‘… we congratulate ourselves that reason has not with us yet left its seat’: first generations of American missionary women in the Near East

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ABSTRACT
A reference to insanity among New England Protestant missionary women serving in the Near East from a letter written during the early nineteenth century offers a provocative opportunity to reexamine the motives, experiences, and mental health of these American pioneers to foreign countries. Two paradigms emerge: the married woman who tried to embody the ideals of True Womanhood while helping her missionary husband, maintaining home and children, and serving local women and children in myriad ways; and the single woman who took on missionary work as a professional career to teach, provide health care, administer, and model Anglo-American ideals. One type fared better than the other, both physically and mentally. Both served as prototypes for later secular humanitarians and both formed a dialectical relationship between the male missionary administration and target populations. The stresses of their encounters and how those affected their abilities to cope are the subject of this essay.

Introduction
The foreign missionary movement was a robust humanitarian industry that grew out of the American Protestant Second Great Awakening (1790s–1840s). Believing that acts of benevolence would increase one’s own chances for redemption, men and women spread across the globe to share their reformed understanding of the Bible, as taught by Jonathan Edwards during the First Great Awakening (1730s–1750s), and lead ‘depraved heathens’ everywhere to ‘hopeful conversion’.1 Such conversions were mostly effected during revivals, when adult church members made public confession of sinfulness and dedication to God. It was the missionaries’ goal to convince the native populations where they worked, whether through public preaching or in their schools, to follow their own experiences and do the same. The evangelistic focus of the movement began to ebb after the US Civil War (1861–1865), but missionary societies sent increasing numbers of men and even more women abroad during the remainder of the century to address not only religious teachings but also social conditions, especially concerning living standards, health, and the rights of women and children. It was the missionary women who were primarily responsible for everything outside conversion.
This paper addresses the experiences of the very earliest women to go abroad for mission work. Most went with highly educated missionary husbands; very few served as individuals. Yet the differences in their adaptation and well-being became apparent to me after finding a reference in Isabella Bliss’s letters from the American Protestant Mission at Trabzon, Turkey to Fidelia Fiske in her Girls Seminary at Urmia, Persia about the apparent predilection among missionary women she knew to become ‘more or less deranged’. I investigate this phenomenon by looking at the role American women played in the early modern missionary movement.

Isabella Bliss represents the first generation of American Protestant missionary women to the Near East—wives, helpmeets, mothers, religious-humanitarians, i.e. classic nineteenth-century ‘angels of the house’. Their commitment was mostly to their husbands and many struggled with their faith and the stresses of their separation from home, poor health, low living standards, the illneses, and deaths of their children, and the multiple expectations made of them in mission stations abroad. Many died young, but we also learn from Isabella’s daily journal that many of those who lived had nervous breakdowns of one kind or another.

Fidelia Fiske stands as the antidote to this model. Recruited as a single teacher to establish a female seminary on the model of Mount Holyoke Seminary (MHS) where she had studied under Mary Lyon, Fiske was already a devout Congregationalist missionary teacher who had effected conversions among her American students. Rather than a private journal, as Isabella kept, Fidelia wrote letters home that shaped a powerful image of a successful instructor, administrator, and social missionary. She recruited prayers, materials, and funds through her correspondence even as she continued to concern herself with the revivals and conversions at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (MHS) while orchestrating those in Persia. She never married, unlike the other single teacher who accompanied her on the outbound journey in 1843. In fact, her close assistant, Miss Mary Rice, who was sent from MHS 4.5 years after Fiske’s arrival, was one of the few to follow her model and remain empowered by her independent vocation. In this way, they stood as nineteenth-century examples of the corollary to the cults of ‘true womanhood’ or ‘domesticity’, which was called the ‘cult of single blessedness’.

In this latter concept, the women unable or unwilling to marry were kept in the domestic sphere by their availability to help out in their families and communities since they were not burdened with husbands and children. However, they also fit a long New England tradition of independence and social service that could reach beyond the local to help the rest of the world. Following the values of the American Protestant social gospel, many became missionaries as a way to civilize, convert, and redeem foreigners. These women were often empowered by their roles, seeing themselves as unusual women doing uncommon work, even if within accepted parameters of the contemporary women’s sphere. Although they most often worked for male supervisors, they were not legally tied to them and could think more independently about when and where they would serve than most married women.

Isabella Bliss chronicled her doubts and weaknesses in her personal journal; Fidelia recorded her strengths and successes in her letters to friends and colleagues. As the century advanced and the American Civil War caused even greater disparities between the sexes, more women remained single and chose to pursue vocational work, whether domestic (like teaching, nursing, or factory jobs) or foreign (as teachers, doctors, and...
nurses, or religious and social reformers). In fact, the Civil War was a great boost to women’s self-esteem as they saw their success running businesses while men were away, providing medical services on the battlefield, and taking on other tasks that had been closed to their sex before the war. More vocational single women were appointed to missions and seemed to have fared better than the accompanying wives, whose records suggest a pattern of premature death and mental collapse. In this way, Isabella represents an earlier generational model, while Fidelia became a paradigm for the next. Over the following decades, as women’s missionary societies proliferated in the United States, increasing awareness of women’s special access to youth and female populations in non-western cultures drove broad sponsorship for growing numbers of single women to serve as teachers and even doctors in world mission stations.

Before the Civil War in the United States, most women who wanted to get out of their enclosed family role and ‘do good’ were restricted to charity work in their hometown or directed towards serving as wives of missionaries across the western US and abroad. The closest they could come to progressive ideals was tied up in abolition, temperance, and missionary work that offered a democratic message of redemption for all individuals. Now we may see their social programs for native peoples in mission stations as misguided, paternalistic, and elitist but they were convinced their work would usher in 1000 years of world peace (the new millenium). Nevertheless, my focus here is on evidence that there was also an overwhelming cognitive dissonance for these women between the ideals they thought they were serving and the negative effects of their interventions, between the racial attitudes they carried from home and the actual people with whom they lived and worked, between the sugar-coated hagiographies they had read from childhood and the real miseries of mission life. In spite of this, their ultimate goal—to be useful—was realized in the work that they did to alleviate illness, injustice, and illiteracy.

At the risk of anachronistic applications of postcolonial theories (presentism), these women could be seen among the pioneer generation of American imperialism in the Near East, an early expansion of Manifest Destiny policies abroad. They came with the Bible rather than economic and political greed but they joined the British, French, and other Western powers in the drive to reshape the region into their own ideals of culture, mores, and, especially, religion. The women were seen to have less agency than men in this regard by the organizations who sent them in these early years; however, it was their work, quotidian and mundane though it may have seemed, that fostered western attitudes—naive, sincere, and well-meaning as they were at the time—about the need to rescue women and girls from slavery and ignorance, teach an Anglo-American domesticity, and set the foundations for modern international humanitarianism that continues to separate the classes of ‘haves’ from the worthy unfortunate ‘have nots’. Written reports that missionaries sent back to the United States, as well as lecture tours they conducted on visits home, were used to shape attitudes and policies abroad—not only for ongoing mission work but also to inform Americans about foreigners. Their stories serve today as ongoing examples of the often inadvertent effects that ‘do-gooders’ can have on the larger political outcomes of a given region, as well as how women’s labor has often been used to support the infrastructure and advance the agendas of culturally biased organizations. They also represent the early generations of travelers who learned foreign languages, became sympathetic to foreign cultures, and often defended native peoples against colonial oppression or supported nationalist movements. By the
twentieth century, their descendants, both literally and figuratively, served the United States government as translators, advisors, and diplomats.9

Fidelia Fiske and Isabella Bliss

1 March 1843: The ship, Emma Isadora, under the command of an English captain, left Boston harbor at 4.30 pm bound for Smyrna (Izmir), Turkey.10 On board was a party of American Congregationalist missionaries led by Justin Perkins and his wife, Charlotte (Bass), with their young daughter Judith.11 The Perkins were returning to their mission station in Oroomiah (Urmia), NW Persia where they labored to convert the local East Syriac Christians (called at that time ‘Nestorians’ and now also referred to as the East Assyrian Church of the East) to the teachings of the Second Great Awakening.12 With them were others who were also sent out by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) to follow similar careers: David T. Stoddard (Yale 1843) with his new wife of 17 days, Harriette Briggs,13 heading to the Oroomiah boys seminary14; Edwin Elisha Bliss (Amherst College 1837, Andover Seminary 1842), who been ordained 8 February and married Isabella Holmes Porter of Portland, Maine on 23 February, heading to a mountain village above Mosul but later deemed too dangerous and stationed instead at Trebizond (Trabzon) to convert Armenians on the Turkish coast; Miss Catherine Myers, a single teacher from Whitehall, New York15; and Fidelia Fiske,16 a recent graduate and teacher of MHS. The latter two were recruited to join Perkins as teachers and establish a girls boarding school at Oroomiah. Also on that voyage was the Syriac bishop of Oroomiah, Mar Johannan, who had accompanied Perkins to America to help recruit the new teachers and to see this fabled land of the Protestant New Englanders.17

Fidelia Fiske (b. 1 May 1816, so age 26) wrote descriptive letters during her three-week voyage across the Atlantic, five more weeks through the Mediterranean to Smyrna and recuperation in Constantinople (Istanbul) before beginning the overland passage of more than 500 miles to Oroomiah, across the desert plains and over the Hakkari mountains that loosely divided Turkey and Persia.18 From her, we learn that the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean was difficult; the captain claimed it was the fastest (21 days) and yet the most storm-afflicted trip he had yet made. Everyone was seasick, some for two full weeks, and Fidelia’s letters repeatedly report how they could only put themselves in the Father’s hands, as lightning, thunder, and wind caused a raging sea to buffet their ship. She tries to portray the fears lightly, referring to the ‘wonders of the mighty deep’ that she saw from the ‘house on deck’19 and reflecting upon her willingness to take a watery grave should God will it, but the shared terrors of the group come through in the descriptive language of the storms’ violence and their thanksgiving once past Gibraltar and into the relative calm, though often too becalmed, Mediterranean Sea. They passed the time in the study of the bible and the Syriac and Turkish languages with Mr Perkins, practicing by making funny sentences at dinner; listening as a group to books read aloud and holding regular religious services with the men taking turns preaching, always with an eye to converting the ship’s crew.20 They marveled together at the passing landscapes, changing skies, birds, exotic locales, and sites known from ancient history and bible narratives. It was exciting, but it was also strange and Fidelia admitted the separation from home was hard to bear, though she was upbeat and claimed to be glad to go for Jesus’s sake. In this, her attitude is much like the male missionaries who were inspired by the
story of daring predecessors and who saw themselves making a direct impact upon people’s lives by preaching conversion.21

Unlike Fidelia, who felt compelled to write deeply felt letters of thanks and details of the voyage to her family, students, friends, and mentors, Isabella Bliss (b. 25 February 1819) wrote no letters on board ship. However, she kept a journal for years before this voyage and though there is a gap from 11 February to 16 March in 1843 (during which time she would have had her 24th birthday), she tries to catch up on board 17 March with a five-page entry covering her gifts, packing, and other preparations; marriage; departure; and subsequent early days on board the ship. She begins by placing herself in the midst of the Atlantic Ocean, ‘bound to a land of darkness and superstition, professedly to spend my life in the cause of Christ’.22 Her account of the trip—who was sick, what they did—does not tally exactly with Fidelia’s, evidencing her differing point of view. Fidelia was pleasantly surprised at the conditions they were given aboard while Isabella, though she admits she was warned by the missionary panel, first thought their cabin was only a corridor. She was seasick the longest and apparently had the least vocation as a missionary so her self-esteem dropped very low. She records what they did each Sunday and fills out some of the other activities, such as studying phrenology23 and the sighting of porpoises.24 She was not at all energized by the voyage and inordinately grateful for each calm and sunny day, every beautiful sunset. The diary entries almost always end with concern for her lack of preparation to face the duties of missionary wife. She mentions more than once how, just a few weeks before, she had little realized the solemnity of her marriage vows and decision to take on this new life abroad. She makes resolutions to be a better Christian and lead a consecrated life. Her diary entries reveal very different notions about the undertaking than the public letters from Fidelia or those written by men like David Stoddard. Isabella’s later letters throughout her life maintained the same concerns—she often expressed doubts about her role as a missionary wife since she did not have the training to imagine she could have much impact. Isabella’s model would have been Harriet Newell, dead at 19 after childbirth while being deported from her mission destination in Calcutta, whose tragic story was widely read among New England Protestants and turned her into a romantic heroine.25

Leaving New England was a shock; it represented a powerful separation from all these young folks knew and loved—most did not expect to see their parents and friends ever again due to the common occurrence of fatal illness at home, along with the intense rigors and dangers of their own travel: the food, accommodations, schedule; the rocking and the violent shaking and heaving of the vessel during storms; the seasickness; the visual expanse of ocean and sky; the rough sailors with their language and manners; not to mention the uncertainty and trepidation at what lay ahead. Here they had barely begun the complicated mission they had undertaken, yet so many things already began to stress their bodies and minds. It is no wonder that many among the little group of pious travelers bonded in new friendship, including Isabella and Fidelia.

Neither woman knew much about what awaited them in their new homes. They were predisposed by their churches and missionary training to distrust foreigners and to consider Muslims as key foes of Christianity. Even the Armenian and Nestorian objects of their destined benevolence were considered inferior in a colonialist manner. Though Christians, at best they called them ‘nominal’ but more often ‘benighted’ or ‘depraved’ heathens. Fidelia promised her friends at Mount Holyoke that she would write what
she learned from the four mission stations they would visit on their way to Oroomiah.\textsuperscript{26} Isabella probably knew even less—she had not been trained in a seminary with such a focus on service as at MHS and she left for Turkey only shortly after her marriage to Edwin Bliss.

Over the following years, Isabella Bliss wrote regularly to Fidelia, who replied when she could find the time. Though the two had become friendly during the voyage out, once arrived they took on very different roles. Isabella had married Edwin with plans to serve as the ideal missionary wife, supporting him in his work and bearing as many children as possible while maintaining a model home. Her writing makes clear that she considered herself inferior to Fidelia in nearly every way. She did not go to the East as a missionary, teacher, or administrator. At the beginning of the journey, she writes: ‘What a work, and what am I that I should be counted worthy [of] such an honor.’ Unlike Fidelia, who had an awakening conversion early in her life and worked to bring Mount Holyoke students to the same state, Isabella was very worried about her ability to sense God’s presence and pray effectively. She constantly berates herself, throughout her journal, for being ‘thoughtless, worldly, and too sleepy to pay attention during sermons’.

Both these young women were part of a movement that favored female participation two-thirds to that of males.\textsuperscript{27} They sought community and acceptance and \textit{usefulness} (a very important word for them) in the solidarity of evangelical religions,\textsuperscript{28} things that were being eroded in newly industrialized New England as their role in and contribution to the family, primarily producing textiles, was moved to factories. They could work in those factories, or teach school, or a little of both. But until they married and began the work of maintaining a home with husband and children, they no longer had any particular identity in society. The subservience they were taught to perfect in preparation for marriage was neatly applied to the self-renunciation of a convert and most particularly the missionary woman. The constant self-doubt that we can read Isabella expressing in her diary is part of the Second Great Awakening’s emphasis on converts maintaining active repentance—a reform of Calvinist doctrine that allows for an individual to affect their own redemption.

Isabella did not begin a successful school for girls, as did Fidelia, nor did she make native conversions—whereas Fidelia scored a record number for recent ABCFM efforts abroad.\textsuperscript{29} She writes to Fidelia in December of the year they arrived in the Near East: ‘I’m not spiritual myself, and am almost ready to despair of either entering the kingdom of heaven myself or guiding others there. I know I am not at all as I should be, and yet am not willing to give up hope for myself … ’ Hope, of course, was the Protestant term for those who wished they could fully recognize their sinfulness and commit to God. It was a state different from mere baptism and regular attendance at church. It meant a complete personal reformation—debasing oneself wholly and then trusting one’s soul entirely into the Lord’s hands. Isabella did not feel she was ready for this and believed this made her less worthy to serve in the missionary cause and certainly less pious than Fidelia. Yet how, one might wonder, did she know to measure her progress against Fidelia’s?

Within Fidelia’s letters to Isabella, which we do not have but which from Isabella’s replies suggest they also recounted some daily challenges and successes, there must have been passages from her longer reports of the status of what would come to be named the Fiske Seminary in Urmia. For one thing, Fidelia carefully shaped letters to solicit clothing, supplies, and funding from American supporters. Her personal letters to acquaintances back at MHS and alumnae abroad, to family and friends at home, or
to a growing network of other missionary administrators were filled with accounts of the daily life of the school. These were carefully crafted to highlight the difficulties of the work, but not to complain, rather to show the immense needs she wanted addressed even as her skillful managing of resources was evident. She recorded every conversion and wrote long narratives about the revivals that began to take place in both her school and that for boys after 1846. She compared these events to those at MHS, which had already begun while she was teaching there and constantly asked for more news about who was now ‘hopeful’, who had fully converted, what the Missionary Society was planning, and how her former section of students was progressing. She begged teachers and students there to pray for her charges in Persia. She traveled to villages around the city and methodically worked to overturn prejudices against westerners and independent women, in order to gain purchase into the social fabric of native women’s lives so that she could recruit their girls for her school and teach the women Gospel stories and even—in some cases—literacy. Fidelia often copied entire passages over and over into letters to many people and into reports to the ABCFM. Some were turned into articles for the Missionary Herald (which Isabella read regularly). Other missionaries then wrote private letters and articles for publication about Fiske’s successes, praising her character and using her work as a model for the field. Isabella often denigrated her own activities in replies, comparing housework, child-rearing, and Bible reading with native neighbors unfavorably to the work Fidelia told her about at Oroomiah.

Nevertheless, making their way in the outer reaches of the Eastern Mediterranean region and creating a semblance of ‘home’ by their New England standards, represented a struggle that Isabella and Fidelia shared. Isabella was unsure where she was going and what her purpose was even when they left Constantinople after three meetings with the missionary leaders there. The Kurdish mountain area above Mosul was deemed too dangerous at that point, there was no room for them in Erzeroom (Erzurum), would they stay at Trebizond? It was stressful and she wrote in her journal that she feared she loved the civilization and social life of Constantinople too much, afraid of life in a remote and difficult location. In fact, Isabella was lucky to stay in Trebizond. In January 1841, The Mitchells and Hinsdales had left Boston, also on the Emma Isadora, for those same mountains. After landing at Smyrna, they headed to Beirut and, fighting constant delays, arrived in Aleppo only on 12 May. Finally ready to depart for the mountains towards the end of that month, Colby Mitchell came down with malaria and then, on the first leg of the journey, delirium and death on 27 June. Within days, Eliza Mitchell was also ill with a fever and died upon reaching Mosul 12 July. By 26 December 1842, Abel Hinsdale was dead and another American couple, the Lauries had arrived in Mosul for backup only to immediately fall ill themselves. One year later, Martha Laurie was dead and the following spring Dr Asahel Grant—the intrepid, evangelical healer of these mountain regions—died. Finally, Sarah Hinsdale’s baby, which she had born after her husband’s death, died in July. In October of 1844, Thomas Laurie, Sarah Hinsdale, and Azariah Smith—who had arrived just in time to attend Grant’s death—packed up and left Mosul for Constantinople. None of these people lived beyond the age of 37; many died still in their 20s. This area of the Hakkari Mountains in which they had all planned to settle was a desert highland of extreme temperatures, poor water sources, remote villages, and perilous routes with some of the most dangerous highwaymen in the world. In spite of strong evidence that dangers of every kind assailed travelers and
political intrigue would never allow an American foothold, the ABCFM went ahead in early 1843 and sent the Blisses to Julamerk—one of the most remote villages associated with the troubled Nestorian patriarchy. It is only due to a war among the Kurds and Nestorians that their passage was halted, yet it is hard to imagine that they would have survived long.32

Yet even in their relatively populated cities, correspondence was clearly important to both Isabella and Fidelia, but nearly essential for Isabella.33 She asks Fidelia:

Is not the arrival of your messenger a great event with you? We watch for the steamer once a fortnight with great interest. We now get our mailed letters from America in little more than 40 days usually. How often do you write your friends and how often do they write you? This letter writing is a precious gift, is it not.34

The first letter that Fidelia saved from Isabella is dated 29 August 1843, about two months after Fidelia had arrived in Persia. Isabella describes how she and Edwin were at that time living in a tent in the country next to the 'shantee' of another missionary, Mrs Johnston,35 and taking their meals with her. Some of their party were sleeping on a sofa and traveling beds in that dwelling, while the Blisses had mats on the floor of their tent, bedding which they stored in saddlebags during the day, and a sort of washstand to use as a desk. They finally secured a house in Trebizond in October so that they could live independently (with servants) and stop being a burden on Mrs Johnston when in the city. They added a chimney, installed windows, and had the building whitewashed before moving in their bedding and cooking stove.

Fidelia, as was the tradition among single missionaries, first lived with an American family, the Stockings. She began teaching by reading to girls in her room and then took on classes in the barn where Judith Grant had begun a day school in 1838, continued by Mr Holladay and Dr Wright after her death in 1839.36 Yet Fidelia had been recruited to extend Mrs Grant’s efforts into a boarding school along the lines of MHS in order to eliminate what were considered bad influences in native homes and steep the children in an American Protestant milieu. Although she initially expected to allow five years for the development of such a school, the mission appropriated funds for the first six boarding students already at the end of her first summer in Oroomiah.

Over the following years, both Isabella and Fidelia faced the common afflictions and worries of missionaries in the Near East—cholera; typhoid; an eye disease which they called opthalmia, presenting as conjuctivitis or even trachoma and, like all other disease untreated by antibiotics, causing severe problems or even blindness; lice, fleas, scorpions, rats and other pests; severe weather and drought; locust swarms; violent political repression and the distrust of the local population.37 In the summers, most missionaries went up into the mountains for relief from the heat and dust of the plains in which they worked, often taking native preachers for further training. It also gave them a break from the constant stresses of living amongst populations who mostly resented their presence.38

‘Deranged’ missionary women

Trebizond was a mission station on the route across Anatolia where arrived and departed visitors, packages, publications and letters (often to be read and then forwarded onward).39 All were the source of much news and gossip; one can sense the personal worries each
account engendered about the outcomes of other missionary families in Isabella’s letters. One particular aspect of this ongoing drama peeps out within her larger news accounts and links up with similar references by other women. It concerns their mental health. Apparently, the isolation, the pressures to perform such difficult and myriad duties, the physical strains of the climate, and the very strangeness of the situation often adversely affected women’s abilities to go on. Isabella writes to Fidelia:

27 June 1845 You will probably hear from Erzeroom that Mr Jackson’s family with Dr Smith are on their way to us. We shall soon be looking for their arrival, though at the rate of half an hour a day it will take some time. Dr Smith represents their situation as very melancholy. What a blessing is a sound reason and how desirable a disciplined mind! There are four ladies in this Turkey mission whose minds are or have been more or less deranged. I pray that I may not follow in the steps of the two ladies who preceded me here.

Already in 1843, when traveling to America, the Perkins had stayed in Erzeroom and Justin referred to Mrs Jackson as ‘the solitary missionary sister’.40 In her next letter to Fidelia from 28 August 1845, Isabella writes:

Mr Jackson and suite have been in quarantine a week after a journey of 70 days. We are now having our August rains and I have not yet been able to go down to the city and see them, but hear rather sad accounts. After every visit made by our husbands we congratulate ourselves that reason has not with us yet left its seat. Did any of you see Mrs Jackson when in Erzeroom? Our husbands and Mrs Powers have been admitted, though we feared a refusal. Three ladies of the Turkish mission and all of them at one time or another connected with the Trebizond station have had their minds more or less affected. Don’t you think Mrs Powers and I ought to be watchful over ourselves?

The Jacksons—Mary A Sawyer and Rev. William C (Dartmouth 1831, Andover 1835)—had originally been stationed at Trebizond from their arrival in the Near East in August of 1836 until transferring to Erzeroom in order to open a new mission station there three years later. They had two children at the first posting and two at the second. Their second child, a son, was born in Trebizond but soon died in Erzeroom.41 It was from there that they set out in summer 1845 to return to America, via Trebizond, traveling incredibly slowly due to Mary’s condition. Isabella’s diary records on 30 June that Mr Merrick had passed the Jacksons on the road and reported they had so far only traveled for three hours over 11 days out; they finally arrived mid-August, taking two months to go 150 miles, an average of about 2.5 miles/day.42

What Isabella meant by ‘deranged’ or ‘minds affected’ is open to speculation. We can imagine many interpretations—from our own meaning of such terms—complete mental breakdown to possible euphemisms for loss of faith, scandalous behavior, post-partum depression, or inability to perform their domestic duties. As one case cited later in this essay will show, official certifications of insanity could also be based upon such negligible offenses as excessive independence or disobedience. Yet Isabella was quite concerned to protect her ‘reason’ and apparently feared that the situation in which she struggled might affect her mind.43

In her diary, Isabella makes rarer mention of the Jackson situation than in these two letters. Instead, from the very beginning of her courtship with Edwin, the entries are more concerned that she was not measuring up to the appropriate piety of a missionary wife. She hopes for more ‘earnestness of prayer’ but often is disappointed; her mind
wandering to worries about her household and children instead. She remarks that Christ’s presence is elusive for her and, though she keeps records of sermons she heard—especially her husband’s—she also notes that it was often difficult to stay awake. The parallels are curious: Did Isabella equate an ability to focus on prayer with mental discipline? Why would she refer to her concerns about her mental health vis-à-vis the other mission women around her to Fidelia, even recording that she and Mrs Powers had been discussing this at length, without also chronicling the situation in her diary? Was she afraid her husband would read it and learn about her worries there but could not in letters she sealed and sent off? In that case, did she log her struggles with devotions for his sake as well? We know that she was ill a great deal and had to return to the United States for medical care during her tenure in Turkey. Her problems were severe gastrointestinal complaints which now we might consider as much stress related as a purely physical illness. Did she fear poor health was threatening an early death and therefore worry inordinately about her spiritual health at the same time? Or was she trying to convince Edwin as much as herself that she was sincere in her faith and therefore a good missionary wife?

The interesting intersection that Isabella’s remarks highlight revolves around the fact that all missionary women were expected—far more than missionary men—to offer nurturing and care to not only their own families and visitors but also the local populations. In fact, contemporaries often described missionary work with an imperialist inequality as the difficult love of a mother for her (often wayward) children. Women’s required service was broad, drawing widely from religious roles to basic social needs. It ranged from sympathetic gatherings with Bible readings to primary health care to significant war relief. Reading letters and journal from women across the entire nineteenth- and early twentieth-century expanse of missionary activities, we see an increasing focus on personal over spiritual service. They often had to feed, clothe, and train children of all ages—even if there was no formal school structure in which they worked. Their roles as keepers of model Anglo-Saxon homes—complete with furniture off the ground, covered dirt floors, proper kitchens and tableware, dress codes, and spotless conditions—meant that they were expected to train their daughters and local girls how to maintain the same domestic mores, both symbolically and physically washing them clean. One of the first jobs most western wives faced upon arrival at a school where they or their husbands were to teach was to delouse, wash away grime and fleas, and freshly clothe the children. They made them beds, taught them to wear nightclothes, and introduced personal hygiene practices, often doing the same with any servants they hired to work in their homes. When anyone became sick (missionary or native), whether with or without training, women were automatically expected to nurse them, and often entire populations turned to them as informal physicians. They helped with childbirth, kept vigil at deathbeds, and comforted the bereaved. They sheltered refugees and fed the poor and starving as necessary. In fact, they worked so closely with the local population, they related sympathetically to them far more often than the men and gain situated knowledges that served dialectical and diplomatic purposes.

One of the shared concerns among missionary women in many foreign countries was the early marriage tradition for young girls. They worried about their treatment by husbands but were also frustrated that this meant the loss of students. They generally responded to the status of women in foreign cultures by trying to raise their consciousness, often hidden within discussions of Bible readings. They held up standards of ‘good’
conduct and struggled to combat theft and lying. They competed with missionaries of other faiths, such as Roman Catholics, and dominant Muslim authorities. Much of this required the acquisition of one or more new languages in which they struggled to communicate and avoid accidental offense. Running their own households on the small stipends allowed by the ABCFM as best they could and maintaining all their daily tasks—to make, mend and wash clothes; purchase supplies and prepare meals; clean, heat, and secure whatever dwelling in which they lived—they meanwhile also became pregnant, bore, nurtured, and then watched their own children die as often as those of the local population. Fidelia writes 9 August 1843 to her siblings that missionaries calculated fully one-quarter of children born to the native population died in early childhood, and many missionary families watched one after the other of their offspring succumb to diseases. For those few families in Oroomiah, during two years 1839–1840, seven children died. To whom did missionary women turn when tired, discouraged, bereaved, or sick themselves?

Some mission stations had more than one family or were near those of other denominations or countries. The British were especially valued among American missionaries because they not only shared a language, but their consuls were their political representatives. In these cases, western women banded together for company and assistance. Often too, single teachers were sent in pairs or schools grew large enough to hire additional staff. Fidelia, for instance, had Mary Susan Rice for eleven years (she arrived November 1847) as well as living at the Stockings, among about ten other families in the Oroomiah mission—housed both in the city and up in the mountain village at Seir, 6 miles away. Isabella only briefly had Mrs Johnston, later Mrs Powers, but also more frequent visitors traveling between stations. Her letters to and from her family, Fidelia and other missionary sisters, thus appear increasingly crucial in her equilibrium. Others were not so lucky. Mrs Johnston wept when Isabella, Fidelia and their party finally arrived in Trebizond, May 1843, recounting her total isolation since the Jacksons had left for Erzeroom in 1839, having only the (Roman Catholic) British consul nearby and having last spoken with an American when the Perkins had stopped on their way out to America in January 1842. Fidelia writes that Mr Johnston had found plenty to do, in spite of very few conversions; however, Mrs Johnston was greatly troubled by the solitude and:

> has suffered much in her health and in her mind, doubtless occasioned by her loneliness. She longs for the society of one Christian sister with whom she may freely communicate. Will you not, my dear sisters, pray the Lord of the Harvest that he will send more laborers here, as those already at their posts sink under discouragement?

Isabella does not specify the other three of the ‘four ladies in this Turkish mission’ with more or less deranged minds but she hoped to avoid the fate of the two women at Trebizond before her so it is clear that Mrs Johnston was one, suggesting that generic references to her poor health, which caused the ABCFM to initially grant them leave to return home but later transferring them to Smyrna instead, was less about physical ailments than psychological damage from the difficulties of their situation. This can be confirmed. On 14 February 1844, in a rare letter from a wife, Mrs Johnston wrote directly to the ABCFM secretary, Rufus Anderson, who was beginning a tour through some of the Near Eastern missions at Constantinople. She begged to return home with her children, saying that Mr Johnston could remain in Trebizond. Apparently, there had been criticism of expenses made in remodeling their house which she felt it necessary to defend:
When we first came into the house only one room had glazed windows. Two of the rooms resembled our jails with small windows barred with iron, very dark, and infested with rats and scorpions. My husband thought these rooms would do as they were, I thought not and I do not think so to this day.

She had been forced to live with the Jacksons at first, and she suggests there had been serious domestic conflict. This offers a possible reason why Mr Jackson petitioned the Board so vigorously to open a mission at Erzeroom and send him with his family. After the Jacksons left, the Johnstons were alone, but it was too much as the years went on:

I have passed through many trials at Trebizond which none can understand except myself, not even my husband. Among the many things which have borne upon my mind the two principal have been the apparent indifference of the Board and Miss. [Mission or Missionaries] in regard to the trying circumstances in which we have been placed and the long seasons I have passed without beholding the face of a Christian sister or, that of any Christian friend.

Isolation was a common refrain and the aggregate longing over years of letters from these women, who wanted to travel to other mission stations for visits, who missed their mothers, sisters, and teachers, who often had no one else with whom to speak their native language than their (often absent) husbands and own small children, is chilling. Even Elizabeth Dwight, who was in Constantinople where so much ABCFM activity occurred and where both boys and girls seminaries were founded, writes to her mother and sisters in September 1832 that their residence was in an outlying village with the Goodells and, though they set a table for fifteen persons due to boarders and visitors, Mrs. Goodell is the only female acquaintance I have who speaks English.

Fidelia wrote to Mary Lyon on 5 July 1843, shortly after her arrival in Persia, that Dr Wright advised her the strongest qualification for young ladies in missionary work was the willingness to labor year after year, when little good might seem to be effected. Is there any wonder that their mental health was affected?

The men, though partners right there with the women, did not lead the same lives. They were given full authority as missionaries and preachers by the ABCFM; the women were always either wives or ‘assistant missionaries’ even if at times they were the only ones working at a mission station. The men dealt with other men—with administrators and church leaders, village elders, and native teachers. The biography of David Tappan Stoddard, serving in Urmia at the same time as Fidelia, is heavily based upon his letters. He argued philosophy and Bible interpretations with the bishop, included clergy and khans among his pupils, and negotiated with political authorities alongside Perkins and other leaders of the mission. The women were left with the children and the native women. The intellectual challenges for them were teaching housekeeping, literacy, and western morality. If wives had time to offer religious instruction, it was in the form of Bible readings to the women on Sundays or simple lessons to the children.

If anyone was ever faced with evident traumatic stress triggers, these women are prime examples. They saw the effects of drought, floods, and fires. They watched men beat their wives and rape their child brides. They were attacked by bandits and threatened by soldiers. They hid students and converts from angry families and villagers. They hid entire sects from government-sponsored pogroms. They tended to the wounded and buried the victims of battles, executions, and massacres. In fact, the type of work missionary
women in the Near East undertook was nothing less than the prototype for the International Red Cross founded by political treaty in Geneva in 1864 and taken to the United States by Clara Barton with her 1881 branch, the American Red Cross. These were secular, international, non-governmental organizations that would come to depend upon vast reserves of fundraising and personnel. Yet early missionary women were already doing much the same work on their own with funding from missionary societies in the United States. What in their New England upbringing and seminary educations prepared them for such labors?

Besides the powerful emphasis on religious faith, a particular brand fostered by stories in the Missionary Herald or by seminary educators like Mary Lyon, the missionary calling gave New England daughters a chance to see the world, it empowered them in an exotic line of work, and it carried a badge of selfless sanctity—something highly regarded within millenialist belief. Whether only nominally baptized Christian, or already ‘hopefully converted’, they were steeped in the language and context of American Protestantism. There was a strong tradition of the performance of piety among New England women, as far back as Anne Hutchinson and Anne Bradstreet who stressed the authority of humility, the special relationship women could have with God through their suffering and the exemplary model of Christianity they offered men within marriage. The irony of early nineteenth-century Protestant belief in such selflessness, however, is that redemption comes in two steps: accepting one’s utter sinfulness and spending one’s life performing benevolent acts to others. Thus the charitable efforts of these missionaries were not wholly altruistic, but driven by self-interest. Knowing this helps account for some of the patronizing attitudes that come through in their writings.

As much as Isabella and Fidelia shared the missionary world of the Near East, they were also very different. Fidelia had nearly died from typhoid after her first year at MHS and her family worried that her subsequent weakness would keep her from being able to do the mission work. She promised her mother before departure that she would always be honest about her health in letters home, but is able to reassure her that she had enjoyed the long sea voyage and strenuous overland passage and found herself stronger in Persia than she had been in New England. Although the work tired her out and she often had common complaints like colds and eye infections, she claims that, ultimately, she found the demands and rewards energizing. She was also completely confident in her vocation. Her writing is some of the most religiously self-conscious of the entire group. Unlike Isabella, who openly confided her lack of pious conviction in conversations with other missionaries, Fidelia never missed a chance to preach, even serving as personal religious instructor to the missionary children, such as Judith Perkins. She facilitated letters between her students in Persia and those at MHS, translating Syriac into English and vice versa. There is little daily news in this correspondence; rather, it centers around confident hopes for conversion.

Isabella, on the other hand, was often ill. After her first child, she traveled to Constantinople to recuperate with friends but was never fully well again. She had four children and a household to care for, while Fidelia had dozens of girls and an entire school to oversee. Yet the differences are telling. Isabella was a traditional nineteenth-century wife, one for whom the marriage proposal was equally a call to missionary work. Raised in the contemporary cult of True Womanhood, she was expected to be pious, pure, and submissive while running a perfect household and rearing ideal citizens. Although she seems relatively...
comfortable with her role as wife, even the suffering that it was expected she endure without complaint, Isabella found herself most often lacking faith and attributed this to having too many cares of the world to distract her mind.

Charlotte Perkins provides an even more potent example of how those cares could manifest; she was nearly destroyed by her missionary experience. Burying six of her seven children in Persia, she made extremely difficult journeys out to Oroomiah and back home again when she was desperately ill. Her husband wrote to the ABCFM that she had gone from poor health after the violent birth of her first child upon arrival at Tabriz to what he calls symptoms of epilepsy, but such fits might have also been the effects of malaria or a polite way to signal a nervous breakdown. Nevertheless, we find her on board the Emma Isadora in March 1843, heading back for more. One thing promised a better situation: the Americans had meanwhile built a missionary retreat in the Hakkari mountains near Oroomiah at Seir. It was cooler, cleaner and served by a fresh-water spring. The Perkins family would live there and run the boys seminary while the families working for the girls school kept homes in Oroomiah but took their summer vacations at Seir and could flee there in times of crisis.

Charlotte was still unwell, so during the 1843 sea voyage baby Judith slept with Fidelia and, once arriving at Oroomiah, with Catherine Myers, who lived at the Perkins home. Within 10 years, that baby, who had grown up to help Charlotte bear the household and missionary duties, was dead and only one son of her seven children remained. It seems suspect that in 1852 the missionary group would recommend that Perkins take his family when he went to meet new recruits in Erzeroom, reasoning that the journey would be good for Charlotte’s ill health. If she were only physically frail or exhausted, a journey of more than 400 miles over the mountains by horseback, spending the night in tents on the ground, would hardly seem salutary. Yet if depression were the cause, such a chance to get out of the house and around evocative scenery might actually make sense. As it turned out, no advice could have been worse, since the party drank water at a village infected with cholera, thus causing little Judith’s death before they reached their destination.

The same Mrs Powers with whom Isabella reports discussing the sad state of Mrs Jackson while in Trebizond, died after returning to America only in her thirties. It is clear that she never forgot their conversations about needing to protect their reason. She had gone with her missionary husband as his second wife to Turkey in 1842 and was in Trebizond with the Blisses by 1845, staying for 11 years. He traveled widely so Sarah Powers was left alone a great deal, facing her own and her two daughters’ illnesses, while the local atmosphere was hostile toward missionaries. In his eulogy for her in 1862, her husband wrote:

During the years that she was in Broosa and Trebizond, repeated domestic misfortune, under the most unusual and aggravated circumstances, often confined her to her bed for weeks, and to her house for months, destroying her health, undermining her naturally fine constitution, sending disorder into the delicate net-work of the nervous system, and putting her cheerful meekness and christian resignation to a severe test. All this in a foreign land, away from the comforts of home and the sympathies of endeared friends, and under the enervating influence of a warmer clime, which very injuriously affected her health. It was impossible that even her firm determination, her elastic spirit, her cheerful, joyous nature, should bear up under the accumulation of trial, and suffer no injury. Hence it was that she often felt that
her weaknesses, infirmities and nervousness were getting the mastery over her—that she was losing the balance of her mind and her wonted self-control. And many years ago, and many times during those years, has she expressed an apprehension that she would one day become deranged and lose the use of her mind altogether; or that she would become so weak, nervous and fidgety as to be a burden to herself and to her friends; and many a prayer has she offered up that she might not see that day. And God has heard her prayer.71

Marianne Johnston’s petition to Dr Anderson was not successful and she was not allowed to return to America. In 1844, she and Thomas were reassigned to Smyrna until sailing for America in July 1853. Thomas also traveled, leaving Marianne alone with her children. An official medical statement from Charles Wood, physician to the British Hospital, was written in April 1852 in response to a query from Thomas about the advisability of taking Marianne back to America.72 Dr Wood cites the insanity in Marianne’s family tree and points to her dislike of her husband as one of the signs of her derangement, linking it to their time in Trebizond where ‘… there being few European families, they were necessarily very much isolated and solitary’. He also bases his conclusion on Marianne’s mercurial moodiness, her constant shifting of furniture from room to room, an instance of pushing Thomas out of bed, her abrupt manner, and her incensed response ‘against the imputation of being “cracked”’. He believes that middle age—Marianne was 47 at this time—only increased these tendencies and that Thomas could not expect her to recover. However, his conclusion is that though she had a very strong predisposition toward insanity, since she now absolutely refused to return to America, she should not be forced since such an action ‘may precipitate matters, may make her decidedly and for the rest of her life a lunatic’. Their regular English physician, James M. Craith, who knew the family much better, adds his own recommendation in the form of a cover letter. Dr Craith describes Marianne’s behavior at more length, stating at the outset that he considers her to be insane. Like Dr Wood, both men state that there is nothing in Mr Johnston’s manner toward his wife that should cause her to dislike him and that her occasional violent outbursts, and the financial difficulties she caused him, were proof that her mind was disordered. Dr Craith recommends—for the sake of the children and echoing Dr Wood’s belief that forcible removal could make things worse—that Thomas petition the Board to lift a work suspension, allowing him to again earn their livelihood, while treating his wife with a ‘forbearing’ conduct. Fifteen months later, in July 1853, the Johnstons finally returned to America where he worked as a missionary in the south until he died in 1883. Marianne lived until 1898, sanely rearing their children and publishing Recollections of my Father and The Young Chaplain (a memoir of her son William, who was killed in the Civil War), only dying at the venerable age of 94.73

Marianne Johnston’s documentation indicates an answer to whether Isabella’s use of the term ‘deranged’ was a euphemism. Clearly, in her day, it was not. The medical diagnosis of her insanity was unqualified. Yet, for us, the justifications behind that judgment are unfair, pointing towards the irremediable demand that women were to follow, serve, and obey their husbands.74 The doctors both seem completely unable to imagine how she could have formed a distaste for her husband, in spite of noting that they spent over three-and-a-half years living in horrible conditions with only each other for company. One can be sure that when they visited the good doctors, Thomas was on his best behavior toward her. But could only lunacy explain why she might have wanted to push him out of their bed?
Her case fits Victorian notions of what Elaine Showalter has written about in *The Female Malady*. Mrs Johnston did not quietly do her husband’s, and the Mission Board’s, bidding when it was unacceptable to her. She wrote directly to Anderson to plead her case; she openly disliked her husband; there was rumor of insanity in her family; she was at the end of her childbearing years. All these were signs of forms of ‘mania’—a refusal to be controlled by the men. We can contrast such an assessment of unsuitability with the panegyric obituary of the 27-year-old missionary wife, Abbie Fairbanks, sent to Fidelia Fiske by her widower. Abbie is pious, obedient, selfless, refined, talented in learning the native language, worried about her sins, and dead in her second childbirth. Her account is clearly modeled on that of Harriet Newell.

Charlotte Perkins, who watched six of her seven children die, remained unwell after her return in 1843. Letters from Fidelia Fiske, after she returned to the United States, and others to Justin Perkins describe their visits to her in the McLean Asylum for the Insane in Somerville, Massachusetts (a division of Mass General). He committed her to their care in 1862, apparently because she had become too stridently religious for social interactions, and returned to Persia. One physician wrote:

I think she spends much time in writing and reading … the book you gave her. The chapter on martyrs she particularly admired considering it applicable to herself.

There is no evidence that Fidelia was bothered by such worries. The record of her life that she left suggests that she focused all her waking moments on the higher purposes of the seminary that made all the domestic chores merely incidental to God’s will. There was no question in her mind that she was sent to Persia to raise native women out of what she saw as ignorance, that she would bring her pupils to an awareness of their sinfulness, train them in Bible knowledge, science, reading and writing, Anglo-Saxon morals and housekeeping. She had no husband on whom she was required to serve as secretary or focus special care and she bore no children of her own. Her closest relationships with men were within the traditional hierarchy of the mission administration, with their wives as friends and occasional helpers in her school, and most importantly, with her assistant, Mary Rice. It was with the latter that she lived, planned the curriculum, met the daily needs of the boarders, celebrated victories and mourned losses. Fidelia seems to have genuinely liked Mary and from all known accounts, they lived closely but in harmony through thick and thin. Although the entire mission was caught up in the work of both schools and the male leaders were responsible to the ABCFM, there was no question that Fiske Seminary was Fidelia’s charge as well as her success. As such, Fidelia was empowered in the manner of her model, Mary Lyon.

On the other hand, Isabella must have felt most suffocating demands of nineteenth-century marriage. She lived during the very years that American valuation of housekeeping had fully shifted from ‘work’ to ‘unproductive labor’, only necessary to support the white, wage-earning, male economy. The Protestant tradition reinforced gender roles, making women responsible for the ideal Christian home as an act of benevolence rather than equal work to their husband’s marketplace labor, or, in the case of the missionaries, their conversion efforts. Although Isabella got away to ‘see the world’, she was no less stuck at home, with ailing children and ‘uneducated’ servants (with nothing to teach her), with the responsibility for the minutiae of everyone’s daily living that went unnoticed as long as she did her job, with friends who were only circumstantial, and with an
expectation that she would model missionary fervor and devotion to God. With the latter, one could resign oneself and one’s cares into His hands, as Fidelia portrays herself doing in her letters. Without it, as Isabella portrays her own struggles, there was loneliness, fear, boredom, poor self-esteem, and a grave need for family and close friends during hard times. Though they may have initially seen missionary work as a kind of freedom from the stultifying lives of their mothers at home, from the stories of Mary Jackson, Sarah Powers, Marianne Johnston, and Charlotte Perkins we can see that these women, whose lives so worried Isabella, were controlled by decisions made in committees by men. For Fidelia, the Near East was a great adventure and she grew to love the people and her work, coming to identify home more with those she denigrated as depraved heathens than her own family. She deeply regretted her inability to return after a furlough home in 1858 due to poor health and worked at Mount Holyoke preparing new missionaries until her death in 1864. For Isabella, life in the Near East was a cross she learned to bear as it became the home for her growing family. Yet she turned out to be one of the strongest of the lot, remaining in Turkey 53 years, only returning to die in Amherst, Massachusetts on 30 March 1897.

By the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, two-thirds of all missionaries abroad were women, sent by increasingly successful fundraising efforts of women’s missionary societies. Fewer went as wives and more as single women: trained professional educators, doctors, and social workers. They were honored for the risks they took, the social issues they championed, and the useful knowledge about the world outside the United States they shared. They fared better than the Isabella Blisses of earlier years, following the model that Fidelia Fiske helped forge.

Notes

1. These terms are used throughout letters and journal entries by missionaries during this period. Target populations were routinely considered ‘depraved’ or ‘benighted’ heathens without any hesitation. For both New Englanders and those they planned to convert, the ideal was to become ‘hopeful’ of salvation. For these terms as well as discussion of women’s careers during the ‘Missionary Age’, see Barbara Welter, “She Hath Done What She Could: Protestant Women’s Missionary Careers in Nineteenth-century America”, American Quarterly 30/5 (1978): 624–38. Countless examples can be found in Fidelia Fiske’s letters to teachers and students at Mount Holyoke Seminary where she refers to her labor for ‘heathen souls’ and ‘benighted souls’ (1–5 April 1843; 1 May 1844) in ‘heathen ground’ (8 April 1843) or ‘degraded little girls’ (9 August 1843): Fidelia Fiske Papers, Mount Holyoke College Archives and Special Collections, South Hadley, MA LD 7092.8/MS0536, Box 1, Series 1. The leader of the Urmia mission, Justin Perkins, wrote books on his experiences and at the end of Missionary Life in Persia: Glimpses of a Quarter of a Century of Labors among the Nestorian Christians, published in 1861, specifically addressed American women about their obligations to help the ‘benighted female sex’ in unevangelized lands on page 248.

2. Because I am studying primary sources from American women, I do not attempt to address the way they affected the local populations where they worked; only how they were affected by their experiences. That would be a much larger project, though I admit this is a one-sided view.

3. Isabella Bliss to Fidelia Fiske 27 June 1845: The Shelburne Free Public Library Fidelia Fiske Collection, Mount Holyoke College Archives and Special Collections, South Hadley, MA.

4. This term gained strength throughout the nineteenth century after appearing in the eponymous poem by Coventry Patmore from 1854.

6. They followed the British and thus absorbed their imperialist culture of mission work. See Jean Haggis, “‘A Heart that Has Felt the Love of God and Longs for Others to Know it’: Conventions of Gender, Tensions of Self and Constructions of Difference in Offering to be a Lady Missionary’, *Women’s History Review* 7/2 (1998), 173–4.


10. I will use the spelling of the day, as appearing in the journals and letters consulted.

11. Justin (Amherst College 1829; Andover Seminary 1832) and Charlotte Perkins were the first American missionaries in northwest Persia, leaving Boston in fall 1833 and arriving summer 1834 after a harrowing delay in Georgia and Armenia, only due to the generous assistance of the British ambassador in Tabriz. They stayed for 35 years, establishing schools for both Christians and Protestants. Justin transcribed the local Syriac dialect, translating the Bible and, by importing a printing press, publishing the Bible in side-by-side texts of ancient and modern Syriac, the missionary periodical *Rays of Light*, sermons, hymnals, and school books. He also made watercolors of the local population, which documented dress and customs among the various ethnic groups. Judith Grant Perkins was the fourth of the Perkins’ seven children, born in Ooromiah in 1840. When the Perkins left Oroomiah for America, she was under a year and would have been age 2½ at the time of this voyage. She traveled the overland journey both directions in a specially made panier on the side of a servant’s saddle. Judith died at 12 of cholera in Persia and was remembered by her father in a memoir entitled *The Persian Flower* published in 1853. It was a tradition among missionaries to name their children after life models. Thus Judith Grant Perkins was named for Judith Grant, wife of the first American mission doctor, who had begun the girls school at Oroomiah. The Perkins named their last child, a daughter, Fidelia Fiske Perkins. She only lasted 11 months. The surviving son was Henry Martyn Perkins (see note 21). As well as the memorial biography of Judith, Perkins wrote two autobiographies of his mission experiences.

12. Although Protestant missionaries originally went to the Near East as part of a larger plan to convert Muslims and Jews across the regions associated with ancient Christianity in preparation for a millennium of universal peace, both Isabella and Fidelia went to missions reconciled to focus on renewing the faith of local Christians. In Isabella’s case, these were the Armenians of the Anatolian coast and for Fidelia, the East Syriac Christians (Nestorians). Protestants considered these religions to be of ancient Christian origin but corrupted into practices that reeked of Roman Catholic ritual and native superstition. Obviously, the bishops and priests were not easy to convince that their flocks needed to be reformed along the lines of New England beliefs and overall, little headway was made. See also Heleen Murre van den Berg, *The American Board and the Eastern Churches: The “Nestorian Mission” (1844–1846)*, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 65/1 (1999), 119–38.

13. Joseph P. Thompson, *Memoir of the Rev. David Tappan Stoddard, Missionary to the Nestorians*, 1858. Perkins mentions that Harriette had studied at Mount Holyoke, *Persian Flower*, 49. Names are spelled with multiple variations in this time period. Stoddard spells both his wife’s and his daughter’s names as Harriette; Thompson alternates and the ABCFM records use Harriet. Likewise, Miss Myers is alternately Catherine or Catharine in publications and records and even her future husband varies the spelling in his love letters. See Sources, below. Also see note 10.
14. David would soon take over direction of the seminary for Perkins and Harriette served as the boys’ house mother. They also had two daughters of their own. Both were exhausted by their labors, however, and David’s health was especially compromised, causing the mission to send them to Constantinople for recuperation in 1848. Harriette died from cholera in Trebizond on that journey and David took the girls back to America, returning in 1851 with only the older one and a new wife, Sophia Hazen—cousin of Dr Austin Wright already in Oroomiah and married to Catherine Myers, see note 15. The younger child was brought back to Persia by the Cranes in 1852.

15. Catherine Myers (b. 1821) went out with the Perkins party as an ABCFM teacher like Fidelia Fiske; upon arriving at Oroomiah, she met the medical missionary Dr Austin Wright (Dartmouth 1830, Union Theological Seminary 1838, University of Virginia-medicine 1839), who had been there three years, and, after living with the Perkins for a year helping with their children, married him 13 June 1844. They would have six children; two of the daughters studied at MHS. It is unclear whether she ever actually taught at the girls school. Annual Report – American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, vols. 34–36 and Justin Perkins, The Beloved Physician: A Sermon Occasioned by the Death of The Rev. Austin H. Wright, M.D. Preached to the Families of the Nestorian Mission at Oroomiah, Persia, Feb 8th, 1865, 1865, p. 9. Catherine’s mother’s letters sent to her in Persia, Mr Perkins’s reports to her mother, and Austin’s love letters to Catherine before their marriage are held at Dartmouth College, Rauner Library Special Collections. My thanks to Margaret Dakin, of Amherst College Special Collections, who helped me sleuth out her identity.

16. Fidelia’s family spelled their name Fisk or Fiske; she most often used the latter, showing preference for an earlier form of the name, but some letters are signed without the ’e’. Her uncle, Pliny Fisk (Middlebury College and Andover Seminary, 1818), was one of the first American Protestant missionaries to the Near East with his friend Levi Parsons (Middlebury College and Andover Seminary, 1817) departing in 1819. See Heyrman, American Apostles: When Evangelicals Entered the World of Islam, 2015.


18. All information about the voyage from Boston to Smyrna comes from Fiske’s letters and Bliss’s diary. See Sources, below. The distance between Trebizond and Oroomiah is reported variously in contemporary accounts. Justin Perkins who traveled it quite a few times specified, in his biography of his daughter Judith, that it was 150 miles SE from Trebizond to Erzerum, and over 400 miles SE from there to Oroomiah. Their route took them past the foothills of Mount Ararat (pp. 177–80).

19. This was a sort of elevated cabin on the deck of the ship where travelers could congregate inside or on its roof. It must have had some rude furniture for Fidelia often wrote there in calm weather and Isabella refers to ‘each in their corner’ relaxing. One assumes the purpose was to keep non-sailors out of the way so that the crew could do their jobs, yet allow them greater visibility of the seascape and fresher air than their cramped cabins afforded.

20. She mentions D’Aubigne’s History of the Reformation and—Amherst College professor—Hitchcock’s Geology.

21. The most famous was Henry Martyn (1781–1812), an Anglican missionary to India and Persia 1806–1812 whose swashbuckling memoir was written by John Sargent and published in 1820. Through this, Martyn became a hero to American Protestants for his resilience and zeal in the face of threats and ill health. His translations of religious texts into Urdu, Arabic, and Persian were widely used by subsequent followers. See Heyrman, American Apostles, 108–21. The Perkins named one of their sons after him, as it was common practice among missionaries to honor martyrs who went before them in this manner.

22. 19 March 1943 in Isabella Bliss’s journal. See Primary Sources listed at end of Notes.

23. Phrenology was a pseudo-science exported to the US from Britain in the 1830s. It concerned the study of the brain and personal character through the shape and size of the skull.
24. David Stoddard gave a full account of their daily schedule:

When breakfast is over, and Harriette and I have read our Bible, we study Turkish till ten o’clock. We are now making very good progress in this language, and I think shall be able to converse in it tolerably before we reach Trebizond. The ladies are excellent scholars. Indeed Harriette, by her readiness in learning often puts me to the blush. At ten o’clock we all meet and spend an hour in reading Geology. It is very desirable that we should have a pretty good knowledge of this science, for we are going over one of the most striking geological countries in the world, and a country, too, very little explored. I am one of those who believe that science can be made subservient to the spread of the Gospel. And while neither this nor anything else should divert us from our great work—the one great work of preaching Jesus Christ—I trust we shall do much indirectly to improve the Persians in civilization and comfort. The discovery of coal beds would be an immense blessing to that country, and no one but a geologist could hope to find them.

After Geology comes our recitation in Turkish, Mr Perkins being the teacher. This fills up the interval till dinner. At half-past one we again assemble to read. The latter part of the afternoon each one spends as he pleases, but it is usually occupied by our whole company in writing letters to absent friends. At six o’clock we meet still again, to spend a half-hour in singing. Several of our number have never learned to sing, and Mr Perkins is very desirous they should learn. I do not wonder at it; for a missionary, of all others, should have this qualification. You will be glad to know that we are making a very tolerable improvement, and that even I have hopes of being able at last to sing. Our singing is followed by our devotions, at which we expound the Scriptures, sing a hymn, and pray. Then a part of the remainder of the evening we read D’Aubigné’s History; the rest we spend in social converse. Our hour for retiring is from nine to ten.

26. 6 April 1843.
28. This is a different use of the term evangelical than in current use today—it refers to early members of the collaborative ecumenical churches that adhered to social gospel evangelism. After the Reagan era, we now have strict fundamentalist churches whose narrow interpretations of Christian dogmas are far from the beliefs and efforts of earlier denominations. See Hollinger, Protestants Abroad, 10–1.
29. The ABCFM made much of Fidelia’s successes and her biographies stress this aspect of her school. Yet the girls she taught were very young. Most were under the age of fourteen, and many under ten. It does not seem remarkable that she would be able to influence and, along with the exhortations of the male preachers, even scare little children into believing that they were sinful and needed to pray for forgiveness. In fact, hers and others’ accounts of the revivals in the two schools sound so emotional that they verge on similarities to the group hysteries observed about young girls during the Salem witch trials. Conversion was not simply a matter of Protestant beliefs—it involved convincing youths to trust the teachings of Americans about everything they offered in their schools and their homes (academic, domestic and cultural) over their own elders and clergy, over the French Jesuits, the English Anglicans, and so forth. It was a struggle for hearts and minds however much they characterized it as merely a matter of ‘souls’.
30. His story, with these facts about his compatriots, is told in Gordon Taylor, *Fever and Thirst: An American Doctor Among the Tribes of Kurdistan, 1835–1844*, 2005.

31. Lack of resources bred a culture of greed and distrust. Tribal rivalries among Nestorians and those among Kurds, as well as between Nestorians and Kurds and against the Turks, made for a world of petty vendettas and constantly shifting alliances in minor wars. Justin Perkins knew this and was never in favor of a mission station in the mountains, yet his former colleague and Austin Wright’s predecessor at Oroomiah, Dr Grant, was a zealous adventurer who managed to convince the ABCFM that the Nestorians would welcome American Protestants and were ripe for conversion. Meanwhile, Rev. George Percy Badger was there, reporting the same thing to the Church of England. It is from Taylor’s text *Fever and Thirst* and the ABCFM records (16/553) that I have taken the account of the missionaries’ deaths. Badger wrote the definitive description of the Nestorians: *The Nestorians and their Rituals: With the Narrative of a Mission to Mesopotampia and Coordistan in 1842–44, and of a Late Visit to Those Countries in 1850, 1852*.

32. In a letter to Fidelia Fiske from Marsovan, probably March 1852, Isabella wrote:

> You congratulate me that I was not sent to find a home among your mountains and I feel that what you say is just. My dear mother was wiser than I when she thought I could not endure much. I have been a poor miserable missionary and am so to this day, though I thank my Heavenly Father that he has permitted me to attempt a little for His glory. Our present situation is one of much trial, but we have never for a moment regretted coming here.

She had returned to the USA in 1848–1850 for her health. Although many other missionary women had *died* in the meantime, she seemed to think her illness was a great failing. Eventually the Coans and Rheas and others would settle in Memikan and other villages in these mountains, but only for short times and with limited success. Most of their efforts were spent at protecting converted native preachers who were harassed by the Turkish authorities. See Dwight Marsh, *The Tennessean in Persia and Koordistan, Being Scenes and Incidents in the Life of Samuel Audley Rhea* (Philadelphia, PA, 1869).

33. Missionary women formed what Julie Campbell and Anne Larsen have called a ‘transnational community of letters’. Although their study concerns the early modern period, the tradition continued among nineteenth-century women who shared ‘social and ideological commonality’ such as these isolated American Protestants abroad, even when they were living and working in uniquely different cultures and far flung foreign countries. Their writing served as both psychological and intellectual support for the correspondents and formed a specifically female interpretation of missionary activities. Little attention has been paid to these primary sources, but they are often at odds with the official reports men wrote back to the ABCFM in Boston. As their embedded standpoints often differed from those of the men, they can provide an alternative epistemology of early American foreign policy. Julie D. Campbell and Anne R. Larsen, eds, *Early Modern Women and Transnational Communities of Letters*, 2009, 3–5.

34. Letter from Isabella Bliss to Fidelia Fiske, 27 June 1845.

35. Thomas and Marianne Johnston had four children and had been posted as the sole missionaries to the Armenians in Trebizond since 1834.

36. Fidelia first followed Judith Grant’s model—giving lessons until 3 pm, then visiting women in their homes for a few hours.

37. Isabella’s diary repeatedly refers obliquely to problems with her hair in the first year, as well as to lice in the furniture. She gets a relative in Constantinople to send her some false hair and has Edwin shave her head more than once. I can only conclude that this desperate act is due to the lice, though she also mentions her hair falling out so it could have been related to diet. She was weighed after arrival in Trebizond on 13 May 1843 and writes that she must have lost 10 pounds on the journey, as arriving at only 107.

38. The Perkins had their home up in Seir and eventually, situated the boys school nearby, though the girls remained down in the city.
39. Primary routes were Smyrna-Constantinople-Trebizond-Erzeroom and east to Oroomiyah or south to Bitlis or Van then on to Mosul or further east to Tabriz and Tehran.

40. Justin Perkins, The Persian Flower, A Memoir of Judith Grant Perkins of Oroomia, Persia, 1853, p. 6. He mentions later in this same book (178) that at the time of writing, Mr and Mrs Peabody were again the sole missionaries stationed there. One wonders how they were doing in the Jackson’s place.

41. Isabella Bliss notes in her diary on 21 September 1843: ‘News of the death of Mrs Jackson’s child.’

42. William wanted to return to his missionary work in Turkey, but was unable due to Mary’s health and he was assigned pastorates in Massachusetts. The official ABCFM cards only list ‘ill health’ as a reason for their resignation; no records indicate her exact complaint. The couple had three more children once reaching the United States.

43. Although I confine myself here to this early group of women in eastern Turkey and northwestern Persia, there are endless records of missionary women with mental illness. For instance, from the detailed accounts of Mary L. Mathews, missionary and girls school director in Monastir/Bitola 1888–1920, we find that Miss Harriet Cole returned to the United States to be institutionalized for insanity in 1909 while Miss Mathews herself had a mysterious nervous breakdown in 1920. See the Mount Holyoke College archives for these materials, summarized in a recent pamphlet accompanying the exhibition ‘A Mount Holyoke Woman in Macedonia’ entitled Miss Mary Matthews of Macedonia (and Mount Holyoke) written by her grandniece, Peggy Hanson.

44. Add to this the standard medical treatments of the day, which were themselves often life-threatening, such as calomel (mercury), blood-letting, and emetics. See Taylor, Fever and Thirst, 77–83.


46. Welter, ‘She Hath Done…’, 626.

47. The 1908 revised edition of the Manual for Missionary Candidates, p. 16, ‘VI. Special Points for Women Candidates’ reads: Although it is highly desirable that missionary wives should be trained for some form of missionary service, and thus become efficient helpers of their husbands, it is not expected that they will devote themselves to the work at the expense of a proper attention to home duties. The establishment of a Christian home in a non-Christian land it itself one of the mightiest of missionary agencies. The papers of missionary wives need not be as technical and as thorough on doctrinal and intellectual points as those of other candidates.

48. Fidelia wrote that the first word she learned in Syriac was ‘daughter’. Her role as teacher took on many more mothering qualities than she would have ever carried in the United States.


50. Fidelia brings home how much her distaste for the children’s condition affected her physical response to them when she writes to an MHS teacher:

> Already I find that I am becoming attached to these poor children much more strongly than when in America. I often feel like fondly embracing them and loving them as I would children at home. I strive to prevent their extreme filth and degradation from severing them from me. They are bound to the same eternity with myself. At the judgment-bar I shall meet them. I would encircle them in the arms of love, and pray God that he will encircle them in the arms of everlasting love.

51. The missionary home was often a liminal space between New England ideals and local customs, as women had to adapt according to resources and the residents. The latter were not only members of their own family or other missionaries, but often servants and students from among the local population. For more about such ‘mosaic arrangements’, see Christine Lindner, ‘The Flexibility of Home: Exploring the Spaces and Definitions of the Home and Family of ABCFM Missionaries in Ottoman Syria from 1823 to 1860’, in Mehmet Ali Dogan and Heather J. Sharkey, eds, *American Missionaries and the Middle East: Foundational Encounters* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011, 33–62.

52. I use the term ‘situated knowledges’ from studies of feminist standpoint theory such as those by Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway, and others in Sandra Harding, ed., *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader* New York: Routledge, 2004. Barbara Welter refers to the sympathy that missionaries, especially women, formed with their host cultures over time. See ‘She Hath Done’, 637–8.

53. This is, of course, the beginning of a long history of white women’s efforts to save ‘other’ women as part of larger efforts towards conversion and colonialization of foreign lands. The kinds of stories these women told in their reports sent back home seem to be direct antecedents of more recent justifications for military intervention, particularly in this same region of the Middle East. It also points to their inability to relate their own lack of autonomy with what they saw among other societies.

54. Because women married to missionaries were not considered employees of the ABCFM, there was no extra stipend afforded them for the work they did.

55. The United States did not have an embassy in the Middle East until 1883, when a congressman whose parents were missionaries in Tehran, feared for their lives and sponsored a bill to establish one there. Until then the embassy in Constantinople (Istanbul), Turkey, established 1830, served for the Ottoman Empire as the entire ‘Near East’, though Persia was not part of it.

56. These consisted of such as the Perkins, the Merricks, the Joneses, the Stoddards, the Holladays. Dr Wright, Miss Myers (who married Dr Wright), the printer Mr Breath and soon his wife, the Cochranes, the Cranes, the Coans and Mr Rhea. The Coans and Mr Rhea were sent to open a mission station at Gawar, 70 miles west of Oroomiah in the mountains. For all the personnel dedicated to Oroomiyah and the successes that the two schools (boys and girls) had with conversions, it is odd that Persia is not covered in the early twentieth-century ABCFM pamphlet entitled ‘The American Board in the Near East’ (including Greece, Turkey, and Syria) nor in its book with maps of missions. Many of these families would provide second and third generation missionaries. For instance, George and Sarah Coan’s son, Frederick (Western Theological Seminary and Princeton, 1882) was born in Urmia in 1859 and after studies and early travels, returned in 1904 to direct Urmia College. He witnessed the genocide of Armenians and Nestorians during 1915 while trying to provide help to refugees and traveling the area gathering information for reports to American supporters.

57. We know that women’s relations with each other were often much closer than those with their husbands and that social circles of female family and friends were crucial to women’s ability to cope with both major household tasks as well as emotional tragedies. Carroll Smith Rosenberg, ‘The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America’, *Signs* 1/1 (1975), 1–29.

58. 13 May 1843 Fidelia Fiske letter to students of the Missionary Circle at Mount Holyoke Seminary.

59. It was only in the 1850s, after widespread practice of solitary confinement in prisons during the 1840s, that awareness of the negative effect loneliness could have on the human psyche grew. See Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1930–1980* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 69.

60. Note that by this date, Isabella and Edwin Bliss were also in residence at Trebizond. Although they had begun as guests of the Johnston’s in a room that Isabella describes as separate from
the main building, they found their own house to rent soon after arrival. One imagines Marianne Johnston was not thrilled to have another couple staying with her, as much as she craved the ‘Christian’ company. Isabella makes small remarks here and there about days when Mrs Johnston was more or less hospitable. Isabella apparently felt it sharply. However, she also agreed to teach their children and the age difference might have given Marianne enough of an edge to keep her happy. She was born in 1804, Mary Jackson in 1814, and Isabella Bliss in 1819. Thus when Marianne arrived in Trebizond and had to live with the Jacksons in 1836, she was already ten years older than Mary Jackson and had taught young women at seminaries in Ohio and Virginia (*Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine*, vol. 13, p. 200). Being 32 yet having to share housekeeping with someone barely 22 could have caused some of that tension. By the time Isabella arrived in 1843, it was definitively the Johnston’s house, Marianne was 39 and Isabella, herself only 24, fell clearly in to the position of a younger guest.

61. H. G. O. Dwight, *Memoir of Mrs. Elizabeth B. Dwight, including an account of the plague of 1837, 1840*, 204. Interesting to note that Elizabeth was H.G.O. Dwight’s first wife. His son by his second wife, Mary Lane, would marry two of Isabella’s daughters. Missionary families were typically intricately connected like this, partly because they searched for like-minded partners (many of the men went to Mount Holyoke Seminary on visits with this specific intention) or the second generation born and raised abroad only met a small pool of westerners, but also because as the women died, the men often returned to the same town, school, or even house for another wife. There are many instances of a male missionary returning to America to marry another, then even a third daughter from his deceased wife’s family.

62. The ABCFM offers the following definition in the historical record:

> Associate Missionaries, including Term Workers. Missionaries not appointed for life, but for a specific period. The definition changed slightly over time, but this category included medical missionaries, single women, and wives of appointed missionaries [in the] Near East (including the Balkans, Turkey, Syria, Persia).

63. Barton herself had begun by offering medical aid to soldiers during the American Civil War and then in Europe during the Franco-Prussian war. She came under the influence of the International Red Cross movement at the time of the Hamidian massacres (Armenians, 1894–1896) and wrote one of the first secular narrative humanitarian reports. See Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones*, 57–90.


65. There were plenty of contemporary men who believed that education itself was the source of ill health for women, that the ‘brain and ovary could not develop at the same time’. See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, ‘The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Women and Her Role in Nineteenth-Century America’, *The Journal of American History* 60/2 (1973), 332–56, quote from 340.


68. There were plenty of crises that made Seir’s haven valuable. Seasons of spreading illness, such as the cholera that killed little Judith and the first Mrs (Harriette) Stoddard, were common. The Kurds were spurred to help the Persian authorities intimidate and even massacre Nestorians on a regular basis, while the Nestorian leaders also turned violent at times against the Protestants. Weather could be severe as well.
69. This seems to have been the wisdom of the day, since Stoddard also was sent once in 1847 to meet the Cochranes and Miss Rice at Erzeroom when he was ill and again on the fatal trip of 1848, see note 5. From Stoddard’s letter to his brother, Charles, in June 1848:

The prospect seemed to be that I should be feeble and accomplish little or nothing during the summer, and the brethren were anxious to have me try the effect of horseback-riding for hundreds of miles, and months together. And I could not leave Harriet, delicate as she is, with two little children, without the greatest solicitude on her account, and as she needed the journey as well as myself, it seemed to be a pretty clear case that I ought not to be separated so long from my family. So we all concluded to go together.

Even he, after being ill for over a year subsequent to this trip, wrote to his second wife’s brother Rev. Allen Hazen in 1851 that his exhaustion had made him fear his ‘mind was gone forever’.

70. Philander O. Powers first married Harriet Goulding and they left for Broosa, Turkey in 1834. He returned to America when she became sick, but she died in February 1842. He immediately turned around and married Sarah Perry and sailed back to Broosa with her. Their first daughter was named Harriet Goulding Powers and later served as a missionary in Turkey as well for 50 years.


72. These letters are held in archives.saltresearch.org (accessible via the DLIR site—see Primary Sources after Notes) as ABA003602814. There is also a letter from Thomas Johnston to the Constantinople mission about how to word their recommendations so as not to affect his wife’s willingness to return to America (ABA003602822001).

73. In the memoir of William, Marianne (quite sanely) describes their living arrangements in Turkey and how she cared for her family.

74. Helen Montgomery, writing about the first fifty years of missionary women’s service, reminds us:

In all the English-speaking world the only woman whom the law recognized as a person was the unmarried woman. The married woman, in the eyes of the law, ceased to exist the moment her vows were said. She could neither sue nor be sued, could hold no property, could not testify in a court of law, had no legal right to the money she might earn, nor to the control of her own children, the legal guardianship being vested solely in the father.


75. Showalter, *Female Malady* on the emotional effect of end of a woman’s reproductive life, 59; on women’s outspokenness, 81 (‘one has the impression that their talkativeness, violating conventions of feminine speech, and insistence on self-expression was the kind of behavior that had led to their being labeled “mad” to begin with.’).

76. Printed obituary included in The Shelburne Free Public Library Fidelia Fiske Collection, Mount Holyoke College Archives and Special Collections, South Hadley, MA, packet 13.

77. Letter to Perkins 16 September 1862 from John Eugene Tyler, doctor at the Mclean Asylum, in Amherst College Perkins collection, Box 2, folder 1.

78. The effectiveness of single women in missionary service was an issue that concerned missionary societies throughout the nineteenth century. It was not until women organized and funded extensive missionary boards, sending out and supporting their own candidates, that single women were truly accepted as full participants in the missionary endeavor. Fidelia Fiske serves as one of the first, but rare, models of this practice, going even before the ABCFM rules expressly allowed it. Later in the nineteenth century, the number of single women sent abroad for missionary work expanded exponentially. See R. Pierce
Even at the end of that century, conditions were unchanged. Women such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Kate Chopin, Emily Dickinson, Edith Wharton, and others took up their pens to describe their struggles and challenge patriarchy. Edwin Bliss’s own sisters offer similar stories to those told above: Emma married H. J. Van Lennep (Amherst College 1837) and left for Turkey in 1839 but died soon after arrival in Smyrna. The other sister, Laura married Mr Montgomery who also planned to serve foreign missions but she was deemed too frail so they stayed to work at those in the United States. She is recorded as dying insane.


Louise Porter Thomas, in Seminary Militant: An Account of the Missionary Movement at Mount Holyoke Seminary and College, from 1937 makes the following pertinent observation:

Another reason for the comparatively high mortality rate among women is to be found in the superior importance of their husbands. It was the male missionary whose health mattered. The family came home when he was worn out, but stayed at its post while the wife gradually died. The convention had its logic in that he was the mainstay of the mission and she merely an adjunct; nor did anyone—least of all the wives—question the logic of it.

This may point to the crux of Marianne Johnston’s diagnosis: She refused to submit to that logic.

Another important consideration is the effect of calomel on these women’s mental health or the physical resilience of the children they bore. This popular all-purpose medicine that the missionaries used contained strong amounts of mercury (known to cause insanity, as in ‘mad-hatter’s disease’). Isabella mentions it often yet she had no apparent mental breakdown so the effects are now unmeasurable.

Two of her daughters married in Turkey; another married into the Ward missionary family in Massachusetts and contributed all their children to the cause (five in Turkey and one in China). There were numerous ‘missionary dynasties’, which created what Ellen Fleischmann has termed ‘transnationals’—people who identified with more than one country/culture as their home. See Ellen Fleischmann, “I only wish I had a home on this globe”: Transnational biography and Mary Eddy, Journal of Women’s History 21/3, 108–30.

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