"LIGHTLY ESTEEMED BY MEN": THE LAST YEARS OF SARAH MALLET, ONE OF MR. WESLEY’S FEMALE PREACHERS

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Mallet, Sarah (Mrs. Boyce) (1764-1846), a native of Loddon, Norfolk, [England] who became a member of the Methodist Society there in her teens. In her early twenties, she began ‘preaching’ whilst apparently unconscious, suffering from a series of fits. Shortly after this, the fits ceased, but she continued to preach, first in the preaching-house in Long Stratton controlled by her uncle, and then throughout South Norfolk. She met JW [John Wesley] three months later; he was convinced of her call to preach and over the closing years of his life they corresponded frequently. In his letters JW advised her about her preaching style, and gave her encouragement and support (including an offer of financial help to assist her as she ‘travelled up and down’). With the approval of JW and the Conference of 1787 she was given written authorization to preach—which no other woman received.

After the death of JW she married Thomas Boyce, a Local Preacher, in 1793. She continued preaching after the 1803 Conference prohibition of female preaching, and the death of her husband in 1813. In her latter years she and Martha Grigson were companions, travelling together to preach. She preached widely throughout East Anglia, and also in London and Birmingham. Her last recorded service was in October 1841, representing at least 55 years preaching.

The above is the entry that I was asked to write for the new edition of A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2000), because the first edition perpetuated a number of the errors about Sarah’s life that had been included in previous articles. These mistakes appear to have arisen because writers have relied on secondary sources, principally an article that was published in the Arminian Magazine in 1788. However, that article is badly flawed, almost certainly because of transcription errors between a written text and the final published article. John Wesley was well aware of the mistakes that had crept into the magazine, and, a year after the article about Sarah appeared, he appointed James Creighton to replace Thomas Olivers as Editor. In a letter, dated August 15, 1789, Wesley wrote to the Rev. Dr. Thomas Bradshaw, “I cannot, dare not, will not suffer Thomas Olivers to murder the Arminian Magazine any longer. The errata are intolerable and innumerable.”

While there are many interesting aspects to Mallet’s life (in particular the authority given to her by Wesley, and his possible plans for her), space limits me to correcting one major misconception.1 Several writers have stated

1Readers who wish to learn more about her life might consider turning to David East’s, Dear Sally, a biography of Sarah, published in Britain by WMHS Publications.
that Sarah gave up preaching after the 1803 Wesleyan Conference effectively banned women from public preaching. Certainly that is what the church authorities at the time would have us believe. However, there is considerable evidence to show that was far from the case. Her preaching career in fact continued for at least 37 years after the ban.

After the death of her husband, in 1813, Sarah resumed preaching on her own, but within a few years she met Mrs. Martha Grigson, a woman of some substance, who had also experienced a call to preach. Sarah had never been wealthy. She came from a poor family, and worked as a tailor. Indeed, Wesley offered her financial help to continue her preaching. She was fortunate, then, in befriending Martha, particularly when, after the death of Martha’s husband, Sarah was invited to live with her. The two of them led services together, not only in East Anglia, but we have evidence that they travelled to London, where Sarah took at least one service. Later they carried out a six-month tour of Central England, culminating in their being invited to lead services in each of the six chapels in Birmingham. The primary purpose of this tour was to visit Mary Tooth. Mary was the last companion of Mary Bosanquet, and had continued her work at Madeley. Sarah met her in London and they kept up a regular correspondence which provides much of the documentary evidence for Sarah’s later work.\(^2\) Sadly, on August 31, 1839, Sarah wrote to Mary, saying that she was left alone to mourn and to suffer, for Martha Grigson had died—her death being the most moving Sarah had ever witnessed: “I went to Calvert Street Chapel [in Norwich] to speak on the Sunday morning. When I returned she [Martha Grigson] smiled and looked so happy.” Sarah herself had then fallen ill for a fortnight, and thought they were both going to die together, as they had so often discussed, but “the Lord’s thoughts are not ours. She is taken and I am left. But it will not be long before we shall meet again—and O what a glorious meeting when saints and angels join.”

A marble tablet in the parish church at Saham Toney, Norfolk reads:

Near this place rest the mortal remains of William Grigson Clerke [sic] Formerly of West Wretham in this county who departed this life on the 3rd day of October 1829 aged 65. In the hope of a glorious resurrection through the merits of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Also of Martha, his wife, eldest daughter of Rev. John Twells Rector of Caston who d. Aug 17th 1839 aged 65. Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord.

Martha had died a relatively wealthy woman. In her will, apart from bequests to her family, she left the Methodist Preacher’s Auxiliary Fund £500 (after inflation, equivalent to about £25,000 today) and £100 (roughly £5,000) to the Wesleyan Book Committee. Strangely, she was less generous

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\(^2\)Their letters to Mary Tooth are preserved in the Methodist Archives in Manchester, England.
to Sarah, with whom she had shared the last ten years of her life. Perhaps, as Sarah was ten years older, and always in poor health, Martha had not expected that she would be the first to die. Whatever her reasons, she left Sarah an annual annuity of just £20 (equivalent, roughly, to £1,000). The following January Sarah wrote to Mary from North Lopham, in Norfolk, telling her that she had passed through many sufferings, trials, and dangers since she wrote last, but that with God's help she had come through. She found that she could not live in Norwich after the loss of her dear friend. She prayed for guidance and soon after received a letter from a friend at North Lopham, inviting her to live there. This friend had engaged two rooms for Sarah with a Methodist family near the chapel and one mile from her only sister. She believed this to be the Lord's doing, especially remembering that this was the first place that she preached when she "began my Lord's work, and though sixty five years ago I have some souls to my ministry now living here—and many are gone to glory."3

In 1794, when she and Thomas first moved to South Lopham, the joint North and South Lopham society had 29 members. This had not increased by 1806, when they left, although the following years saw steady growth, with membership reaching 101 in 1813 (the population of the two villages was about 1,500—for 7% to be Methodist members is exceptional; in 1811 the membership of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Britain represented only 1.22% of the entire population).4 How much of this was the result of Sarah's work is, of course, impossible to say.

Sarah went on to describe an accident she had been involved in:

The 16th December, as I was going to see a sick woman, I was knocked down with a horse and cart—a wicked careless youth was driving on the footpath5 behind me... I was covered with mire from head to foot, got a blow on the back of my head with the horse, a wound on my left side, and my right hand and arm much hurt. I looked for sudden death, but I felt it would be sudden glory... in that state I was carried to the sick woman and talked with her a short time, but I soon grew worse... was got to my home, and to bed. Found one rib was brook [sic], but it was all mercy that I had no more brooken [sic] bones. . . .

Sarah was 75 at the time. Not only was she still visiting the sick, but she was to survive the shock of this accident with only a broken rib. She described that she had been confined to her home, a prisoner ever since, "but my prison is a palace, for the king of kings condesend [sic] not only to visit me, but to come and make his abode with me . . . . I praise the Lord."

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3Her first sermon was actually preached at Long Stratton. Shortly after this she went to North Lopham. She is also confused about dates - she was only eleven 65 years earlier. She actually began her preaching career 54 years before this.

4National figures from Robert Currie, Methodism Divided (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 90. Local membership statistics are from the District Circuit records held in the Norfolk Records Office.

5The roads in North Lopham, around the chapel, are still dangerous, having no footpaths in some places.
By the time she wrote this letter (about a month after the accident) she had regained sufficient strength to sit up. Her arm and hand were much better, and she could once more hold her pen, “but half the hand is lame for life.”

A year later, she wrote again, saying that she wished that she lived closer to Mary, for she was now left alone, with no one to converse with. She was unable to walk to the chapel, nor bear the cold. It was rare for anyone to call on her. However, she did not seem excessively dispirited by this state of affairs, for, as she said: “O my Dear what a mercy—if the servants pass by me, and forgit [sic] me, the master does not—for he call[s] on me daily and comfort[s] me with the consolations of his holy Spirit.”

Clearly, although she could not walk to the chapel, she had been up and about. The previous summer she spent three months in Norwich, and although ill for much of the time, she had preached three times—once at Ramplingham and twice at Barford (villages near Norwich). In a subsequent letter she explained that she had also been asked to preach in Norwich, but was not able. Nevertheless, she had much to do; “in meeting classes and preaching from house to house.” She visited many families “both rich and poor... Methodist or Church people—or Quakers.” She was so busy that she had little rest and eventually became very ill and was obliged to return home.

Ill-health was not her only obstacle:

Satan has always tried to hinder me in my Lord’s work, but could not. Now he has set others to work to do it, that ought to have helped me. They own they cannot hinder me from publick [sic] speaking because Mr Wesley took me in as a preacher, but I am denied the pulpit. I may exort [sic] in the meetings but take no text. I ask them if God had ordered them to chose his instruments—and their work—and how—and where it was to be done? I said Mr Wesley never treated me thus, but have offerd [sic] me his pulpit, when with him once at Lowestoft... I will go on as I have done and speak good of the name of the Lord wherever I go, and if I am denied the use of Chapels or pulpits, I do not trouble at that. While there is a barn, or a waggon in our land, neither earth nor hell shall shut my mouth—till the Lord shut it by death.

It would appear that the 1803 regulations were (38 years later) at last being applied to Sarah. Whether this is an indication that the Wesleyan Church as a whole was becoming more rigorous in its attitude towards women, or merely that new ministers had come to the area, is not clear. However, Sarah’s next letter shows us something more about the general attitude towards women preachers. In it Sarah spoke about, “the short account of our Dear departed friend Mrs Grigson in the magezene [sic] for April. You see by that how little the labours of females is thought of. We are lightly esteemed by men, but loved of God. I do not intend letting my papers come into their hands whenever the Lord please to take me. There will be much more of Mrs. Grigson’s life—and labours—published in mine. It may speak to some, though we are dead.”
An obituary of Martha Grigson had been published in the Wesleyan Methodist Magazine for April 1841 (nearly two years after her death), written by their old minister, William Constable. It appears that he, or the editor, was not willing to admit publicly what she had been doing, as the biography merely speaks about her spiritual life, and, whilst admitting that "she became increasingly desirous that others should know and love the Saviour," it merely notes that to achieve this, "she read, and prayed, and laboured, and put forth a willing hand to procure a better place for preaching, and a school, in which the children might be taught." Nowhere is there even a hint that she might have spoken publicly herself, far less that she actually preached.

A large part of Martha's life's work had thus been ignored. Given that Sarah had been engaged in preaching for a far longer period, it is no wonder that she was upset. She clearly anticipated that her own obituary would similarly expunge her activities from the official record. She was right be to concerned, for, as Leslie F. Church observed, "In the early years of the nineteenth century obituary notices of certain Methodist women appeared in the Methodist Magazine often without any reference to their preaching... [an] unfortunate but deliberate policy of omission... [which] may have been because the writer, or Jabez Bunting, the Editor, disapproved!"

In fact, no obituary of Sarah was ever printed in any Methodist publication. William Constable, who might, perhaps, have written one, died the year before Sarah. She seems to have faded from public memory very quickly—partly, perhaps, because her contemporaries had mostly died before her, and with ministers moving every year or two, there was no one left to remember her. As an example of this, she clearly felt that she had converted many at North Lopham, and we know that her husband Thomas had been a class leader there for some years, yet a booklet, celebrating Wesleyan Methodism in the village, published only fourteen years after her death, fails even to mention them.

Mallet visited Norwich again, the following August (1841), at the age of 77, but was ill, "I have not been able to do much for my Lord, only preached twice and met a few classes, and visited about fourteen families, reproving, rebuking, exhorting [sic] wherever I go. I feel it will be the last warning I shall give them... I shall soon return to my quiet retire-place at Lopham, to leave it no more till my Father call me to leave this vale of tears."

In October 1841 she wrote again, a letter filled with details of the pastoral work she had done, and with love and best wishes to her friends in Madeley. In a postscript she mentions that, "I preached at North Lopham last

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This observation about Bunting is repeated, in respect of Diana Thomas, whose obituary in 1821 makes no reference to her preaching, in Geoffrey Milburn and Margaret Batty, eds., Workaday Preachers (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1995), 171.
'A memorial of Wesleyan Methodism in North Lopham, (Diss., F. Cupiss, 1860).
Sunday evening but in great weakness.” This is the last record we have of a service taken by Sarah. Their correspondence ends there, as Mary Tooth died in 1843.

We do, however, have one final letter of Sarah’s. It was written on the February 4, 1845 to Mr. & Mrs. Zechariah Taft. Sarah had obviously been in correspondence with them many years earlier, before Taft’s *Biographical Sketches of the Lives and Public Ministry of Various Holy Women* (which includes a section about Sarah) was published in 1825. She wrote that it was good to hear from them again—she would have written long ago but has not been able, for “dim sight and trembling hands will not permit me to write but little—you like me are sinking under the infirmities of age.” She spoke about her trials and that she was tempted to think her religion in vain, but God upheld her.

It appears that she was no longer preaching by this time—although whether she was physically incapable, or had been barred, she does not make clear, merely observing that, “I cannot help in publick [sic] but take pleasure in them that can.” She says that she cannot wait for heaven, but feels that she will not have to wait long. “I can write but little now—this letter has been the work of some days—but it may be the last I shall ever write.”

As far as we know, this was her last letter. Visiting her the same year, G. J. Stevenson found her “holy and faithful as ever but so weak.” She held on to life for another year, before finally going, as she had long wished, to meet her Maker. She died on April 22, 1846, aged 82 (nearly matching her mentor, John Wesley, who had lived to be 88). Mallet’s remarkable preaching career, spanning 55 years, was conveniently forgotten by the church that wanted to halt her activities in life. No obituary was published, and even her funeral service was not conducted in her local Methodist chapel (which did have its own graveyard). She was buried at North Lopham parish church on April 29, 1846, in an unmarked grave.

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9 Held at the Methodist Archives in Manchester, England.
8 They were both eight years younger than her, and outlived her: Zechariah Taft 1772-1848; Mary Taft 1772-1851.
10 I have been unable to trace this quotation elsewhere. It is given, unattributed, by John Ashley (nom de plume of Dr. John Vickers) in “Long Stratton’s Woman Preacher,” *Eastern Daily Press*, August 21, 1961.