Ibid., 135.

³⁸Ibid., 193.

³⁹Ibid., 40.

⁴⁰Ibid., 160.

⁴¹Ibid., 158. Luke 23:34

was naked, and ye clothed me not; I was sick and in prison, and ye came not unto me. Inasmuch as ye have not done it unto one of the least of mine - ye have not done it unto me."⁴²

In a more subtle way, Nancy Towle identified with the female prophet Anna. For the duration of her stay abroad letters of recommendation referred to her as "Ann" or "Anna" Towle. Since she was going in a prophetic role to another country, she assumed the name not only of her paternal grandmother, but also the name of an important female prophet.

In a departure from identifying with prophetic leaders, Towle compared herself to the prodigal son when returning home after a three and half year absence.⁴³ The prodigal had exhausted all his resources before he "came to himself" and realized he could at least go home. Did Nancy Towle feel like a failure, returning to the only place of security she knew? She quoted the father's words in scripture about the prodigal, changing the pronoun from "he once was dead etc." to "I once was dead; but I am alive again! I was lost; but am I found!"⁴⁴ At home she could retreat and prepare her journal for publication.

Towle compared herself with Hebrew prophets, with Jesus, and with Paul, the early Christian church's most travelled and persecuted missionary.

⁴²Ibid., 161. Matthew 25:42-45.

⁴³Ibid., 105. Luke 15:11-32.

⁴⁴Ibid.

She too, was one of God's chosen messengers, rejected for being faithful. Even her suffering validated her role: "It is with much tribulation that we shall enter the kingdom."⁴⁵

Nancy Towle's account of conversion, call to preach and ministry convey her belief that spiritual authority came to her directly from God. Second, she understood her struggles to be characteristic of faithful disciples, and in describing the events of her life she identified with biblical figures revered by the Christian community. The third way that Vicissitudes is a testimony to Towle's faithfulness and a defense of female evangelists is the documentation of her ministry. Using her journal entries, Towle documented her travel schedule, her preaching engagements (including three funerals), her successes and failures. Dates, places, means of travel, names of companions and ministers, twelve letters of recommendation, testimonies, letters to and from family and friends, poems and a sermon, along with commentary interlaced with scripture, established her identity. Lest anyone doubt her commitment, she counted the miles, over twenty thousand, and the thousands of people "made the sharers of redeeming grace."⁴⁶ Nancy Towle was "a relentless preacher on the move."⁴⁷ With the record of her ministry, she attempted to prove her worth in an increasingly

⁴⁵Ibid., 82. Acts 14:22.

⁴⁶Ibid., 11.

⁴⁷Hatch, 78.

hostile environment.

Perhaps Nancy Towle's greatest defense of female evangelists and most enduring contribution (apart from the converts she led to "redeeming grace"), is that she named the women in her preaching network, securing their place in history. Not only did she identify twenty-three women who were exhorting and preaching during her eleven-year career, she noted the female preacher in Hillsford, England who had her own chapel as well as "a number of female preachers" in London. Towle named the Irish woman who offered hospitality in Dublin. In contrast to the unnamed woman in the Bible who had anointed Jesus' head, Towle made sure that Sarah Templeton would be known by name.⁴⁸ She included the "mothers in Israel" as well as the women in her family who had encouraged her. Her older sister Sally Bartlett Towle Odell was especially prominent in *Vicissitudes*. Sally affirmed Nancy Towle's itineracy and promised to join in her work when her children were grown. Sally's interpretation of Philip's death, that in the end he was saved, was adopted by Towle.⁴⁹

Nancy Towle gave tidbits of information about other itinerants, praising their labors, at times telling their stories. These women, like Towle, worked hard, leading hurried, fragmented lives. Susan Humes, a young

⁴⁸Towle, 57. Jesus' disciples protested when a woman in Bethany anointed his head with costly oil. Jesus replied that "what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." Her name is never given. Matthew 26:6-13.

⁴⁹Towle, 229, 176, 205.

evangelist from Connecticut, literally worked herself to death. She travelled more than three thousand miles in four years, often preaching outdoors to expectant crowds. Unwilling to moderate her demanding preaching schedule even though she was often ill, Humes died of a throat ailment in 1826 at age 23. Towle wrote that her “ardent solicitude . . . And her melting addresses . . . Exceeded what I had ever witnessed before, in either male or female.”⁵⁰

Another woman whose story Towle included was Judith Mathers. Evangelist Mathers had chosen to disobey her family rather “than to disobey her Heavenly Father”⁵¹ and had suffered greatly for her decision. After several years of “exhorting,” Mathers asked to preach at the conference of ministers, presumably Methodists. This being granted, she left her “last, and dying testimony” with us all, “to be faithful to the Lord Jesus; and in the discharge of our duty, to precious souls.” Not long after, in 1827, Mathers went to her rest.⁵²

In addition to naming the women who preached or supported female preachers, Nancy Towle wrote defenses of female preaching. She presented an argument for inclusion that both transcended gender and recognized the

⁵⁰Ibid., 26. Towle cautioned Humes to take better care of herself. Later, in February of 1832, Nancy Towle received similar advice in a letter from a friend. “God does not require the destruction of life for sacrifice! Do not destroy your usefulness by overmuch labor; and thus break down your constitution, and so shorten your days.” *Vicissitudes*, 272.

⁵¹Ibid., 37.

⁵²Ibid.

importance of women, though she did not appeal to the inherent spirituality of women. First in the Preface, after her account of the call to preach, and in other instances, Towle set forth a justification of female preaching based upon biblical passages and her underlying though unstated belief in equal rights for all persons.⁵³ Towle boldly stated that it had never been with her “any controverted point, (although it is such with many others of the present day,) whether the preaching of the Gospel by females was justifiable or not, but rather to the reverse.”⁵⁴ Towle did not directly address the biblical passages (I Corinthians 14:34-35 and I Timothy 2:11-12) that dictate the silence of women in churches, but chose passages that support her argument for female preaching.

The cornerstone of her argument was that in Christ Jesus all believers were one, “both male and female” and that the scriptures give evidence that “holy women,” as well as “holy men of God” spoke, prophesied or preached.⁵⁵ She linked her premillennialist view with the Apostle Peter and the prophet Joel when she argued that “in these last days” before Christ’s

⁵³In his obituary, Towle’s father is described as a “republican” who “ever evinced unshaken confidence and unhesitating perseverance in the cause of liberty and equal rights.” Towle, 131.

⁵⁴Ibid., 14.

⁵⁵Ibid., 15. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28.

return there is a need for men and women to “prophesy.”⁵⁶ The passage from Joel is included in Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost, the day the New Testament church was formed by the anointing of the Holy Spirit. In response to the argument that women were not among the twelve disciples nor the seventy sent out to preach the gospel, Towle identified Mary Magdalene as the first New Testament preacher. Mary was given the “most important Gospel message ever,” the first news of the resurrection of Christ.⁵⁷ Towle listed other scriptural references and the names of strong, outspoken Old Testament leaders who were prophets and judges, Miriam, Huldah, Deborah and Noadiah.⁵⁸ Towle argued that if “women thus prophesied, then women preached.”⁵⁹

Towle did not argue that women were necessarily more spiritual than men, yet she was quick to defend female preachers. Towle’s most impassioned argument was refutation of the charge that women are “false prophets.” She observed that in the New Testament six women engaged in

⁵⁶Ibid. Towle quotes from the Old Testament book of Joel, one of the primary passages that supports female preaching. “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.” Joel 2:28.

⁵⁷Ibid., 8. Mary Magdalene was one of the closest and most faithful disciples of Jesus. She was the first to visit his tomb after his death, and the first to see the resurrected Christ.

⁵⁸Ibid., 16.

⁵⁹Ibid., 9.

public testimony, "Anna, the four daughters of Philip, and Jezebel: the latter of whom was vile."⁶⁰ One of the six women was false, but Towle reasoned that these were better odds than in the days of the Prophet Elijah. At that time four hundred and fifty male prophets proved to be false and only one found true. Towle wrote a vehement conclusion:

And what of all this, I ask, if we are to make a similar estimate of the two distinct genders, for the present day? The Scriptures forewarn us: it cannot be denied, that in the last days "perilous times shall come:" and that many false prophets and false teachers shall arise, etc. But is it once suggested, pray that from those of the finer mould, (women) there shall be any such occasion of alarm? No. Why then the hue and cry of false teachers! Fy! Fy! If a single female, constrained by love to precious souls, should forsake her own advantage, to win them to the Lord? Oh, it is because the world abounds with priestcraft and superstition! Pope! Bishop! Priest! Hirelings, who of filthy lucre can never have enough! These shall receive the greater damnation.⁶¹

It simply did not make sense to Towle that the clergy would exclude capable female preachers who were willing to give their lives in evangelistic efforts. These women had a specific purpose to fulfill. After preaching in a revival in New York with Ann Rexford, Ruth Watkins and Ann Warren, she wrote: "I believe that females are sent into the harvest of the Lord Jesus, more especially to provoke the idle shepherds to more earnest endeavours for the good of souls, and the promotion of the 'word and kingdom of the

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

Redeemer' over the world."⁶²

Nancy Towle argued for female preachers, named them and told their stories. She interpreted the events of her life in biblical terms. She wrote Vicissitudes documenting travel and preaching, with an understanding that her authority came from the God who called her and "providentially directed"⁶³ her life. The genuine preacher was born out of personal experience with God and submission to God's will. As in the conversion experience, the self had to be submitted to God, but in self-submission women (and men) could lay claim to a greater authority, letting God guide and give the words to speak.⁶⁴

The issue of authority was crucial in the effort to be recognized and accepted as a "preacher," not just as a woman who exhorted or prayed in public. Clergymen who supported female praying and exhorting would draw the line at female preaching. To preach meant using a biblical text, thus speaking at the highest level of authority.

Extemporaneous preaching was the style of revivalist preachers, not reading from prepared sermons. By freeing themselves from a manuscript, it was thought that preachers would be more in tune with the Holy Spirit.

⁶²Ibid., 81.

⁶³Ibid., 225.

⁶⁴Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Miller Stewart as Black 'True Woman' and Public Advocate," Women Public Speakers in the United States, 1800-1825 (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 346.

Therefore, Nancy Towle did not write her sermons though she intended to publish a book of her sermons after Vicissitudes "for the encouragement of my own sex that may succeed me in the Lord's Vineyard."⁶⁵

However, throughout her book Towle included biblical texts for several of her sermons, thus establishing her status as a preacher. There are only two texts from her earliest and happiest years of preaching, 1821-1830. Other texts were for sermons preached between 1830-1832, her most difficult years.⁶⁶ Most of the texts, taken from the Old Testament, are prophetic in either a negative or positive sense. There are but two New Testament texts, and no sermons on the love of God, though presumably she included a

⁶⁵Towle, 7.

⁶⁶Her sermon texts: In 1821, her first sermon, at Stratham, John 5:25, "The hour is coming and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live." In 1822, at the Baptist Church in Hampton, she preached from Esther 8:6, "For how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? Or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?" In 1830 she preached, July 4, in Boundbrook, New Jersey on Isaiah 11:10, a prophetic passage in which she identified the "root of Jesse," with Jesus. In Alexandria, February, 1832, she chose a passage from Ezekiel 48:35, a vision of God's city. For a sermon in Baltimore, February, 1832, she preached from Revelation 12:7 - "And there was war in heaven." When she visited Alexandria (Feb. 1832) a different interpretation of Ezekiel 48:35 - "the name of the city "The Lord is there." In Georgetown (Feb. 1832) "Their foot shall slide in due time," Deuteronomy 32:35. For the annual conference of the Winebrenners' Church of God she preached on I Chronicles 21:1-2 "And Satan stood up against Israel and provoked David to number Israel." In Richmond, Virginia, July 1832, convinced that the cholera which had reached New York and Baltimore would affect Richmond, Towle preached on Ezekiel 9:5-6: "Go ye after him through the city, and smite; let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity. . . ."

message of salvation in each.⁶⁷ Her sermon in Richmond, Virginia during the summer of 1832 was perhaps the most frightening, since she reported that “loud cries were heard through the house.” It was so powerful that after the fourth service people were afraid to come.⁶⁸

Like other revivalist preachers Towle preached a message of sin, repentance and salvation, convinced that world events signaled the last days before destruction, Christ’s return, judgment and the millennium.⁶⁹ Male and female preachers of the Freewill Baptist, Methodist and Christian sects were *premillennialists*, in contrast to *postmillennialists*. After the American Revolution the postmillennialists celebrated what they believed to be America’s glorious destiny, the beginning of the millennium, and an era of continual progress. The premillennialists believed the opposite. They predicted that there would be a violent apocalypse before Christ’s return and the thousand year reign of peace, though unlike William Miller, who predicted that Christ would return in 1843, they did not believe humans

⁶⁷Towle, 68. She preached on “God so loved the world” in England, but she was annoyed that the male preacher chose and announced the topic without consulting her.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 157.

⁶⁹Millennialism had two important components: destruction of the world which would precede Christ’s return - apocalypse: and Christ’s return and one thousand year reign - the millennium. John Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 217.

could know the exact time the end would come.⁷⁰ Premillennialists interpreted the unprecedented changes in American life as a signal of the last days before judgment. Whenever there was a comet, an earthquake, a violent storm or any other natural disaster, these preachers interpreted the event as a sign of worse things to come.⁷¹ Nancy Towle was convinced that the outbreak of cholera in 1832 was a sign of God's judgment and a vindication of her warning.

The United States underwent a long economic boom from the mid-1820s down to the panic of 1837. This was the period now thought of as the beginning of sustained economic growth in the U.S., spurring the development of industrial capitalism and the creation of a national market. It saw a great increase in prosperity as well as heightening divisions between social classes. At the same time, by the early 1830s, the social changes stirred by the economic growth were starting to trouble many people and cause a conservative reaction, as evident in the narrowing opportunities for Towle to preach and in the increasing intolerance for dissent of all sorts. To Nancy Towle, the disturbing changes were reminiscent of the poverty and misery brought on by industrialization that she had witnessed in England. Towle feared that similar conditions would follow in America because of

⁷⁰Brekus, 312. Miller's calculations, based on the Old Testament book of Daniel, attracted at least 50,000 followers, "Millerites," in 1842-43.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 159.

“slothfulness, wickedness, stupidity” and a “swelling tide of avarice and ambition.”⁷²

While other nations were under the chastening rod of Divine indignation; I saw my own people comparatively at ease; and swimming as in luxury. Said I, Things at this rate, cannot long remain! If mercies have not a tendency to draw; judgments here must drive the thoughtless from their lethargy!⁷³

From Towle’s point of view, the changes must have appeared connected: “luxury” (new wealth) and “infidelity” (lack of true commitment to Christ).⁷⁴ Her task as an evangelist was to sound the warning, to use sermons, conversations, letters, exhortation and fervent, prolonged prayers to evoke repentance and consequently salvation from eternal death. For example, her concluding exhortation in Vicissitudes followed the familiar pattern of judgment, invitation to change, offer of salvation and challenge to a life of faithfulness. First Towle described the impending judgment to those who had not repented of several sins - love of money, fame, entertainment and “spirituous liquor.” “Fellow-Sinner, of whatever rank or condition, I echo to you in friendship, the voice of conscience, ‘You are travelling down to Hell.’” Then, having threatened the audience with the justice and wrath of God, Towle offered the way out: in Christ Jesus there is “pardon for the guilty,

⁷²Towle, 236.

⁷³Ibid., 235.

⁷⁴Anne C. Rose, Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830-1850 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 17.

life for the dead and salvation for all that are lost." All the reader has to do is to "believe and thou shall be saved." From the point of belief the convert is to trust in God and to tell everyone "How great things the Lord your God hath done for you. Thus do you set forward to heaven."⁷⁵

Nancy Towle was determined to be recognized as a preacher, one who spoke authoritatively with a biblical text from the pulpit. On one occasion during a revival in Ithaca, New York, 1831-1832, Towle insisted that she had a special message to the congregation. After some discussion it was agreed that she would speak after the minister's sermon, but not from the pulpit. However, when the time came Nancy Towle "arose very deliberately, took off her bonnet, marched up into the vacated pulpit, and without apology or further preliminaries, announced as her text Revelations (sic) 12:1 . . . and preached fully one hour and a half."⁷⁶

In form and content Vicissitudes is a defense of female preaching as well as a story of faith, courage and perseverance. In November, 1832, at a turning point in her life Towle published testimony of all she had experienced as an expression of her commitment and for the benefit of women who would come after her. And she fully expected that others would

⁷⁵Towle, 286-289.

⁷⁶Charles D. Burritt, Methodism in Ithaca (Ithaca: Andrus, Gauntlett, and Co., 1852), 104. Rev. 12:1: "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars," a prophetic vision pertaining to the birth of Christ and the last conflict between good and evil. See Brekus, 201.

follow. Towle did not doubt her conversion, her calling and the conviction that women were essential in the purposes of God.

The last publication of Nancy Towle that survives is a short book that promotes her evangelical theology and inspired leadership. Some of the Writings and Last Sentences of Adolphus Dewey tells of the dramatic conversion of a twenty-four year old man convicted of murdering his wife.⁷⁷ The book is reminiscent of the criminal conversion narratives of colonial New England. Clergy would publish accounts of condemned prisoners' last words and dying speeches along with sermons preached at their execution.⁷⁸ Towle recorded the conversion and last speech of Dewey in an era of extensive newspaper reports of sensational crimes and trials, especially those of sexual deviance or violence.⁷⁹ No doubt Nancy Towle hoped for wide readership of her book.

In Montreal, August 1833, Towle and a "female friend" visited the inmate in prison. During their visit the women prayed and wept with the penitent Dewey until he experienced forgiveness: "I am happy! I believe God has blotted out my sins and I am prepared to die! I have nothing to fear! I

⁷⁷Nancy Towle believed that she had been sent by God to Montreal "just in time to comfort him." Nancy Towle, Some of the Writings and Last Sentences of Adolphus Dewey Executed at Montreal, August 30th, 1833, (Montreal: J. A. Hoisington, 1833), 12.

⁷⁸Daniel A. Cohen, Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 14.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 34.

long to be gone!"⁸⁰

When she visited a second time Towle gave him a copy of her book, presumably Vicissitudes, for his instruction. Towle urged him to throw aside his Roman Catholic prayer book and let his requests be in "earnest; not to any disembodied spirit or created angel, but to the Lord Jesus Christ." Adolphus Dewey's reply was evidence to her that God was with him, "It makes no difference what our language is - it is the heart which God looks at."⁸¹

Towle believed that Adolphus Dewey's experience of forgiveness was proof that anyone, even a confessed murderer, could find salvation and peace with God. The fervent prayers of two evangelical women invoked the presence of the Holy Spirit, she believed, and not the written prayers of the Catholic priest who had visited Dewey. Like Ann Mason, Towle confronted a different religious tradition and brought salvation to one near death. For Towle, it was such a high moment that she described it as "the most joyful of my life! Such a sense had I, of the presence of the Omnipotence: His unparalleled love and pity to poor outcast, miserable sinners; that my whole soul exulted."⁸²

Interestingly, Nancy Towle published Adolphus Dewey's speech delivered on the scaffold even though he did not mention her. He attributed

⁸⁰Towle, 13.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid., 8.

his misfortune to his failure to follow the precepts of the Roman Catholic religion. Though he experienced the concern and prayers of Towle and her companion, he remained faithful to the church of his youth. Towle did not comment upon his speech, but she printed a poem entitled "On Prayer" in the appendix of the book. The message of the poem is to renounce formal prayers from printed books.⁸³

Nancy Towle, who urged Dewey and others to seek the presence of God directly, not through printed liturgies, nevertheless was forced to use print as a means of communication. Her first calling was to the spoken word; now, with preaching opportunities limited, she had to rely on print.

According to Joseph Dow's History of the Town of Hampton, New Hampshire, first published in 1892, Nancy Towle began publishing The Female Religious Advocate in 1834 in New York City. Copies of the journal are not available, but the title has a familiar ring. The use of the word "advocate" was widespread in nineteenth century publications. An 1801 publication entitled The Female Advocate "assaulted sexual inequality, mocked male superiority and demanded female empowerment."⁸⁴ A newspaper entitled "The Female Advocate" was published in New York, 1832-1833. "The Advocate of Moral Reform" the weekly newspaper of the Moral

⁸³Ibid., 26.

⁸⁴Nancy Woloch, Early American Women, A Documentary History: 1600-1900 (New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 1997, 142.

Reform Society grew into one of the nation's most widely read evangelical papers, boasting 16,500 subscribers.⁸⁵

Advocacy took many forms in New York during the early 1830s, from the optimistic middle class reformers following evangelist Charles Finney to the followers of Matthias who wanted to restore an "ethos of fixed social relations and paternal power."⁸⁶ The Female Moral Reform Society was founded in 1834 to abolish prostitution,⁸⁷ and working women demanded representation of the National Trades' Union convention the same year. New York City was a "city of women" in which new conceptions of womanhood were taking shape.⁸⁸ It was just the place for Nancy Towle to advocate not only for women, but religious women, even preachers.

By publishing A Memoir of The Life and Ministry of Ann Freeman, Towle presented a dramatic role model for American evangelical female preachers and a defense of female spiritual leadership. With the publication of Vicissitudes, Nancy Towle, who had been in the center of evangelistic revivalism and shared its theology, substantiated her identity as a preacher whose life story was worthy of telling. She secured a place in history for other

⁸⁵Smith-Rosenberg, 115.

⁸⁶Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, The Kingdom of Matthias (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 9.

⁸⁷Christine Stansell, City of Women (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 69.

⁸⁸Ibid., 11.

female preachers. She also recognized that she was being marginalized because of gender. She acknowledged her anger and her determination to fight against the exclusion of females from preaching. Vicissitudes with its diary format and almost stream of consciousness commentary, reflects her journey in establishing her identity through the changes of her life.

Some of the Writings and Last Sentences of Adolphus Dewey is an argument for the universality of God's forgiveness and an example of inspired female leadership. The Female Religious Advocate provided a journalistic pulpit for the defense of preaching women.

CONCLUSION

After studying the life and times of Nancy Towle, it is tempting to conclude “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” It is discouraging to realize that twenty-first century women still contend with gender-based inequity. Christian women still use the same biblical arguments for female equality that Nancy Towle used, and their opponents still use the same biblical arguments that Towle’s used. The battle continues to rage among biblical literalists over the proper role for women in the church. Women whose gifts and sense of calling lead them into ministry must first decide whether they have the strength to run the gauntlet of suspicion or outright rejection. Thus many Christian women who are feminists decide they cannot live honestly within the church. But the question remains, what do they do with their faith, with their conviction that “Jesus is Lord”? Can they be Christian and feminist?

The most theologically conservative Christians today and the most radical secular feminists would view “Christian feminist” an impossible contradiction in terms. Fundamentalist Christians believe the Bible excludes women from authoritative positions of leadership. Secular feminists contend that women who claim to be Christian compromise their personhood by adhering to what they consider an oppressive religion. Yet there are women

who embrace both Christianity and feminism, who claim the third option between two opposing forces. These women bridge the gap, allowing the insights of both camps to enrich and inform their lives and acknowledging the reality of complexity and paradox.

Many things have changed since Nancy Towle wrestled with those who excluded women from preaching. Women serve as pastors of churches and in other positions of ecclesiastical authority. Women who are both Christian and feminist today have the advantage of theological education; knowledge of Hebrew and Greek allows fresh interpretations of biblical texts. Feminist theologians who recognize the influence of a patriarchal society, as well as an androcentric world view upon the Bible, are developing new theologies that imagine God as female as well as male. In addition, today's women enjoy political and social benefits achieved through the efforts of radical feminists.

Contemporary women have made progress since Nancy Towle struggled with literalistic interpretations of the Bible in a society where she was not even allowed to vote. Yet Nancy Towle, with her sense of divine leadership and her belief in equal rights also negotiated an identity that bridged evangelical theology and woman's rights. Who would have thought that one person could embrace the ideas of both Lorenzo Dow and Mary Wollstonecraft?

Nancy Towle's publications are valuable evidence for a tradition of

preaching women as well as for a woman who believed in the basic worth and natural rights of women. In several ways Towle was a “bridge person.” She was born into a strong revolutionary family of independent thinkers who expressed their freedom socially, politically and spiritually. She experienced conversion under the preaching of a woman and then participated in early nineteenth century revivals along with the most famous and influential female and male preachers of the era.¹ When dissenting sects were becoming respectable denominations that excluded female preaching, Towle recognized gender inequality and protested with a publishing campaign. Towle dismissed passages of scripture that prohibit the public teaching of women in favor of scriptures that assume equality for both males and females. Towle lived in a “bridge” period of history in which there was a strong community of female preachers. After 1830 the numbers declined and those who followed did not enjoy the same level of support. As if aware they would be forgotten, Towle preserved their lives in print.

Little is known of Nancy Towle’s life after she published The Female Religious Advocate in 1834. And the ending is not a happy one. One can sense the frustration of a woman who no longer fit in anywhere.

¹Towle is listed as a minister from Hampton in David H. P. Carter, The Native Ministry of New Hampshire (Concord: Rumford Printing Co., 1906), 903.

According to family history,² she returned home to Hampton in 1840 after the sudden death of her brother Major Simon Nudd Towle.³ She reportedly felt that it was inappropriate for her unmarried brother David and Simon's widow, Sarah Berry Towle, to live in the house together, even though three of Sarah's children were still in residence. Did she retire from itineracy at that time? Was Simon's death a reason or an excuse to leave the "howling wilderness"?

In view of the Panic of 1837 and years of depression that followed, perhaps Towle returned to claim her inheritance. As the only unmarried daughter, her father's will provided for her one third of the house, enough wood to keep the fires going, and one eighth acre of land, presumably for a garden.⁴ The land belonged to her older brother David Towle, who had remained on the farm.

Many questions are unanswered. Did Nancy Towle give up preaching? Was she forced to depend upon David for support? It is unlikely that Nancy Towle was content to do the household chores and renounce her professional

²Virginia Taylor, Nancy Towle's great, great, great niece. Interview by author, Hampton, New Hampshire, August 1996.

³Major Simon N. Towle, age 36 at his death, was described as a well-known and respected public servant. "He was an indulgent husband and kind father, an approved christian and sincere friend. His life, though short, was filled with works to answer life's great end." Portsmouth Journal, 17 January 1840.

⁴Philip Towle, "Last Will and Testament," 1831 October 12 (Brentwood, N.H.: Rockingham County Probate Court), Old Series No. 12257.

identity completely. There may have been occasional preaching engagements among old friends. She apparently never gave up her love of travel, and in her old age dreamed of going again. "Impressions of her foreign travels remained longest in memory and glorified the phantasms of her later years, when her over-taxed system shattered, her useful labors closed, the still restless soul kept up the hopeful refrain: "The good ship is coming - we're going tomorrow."⁵

Letters from nieces Mary Elizabeth and Georgie indicate strained family relationships, as Nancy Towle, the revivalist preacher returned home. Towle had expressed concern in Vicissitudes that her mother and sisters, with the exception of Sally Odell, were not sufficiently zealous in their faith.⁶ Always an authoritative person, she apparently was increasingly judgmental and contentious in her old age.

Mary Elizabeth Towle (born in 1835) wrote to mother Sarah: "The years I spent at the Academy I was always afraid of Aunt Nancy. She was so ugly to you. And the way she yelled at you and Simon was downright hateful. Such hellfire and damnation!"⁷

Elizabeth's sister Georgie (born in 1837) agreed. In a letter to her mother after Nancy Towle's death she wrote to her mother: "When I went to

⁵Dow, 1012.

⁶Towle, 110, 117.

⁷Virginia Taylor, Personal Collection of Family Letters.

school in the academy, I was always terribly afraid I should come across Aunt Nancy . . . " (February 22, 1877)⁸

Upon Nancy's death, January 1, 1876, Sarah Berry Towle wrote to her daughter Mary Elizabeth: "Today your Aunt Nancy died in the front chamber where, first her father, then her mother also passed away. Of late she suffered such delusions and voiced so much lamentation, that she sought death as a joyful release. At long last may her weary soul rest in peace."

Nancy Towle's tombstone in High Street Cemetery, Hampton, bears the following inscription: "She was a faithful child of God."

⁸Ibid.



Fig. 1: Nancy Towle

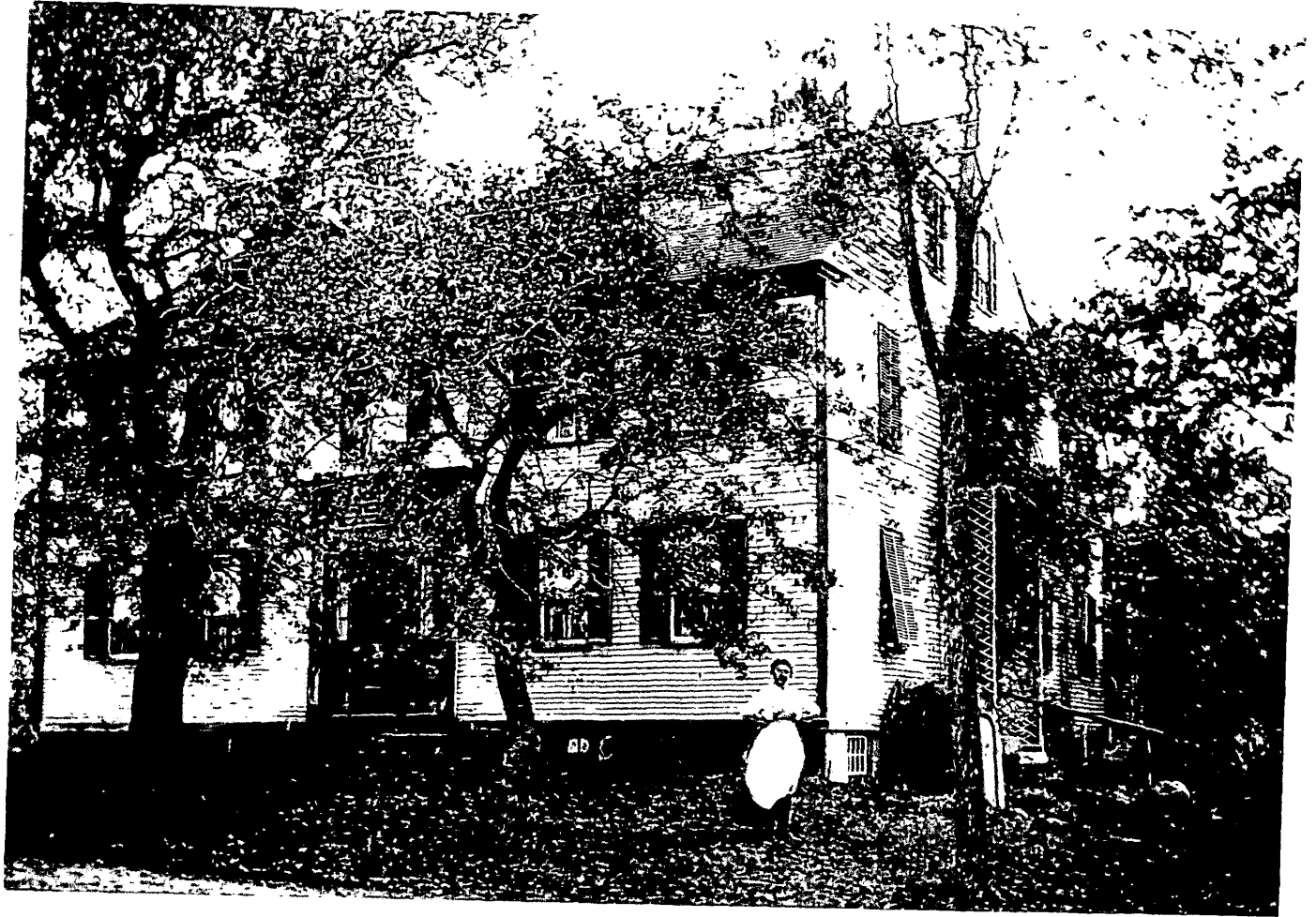


Fig. 2: The Towle House, Hampton, New Hampshire
1912



Fig. 3: The Towle House, 1996



Fig. 4: Nancy Towle's Tombstone
High Street Cemetery
Hampton, New Hampshire

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