Setting Out for the West:

Mary Richardson Walker, Women, and Place in the Nineteenth Century American Missionary Movement

Kara Mowery
Spring 2010

Advisor: Dr. Jennifer Thigpen
Department of History
College of Liberal Arts

Honors Thesis

***************
PASS WITH DISTINCTION
TO THE UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE:

As thesis advisor for KARA MOWERLY,

I have read this paper and find it satisfactory.

[Signature]
Thesis Advisor

03.08.10
Date
Précis

Mary Richardson was a young woman from Maine who, in 1838, married the Methodist missionary Elkanah Walker and promptly said good-bye to her friends and family to become one of the first white women to cross the Rockies and establish a missionary near present-day Spokane, Washington. At this time, rigid boundaries confined men and women to certain roles and expectations within society. Women were expected to be pious, pure, and meek; their domain was the domestic sphere, where they attended to childrearing and religious matters for the family.

The missionary wives that left America's borders experienced a revolutionary change in gender roles: in their departure from the neighborhoods and cities that enforced strict social guidelines, women found themselves thrust into both foreign environments and roles within their newfound communities. Necessity allowed them to partake in activities previously frowned upon or forbidden. Mary Richardson Walker provides a prime example of how a physical movement allowed a psychological and societal departure from established beliefs and standards in relation to gender roles and beliefs regarding the inherent nature of men and women.

The Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections area of the Washington State University Libraries in Pullman holds Mary’s personal effects, including her diary, correspondences, watercolor paintings from throughout her lifetime. In addition to these primary source materials, the libraries also contain a great deal of information regarding the Great Awakening religious movement that swept the United States in the nineteenth century; many secondary sources
relating to missionary work in the area; and other materials essential to a study of religion, women, and place in the American West.

A study of these materials proves that it was the physical mobility of missionary wives, more than any other single factor, which allowed them more than other groups of women to step outside of the established gender spheres and demonstrate the full capacities of women in a time and society that normally restricted such activities. Without both the vital primary and secondary sources available, a study of this kind would not have become complete.
# Table of Contents

Précis

Introduction 1

Causes of Transformation

- Gender and The Great Awakening 2
- Industrialization 5
- Movement 7

Chronological Sequence

- Leaving 11
- In the Field 18

Conclusion 23

Bibliography
I have now reached the close of another year. It has been a year of mercies. A year ago tonight, I sat with my sisters by the fireside of my father, and watched to see the old year go out. Now I find myself on the other side of the mountains, a wife and a mother. Surely this is a changing world.¹

In late December of 1838, Mary Richardson Walker recorded these words in her diary. Now the wife of Elkanah Walker, a Methodist Missionary to the Spokane Indians, Walker’s life had indeed changed. The early nineteenth century was a time of great transformation in America. The Industrial Revolution prompted the shift from families working together to produce many goods in the domicile to the production of specialized products in a setting outside of the home. Americans began splitting the indoor work of women from the outdoors and increasingly, away-from-the-home work of men, establishing a new kind of domestic sphere. Beyond economics, religious life was shifting due to the Second Great Awakening; Evangelism arose with intensity, prompting waves of conversions and a new focus on foreign missions.²

Walker was born in the midst of all of these changes. Raised in a deeply pious family, she declared: “At the age of 9 or 10 my mind first became interested in the cause of missions, and I determined if it were ever in my power I would become a missionary. This determination I never forgot.”³ Walker’s words reflect her unusual ambition for the time. She was a female desiring to become a missionary in her own right; something that would be denied. Contemporary missionary boards did not believe that women had the capacity to evangelize, and could only aid their missionary husbands in domestic affairs if sent on an assignment. Walker settled for what she could. She became the wife of a

¹ Ruth Karr McKee, Mary Richardson Walker: Her Book (Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, 1945), 183.
³ McKee, 44.
missionary for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), and would become one of the first white women to cross the Rocky Mountains. Additionally, she would become one of the first women to discover how physical movement could create a great deal of ideological movement within society’s gender-based rules and restrictions.

GENDER AND THE GREAT AWAKENING

The Cult of Domesticity, an idea which developed during the period of the religious “Great Awakening” in the United States, marked a profound shift in American gender roles: in the early part of the nineteenth century, beliefs regarding the inherent nature of men and women practically reversed. Women, long depicted as innately immoral, became virtuous guardians of family values. Conversely, men were suddenly deemed inherently lustful, requiring a good wife to rein in their behaviors. The new gender division could be witnessed in environments where both sexes worked together; one of the few stages dealt with religious revivalist efforts. In regards to missionary work, men were assigned the dirty work of converting “heathen” natives and building schools and hospitals; women, on the other hand, were understood as “angels of mercy,” tempering strict religious guidance with compassion and providing an example of what Christian women ought to look and act like. As Walker experienced firsthand, women themselves were not allowed to be missionaries; instead, they accompanied their husbands to the field to provide guidance and support and to provide an example of Christian femininity.

---

In mainstream society, hardly any women were allowed to move beyond the few positions thought appropriate to their sex; those who did often faced resistance (Walker herself dreamed of becoming a doctor, until those aspirations were dashed by societal regulations and other factors, including financial necessity). Missions, however, provided Walker an outlet and exception to these standard procedures. At home, women were generally prohibited from preaching to mixed-sex groups; church leaders preferred that they lead small, all-female prayer groups or teach Sunday school. Women found themselves “serving tea, sewing fancy goods for sale at missionary bazaars, and collecting subscriptions door-to-door.” Because they were perceived as weak and delicate, women were prohibited from taking on any positions of real authority. For these posts, “men and men alone were deemed fit to minister.” Walker, as we will find, was not someone content with sitting at home to knit. She longed to be an active member in society, involved and interested in many different arenas.

Though the cult of true womanhood seemed to allow needed opportunities, a paradox emerged. While women were declared models of piety and purity, second only to angels, they were vastly limited in positions available to them in spreading the religious gospel. While the Benevolence Empire, a development of revivalism involving a great deal of missionary and social-aid work, mostly consisted of female members, they were not awarded any authority or prowess. As Matthew LaRue Perrine patronizingly declared in his 1817 lecture, *Women Have a Work to do in the House of God*, “The pious female,

---


6 The Protestant organization of a “benevolent empire” of voluntary societies developed throughout the nineteenth century. Its main embodiment was the Evangelical United Front, which included activities such as antislavery movements, black colonization, female moral reform, temperance, Sunday schools, antitobacco reform, works to dissolve prostitution and poverty, and missionary movements at home and abroad.
therefore, does not aspire after things too great for her. There is a wide field opened for
the exercise of all her active powers, in which she may do much for the honour [sic] of
God and the good of men. Her true dignity and usefulness consist... in being an assistant
of man.” Women were allowed to take part in many religious activities, but were limited
to female-only audiences: small prayer meetings and benevolent, charitable works were
preferred. Missionary work, then, was initially out of the question, for the perceived
weakness and delicacy of women made them unfit for the harsh environments in which
missionaries had to live and work. When, in 1812, a young missionary wife named
Harriet Newell died only ten months after embarking, “her death seemed to confirm the
predictions of skeptics who had objected to women being missionaries.”

But the necessity of having women in the missionary field certainly proved itself.
First, male missionaries testified that they were only able to devote themselves
completely to their ministerial duties when their wives attended to social needs including
teaching children, nursing the sick, delivering babies, and teaching domestic arts.9
Elkanah, as much as any other husband, would have probably agreed with this idea.
Additionally, “since it was improper for men to approach women in sex-segregated
societies,” it was deemed necessary to recruit female evangelists and physicians for
missionary work in many non-Western cultures.10 Women soon found themselves across
the globe on missionary trips, working in positions otherwise restricted from their female
counterparts back home in the United States; Walker soon found herself bargaining
business deals and leading traveling groups. This new-found ability to use their physical

7 Hardesty, 111.
8 Dana L. Robert, “The Influence of American Missionary Women on the World back Home,” Religion and
9 Huber and Lutkehaus, 42.
10 Robert, 70.
and mental resources outside the home, including learning new languages, ministering and doctoring others (other women, at least), and contributing to the mission by organizing and even helping to build structures, empowered women and sparked sentiments in support of widening the female domain. Missionary wives did not intend to shift cultural standards; but when they moved outward and westward, they were to discover the effect of westward movement on the standard social order.

**INDUSTRIALIZATION**

It was not only within the religious arena that women were dealing with a great deal of change in relation to their responsibilities and expectations. The beginning of the Industrial Revolution marked a great watershed in history. In the previous century, the US economy was largely agrarian, with the work of a family shared among all able-bodied members. Women were generally perceived as equally as valuable as their male counterparts, as keeping the family farms efficient and productive required every available hand. This is not to say that women were regarded as equal to men, for they most assuredly were not; their economic contributions, however, could not be denied. Walker’s family, like so many others, had to deal expressly with these changes; women were still essential to running the family farm, and Walker thus had had a great deal of experience in that area before she attended school. The Richardsons could trace their ancestors to their arrival on the shores of North America, and had long been members of

---

11 MacHaffie, 104.
12 For an example of how women proved as economically productive as men, see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s *A Midwife’s Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*. Ballard’s story exemplifies the shift of the American economic climate at the turn of the nineteenth century; as a midwife, she was essential to the life of her New England community for many years. She was also one of the last of her kind, prior to the shift towards male-oriented careers and the banishment of women to the home.
their farming community in Maine; however, industry was quickly invading even this far corner of the country.\(^{13}\)

The time of change had certainly arrived. "In 1800 America was an agrarian nation; in 1900 it was not."\(^{14}\) Over the course of a century, "Jefferson's 'great agrarian democracy' had become the most highly industrialized nation on earth."\(^{15}\) It was during this time that occupations began moving away from the home: men left to work in industry or government on a daily basis, while many women were relegated to the home with the duties of housework and childrearing. Due to the fact that these activities did not generate income, women's work developed a stigma. Their labor, in short, was considered inferior to that of men. It follows that women were seen as inherently weak and small-minded developed; they belonged in the home because the outside environment was too chaotic and confusing for them to understand or handle.\(^{16}\) To the chagrin of many competent and ambitious individuals, "the world belonged now to men, the dirty realm of business and politics, where power resided and the 'important' decisions were made."\(^{17}\)

Women were the model citizens in society, inured with the duty of making the home a haven for their families when they returned from the squalid outside world, for

---

\(^{13}\) McKee, 31.
\(^{14}\) Hardesty, 30.
\(^{15}\) Ibid, 31.
\(^{16}\) This characteristic of separating the "spheres" of men and women to such an extent was apparently unique to the United States, for in 1831, famed French historian Alexis de Tocqueville remarked, "In no country has such constant care been taken as in America to trace two clearly distinct lines of action for the two sexes." The partition would have been striking to most foreigners. The recent specialization of male and female domains and the perceived weakness of women that required them to remain solely in the home was based in American economic shifts. As a result, the genders were about as far from equality as they ever had been in the history of the Western world.
\(^{17}\) Ibid, 38.
women “found power and happiness at home in the role of wife and mother.”18 A single other option had developed for women, though it was only available before marriage: single girls of low class might leave home in order to find work in the quickly-developing factory areas around the northeast. But even this was a short-lived venture, which would end a few years later with marriage and a return to the home. Walker herself recognized that she would not be happy as a regular housewife, and demonstrated far too much learned ability and zeal for life to enter the factory life. This left her very few options for fulfillment in her life.

MOVEMENT

The mission movement, of course, was one avenue, but even this was not a perfect solution to the dilemma Walker faced in being restricted to the domestic sphere. Mission wives who gained new kinds of autonomy found that it was not easy to shed this power upon a return home, if it occurred. Nor was it easy for the women at home to ignore the freedom and influence granted to women on mission. In fact, some scholars have suggested that missionary women were “middle-class cultural imperialists who fled the United States to avoid dealing with gender limitations in American society.”19 Walker herself noted that “nothing would tempt me to leave the missionary field and return to spend my days at home. I know of no place, no situation in the world where I would prefer to be rather than here.”20 It follows, then, that the West was flooded with settlers

18 Barbara Welter can be credited for first using the term “The Cult of True Womanhood” in relation to the popular ideas surrounding femininity in America in the 1800s. These beliefs were largely founded on the economic and religious shifts taking place in contemporary society, and play directly into the environment that Mary Richardson Walker and her peers lived and worked.
19 Ibid, 60.
20 McKee, 201.
when women advertised its benefits (and not before). As Annette Kolodny has observed, "it was only when women began popularizing the appeals of a prairie frontier to members of their own sex...that the promotion of the prairie became both effective and persuasive." While it probably wasn't advertised so directly as to say that women should go west specifically to escape the confines of domesticity, it might have factored into women's decision to go to a place where hard work would pay off in the form of greater liberties and opportunities. Walker herself was able to practice forms taxidermy, botany, geology, and chemistry; she sketched and painted; and in general experienced in her everyday life a kind of autonomy and opportunity unavailable to those thousands of miles away at home. The movement of women across the continent, and even out of it, allowed them to demonstrate their full facilities and take part in typically male-dominated domains. As historian Virginia Scharff has observed, it is "To the extent that women have contested restriction of their power to move, to claim access to male-dominated spaces...they have been agents of historical transformation."

Given the limited opportunities at home and the wide-open vistas available in the mission field, it should come as no surprise that religious-minded women clamored for the opportunity to go West. The mission board weighed the benefits of sending women into the field. An exploring mission to Oregon Territory to investigate the possibility of missionary efforts in the area had been commissioned by the ABCFM in 1815. The explorers reported back that "difficulties and dangers would be incident to a journey

through a country of such extent, uninhabited except by wandering bands of Indians."

Those who argued against sending women on such a journey maintained that the severe 
physical hardships would be too great for such “delicate creatures.” Women could be 
thrown from their horses and dragged, or might prove particularly susceptible to attacks 
by Native Americans. Additionally, the necessity of travelling on the Sabbath would 
surely injure the “high moral worth and sincere piety” of the women who were approved 
to go on the mission. The ABCFM exploring tour, which had taken place some years 
before, lamented travelling on the Sabbath. “How great a contrast to the sacredness of the 
day,” the report declared, “when it is enjoyed in the Christian family circle.”

Regardless of the dangers the journey posed, Walker was determined. Narcissa 
Whitman, who had accompanied her husband to Oregon Territory in 1836, 
enthusiastically endorsed the overland route, praising “the purity of the mountain air, the 
exhilarating effects of outdoor living, and the healthful exercise of a horseback ride.”

Reverend David Greene, secretary for the ABCFM and a correspondent of Elkanah’s 
before their departure, assured him that “I believe that most persons, even females, soon 
become accustomed to such a mode of life.” Although women were only allowed the 
status of “assistant missionary” by the ABCFM, they took the offer in return for the 
promise of an exhilarating and fulfilling assignment. Their resolve in the face of 
expected dangers and difficulties was the initial statement in a great (and unintentional)

24 Clifford Merril Drury, *The Mountains We Have Crossed* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 310.
25 Phebe Paine, letter to the ABCFM, November 28, 1836.
26 Parker, 29.
27 Ibid, 311.
28 D. Green, letter to Elkanah Walker, January 11, 1838.
argument formed by female missionaries for gender equality. Women demonstrated their strength and determination through undertaking the same perilous journeys upon which their male counterparts were embarking, and it was the West that provided the stage for them to do so.

Like Walker, those who left the comforts of home to serve in the mission field were rarely recognized for their achievements: "nowhere was the missionary work that married women did acknowledged as professional or paid." Walker certainly provided an example of a great deal of hard work with small compensation to show for it. Women were rewarded, however, in a much more meaningful and lasting manner. In a twist of irony, embarking on the mission trips that had been forbidden to them due to their "delicacy" was exactly the movement that allowed women to demonstrate their greatest strengths. Due to the peculiarities of mission trips, many women were called upon to perform beyond their normal realms (or embarked upon such pursuits on their own, in some cases). Many, if not most, women found these newfound responsibilities desirable and advantageous. Whether they intended to or not, mission wives broke down some of the social stereotypes that so severely limited their peers at home. As historian Mary Zwiep points out in a discussion of missionaries to Hawaii, women "took an active interest in the primarily male jobs of printing, preaching, and translating; they paid attention to the various political crises of the nation; they taught school; they met with [native] groups." Their physical departure from established society allowed these women to behave as they did. Venturing westward not only for religious duties, but also (usually inadvertently) venturing away from their restricted cultural surroundings allowed

30 Ibid, 43.
Walker and her contemporaries an opportunity to experiment with a new, more expansive role than the one available to them at home. Every one of the mission wives’ stories begins with a departure from home.

LEAVING

As a spirited and audacious youth, Walker excelled in math and science—areas traditionally reserved for boys. As one of her instructors pointed out: “She is a chemist and practical botanist...has a correct knowledge of the construction of the French and Spanish languages, has made mental and moral Philosophy her study with Political economy...”32 Walker often expressed thoughtful and intelligent sentiments in her diary regarding contemporary society and the issues it faced. Turned away from medicine (an unlikely occurrence one hundred years previous, at least in the realm of midwifery), missionary work seemed the most likely vocation that would allow her to see the world and fully dedicate herself to a worthwhile cause. The unfamiliar and sometimes hostile environments of missions provided the stage for the development of new roles; women were often—by necessity—required to work and act in a manner prohibited by traditional gender norms. The extreme hardships endured in mission life mandated that all available bodies were put to use. On the edges of the developing nation, women in the West often found themselves on the edge of social rules and boundaries as well.

Walker had joined the Congregational Church in Baldwin, Maine at age twenty. Interestingly, she experienced twangs of unease concerning her own faith for several years afterwards, until settling firmly on a spiritual platform that allowed her missionary devotion. In 1833 for example, she confessed: “I have not felt solemn today...I can not

32 Phebe Paine, letter to ABCFM, November 28, 1836.
see what use it is to pray. I am afraid the Christian religion is a delusion like all the others.\textsuperscript{33} Crises of faith, however, are somewhat common in pious diarists; fear of personal inadequacy plagued many devout souls, and would continue to bother Walker to a certain degree throughout her life. The call to serve appealed to those both unsure of their convictions, in an effort to demonstrate and prove their faithfulness, and to those very comfortable with these matters. Notably, the argument has been made that conversion proved itself a useful tool for women such as Walker in adjusting to married life. According to Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller, as women grew close to marrying age, the frivolity of youth no longer seemed appropriate. This made them particularly susceptible to the revival’s evangelical message, as they experienced religious anxiety in regards to their frolicsome earlier days. Guilt in regards to not praying enough, or perhaps attending too many parties, plagued the souls of many young women. They looked to the rebirth of religious conversion to start anew, in a more proper and pure manner.

At the same time, the idea of beginning anew and surrendering one’s life to service and moral righteousness provided a smooth transition into the subordinate role of a wife. As Ruether and Skinner point out, women who undertook the “renunciation of past sinfulness, recognition of one’s powerlessness in matters of salvation, and acceptance of God’s sovereignty” may have felt the parallel with the acceptance of a drastic loss in independence and recognition of male authority in married life.\textsuperscript{34} In this regard, conversion was the means through which women adapted to their culture’s demands that they submit to both God and man.

\textsuperscript{33} McKee, 58.
This became especially relevant in Walker's life when she was unexpectedly informed that she could not be an "official" missionary, and that only married women were allowed to partake in missionary work. These developments led her to willingly marry a man who was a virtual stranger to her. She had long expressed discomfort regarding who she ought to marry, and requested that God send her a devoutly Christian man.35 Despite her deliberate attempts to demonstrate appreciation for her situation, the life she described in her diary was marked by frustration with her subordinate position, particularly when dealing with a husband who turned out to be emotionally unstable and sometimes irrational.

The continental crossing proved every bit as difficult as had been promised, though Walker's party was lucky to escape any major setbacks or misfortunes. The "lofty and perpetual snow-topped mountains...the widely extended prairies, plants of enormous growth, and the results of volcanic agency which are met with in almost every direction" awed the missionaries and provided some psychological relief.36 Walker breathlessly described the pleasures of beholding the thrilling Western experience, which "relieved in great measure the weariness of the way."37 Her remark is especially pertinent when one understands that she rode side-saddle for nearly two-thousand miles, "sick" with the pangs of pregnancy. Walker offered an example of the strength, both physical and mental, of women.38 In addition to a serious lack of privacy and perpetual hardship and danger, a shortage of supplies forced the party to have their first taste of horse meat

35 McKee, 53.
36 Parker, 5.
37 Clifford Merrill Drury, On to Oregon: The Diaries of Mary Walker and Myra Eells (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 93.
38 Ibid, 136.
during the winter of 1838-1839.\textsuperscript{39} Though they had been allowed to accompany their husbands on their mission, Walker and Myra Eells, another missionary wife on the trip, were required to ride in the rear of the wagon train. Walker noted this in her diary, but she did not remark on its cause.\textsuperscript{40} Naturally, we can assume that this was a mixed effort to protect the women while allowing the men to lead (a job that was certainly viewed as theirs and theirs alone). Nevertheless, their achievements directly offset the existing notions regarding the delicacy of women. Walker and Eells were some of the first white women to cross the Rocky Mountains, setting an example of the fortitude and abilities of their sex.

In addressing the idea of women travelling west, Elkanah Walker later reflected that, were they to take the trip again, they would have preferred to travel by sea.\textsuperscript{41} In all likelihood, his hindsight was influenced heavily by his family, which grew rapidly once the Walkers arrived in the West.\textsuperscript{42} If anything is a testament to the strength of Mary Walker and missionary wives in general, it was perhaps their ability to rear children and to maintain domestic harmony in the perceived wilderness, so far from their hometowns and accustomed society. With only the barest supplies, in the roughest conditions, and with their husbands away for long periods of time on mission business, the women survived and even prospered. Walker and Eells, once established at Tshimakain, found themselves “sharing the out-of-doors work with the men, working in the garden, milking

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 130.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 75.
\textsuperscript{41} Drury, \textit{The Mountains We Have Crossed}, 314.
\textsuperscript{42} The Walkers had six children during their decade spent at Tshimakain, all raised in a 14 square-foot cabin with only a fireplace to cook over.
the cows, and caring for the animals." While caring for newborn children during Elkanah’s absences, Walker recorded “keeping up her regular outside duties.”

Childbirth, in particular, was a dangerous and painful experience, although certainly one of her “regular duties.” Walker complained very little about pregnancy and deliveries (at least those after her first experience with them), discussing them in the same matter-of-fact manner as all of her other activities. She did pause from time to time, however, to reflect upon herself and her duties to her family: a loving and involved mother, she often wondered if she over-indulged her children’s desires, and other such motherly musings. For her first child in 1838, though she was lucky enough to be attended by Dr. Whitman, Walker had serious health problems after the delivery. She later noted that during that first experience with child labor she “became quite sick enough- began to feel discouraged. Felt as if I almost wished I had never been married.” This was a feeling she would reflect from time to time throughout her diary, although the rest of the comments usually dealt with interactions with Elkanah. As a noticeably independent and energetic woman, it does not seem unlikely that she would have been dissatisfied with a relationship that expected her subordination and obedience towards the whims of a husband who did not always act in ways of which she approved. Her diary reflects a constant turmoil between her deep-seated desire to fulfill her duties and please her husband, and a dissatisfaction and frustration with the system in which she was required to operate.

When their first baby, Cyrus, was three months old, the Walkers and Eells’ moved to Tshimakain, bringing a milk cow to feed the baby when Walker was unable to nurse.

43 Drury, Elkanah and Mary Walker, 137.
44 McKee, 203.
45 Drury, Elkanah and Mary Walker, 136.
Cushing Eells recalled in his old age “how he would gallop ahead of the party, build a fire, and warm the milk at regular feeding intervals.”\textsuperscript{46} Childcare was something that gave Walker great joy throughout her life. She mentioned her children constantly through the years, explaining not only their basic activities but also their ideas and her reflections on their behaviors and her own mothering skills. Late 1842 found Elkanah away from the mission; Walker discussed great personal distress towards the situation of her family.

Beginning a long diary entry with, “Having been reflecting on the prospect before me and feel at times almost ready to resign myself to my fate and not to try to get along decently,” she continues on in declaring that, “I can see no way that I can bestow that labor and attention on my family which it requires.”\textsuperscript{47} It should not be deduced from this entry, however, that Walker did not enjoy being a mother. In July of 1844 she recounted an interaction between two of her children: “Abigail struck Cyrus and he came in crying and complaining bitterly.”\textsuperscript{48} A fairly circus-like series of events followed where Abigail hid to avoid being punished and Cyrus refused to tell his mother where his sister was in order to protect her. In the end, Abigail and Cyrus made up quite well. Walker’s delight in watching her children interact and grow is strikingly evident in the way that she told this story, and one can see through this example and so many others how pleased she was with her family.

Childbirth appears to have grown easier for Walker over time. This can only be interpreted as a significant blessing: Walker bore six children over a span of ten years of missionary life. In all, she bore eight in her lifetime. When her third child was born in 1842, her diary entry was remarkably different than that of her first experience with

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, 120.
\textsuperscript{47} McKee, 242.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid, 264.
childbirth, and offers a striking demonstration of the profound difficulty of life at Tshimakain. After recounting, “rose about 5 o’clock,” Walker detailed how she “baked six more loaves of bread,” cooked, ironed, cleaned the house, put all of the clothes away, and finally, at “nine o’clock p.m. was delivered of a son.” She almost certainly was experiencing labor pains throughout the day. The idea of working so intensely, even exclusive of being nine-months pregnant, is foreign and daunting to most of our society today. But Walker had little choice in the matter, for if she were to ignore her household duties, the ramifications would be immediate and severe in regards to her family’s standard of living. And in all reality, Walker did not mind her difficult position; in fact, one might argue that she reveled in having so much to do, so many interesting things to study and partake in, so many things to see and hear and learn about. Her diary demonstrates her eagerness for life: voluntary interest in geology, botany, and mineralogy kept Walker entertained in the exciting new landscapes she encountered. A passion for productivity and accomplishment lead her to lead extraordinarily full days, such as the one she recorded in 1844 where she “washed and cleaned furniture reading for painting; painted chairs, settees, stools” followed by trading potatoes for mountain berries, and finally, she “sat up until a late hour to make a rag baby for Abigail.”

In the midst of so many duties, including sewing, dipping candles, making clothing and shoes for the families, cooking, cleaning, and farming, Walker somehow found time for personal interests: she demonstrated an avid interest in both botany and taxidermy, mostly evident in diary entries from 1846 and 1847. For example, on October 3, 1847, she wrote, “Spent most of the day arranging dried plants Find my collection is becoming
large.” At the same time, she was busy collecting sparrows, rattlesnakes, hawks, cranes, and ducks to preserve, much to the disdain of her husband.52

It is necessary to note that Walker did not set out to become a missionary explicitly for the hope of breaking through gender stereotypes and leading a sort of revolutionary movement. She did not intend to be—or see herself as—a trail blazer. She was loyal to her husband and to her cause and certainly would not have overtly attempted to usurp the existing social order. And yet she was, in the end, a major example of how women could work outside of gender stereotypes and demonstrate remarkable capacities and resourcefulness when given the opportunity. While working to survive in an unfamiliar landscape, she successfully raised a family in extreme conditions; she learned much of the native culture in which she worked; and she seemed to fully support her husband in his endeavors, bearing with patience and love all of his health problems and erratic behaviors.53 Moreover, Walker did most of this on her own. In Elkanah’s protracted absences, Mary Walker found ample opportunity to try out new roles and to develop new skills, some of which might have been off limits to her in Maine.

IN THE FIELD

The one place where women seemed to find escape from the confines of domesticity was the frontier, which many reached through participation in mission trips. In these supposedly undeveloped areas, “all hands were needed; society was flexible and

52 Drury, Elkanah and Mary Walker, 190.
53 Elkanah was prone to stomach ulcers caused by stress, which he referred to as “blue devils”. These periods of sickness were accompanied by deep-set depression which often affected the entire family, none harder than Mary. Due to the financial difficulties that plagued Elkanah during his lifetime, he was never fully well, and required Mary to care for him extensively throughout their marriage. Mary’s constant struggles with her husband’s moodiness can be found throughout her diary.
innovative." Here women might be called upon to manage the mission in the event of a sick or absent husband. Walker's own diaries reflect a great deal of responsibility and authority awarded to her during Elkanah's long absences on mission business. On one such instance in 1840, Walker recorded a visit from members of the Wilkes Exploring Expedition, authorized by an Act of Congress for exploring and scientific purposes in the Northwest. In obtaining fresh horses for the men, Walker made note of her work in her usual polite tone: "Traded some horses of the chief. I had to do most of the talking. But while I was preparing dinner, they employed Sarah to talk and through her misunderstanding all the trading was nearly done with. But when I found out, I was able to talk things straight again..." Should Elkanah have been home, Walker probably wouldn't have been associated with such business deals. Here again, as in many similar situations, missionary women were able to rise to the occasion and perform work considered outside of the domestic realm; their physical location, away from established society, allowed them to demonstrate the coherent capacities of women.

Walker demonstrated this same ability and fortitude, raising six children in the "wilderness," a decade of which was spent in a fourteen square-foot cabin in the remote territory of the Spokane Indians. In addition to being a mother, she lead prayer groups, attempted to learn some of the Spokane language, conducted scientific work, helped to build and improve her house, and conducted nearly all of her household duties without help. She demonstrated great resourcefulness continually throughout the years: in January of 1841, the Eells family, who were also missionaries to the Spokanes, experienced a

---

54 Hardesty, 109.
55 McKee, 228.
56 Ibid, 195.
house fire. This forced the two families to live together in the Walkers’ tiny cabin for more than a month. Walker found herself doing double loads of washing, which often took from before breakfast time until after midnight to complete.\textsuperscript{57} Later, in June, when both Elkanah and Cushing Eells were gone from the mission, and Myra Eells fell sick, it was left to Mary to both care for Myra and the women’s children while also managing the two households inside and out.\textsuperscript{58} This situation, while undoubtedly stressful, probably reminded Walker of her time in Maine when she was left to watch over her family’s old farm and younger siblings while her parents were moving. Walker seemed to enjoy the temporary authority and was sad to see it end. It is thus likely that, however inconvenient certain aspects of her situation were, Walker enjoyed the autonomy of her life at the mission.

Walker provides a prime example of how movement broke down social regulations and limitations to eventually provide inspiration the world of women back home. Through her demonstration of the female talents, she provided an inadvertent argument towards the right of women to exercise these abilities more often, and in wider fields. When Walker found something that needed to be done and not enough men around to do it, she would often set herself to the task. July of 1842 Walker explained, “My tub fell apart and I spent several hours in fixing it up, succeeded better than I expected to.”\textsuperscript{59} In October of 1845, she mentioned how she was currently “taking up the chamber floor” which she found to be “rather an unwomanly job.” Later that fall, Walker tore out a mud

\textsuperscript{57} Clifford Merrill Drury, \textit{Elkanah and Mary Walker: Pioneers Among the Spokanes} (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1940), 151.
\textsuperscript{58} McKee, 226.
\textsuperscript{59} McKee, 239.
hearth and laid a new brick hearth within her home.\textsuperscript{60} According to the gender ideology, such tasks were not “women’s work.” Yet the mission environment demanded that Walker engage in just such labor. Walker for her part did not seem to mind these tasks. In all likelihood, she was proud of her accomplishments.

Other women in the mission field worked as doctors, religious officials, translators, and legal representatives. For example, Emma Crosby served as a Methodist missionary on the north coast of British Columbia, far removed from high society. Her experience fully demonstrates what women could accomplish in their move from male-dominated society to an “undeveloped” territory. As “mother of the mission,” she took native girls into her home and provided them with “the moral supervision and practical experiences important to their transformation.”\textsuperscript{61} Narcissa Whitman was another missionary wife who grappled with power and position in the West. Her husband Marcus was a missionary to the Cayuse in present-day Washington; she was often left alone to manage their mission, Waiilatpu. She conducted business and hosted visitors, including the Cayuse Indians and other missionaries while Marcus, a physician, was often called away for long period to attend the sick or purchase supplies.\textsuperscript{62}

Another example is provided in the form of Sue McBeth, a missionary from Ohio who worked with the Choctaw and then Nez Perce tribes in the mid- to late- 1800s. She worked with and instructed both men and women; something that would have been impermissible east of the Mississippi. Author Michael C. Coleman discusses the “denominational chauvinism” that kept women religiously in their gendered place. But as

\textsuperscript{60} McKee, 271.
\textsuperscript{61} Jane Hare and Jean Barman, \textit{Good Intentions Gone Awry: Emma Crosby and the Methodist Mission on the Northwest Coast} (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), 96.
a missionary, physically distanced from the churches and ministers who enforced the
gendered rules, "such a career could provide women with greater scope for the utilization
of their talents: McBeth would never have been allowed to instruct male seminary
students on the home front."63 Great.

It is interesting to note that though mission wives actively broke from reigning
gender roles, they worked to introduce them to local, native tribes. More than anything
else, many missionary wives discussed a desire to "civilize" the Native Americans and
allow them to adopt a proper Christian way of life, Walker included. This meant teaching
the natives to behave in a manner appropriate to men or women. While attempting to
instruct Indian women to be proper wives, many missionary wives broke the very gender
norm they were attempting to reinforce; in attempting to reinforce Christian behavior
within the domestic sphere, it was necessary for missionary women to step outside of it
and rupture their own standards. Walker found herself outside of her home more than
once in order to instruct the Spokanes in the area and help introduce them to the
"Christian" way of life; she often expressed desires to further "teach them in this way,"
and lamented a lack of time to complete all of her tasks.64 The few who demonstrated an
awareness of this fact believed that it was a necessary sacrifice in for the greater good;
the long-term effects of breaking societal rules and stepping out of explicitly-gendered
functions, however, were not foreseen.

While Walker may have been awarded power during her husband's absences,
Elkanah was not quick to regard her as an equal. Although recognizing her excellent
capabilities in his absence, his journal offers a reflection of his condescension: "I hope

63 Coleman, 25.
64 McKee, 242.
she will continue to improve as much in her manner as she has of late and will continue to make the same exertions to please me." Despite the flexibility of frontier societies, Elkanah's attitude makes clear the ingrained and lasting attitudes towards women's work. Like most wives, Walker expressed a true desire to fulfill these expectations to please her husband and perform her duty as a wife. It is important to note that these women were, in the words of Patricia Grimshaw, "not marginal figures in their own social worlds; on the contrary, they showed peculiar sensitivity to its tendencies and were representative of its central cultural beliefs."

This required submission of women to man and religion seems especially relevant in interpreting Walker's life. The oldest of eleven children and strongly independent, Walker also experienced full powers of self-governance both during her time at Maine Wesleyan Seminary and for a period when she occupied, unaccompanied, her parents' old farmhouse. During this period, Walker watched over her younger siblings when the family was in the process of moving. Clearly she was a woman used to determining her own affairs. In some ways, this would change dramatically, as she experienced marriage in a society that required a great deal of deference towards one's husband, and men in general. At the same time, Walker found ways to exert her authority on the frontier in a manner largely unavailable to women in the "civilized" East.

CONCLUSION

It was testament to the might and abilities of Mary that the Walker family survived and in many ways succeeded at Tshimakain; it should, however, be noted that not a

---

65 Ibid, 224.
66 Grimshaw, xi.
67 McKee, 53.
single Spokane Indian converted to Christianity during the time that the Walkers lived in the area (Walker felt at the time that, out of all of the area missions, only the Spaldings at Lapwai had successfully created “true” Christians among the natives.68) This failure did not prevent the family from loving the place that they had come to call home for nearly nine years. In fact, by 1848, when the Whitmans were killed at their mission by members of the Cayuse tribe and the ABCFM subsequently removed funding for the remaining missions, the Walker family did not want to leave Tshimakain. The mission was the only home that the children had ever known, and certainly a place of wondrous opportunity for the adventurous and outgoing spirit embodied in Walker. It is probable that Walker feared returning to established society, and correspondingly losing many of the privileges she had been allowed on the frontier. On January 23rd of that year, when Elkanah travelled to nearby Colville to hear the reports and the news of their fate, Walker recalled that it was “a lonely anxious day... It seems almost as bad as death to think of leaving here.”69

Further demonstration of the capacity of the female mind on mission, and the changes it endured in the relatively undomesticated West, is the story of the relationship between Mary and Elkanah. While perhaps every couple in Oregon Territory experienced marital difficulty, Elkanah proved particularly hard to live with. Prone to what he termed his “Blue Devils,” Elkanah often behaved unkindly toward Mary. She was frequently frustrated and bewildered by his behavior.70 Often physically unwell, his frequent stomach ulcers were accompanied by spells of deep depression.71 While Walker offered

68 Drury, Elkanah and Mary Walker, 216.
69 Ibid, 211.
70 Drury, On to Oregon, 152.
71 McKee, 123.
few indications such irregularities before their marriage, they had shared a short and distant engagement. The first real laments about his behavior appeared during their overland voyage, including Walker’s diary entry on April 25th: “Had a long bawl. Husband spoke so cross I could scarcely bear it.” Shortly thereafter, following an incident in which many of Elkanah’s chickens had died (for which he blamed Walker for having persuaded him to bring them in the first place), Walker felt “tempted to declare: better to have lived and died an old maid with none to share and thereby aggravate my misfortune! But it is too late.”

What an intense emotional experience it must have been for Walker, suddenly married to a stranger who frequently caused her great distress, particularly in their first years of marriage upon arriving in an already-foreign and desolate environment; though she certainly would grow to love her newfound home, expressed through collecting and painting wild plants, preserving native animals, and other obvious manifestations of delight, Walker unquestionably expressed some unease in initial interactions with this new environment. Without her family and friends and expected to perform a wide range of tasks previously unknown, it required a great deal of fortitude to not only survive, but prosper in such an atmosphere. Yet prosper she did. This was certainly not the case for all missionary families in the Northwest- in fact, several of them suffered greatly from the experience. But Walker was not the only wife to have so enjoyed and succeeded at her attempts. She raised her children, devotedly attempted to educate the Native Americans around the mission, and supported her husband in his work. She practiced botany, geology, chemistry, and medicine. An incredible feat of resolve was demonstrated on the

---

72 Drury, On to Oregon, 72.
73 McKee, 199.
part of Mary Walker, and it is for these reasons that she and so many other women who took part in missions in the early nineteenth-century can be attributed to demonstrating the power of place in molding society’s chief objects and rules. Regardless of whether they were conscious of it or not, these women revealed the aptitude of women to keep up with men in extreme conditions, and preserve their dignity and piety in the process.

Mary Walker remained in Oregon Territory for the rest of her life, save for a single trip to New England to visit her hometown. Upon her death in 1897, she was the last of the ABCFM missionaries to die; the longest to remain on the West coast; and the oldest when called from the Earth. She demonstrated the breadth of opportunity available to women who physically and mentally removed themselves from the confines of conventional society. Stories of their lives, detailing how the women braved the elements for their families and faith, and accomplished great and remarkable feats, were popularly distributed throughout the country. With the great rise of Evangelicalism soon followed a rise of female-lead missionary movements in the second half of the nineteenth century, including the development of such societies as the Woman’s Board of Foreign Mission and organizations such as the Hull House. The Benevolence Empire took root, giving women a leading place in society and allowing them to fully demonstrate their own capacities, eventually developing into the gender equality and feminist movements. Aside from religious movements, women pushed far harder for westward expansion after receiving the reports from their missionary counterparts. Women such as Mary Walker lead the way for these advances as heroines of American society, proving to the world what women could truly accomplish.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO INCLUDE YOUR HONORS THESIS IN
THE WSU RESEARCH EXCHANGE
Washington State University Libraries

Permission is requested for a non-exclusive license to post the Honors thesis described below in digital form in the Honors College community within the WSU Research Exchange <https://research.wsulibs.wsu.edu:8443/dspace/community>. Posting in the Research Exchange will make the material publicly available as part of the Washington State University Research Exchange digital repository of research-related documents. Additional information about Research Exchange can be viewed at <http://research.wsulibs.wsu.edu>.

Author         Title                                           Date
Mowery, Kara   "Setting Out for the West: Mary Richardson Walker, Women, and Place in the 19th Century American Missionary Movement"
F 10

I grant a non-exclusive right to include this item in the Research Exchange. All other rights under copyright law are retained.

Permission granted by:

Kara Mowery
Name (Please print)

Signature (not computer generated)

(509) 280-1650
Telephone/Email

06/14/2010
Date
REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO INCLUDE YOUR HONORS STUDENT’S THESIS IN
THE WSU RESEARCH EXCHANGE
Washington State University Libraries

Permission is requested for a non-exclusive license to post the Honors thesis described below in digital form in the Honors College community within the WSU Research Exchange <https://research.wsulibs.wsu.edu:8443/dspace/community>. Posting in the Research Exchange will make the material publicly available as part of the Washington State University Research Exchange digital repository of research-related documents. Additional information about Research Exchange can be viewed at <http://research.wsulibs.wsu.edu>.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mowery, Kara</td>
<td>“Setting Out for the West: Mary Richardson Walker, Women, and Place</td>
<td>Spring 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in the 19th Century American Missionary Movement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I grant a non-exclusive right to include this item in the Research Exchange. All other rights under copyright law are retained.

Permission granted by:

Jennifer Thigpen
Name (Please print)

Signature (not computer generated)

Telephone/Email

Date