

## **Female itinerants of early Primitive Methodism, with special reference to those stationed in missionary situations**

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H. B. Kendall, the historian of Primitive Methodism, remarked that its early period was one of aggressive evangelism, resulting in a great expansion of its borders. Within 30 years it had spread north, south, east and west from Staffordshire and even sent missionaries to the United States and Canada.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I intend to look chiefly at some of the female itinerants who were actually stationed and worked in missionary situations. As mention will be made frequently of Tunstall and Hull Circuits the observation must be made that in the early days both circuits were very extensive, covering between them, with their various missions, much of the country.

When considering the work of the female travelling preachers several things need to be borne in mind – (1) their **novelty** and **drawing power**. ‘Curiosity to hear a young female preacher hastily drew together a large concourse of people’ was the comment on Sarah Kirkland.<sup>2</sup> In Hull the preaching room was too small for all who wished to hear her. Great crowds flocked to hear Elizabeth Allen on her missions to Scotland and Ireland. People had to be turned away when Mary Buck preached at Bradwell and her superintendent minister reported that ‘the novelty of a female preacher drew numbers to hear’ Elizabeth Smith. So, I think, it is fair to say that, in some quarters at least, the large congregations and perhaps even Primitive Methodism’s success was due to the novelty of its female itinerants as much as to its more general appeal. (2) **invitations** aided the movement’s spread. Often someone attended a camp meeting or service and then invited the preacher to go to another town or village. Doubtless true for both sexes, but allied with the novelty aspect it was particularly marked in the case of the women. Sarah Kirkland, Elizabeth Smith and Jane Ansdale certainly went on missions by special invitation. Primitive Methodists were very ready to make use of every contact available to help the spread of the Gospel and thus a useful network built up over the years. (3) the women had an **equal work load, but lower status** than the men. Little consideration was given just because they were women. They were expected to take their full share in conducting services, pastoral visitation and particularly in undertaking missions and ‘opening’ villages and towns. When Mary Porteus was sent to the Ripon Circuit it was expressly stated that there were five itinerants there and that she was not given any special consideration because of her sex. (4) **salaries** – they were paid less than the men. I hope that these points will be brought out as we look at the examples of the female itinerants and their work.

First, the two earliest women travelling preachers who worked before the first stations were printed in 1821. **Mary Hawkesley**: Hugh Bourne had set up a ‘tract society’ and one of its visitors was Mary, mentioned by Bourne as converting one of Sarah Kirkland’s brothers.<sup>3</sup> Mary

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<sup>1</sup> Kendall, H.B. *What Hath God Wrought* (c. 1907) p.23

<sup>2</sup> *PMMag.* (1881) p. 164

<sup>3</sup> Walford, J. (ed. Antcliff, W.) *Memoirs of the Life and Labours of the Late Ven. Hugh Bourne* (1855-57) (2 vols). Vol I p.393; Kendall ,H.B. *The Origins and History of the Primitive Methodist Church* (n.d.) (2 vols) Vol I. p. 177

Hawkesley, whose husband was fighting in Spain, had been reduced to earning a little money by lace-making as her parents had thrown her out because they could not stomach her new found faith. Obviously she was near starvation level because Hugh Bourne says: ‘I promised to give her some assistance for a quarter of the year’ (May 1813).<sup>4</sup> This was a shrewd move on Hugh’s part as he capitalised on her piety and made use of her gifts as a salaried evangelist, then as a travelling preacher. Next we have **Sarah Kirkland**, always regarded as the first female travelling preacher of Primitive Methodism,<sup>5</sup> although she had retired before the stations began. Her story is well documented by all the Primitive Methodist historians, both past and present, and so I do not intend to repeat well-known material, just to note that she was born in Mercaston in 1794; converted in 1811; became a local preacher in 1813 and was ‘taken out’ as an itinerant by Hugh Bourne the same year. Her first preaching appointment was at Sutton-on-the-Hill in 1814, where a young gypsy lad was converted and more-or-less constituted himself her publicity agent! The story of her evangelistic travels and missions during the following four years in the North and East Midlands is one full of adventure, excitement, not a little danger and considerable success. So suffice it to say that the novelty of a young girl, fired with extra-ordinary missionary zeal and enthusiasm, braving countless dangers to proclaim the saving gospel throughout Derbyshire, Staffordshire, Cheshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire captured the imagination of the crowds drawn to hear the Primitive Methodist preachers. Her travels were extensive, her impact enormous, many were converted, among them people who later played an important part in the development of Primitive Methodism, for example George Herod.<sup>6</sup> Sarah Kirkland worked from 1814-1818 before she was married, on 17 August 1818, at the age of 24, to fellow travelling preacher John Harrison. After her marriage she continued for nearly two years as a recognised itinerant preacher. Unfortunately, John soon became seriously ill, and Sarah’s activities were naturally curtailed, but by early 1819 they were able to take up their work again. After working in Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire they were appointed as missionaries to Hull where they covered an extensive area, sometimes working together, but often independently as John comments in his Journal – ‘We separated, that we might be more useful, and by so doing we succeeded in opening two places each night.’<sup>7</sup> Their work load during these months was formidable,<sup>8</sup> but Sarah was now coming to the end of her itinerant ministry because in November 1819 her husband’s health finally failed and Herod writes ‘that she entered into his work’ which probably means that as well as fulfilling her own itinerant duties she undertook as many of John’s as possible. After resting he returned to work too soon and became ill again. In consequence, Sarah over-exerted her strength and, as she was expecting a baby, they were both forced to retire, though they remained in Hull for the first Conference of the Primitive Methodist Connexion, which met there on Tuesday, 2 May 1820. Then they went back to Mercaston. John died suddenly on Sunday, July 22 1821, aged 25. Soon after becoming a widow the society in Hull asked Sarah to go back there, but she stayed at Mercaston serving as a local preacher. In

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<sup>4</sup> Wilkinson, J.T., *Hugh Bourne 1772-1852* (1952) p. 95 fn. 33; Kendall, op. cit., I. p 178

<sup>5</sup> Kendall, op. cit. I pp. 176-7; *P.M.M.* (1881) pp. 99ff; Herod, G., *Biographical Sketches* (1855) pp. 305ff; Wilkinson op. cit. p. 101; Wilkinson, J.T., *Life of William Clowes* (1961) p. 38; Walford, op. cit. I p. 413; Ritson, J. *Romance of Primitive Methodism* (1909) p.135.

<sup>6</sup> Herod op. cit. p. 320; *PMMag.* (1881) pp. 227-8.

<sup>7</sup> *PMMag.* (1881) pp. 292

<sup>8</sup> *PMMag.* (1881) pp. 293; 357-8; Herod op. cit., pp 368, 384, 330, 331

February 1825 she married William Bembridge, another local preacher. Together they continued their local ministry till his death in January 1880 and Sarah herself died on 4 March that year.

Several other women worked in the pre-station period: **Jane Ayre**, who then married William Holliday, a joiner, and they served separately as missionaries in the Dales of northern England in contiguous circuits. **Ann Brownsword**, who was one of the earliest female itinerants, and the sister of Thomas, known as the ‘boy preacher’. Hugh Bourne makes a number of references to Ann’s usefulness as a missionary. She later served in the Tunstall circuit (1821). She married Charles John Abraham, a druggist, of Burslem and reverted to local preacher status. Then we have **Suzannah Barber** (probably nee Perry), who according to her obituary was born in Nottingham in 1776, converted at 18, became a Wesleyan Methodist, but joined the Primitive Methodists when they missioned Nottingham, became a local preacher and then an itinerant. As one of the first itinerants to mission Huddersfield she faced much opposition and persecution, where she was imprisoned along with her male colleague, William Taylor, on 16 July 1820.<sup>9</sup> Her obituary states that she worked in Newark, Barnsley, Huddersfield, Sheffield and Bradwell. When in the Bradwell Circuit she married a J. Barber and settled at Waterside, New Mills, reverting to local preacher status. Her husband died in 1834 and Suzannah on 26 June 1851.<sup>10</sup> An interesting sidelight is thrown on later male orientated thinking that, in noting her imprisonment at Huddersfield, John Petty merely refers to her as ‘another’!<sup>11</sup> **Ann Blackburn** (probably nee Armstrong) was born at Flintham, near Newark in 1797. She was converted in May 1820, becoming a travelling preacher the same year. She served in Hull, Lincoln, Barnsley and Pocklington. She married Joseph Blackburn of Denby Dikeside on 2 February 1822 and continued as a local preacher for five years, before dying 12 August 1827. **Jane Ansdale**, described as ‘a woman of more than extraordinary ability and power’, worked tirelessly in the Hull Circuit, Weardale and the North-East, where she converted many who became local preachers and leaders. She married a fellow itinerant, William Suddards, and they worked in contiguous circuits, until William retired for financial reasons and they emigrated to the United States of America (c.1829). He eventually entered the Episcopal Church. Little is known of **Hannah Johnson**, but she seems to have worked both before and after the stations started. She is worth a mention as she served in the Isle of Man from 1824-26, thus indicating the spread of early Primitive Methodism.

These women are listed on the stations from the year 1822: **Mary Burks, Martha Doncaster, Mary Edwardes, Hannah Farr, Elizabeth Hunt/Wheeldon, Elizabeth Johnson, Sarah Spittal, Sarah Welch** and **Ann Stanna**. Brief comments about them show their work and illustrate the points made at the beginning of this paper.

**Mary Burks (Birks) (1796-1837):** In the case of Mary Burks we are fortunate, not only to have her obituary in the *Primitive Methodist Magazine* of 1837<sup>12</sup> but also a memoir, *The Vessel of Beaten Gold*, by John Davison. Mary, born on 2 February 1796, often attended an Independent

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<sup>9</sup> Kendall, op.cit I pp.492-93

<sup>10</sup> *PMMag.* (1851) pp.641-42

<sup>11</sup> Petty, John, *History of the PM Connexion* (1880 edition) p.125

<sup>12</sup> *PMMag* (1837) pp.145ff.

chapel with her mother. Converted, she joined the Primitive Methodists in 1818, soon becoming a local preacher and then a travelling preacher in 1822. Said to be over six feet tall she was reported to be an impressive figure, with a powerful voice and forceful personality. She itinerated from 1822 to 1836, chiefly in Lincolnshire and Yorkshire. By 1834 Mary was far from well and by 1836 had retired from the itinerancy, returning to East Stockwith to live with her father. Here she acted as a class leader and took services as a local preacher whenever her health permitted. Mary died on 22 January 1837. One final note: in 1828 she was reported to have petitioned the Hull Quarterly Meeting to buy her an ass so that she could ride to her appointments. The picture of a six foot lady riding an ass would surely be a sight to behold. The petition was refused!

**Martha Doncaster (1806-75):** Martha was converted in 1815 in Derbyshire, through a Sunday School teacher. She began to preach and became an itinerant in 1822. She appears on the Preachers' Sunday and Weekday Plan of the Western Mission as '4 Martha Doncaster'. The Western Mission, chiefly in Gloucestershire, was missioned from the Tunstall Circuit. She is also included in its accounts, where we note her salary being less than her male colleagues, though she did as much work! On 18 March 1824 she married a fellow itinerant, John Ride, a widower (his first wife was also called Martha). He was a fervent evangelist and 'opened' many places up and down the country, so doubtless Martha continued her work, though she was no longer stationed in her own right. In 1849 they went as missionaries to Australia, where John died in 1862 and Martha on 12 November 1875.

**Mary Edwardes (1802-75):** Mary was born at Turnditch, Derbyshire on 27 March 1802. She was taken to church, at an early age, but when she was 18 she heard the Primitive Methodist missionaries, was converted and, in spite of opposition from her family and friends, joined them. Soon Mary felt the call to preach and left home to become a travelling preacher. She worked chiefly in the early Tunstall circuit. She married itinerant Sampson Turner in 1824 and reverted to local preacher status, but doubtless as an itinerant's wife she continued her work, though not officially stationed. They retired and settled in Sunderland, where she died on 20 November 1875. An extract from her Journal of 1822 gives some idea of her workload:

17 April – Tunstall; 18 – Norton; 19 – Burslem; 21 – Macclesfield (twice), plus a class; 22 – Macclesfield; May 12 – Tunstall & Burslem, plus a prayer meeting; 13 – Chesterton; 17 – Burslem; June 2 – Biddulph Moor, plus visiting; 9 – Newport, Shropshire; renewed tickets in afternoon and spoke in market place at night; 10 – Coal Pit Bank; 12 – Oakengates; 18 – Bradley; 19 – Redmore Lane; 23 – Oakengates.<sup>13</sup>

**Elizabeth Hunt [Wheeldon, West] (1796-1841/4?):** Elizabeth became a travelling preacher in 1822 and itinerated under her maiden name of Hunt for just one year in Darlaston. She retired on marrying a local preacher from Belper, Richard Wheeldon, on 18 June 1822. After his death on 9 April 1826 Elizabeth returned to the itinerancy under her married name. After working in Darlaston and Wrockwardine she moved to the Shefford Circuit in 1832. Her successor commented that 'During her stay two preachers work was added to the branch by missioning and

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<sup>13</sup> *PMMag.* (1822/3) pp.258-59

a neat and commodious chapel built at Wallingford ... also a new well built house...The chapel was opened on Tuesday Sept. 23<sup>rd</sup> 1833 by Brother West and Sister E. Wheeldon.’ She also opened Bishoptown Chapel on 13 October 1833.<sup>14</sup> One account gives us a picture of the difficulties the early itinerants faced:

Dorchester is a popular village north west of Wallingford. It was opened seven years ago (1832). One preacher was treated badly – stoned nearly every Sunday morning and on one occasion Mrs Wheeldon (now West) was hit with a stone in the eye... At another time Brother Ride and Mrs Wheeldon were holding a meeting and standing close under a ham rick, as it is called, the persecutors pushed it over them; but the rick parted (about their height) in the middle, so that part was behind and part before, and but a little fell directly upon them... In the very height of this contest with the power of darkness, a pious gentleman came and intreated Mrs Wheeldon to give up the place, saying they would no more mind killing her than a dog;... But the missionaries, whenever they thought of giving up the place, were very much distressed in mind and stuck to it and won through!<sup>15</sup>

Elizabeth opened a chapel there on Sunday, 18 September 1839. After marrying Samuel West, another itinerant, Elizabeth virtually continued her work alongside him, missioning areas, preaching, opening chapels and processioning throughout the extensive Brinkworth District. She died sometime between 1842 and 1844.

**Elizabeth Johnson (Mrs Brownhill) 1808-60:** Elizabeth was born in Shrewsbury on 24 August 1808. She attended the Wesleyan Methodist Sunday School, but when the Primitive Methodists visited the town she was converted and joined them. She quickly began to exhort; became a local preacher and then, in 1824, a travelling preacher. She was the victim of considerable opposition, for example, ‘while she was conducting a service in a barn near Manchester, a number of musicians were engaged to interrupt her; they played through the street to the meeting and while she was giving out the hymn ..., the drummer, who stood in front with his hands lifted ready to commence drumming, was much affected... so no music was played... he was converted and became a local preacher.’ At another place the local clergymen put up notices to stop her, but on rebuking an old man for going to hear her they were met with the response that he’d got more good from her than from all their sermons! At Albrighton she was attacked by drunkards and fireworks were thrown into the house where she was preaching in Lichfield. Elizabeth married Mr W. Brownhill of Birchills, Walsall on 17 March 1828. They lived in Darlaston where she served as a local preacher and class leader. She died on 15 November 1860, survived by seven sons and three daughters. Incidentally, three of her sons became Mayors of Walsall.<sup>16</sup>

The next three women all came from Bronington-in-Flint, a small village near Whitchurch. It was an area missioned very early by the Primitive Methodist evangelists and obviously they responded to the challenge. **Sarah Spittal(le)** in seems to have started her ministry in 1822; **Sarah Welch** in 1826 and **Ann Stanna** in 1818/19. **Sarah Spittal** worked for seven years and

<sup>14</sup> *PMMag.* (1835) pp. 272, 347

<sup>15</sup> *PMMag.* (1840) p. 313

<sup>16</sup> *PMMag.* (1861) p. 256; Ritson, op.cit. p.145 cf. list of Mayors (Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council)

the little we know comes the extracts in the *Magazine* of 1823, showing that as well as her ordinary ministry she took part in camp meetings and organized class and prayer meeting. **Sarah Welch** also worked in the Shropshire area, helping to bear out the theory that that area was happy to employ women itinerants. Apart from a few references in Hugh Bourne's Diary for 1820 to **Ann Stanna** and her work<sup>17</sup> all we know of her is contained in the extracts of her Journal printed in the *Primitive Methodist Magazines* 1819/20 and 1822. From these we can see that she undertook a punishing schedule of preaching, usually three times a Sunday, at villages several miles apart, services every weeknight, plus house to house visiting. Her congregations were large, but often contained people who came to mock, but stayed to praise, as happened both at Lichfield and Alrewas in February 1821. In 1823 and 1824 Ann was stationed at Darlaston, Ramsor, Shrewsbury and Oakengates for six months at each station and it is worth noting that she shared the work at each place with a female colleague. It seems that these circuits were happy to employ female itinerants. Why? To return to my introductory points there may be several reasons: 1) They were a novelty and drew large crowds to hear them, which not only aided the spread of Primitive Methodism, but helped the finances! 2) They were paid less than the men, receiving £2 a quarter in 1819; increased to 2 guineas plus board and lodging in 1823, then in 1831 it was decreed that after 2 years travelling they should get £2.10s 0d, whereas the men were more expensive at £4, plus a board and lodging allowance of £2.10s.0d. 3) Naturally, there would not be the additional allowances for a wife and children! 4) Perhaps the likelihood of persecution might be less if the 'ranter' was a woman, than a man and so the local church would not have to face disruption from the hearers or even worse from the civil authorities – the custodians of law and order or the Anglican clergy or the local squire. All these things would be important to an impoverished circuit or to one where the work was just staring to make an impact. Certainly some circuits liked to have female travelling preachers and some were prepared to go to considerable lengths to obtain a favoured female itinerant, as illustrated by the following extract:

The method of securing travelling preachers in the far-off days was by no means simple. Some minutes in the Circuit books reveal a strange mixture of piety and worldly cunning, when some coveted worker was sought after. Women were in great demand because they drew large congregations and accepted smaller salaries. It was thought quite right to pay a woman less for her services than a man, even when her work was more effective and remunerative...

In 1837 an attempt was made to secure a popular female preacher from the Burland Circuit. If she could not be secured it was possible to get a young man from Presteign. The Circuit decided to try for the woman first, even at the risk of paying the difference between her salary and that of the young man. But this munificent offer was not to be made unless the Burland Circuit objected to forego the services of such a popular preacher.

Four minutes were passed at the June Quarterly Meeting that year to secure a successful issue for these difficult negotiations:

1. That if the way be clear with the woman, brother Nixon get her, if he can, instead of the man – if not we receive him according to the offer of the Burland Circuit.

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<sup>17</sup> Walford, op. cit. II pp.71, 89

2. That if any objection be made on account of the difference of salary between the man and the woman this circuit will pay the difference.
  3. That if Burland give up the woman without name the salary then this circuit offer to pay the young man's travelling expenses from Presteign to Burland.
  4. That James Nixon go to Burland about this.
- How the negotiations ended is not stated.<sup>18</sup>

A passing reference must be made to **Ruth Watkins**, who, after five years in the Tunstall Circuit, went in, 1829, as a missionary with four male colleagues to America from where she sent back reports of her experiences and impressions.<sup>19</sup>

I could provide illustrations from later dates to show how women were used by Primitive Methodism in missions to extend its boundaries and influence, but I hope you have got the picture. The number of women itinerants reached a peak in 1834 when 26 were stationed. After that the numbers declined. Why did they disappear? I offer a few suggestions – four particular reasons, plus several contributory factors.

1) It appears that once the Connexion was more established and organized it became more male-orientated at least in its public image of the itinerancy. It is likely that the Church dignitaries felt the movement would be more socially acceptable if it became more 'orthodox' and 'respectable' and if this meant shedding their female itinerants that was a price they were willing to pay at this point in their development. However, although not prepared to station them officially, they were still happy to use them as preachers locally, in missions or for special services. Why? Does this smack of double standards, in that they were happy to use them, but not to give them equal status with the men. Was it male chauvinism? Or was it just plain jealousy? Did the men wish to relegate them to a more respectable role in the church in order to appear more in line with the other denominations? Whereas the women had been very useful in the evangelistic era now that the Connexion had settled down to a more mundane existence did they feel that it would be more appropriate for them to seem more conformist and hope to bury their early 'ranter' image? Special occasions and missions would be ideal opportunities for the women to be used once again to attract the crowds in order to have great anniversaries and perhaps, unworthy thought, help to raise a good collection to assist with the upkeep of the chapel building so that the activities of the chapel community could continue to the mutual benefit of the members and the neighbourhood. As the Connexion strove towards attaining respectability in the eyes of the world and the other denominations the apparent excesses of its earlier years were toned down or abandoned and the female itinerant was one of the casualties.

2) The evangelical thrust of the early years gave way to revivalism as the societies, which had been formed as a result of missions, needed building up into cohesive 'chapels'. The converts needed not only spiritual food, but also a permanent and often a special place in which to receive that food, so a logical progression from cottage and hired halls to a purpose-built 'Prim' chapel ensued. Chapel building meant special office holders were needed to deal with building programmes. Inevitably the itinerant became involved and, as these were considered to be

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<sup>18</sup> Langham, J. P., *The Tunstall Book: a souvenir of a Hundred years of Grace, 1810-1910* (n.d) p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> *PMMag.* (1827) pp. 286 -8; (1830) pp.123 -31, 237-40

predominantly male preserves, this was yet another factor affecting the continued use of the women itinerants. Graphs based on the Religious Census of 1851 indicate the ‘explosion’ of chapel building in the mid-nineteenth century just at the same time as the phenomenon of female itinerants was on the wane.

3) As consolidation and chapel building took place obviously more lay opportunities arose for women to exercise their talents within the local churches and circuits. The chapel now provided a tangible focus for the ‘life’ of the chapel community. A purpose-built building meant that all the ancillary organizations associated with Primitive Methodism evolved and developed. By providing such activities as Sunday Schools, tract societies, Dorcas societies, mutual improvement societies, sick visiting and missionary collecting the chapel not only catered for its own members and families, but also for the local neighbourhood. So, it appears that, from the 1840s women continued to exercise their ministry, but in a localised, rather than an itinerant situation – as local preachers, class leaders, Sunday School teachers, sick visitors and missionary collectors working in the local chapel.<sup>20</sup>

4) Ministerial training was another likely factor. As Primitive Methodism built its chapels, developed its organizations and activities, became more conformist and respectable the whole concept of the ministry changed. The status of the travelling preacher was raised. In the early years there was virtually no training for the young preachers -they learned on the job. Evangelism and the saving of souls were considered more important than a formal education. However, as the century progressed the educational demands of the ministry increased and as the congregations became more knowledgeable and sophisticated they demanded better educated ministers and so a college training was required. This, added to the other factors, worked towards the change in the role of women in Primitive Methodism. As, in general, it was not considered necessary for women to be educated equally with men, when the Connexion set up a one year training scheme for ministers at Elmfield College in York in 1865, followed by the establishment of a theological college in Sunderland in 1868, this further militated against the use of women in the itinerant ministry. Also it seems that an ample supply of young men was coming forward and so it was felt that women could employ their talents better elsewhere.

Contributory factors were, of course, the strain and stress, which often led to illness; marriage; and the changing social conditions and attitudes to women in the country in general in the Victorian period.

To sum up, it seems that although all these factors played a part in the decline and demise of the female itinerant, the chief prejudice, as the nineteenth century progressed, was towards women engaging in itinerant preaching. Local preachers and evangelists were still welcomed and well used in the circuits and for missions. When the centenary of Primitive Methodism was being organized in 1907 there was considerable feeling that women were not being given their rightful place in the official programme of celebrations. Then later when Methodist unity plans were underway the phenomenon of female itinerants was an embarrassment to the leaders of the churches and so they were conveniently forgotten.

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<sup>20</sup> *PM Mag.* (1862) contains biographies of 15 women, most of who engaged in these activities.