

Converted to Usefulness: The Theological Plot of Harriet Newell's Memoir in the Evangelical Textual Community

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The 1814 memoir of missionary wife Harriet Newell was important for awakening the early nineteenth-century American Evangelical imagination on behalf of the burgeoning missionary cause. As young women 'read the self' and patterned their lives according to the literary examples they encountered, Newell's memoir used the language of 'usefulness' as a powerful theological plot. This article hopes to address the lacuna of scholarship regarding the theological aspects of Newell's writing and how it was those aspects in particular which subsequent generations venerated in the creation of missionary wife memoirs.

In 1814, eighteen-year-old Harriet Lathrop of Norwich, Connecticut, considered the direction of her life in a letter to her mother. Searching for ways to improve upon the grace she had received in conversion, Lathrop found an example in the recently published memoir of another young woman, also named Harriet. Two years earlier, nineteen-year-old Harriet Newell had died while travelling to India as one of the first overseas missionaries commissioned by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission (ABCFM). Now Harriet Lathrop found herself greatly moved by the recently published account of Newell's life and death, writing, 'I am almost ready to ask, Why was Harriet Newell taken from life, and a creature of so little worth as I am, continued here? Am I reserved for similar usefulness? I will encourage such a

ABCFM = American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions; ABPSSS = American Baptist Publication and Sunday School Society

hope.¹ Five years later, Lathrop herself married a missionary, Miron Winslow, and departed for India in fulfilment of her search for 'usefulness'.

In recent years, scholars have worked to retrieve the historical and literary significance of Harriet Newell. Mary Kupiec Cayton's research first uncovered Newell's rightful position within the Evangelical canon by unearthing not only the astounding fact that between 1814 and 1840 Newell's memoir went through fifty editions printed in twelve different American and British cities, but also the surprising number of times the full given name 'Harriet Newell' appears in the genealogical record immediately following her death.² Through careful analysis of several cultural factors and trends, Cayton convincingly argues that Newell's significance for missions history mirrors that of David Brainerd. More recently, Ashley Moreshead has demonstrated the importance of the missionary wife memoir genre for the success of the American missionary cause, studying Newell's memoir accordingly.³ Moreshead provides a comprehensive overview of several key themes within the genre broadly, such as Evangelical reading, female education and the work of benevolence. These contributions help recover the significance of Newell's memoir for the early nineteenth-century American Evangelical imagination, for as Thomas Thwing, a domestic missionary in Boston, wrote, 'Next to the Bible, there was no book I was more delighted in than the "Memoir of Harriet Newell".'⁴

Nevertheless, what remains missing is more thorough engagement with the theological significance of Newell's memoir, particularly regarding her language of 'usefulness'. For if ever a community was ideologically driven, it was the New England Evangelicals. Certainly, Newell's memoir was noteworthy for many reasons. It provided a narrative of a young woman who was highly educated and desired to undertake the new forms of work and social activity available to women in early nineteenth-century New England. It also told the story of a young woman who demonstrated female agency

¹ Miron Winslow, *A memoir of Mrs. Harriet Wadsworth Winslow, combining a sketch of the Ceylon mission*, New York 1835, 26–7.

² Mary Kupiec Cayton, 'Canonizing Harriet Newell: women, the Evangelical press, and the foreign mission movement in New England, 1800–1840', in Barbara Reeves-Ellington, Kathryn Kish Sklar and Connie A. Shemo (eds), *Competing kingdoms: women, mission, nation, and the American Protestant empire, 1812–1960*, Durham, NC 2010, 85–6.

³ Ashley E. Moreshead, "'Beyond all ambitious motives": missionary memoirs and the cultivation of early American Evangelical heroines', *Journal of the Early Republic* xxxviii/1 (2018), 37–60.

⁴ Edward Payson Thwing, *A memorial of Thomas Thwing: thirty years city missionary in Boston*, Boston 1868, 10.

in choosing a life of travel and adventure, despite the doubts and concerns of some in her social circles.

However, these factors alone cannot account for the significance of Newell's memoir. Newell's audience was both highly theologically educated and highly spiritually motivated. In order to have an impact within the Evangelical textual community, Newell's memoir needed a sound theological plot. Though the memoir is much more than a theological text, it is certainly not less. It is divided into two major sections: the first recounts her awakening, conversion and decision to marry Samuel Newell and hence travel to India as a missionary wife, while the second recounts her travels onboard ship, the Newells' unsuccessful attempts to enter India and the eventual journey to Mauritius where Harriet met her tragic demise. This latter portion defended and justified Newell's departure and premature death, and, therefore, the entire narrative is important. But it is the opening section which establishes the theological foundations of Newell's life and decisions. Where Cayton and Moreshead have so wonderfully established the social context needed to understand the significance of Newell's memoir, this article hopes to address the *lacuna* of scholarship regarding the theological aspects of Newell's writing and how it was those aspects in particular which subsequent generations venerated through the creation of subsequent missionary wife memoirs which also highlighted their subjects' writings on the topic of usefulness.

In order to give more in-depth attention to the theological argument for 'usefulness' in Harriet Newell's memoir, four points will be addressed. First, I will revisit women's reading and writing within the nineteenth-century Evangelical textual community. This has been discussed by both Cayton and Moreshead, but I hope to pay particular attention to the religious dimensions of such reading. Second, I will revisit how women engaged the New Divinity's theologies concerning disinterested benevolence and the millennium. Third, I will systematically examine 'usefulness' in Newell's memoir as a theological argument, or rather, a theological plot, given the narrative format. Finally, I will look at how subsequent memoirs in the missionary wife genre repeated Newell's language of 'usefulness' as evidence of its importance, particularly early on. I will also briefly touch on the ways in which many of the next generation of missionary wives after Harriet Newell credited Newell's memoir specifically in their decisions to go overseas. As such, this study seeks to better understand Newell's memoir within a textual community that looked to exemplars not solely as cultural or social models, but as deeply spiritual, theologically-driven guides.

The Evangelical textual community

The communities in which the first missionary wives were educated and prepared for the mission field were highly motivated by theological ideas

and spiritual imagining – a complex ecosystem of religious preaching, reading, writing and publishing. Newell's memoir can and should be read as many things: the journal of a minor; an early attempt at travel writing; a careful piece of propaganda to deflect criticism of the premature death of one of America's first missionaries. But it can never be less than a theological argument created by both an individual writer and the community which both produced and received the published text.

Increased literacy among women in early nineteenth-century New England not only gave women a practical advantage; it was the primary means by which New Divinity Evangelicals engaged a textual spirituality. As Candy Gunther Brown writes, 'Texts acquired ritual significance as evangelicals used words, in the context of relationships with other members of their textual community, to order experiences and formulate connections between embedded patterns and the details of everyday life.'⁵ Antebellum women intentionally patterned themselves in what they read, associating the act of reading with spiritual improvement, rather than simple intellectual or social improvement.⁶ Reading also served as a unifying act for women in the Evangelical textual community; not only did it situate women within their immediate geographic and chronological community, it also enabled them to engage with Evangelicals across distance and time. Books became a 'compass' by which women set the course for their lives, and were used for the creation of self-identities to such an extent that they were often viewed as important companions and encouragers. At times, women even talked about time alone with their books as time in the presence of the authors they represented.⁷ In 1838 one young diarist described her time alone with her books as 'sweet communion' with the 'glorious minds' of the past.⁸ When women read common Evangelical narratives in order to attain spiritual growth, they viewed themselves as actively engaging the original authors. In this way, women were brought more fully into the theological traditions of the New Divinity as their literacy increased.

As Evangelical women in New England became better educated, writing increasingly became a correlate activity to reading. 'Reading the self', or self-examination expressed through writing, was a common practice with roots in Puritan spirituality.⁹ Discerning God's will in the life of an

⁵ Candy Gunther Brown, *The word in the world: Evangelical writing, publishing, and reading in America, 1789–1880*, Chapel Hill, NC 2004, 12.

⁶ Mary Kelley, 'Crafting subjectivities: women, reading, and self-imagining', in Heidi Brayman Hackel and Catherine E. Kelly (eds), *Reading women: literacy, authorship, and culture in the Atlantic world, 1500–1800*, Philadelphia, PA 2008, 57, 60.

⁷ Ibid. 65–7.

⁸ Ibid. 64–5.

⁹ Heidi Brayman Hackel and Catherine E. Kelly, 'Introduction', in *Reading women*, 8; Margo Culley, 'What a piece of work is "woman"! An introduction', in Margo Culley (ed.), *American women's autobiography: fea(s)ts of memory*, Madison, WI 1992, 10.

individual was a crucial and important aspect of developing one's identity; however, writing as reading the self was not considered or expected to be an autonomous act of self-creation. Instead, women sought to write in submission to God, understanding their literary explorations of self as humble discoveries of God's work in their lives. In a study of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American women's memoirs, Ann Taves writes that 'These memoirs make clear that ascertaining God's will was a complex interpretive process in which humans, texts (the Bible and other devotional books), and diary keeping all played critical roles.'¹⁰ As women read, examined their lives and wrote, they expected to learn about both God and themselves in order to shape their hearts and identities, bringing their individual wills into alignment with the will of God, thereby conforming to Evangelical expectations.¹¹

In the New Divinity context, reading and writing were fundamentally spiritual and theological practices. In seeking to learn and submit to God's will through their reading and writing practices, Evangelical women expressed dynamic theological thought within their particularly feminine spheres. Harriet Newell wrote the letters and journals which eventually comprised her published memoir as part of this Evangelical textual community. As such, her memoir and those of other missionary wives convey rich repositories of lived New Divinity teaching.

Disinterest, benevolence and millennialism

Women in Evangelical New England lived within a textual community that was concerned with the discernment of God's will and mutual spiritual encouragement; however, its purpose and vision extended beyond these concerns, hoping to greatly influence the world. Evangelicals viewed writing and publishing as powerful and effective methods by which to usher in awakening, conversion and fruitfulness. Important for this disposition was a belief in the approaching millennium and a confidence in God's direction of evangelistic and benevolent efforts. As New England women engaged each other and the broader community through acts of literary exploration and textual self-creation, they engaged these important theological distinctives of the New Divinity.

Though New Divinity ideas of benevolence and missions were derived in part from interpretations of Jonathan Edwards by Samuel Hopkins and other disciples, the early nineteenth-century Evangelicals placed greater emphasis on the action of the human will and humanity's natural

¹⁰ Ann Taves, 'Self and God in the early published memoirs of New England women', in Culley, *American women's autobiography*, 70.

¹¹ Ibid. 71.

ability.¹² Both Edwards and Hopkins conceived of virtue as a lack of self-interest resulting in a benevolent disposition towards 'being in general', and both maintained that regeneration was necessary to cause the shift from self-interest to benevolence. As Joanna Gillespie explains, 'Religious calling mandated the minding of others' welfare as a condition of working out one's own salvation.'¹³ Yet Hopkins's emphasis on the resulting action of the will introduced a new emphasis to Edwards's theology.¹⁴ David Kling explains that 'Whereas Edwards saw true virtue culminating in a holy consciousness, Hopkins viewed it as culminating in holy action.'¹⁵ Additionally, antebellum Evangelicals, particularly those involved with the missionary effort, were greatly influenced by Edwards's view on providential history and the dawn of the millennium.¹⁶ Though many found the state of American society discouraging, the spiritual awakening taking place pointed at eschatological purpose and encouraged the burgeoning benevolent and missional movements to seek popular influence.¹⁷

Along with their male counterparts, women encountered the ideas and teaching of Edwards and the New Divinity in their engagement with the Evangelical textual community.¹⁸ As women sat under New Divinity preachers and studied in female seminaries, they were instilled with the movement's messages, not only through oral teaching, but through the abundant reading material in response to which they wrote copiously.¹⁹ In fact, women were central to continuing and promoting the Calvinistic tradition in the opening decades of the nineteenth century.²⁰ Women were explicitly taught that their disinterested benevolence should not be relegated to their domestic spheres alone; instead, the call to disinterested benevolence in the lives of women encompassed the concerns of the broader community.²¹ For many, a language of 'usefulness' was adopted

¹² Joseph A. Conforti, *Jonathan Edwards, religious tradition, and American culture*, Chapel Hill, NC, 1995, 121.

¹³ Joanna B. Gillespie, "'The clear leadings of providence': pious memoirs and the problems of self-realization for women in the early nineteenth century", *Journal of the Early Republic* v/2 (1985), 199.

¹⁴ Conforti, *Jonathan Edwards*, 129–30.

¹⁵ David W. Kling, 'The New Divinity and the origins of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions', in Wilbert R. Shenk (ed.), *North American foreign missions, 1810–1914: theology, theory, and policy*, Grand Rapids, MI 2004, 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 19. See also R. Pierce Beaver, 'Eschatology in American missions', in *Basileia: Walter Freytag zum 60. Geburtstag*, Stuttgart 1959, and Richard Lee Rogers, "'A bright and new constellation": millennial narratives and the origins of American foreign missions', in Shenk, *North American foreign missions*.

¹⁷ Kling, 'The New Divinity', 13, 15.

¹⁸ Genevieve McCoy, "'Reason for hope": Evangelical women making sense of late Edwardsian Calvinism', in Stephen Stein (ed.), *Jonathan Edwards's writings: text, context and interpretation*, Bloomington, IN 1996, 175.

¹⁹ Joseph A. Conforti, 'Mary Lyon, the founding of Mount Holyoke College, and the cultural revival of Jonathan Edwards', *Religion and American Culture: a Journal of interpretation* iii/1 (Winter, 1993), 72–3.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 77–80.

²¹ *Ibid.* 78–9.

to describe the outworking of benevolence in a Christian's life. As Genevieve McCoy notes, 'In ever greater numbers orthodox young women attended female seminaries that eschewed the traditional "ornamental" education for "useful" types of knowledge that would prepare them to become schoolteachers, wives of ministers and missionaries, or just good Christian mothers.'²²

New England women in the opening decades of the nineteenth century engaged the message of the New Divinity within a new social and religious context. A new emphasis on female virtue placed greater emphasis on women's education, and women found themselves engaging in textual communities at remarkable new rates. Within Evangelicalism, women began to read and write as foundational disciplines for spiritual growth, enabling and encouraging them to contextualise New Divinity theology for their own gendered realities. As a result of these social and religious changes, women experienced a new opportunity to translate the Christian message themselves for the context within which they lived.

'Usefulness' as theological plot

Published in 1814 for an Evangelical community which was taught to model their lives after the exemplars they engaged and communed with textually, the plot of Harriet Newell's memoir is vital for retrieving its full theological significance.²³ The main complication facing scholars of Newell's memoir is the complete absence of archival material other than the published memoir. As Michael Gamer and Katrina O'Loughlin state, for us today Harriet Newell is her book.²⁴ One cannot separate Newell from her male interlocutor, Leonard Woods, nor her theological ideas from the New Divinity. And yet, this is precisely what her textual community intended. It is also what makes her memoir so fascinating. Newell's memoir is important for understanding the textual community in which it was produced, in which the lines between exemplar, author, editor, publisher and audience are blurred in ways difficult to grasp today. The result shaped the female Evangelical imagination powerfully and enabled women to read themselves into new stories and theological plots.

In literary terms, Newell's narrative of spiritual conversion leading directly to missionary commitment drew heavily upon both Hopkins's

²² McCoy, "'Reason for hope'", 181.

²³ Although she was born Harriet Atwood, for clarity's sake I have chosen to refer to her throughout this paper by her married name of Harriet Newell since it is the name under which she became famous.

²⁴ Michael Gamer and Katrina O'Loughlin, 'Unpacking Harriet Newell's library', *Studies in Romanticism* 1x/4 (2021), 419–33.

exemplary women and on one of the New Divinity's most important male protagonists. As an account written by a woman in the New Divinity context, its closest literary predecessors were Samuel Hopkins's memoirs of Susanna Anthony (1796) and Sarah Osborn (1799). These works by American women were published posthumously by a New Divinity minister whose mediation of their writing enabled them to become exemplary. Both memoirs open with their protagonists' conversion narratives, an important plot device for signalling the worthiness of their female subjects. Additionally, Newell's memoir was an immediate literary descendant of Jonathan Edwards's memoir of David Brainerd, which similarly recounted a plot beginning with the subject's conversion and progressing towards missions.

A consuming question for many young Evangelical women was what one should do after conversion. This question likewise consumed Newell, and Woods clearly structured the pre-departure portion of Newell's memoir to position her life as an exemplary response to conversion by placing great emphasis on the search for usefulness which ensued. The textual community surrounding the New Divinity was taught to associate published conversion narratives with evidence of God's favour, arguments for religious causes and spiritual exemplariness.²⁵ Woods opened Newell's memoir with her firsthand account of conversion, which she had prepared for entrance to church membership; he then doubled back to recount the narrative again through her journal entries and personal correspondence. By twice placing the emphasis on her conversion, Woods heightened its events and outcomes narratively.

'Usefulness' was not only acceptable for a young woman in the New Divinity context; it was prescribed language for outwardly enacting an internal religious experience. Philip Doddridge's *The rise and progress of religion in the soul* (1745) helped guide prospective converts through the various stages of conversion and dedicated an entire chapter to the subject of usefulness.²⁶ William Law's *Serious call to a devout and holy life* (1728) also discussed the importance and necessity of Christian usefulness, exhorting his readers:

As to your bodies, you are to consider them as poor, perishing things, that are sickly and corrupt at present, and will soon drop into common dust... you are to consider

²⁵ Brown, *The word in the world*, 89–95; Susan Juster, "'In a different voice': male and female narratives of religious conversion in post-revolutionary America", *American Quarterly* xli/1 (1989), 34–62; Douglas L. Winiarski, *Darkness falls on the land of light: experiencing religious awakenings in eighteenth-century New England*, Chapel Hill, NC, 2017, 12–20.

²⁶ Virginia Lieson Brereton, *From sin to salvation: stories of women's conversions, 1800 to the present*, Bloomington, IN 1991, 10–11; Philip Doddridge, *The rise and progress of religion in the soul*, Boston 1831, 234.

them as the place and habitation of your souls, and so keep them pure, and clean, and decent; you are to consider them as the servants and instruments of action, and so give them food, and rest, and raiment, that they may be strong and healthful to do the duties of a charitable, useful, pious life.²⁷

Both Doddridge and Law were widely read in the New Divinity context and Newell discussed avidly reading both in the process of awakening and conversion.²⁸

Before her conversion, Newell frequently contrasted the term ‘usefulness’ with ‘stupidity’, which in her pen did not mean a lack of cognitive ability but rather a lethargic disposition of the heart to resist spiritual improvement. Duty to God and the improvement of self and time all figured prominently in Newell’s reflections such that a keen sense of awakening to action is palpable in her private account of conversion, in which she wrote, ‘How awfully aggravated will be my condition, if I do not, after this second call, awaken all my drowsy faculties and become earnestly engaged for God.’²⁹

After her conversion, Newell’s writing became increasingly consumed with questions concerning her duty to God, her purpose on this earth and the needs of the ‘heathen’. She frequently asked herself, ‘What have I done for God?’ and, ‘how sincerely ought I to be engaged for him?’³⁰ Newell believed that with her affections rightly ordered, she would better understand her purpose on earth – whereas eternity offered her full and everlasting rest, the confines of time required her active service of God and the unconverted.³¹ At a crucial point in the narrative, Newell met with Ann Hasseltine, who disclosed her decision to depart for India as the wife of Adoniram Judson. Inspired by her friend, Newell asked herself what she might do to give aid to the cause and wrote: ‘Great God direct me! Oh make me in *some* way beneficial to their immortal souls!’³²

Not long after meeting with Hasseltine, Newell was visited by her future husband, Samuel Newell. She found herself deeply challenged by his devotion to the Gospel and commitment to missionary service, causing her to question the depth of her own faith, so much so that she developed insomnia.³³ Eventually, she wrote, ‘I am as much obligated to yield myself a willing soldier to Christ, to fight his battles, and glorify him, in every action of my life, as he who ministers at the altar, and performs the office of a preacher. Why then, am I not employed in his service? Why stand I here *idle*, all the day?’³⁴ This was a fascinating conclusion, for

²⁷ William Law, *A serious call to a devout and holy life; adapted to the state and condition of all orders of Christians*, 18th edn, Boston 1821, 268.

²⁸ Leonard Woods DD, *A sermon, preached at Haverhill, Mass: in remembrance of Mrs. Harriet Newell, wife of the Rev. Samuel Newell, missionary to India: who died at the Isle of France, Nov. 30, 1812, aged 19 Years: to which are added memoirs of her life*, Boston 1814, 28, 71. ²⁹ Ibid. 44. ³⁰ Ibid. 45. ³¹ Ibid. 49–50. ³² Ibid. 65. ³³ Ibid. 66.

³⁴ Ibid.

Newell declared herself as obliged as male preachers to be employed for God. Usefulness was not a spiritual category for male religious leaders only, but rather a necessary requirement for all converts, including women.

Leading up to Samuel Newell's marriage proposal, Newell's convictions concerning usefulness turned into efforts to begin acting usefully. She recorded that her mother desired her to engage a school, which intimidated Newell greatly, but she none the less was willing to comply.³⁵ She wrote, 'Can I think of such a responsible situation as that of instructing immortals? I know that I ought not to consult my own ease; the question should be, how can I be most useful in the world? I hope I shall be directed by Heaven! Oh that God would use me as an instrument of promoting his glory.'³⁶

Ultimately Newell decided to accept Samuel's proposal of marriage and though some might find intriguing Newell's statements regarding her independence of choice in the matter, when understood within the theological plot unfolding across the narrative, the main thrust of the account was not Newell's female agency, but rather the pivotal nature of this moment in her search for usefulness. In fact, finding usefulness served as both the culmination of her spiritual journey and the justification for her participation in the missionary cause. In one letter to a friend, Newell made this abundantly clear by questioning whether she would ever experience God's blessing or a peaceful conscience should she refuse her 'little aid' to the missionary cause.³⁷ In the light of eternity, and her short time on earth, the anticipated trials of India paled in comparison to the work to be done, and Newell trusted that God would use her.³⁸

Newell's decision for usefulness was not an individualised decision, however – her community shared this theological language and encouraged the seeking of usefulness by young women. It was only because those in Newell's community had decided women could be useful that she took the proposal seriously. She wrote, '*All* my friends with whom I have conversed since my return to Haverhill, advise me to go. Some Christians who were formerly opposed, after obtaining a more extensive knowledge of the subject, think females, would be useful.'³⁹

The remainder of the theological plot presented in Newell's memoir involves a complex argument responding to the personal criticism Newell feared receiving from her friends and acquaintances, for her decision did not meet entirely with community approval. Describing the charges made against her, Newell listed accusations which would have been very serious for a modestly pious Evangelical woman: 'Even while blest with an habitation in my own country, I hear some of those friends, whom I fondly love accusing me of the love of novelty, of an invincible

³⁵ Ibid. 71.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid. 76.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid. 76–7.

attachment to a fellow creature, of superstition and of wanting a great name.’⁴⁰ Her motivations and the accusations of those who failed to understand them became a significant issue for Newell to address within her own heart, and she herself doubted her reasons for going, for she believed she had not yet proved herself to be useful.⁴¹ Without anything to show her usefulness since her conversion, how could she be assured of usefulness in her future work among the heathen?⁴²

Newell wrote some of her most nuanced theological reasoning as she worked towards peace on the matter. Though she questioned herself as she considered the doubts of others, Newell was consoled by the knowledge that God understood her motives and accepted them.⁴³ Newell’s usefulness might have been in doubt, but her desire to be useful was not, and that would be accepted by God. Even if she failed, the desire for usefulness itself constituted spiritual fruit. She wrote, ‘I have this consolation, if the motives by which I am actuated are sincere and good, God will accept the inclination to glorify him, even though I should not be made useful.’⁴⁴ Her hope was that God would honour her motivations and bless her longing to be ‘swallowed up in endless fruition!’⁴⁵ Because her motivations were pure, Newell was able to sacrifice everything.⁴⁶

Eternity overshadowed Newell’s understanding of Christian usefulness. The more she considered eternity in her journal and letters, the more urgently she sought usefulness. Before her conversion, eternity represented the spiritual judgement which awaited her, and hence the testing of her life on earth.⁴⁷ But after conversion, eternity began to represent the promise of eternal bliss and joy with Christ.⁴⁸ Though Newell frequently found herself longing for the release and completion she would find in eternity, the millennium signified that great work was first to be done on earth. She wrote, ‘Oh, that he would hasten that happy period, when the whole earth shall be brought to a knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus. Let us frequently and earnestly intercede at the throne of grace, for the commencement of the Millennium.’⁴⁹ As Newell perceived eternity drawing close to temporal reality in the arrival of the millennium, usefulness became more and more important for earthly existence.⁵⁰ As the ‘glorious morn of the Millennium hastens’, Newell did not believe God’s children had been tasked with idleness, but rather with work for the glory of God.⁵¹ Her greatest desire for herself and her companions was to ‘be made eminently holy and useful’.⁵² For those converted in the dawn of the millennium, usefulness was the necessary outcome of conversion.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 89.

⁴¹ Ibid. 81–2, 95.

⁴² Ibid. 91.

⁴³ Ibid. 82.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 86.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 82, 81, 91, 93–4, 101.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 38.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 57, 67, 71, 90.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 57.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 100, 103.

⁵¹ Ibid. 103.

⁵² Ibid. 101.

As Newell's ideas about and commitment to usefulness reached their climax in her marriage to a missionary and subsequent departure for India, she most succinctly articulated the connections she drew between conversion, usefulness, eternity and the encroaching millennium. In one of her final letters to a faithful correspondent, Newell beseeched her friend to at last be converted. She explained that it would be one final source of joy and comfort before embarking upon the challenges of a missionary life to know that her friend had at last accepted true religion. The reason Newell gave for this great desire was so that she might be at peace knowing she left a useful friend behind at home. Newell wrote, 'How would it gladden my sad heart, in the trying hour of my departure, could I but leave a dear circle of females of my own age, engaged for God, and eminent for their usefulness in Haverhill.'⁵³ Newell clearly equated her friend's potential conversion with the eventual spiritual fruit of usefulness. For Newell, usefulness was not only the final goal and aim of conversion, but something to be multiplied within the community.

In Harriet Newell's memoir, the case for female participation in the American missionary endeavour was strongly articulated through the idea of usefulness. Because of its imprecise yet rich theological meaning, usefulness was a powerful concept for women to apply the Christian message to their particular contexts. Usefulness was such powerful language in Newell's pen because it expanded the world in which she participated while holding onto the theological context in which she lived. Though the terminology of Christian usefulness was not new in Newell's writing, her connection of the term with missionary involvement introduced a new application of it by women. And by framing her search for usefulness within traditional literary patterns of conversion, Woods effectively cast Newell's decision to participate in the missionary cause as an acceptable theological plot. Woods's editorial choices positioned Newell's decision to marry a missionary and travel overseas not as personal interest or social impropriety, but rather as a search for usefulness which resulted in a missionary commitment.

'Usefulness' in subsequent memoirs

Throughout the nineteenth century, publishers continued to produce dozens of memoirs dedicated to deceased missionary wives, most of which repeated important elements of Newell's prototypical memoir. Newell's was the first memoir of its genre and a massive bestseller. As young women 'read the self' and patterned their lives according to the

⁵³ Ibid. 93–4.

literary examples they encountered in New England's burgeoning print culture, many remembered Newell before any other as the figure who most inspired their missionary activity and pointed to her memoir as deeply impactful. By examining how subsequent memoirs in the missionary wife genre repeated Newell's language of 'usefulness', not only is its importance for the genre emphasised, but it is also clear how many of the next generation of missionary wives credited Harriet Newell and her language of 'usefulness' specifically in their decisions to go overseas.

In total, I have studied seventeen memoirs of ABCFM or Baptist missionary wives published between 1814 and 1880. A few observations are important at the outset. First, though the genre changes somewhat in style over these seven decades, missionary wife memoirs remained remarkably similar in format and function throughout the century. The genre generally closely followed the style of Newell's memoir; it continued to feature the subject's conversion narrative followed by compilations of personal letters and journal entries. Initially the genre relied solely on male interlocutors, but as the century progressed female editors became acceptable.⁵⁴ Though there are different emphases in each memoir and they vary in quality, all to some extent reflect Newell's theological plot of 'usefulness'. Over the decades, the specific language of 'usefulness' eventually becomes less prominent; in the later memoirs it feels somewhat perfunctory. But I would argue that this diminishing, yet still needed, language demonstrates how foundational 'usefulness' is for understanding Newell's memoir and its impact.

Among the missionary wife memoirs, those dedicated to Ann Judson, Myra Allen, Harriet Winslow and Eliza Jones are particularly helpful for understanding the impact of Newell's memoir. This is in part because the women were quite different from each other. Myra Allen and Harriet Winslow belonged to the ABCFM and Ann Judson and Eliza Jones were Baptists, yet Judson and Winslow's personalities were much more similar, likewise Allen and Jones. As such, they demonstrate a breadth of personality and religious affiliation across the genre.

In addition to these differences, certain similarities among this subset are also helpful: the memoirs provide examples of women deeply impacted by ideas of benevolence, the millennium and eternity. All took seriously the call to usefulness that their conversions required, making great efforts to demonstrate their service to God before departing for the mission field. And all were highly active in the Evangelical textual community, noting the spiritual impact and significance of their reading and writing. Furthermore, in each of these memoirs their subjects' voices are quite prominent. Certainly, the editorial perspective of the male interlocutor

⁵⁴ For an example of a female edited memoir see Emily C. Judson, *Memoir of Sarah B. Judson of the American mission to Burmah*, New York 1850.

must be kept in mind; however, these four memoirs seem dedicated to mimicking the style of Newell's memoir by emphasising their subjects' personal writing to the fullest extent possible.

Ann Judson

Harriet Newell's childhood friend, Ann Judson, *née* Hasseltine, was the second missionary wife to have a memoir, published in her honour in 1829. Judson was one of America's most famous missionary wives, and the editor of her memoir, the Boston minister James Knowles, made the reason for its publication explicitly clear – it was published in order to inspire and encourage women into missionary service.⁵⁵ As with Newell, Knowles situated Judson's conversion as foundational to the narrative. Religious reading had played an important role and she had participated in a number of religious conferences at Bradford Academy, a hub of New Divinity teaching.⁵⁶ After much spiritual agony and discomposure, Judson eventually began to find beauty in God's plan of salvation and committed her soul to him.⁵⁷

Whether addressing needs at home or on the mission field, Ann believed usefulness ought to be the clear outcome of spiritual rebirth.⁵⁸ As evidence of the Christian's growth in grace, seeking the good and conversion of others became her most immediate interest. She wrote:

Ever since I have had a comfortable hope in Christ, I have desired to devote myself to him, in such a way, as to be useful to my fellow creatures. As Providence has placed me in a situation of life, where I have an opportunity of getting as good an education as I desire, I feel it would be highly criminal in me not to improve it ... On being lately requested to take a small school, for a few months, I felt very unqualified to have the charge of little immortal souls; but the hope of doing them good, by endeavoring to impress their young and tender minds with divine truth, and the obligation I feel, *to try to be useful*, have induced me to comply.⁵⁹

As with Newell, Knowles included writings from Judson that clearly communicated a lack of self-interest in her decision to go overseas. She wrote that it did not matter where God called her to be useful, because she would spend

⁵⁵ James D. Knowles, *Memoir of Mrs. Ann H. Judson, late missionary to Burmah. including a history of the American Baptist Mission in the Burman empire*, 4th edn, Boston 1829, pp. iv–v, 9–10, 26.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 13, 15–17, 20, 29, 31. Judson was a voracious reader and studied many major theological and religious works, including: the works of Hannah More, Joseph Bellamy, Phillip Doddridge, Samuel Hopkins and Jonathan Edwards; memoirs such as *The life of David Brainerd* and *The life and character of Miss Susanna Anthony*; and commentaries from 'Guise, Orton, and Scott'. ⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 17. ⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 22, 24, 25, 27. ⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 28.

eternity neither at home nor abroad.⁶⁰ Her desire was simply to go wherever she would be most useful, writing,

Time appears nothing when compared with eternity, and yet events the most momentous depend on the improvement of these fleeting years. O Jesus, direct me, and I am safe; use me in thy service, and I ask no more. I would not choose my position of work or place of labor; only let me know thy will, and I will readily comply.⁶¹

Within Judson's memoir, Knowles recognised Harriet Newell as the 'proto-martyr' in the light of whose death missionary wives were to be understood.⁶² The work of missionary wives in the field was important, but as Knowles's appreciation of Newell's shortened tenure demonstrated, usefulness was defined primarily not by the work they accomplished but by the decision to go itself.⁶³ Certainly, subsequent missionary wives hoped and expected to do more than Newell had been able to do. Yet, through the honour her short life garnered, they were reminded that their usefulness was not defined by their productivity; rather, usefulness was defined as internal, spiritual motivation.

Harriet Newell and Ann Judson's lives as missionary wives could not have been more different – Newell died quickly before her labours in the field started, whereas Judson's work in Burma became legendary during her fourteen years there. Yet in his editing and commentary, Knowles sought to make it clear that what united the experiences of these two early missionary wives was not their respective accomplishments, but the desire for usefulness that first compelled them to depart.

Myra Allen

The ABCFM missionaries David and Myra Allen departed from Boston for India in 1827. Within four years Myra had died in childbirth and her journals and letters were quickly returned to the United States for publication. Under the editorial oversight of Cyrus Mann, Allen's memoir was published in 1832. Mann made it explicitly clear that the purpose of Allen's memoir was the subject's pedagogical exemplariness and the desire to encourage conversion and commitment to the missionary cause.⁶⁴

As with Newell's and Judson's memoirs, Mann included Allen's conversion narrative at the beginning of the memoir.⁶⁵ But additional similarities with Newell are identifiable throughout Allen's writing, particularly in her spiritual reasoning. She frequently used the terminology of the religious

⁶⁰ Ibid. 39.

⁶¹ Ibid. 38.

⁶² Ibid. 12, 36–7.

⁶³ Ibid. 40–1.

⁶⁴ Cyrus Mann, *Memoir of Mrs. Myra W. Allen, who died at the missionary station of the American Board in Bombay, on the 5th of February, 1831, in the 30th year of her age*, second edn, Boston 1834, 1–2, 24, 89.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 9–16.

affections, and she understood them to undergird all spiritual action – whether rebellion or submission.⁶⁶ Only affections renewed by conversion dispose the Christian towards benevolence. As Allen wrote, ‘Religion with its duties and prospects is not calculated to fill the mind with gloom and despondency. Far otherwise, it expands and ennobles the faculties, it tends to regulate, refine and purify the affections, restrain the passions, and promote a spirit of benevolence to man, and resignation to God.’⁶⁷ Conversion leads to benevolence which in turn leads the Christian into usefulness, particularly when understood in the light of eternity. In a letter to an unconverted friend, Allen wrote:

How important that we live in constant readiness for death. What do we lose, if we come short of Heaven! ‘What shall it profit, should we gain the whole world, and *lose our own souls!*’ ... But how joyful in the regions of bliss must be the recollection of opportunities for usefulness faithfully improved. Let such considerations animate us to diligence in securing our salvation, and in striving to promote the spiritual interests of those around us.⁶⁸

As spiritual fruit growing from the vine of Christian conversion, usefulness was something a woman ought to seek in order to improve upon the short time given her by eternity.

Allen demonstrated active usefulness before her departure, providing Mann with abundant examples to demonstrate the exemplariness of her Christian life. Allen was involved in raising money for missions, caring for the poor, teaching Sunday school and participating in prayer meetings.⁶⁹ Furthermore, Mann documented Allen’s influence over several conversions among her personal acquaintances, the children in her neighbourhood and even among strangers.⁷⁰

Mann also highlighted Allen’s contact with the missionary endeavour before her own commitment to it, demonstrating the movement’s growing social presence more than a decade after the publication of Newell’s memoir. For example, Allen wrote of an acquaintance who became a missionary, and she corresponded with a brother regarding his visit to a Native American mission.⁷¹ Allen mentioned reading the work of Catherine Brown, a Cherokee convert who was active in promoting benevolent Christianity among her people, along with several other books on the topic of missions.⁷² Of particular interest to this paper, Allen specifically mentioned reading Newell’s memoir and its influence on her own conversion. Reading it in the year of its publication at the age of thirteen,

⁶⁶ Ibid. 9–10, 68, 83–4.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 64.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 63. Other examples of such connections can be found at pp. 43, 65–6, 76–9, 83–4.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 22–3, 30, 39, 76.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 28–9, 41–4, 46, 59ff, 74ff, 88–91.

⁷¹ Ibid. 44, 79–80.

⁷² Ibid. 44–5, 54.

Allen credited the memoir with giving her great religious insight.⁷³ She clearly echoed Newell when she wrote,

Oh my dear sister, it is vastly important that we fill our stations with usefulness. How heart-rending will be the reflection in the dying hour, and in eternity, that we have buried our talent in the earth. The precious *now* that flies is the time to prevent this unhappy issue of things. Let us think of the inexpressible music of that plaudit from our Judge, 'Well done'.⁷⁴

As with Newell and Judson, Allen's primary concern with regards to usefulness was not its pragmatic outworking, but rather the heart motivation through which usefulness was sought and enacted.

Harriet Winslow

Harriet Lathrop married Miron Winslow in 1819 and sailed for India with the ABCFM. Remarkably, though she had experienced significant ill health throughout her adolescence and young adulthood, she served in the field for fourteen years.⁷⁵ Two years after her death, Miron gathered together her journals and letters and published a memoir in her honour in 1835 in order to inspire readers to join the missionary cause.

Winslow recalled experiencing awakening and conversion at an unusually early age. When she was twelve years old, Winslow's mother began taking her to the town's religious meetings, and it was through these meetings that Winslow became aware of her sinfulness, disobedience and temper.⁷⁶ As with the other missionary wives, reading was an important element of her conversion, and she specifically mentioned the work of Doddridge.⁷⁷ Usefulness was a constant term in Winslow's writing, and she plainly described her efforts on behalf of others as the fruit of her conversion. She frequently echoed Newell's contrast of usefulness with 'stupidity', prayerfully requesting that she be enabled to use her gifts in service to God and for others.⁷⁸ She wrote: 'I beseech thee let me not live for myself alone. Enable me to be useful to all around me.'⁷⁹

Throughout her activities, Winslow worried she was too ambitious in her pursuit of usefulness and frequently chided herself for it. Prior to departing overseas, Winslow started numerous benevolent endeavours including a Sunday school and a ladies' prayer and benevolent society.⁸⁰ Furthermore, she worked arduously for the conversions of her friends and at collecting relief money for the poor.⁸¹ In 1814, at the age of

⁷³ Ibid. 10.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 84.

⁷⁵ Miron Winslow, *A memoir of Mrs. Harriet Wadsworth Winslow, combining a sketch of the Ceylon mission*, New York 1835, 387–91.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 10–11ff.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 12, 14.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 26–7, 29–30, 39–40, 46–7, 49, 50, 63–4, 69–70, 73–4, 83.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 20.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 28–30, 33–4, 36–7, 40, 53, 59, 61.

⁸¹ Ibid. 16–18, 26–7, 33–4, 41, 47–8, 51–4, 58, 65–6, 69–70, 73, 75, 78, 80, 86–7.

eighteen, Winslow confided to her diary that she was so concerned for the heathen that she almost wished herself to be a man in order to exert herself further on their behalf. She wrote:

When I reflect on the multitudes of my fellow creatures who are perishing for lack of vision, and that I am living at ease, without aiding in the promulgation of the Gospel, I am almost ready to wish myself a man, that I might spend my life with the poor heathen. But I check the thought, and would not alter one plan of Infinite wisdom ... Oh, how basely ungrateful and selfish in me, to sit down quietly in the care of self, without making any exertion for their salvation. But what can I do? A weak, ignorant female. One thing only do I see, My prayers may be accepted.⁸²

Winslow was unabashed in asking God to increase her sphere of influence, writing, 'Oh God, I pray thee enlarge my sphere of usefulness. Give me power and desire to do good continually.'⁸³

For Winslow, the language of usefulness was rooted in a subjective understanding of self, purpose and the joy it brought to her earthly life. Harriet Winslow's memoir was published two decades after Harriet Newell's, demonstrating the impact the missionary endeavour had on the next generation of young readers. Miron Winslow carefully promoted his wife as pious and worthy of emulation, intentionally positioning his wife's memoir as part of a long line of pedagogically important Evangelical literature.⁸⁴

Eliza Jones

Eliza Jones sailed to Burma as a Baptist missionary wife in 1830, shortly after marrying John Taylor Jones.⁸⁵ She died eight years later, after which the ABPSSS published a memoir in her honour in 1842. Jones's memoir maintained the focus on conversion and usefulness almost three decades after the publication of Harriet Newell's memoir. Jones's conversion narrative, written in a personal letter, introduced the memoir's plot; she recounted an extended period of spiritual apathy followed by awakening at the young age of six or seven.⁸⁶ Jones listed three things that were particularly important for her eventual conversion. First, she mentioned conversation with her father, a Baptist minister, and second, the recurrence of her birthday, likely a time for contemplating the eternal state of her soul. Third, Jones made particular mention of the writings of Harriet Newell, demonstrating exactly the converting influence Newell's memoir was intended to have.

⁸² Ibid. 23–4.

⁸³ Ibid. 34.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 11, 16.

⁸⁵ ABPSSS, *Memoir of Mrs. Eliza G. Jones, missionary to Burmah and Siam*, Philadelphia, PA 1842, 3, 25.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 4–9.

Many aspects of Jones's path to usefulness echoed those found in the memoirs of Harriet Newell, Ann Judson, Myra Allen and Harriet Winslow. She was concerned that she had 'misimproved' the spiritual blessings God had given her and wrote of her desire to grow closer to God in order to faithfully serve him.⁸⁷ The language of duty recurred in her writings, particularly in connection to the unconverted around her.⁸⁸ Jones was motivated by a desire to repay Christ for his work on her behalf, writing:

There have been times when I have felt such an ardent, inexpressible desire to do something for God; to manifest in some way my attachment to Jesus; to devote every moment of my short life to his service, that I have thought no sacrifice too great to make, no trials too severe to be endured, so that I might do some good in his cause, or be the means of the conversion of one soul. And shall I now draw back? Shall I withhold any thing from Jesus? From Him who has died to redeem me from sin and misery; who, I trust, has renewed me by his grace, and is now preparing for me a mansion in the realms of eternal glory? No: 'I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me.'⁸⁹

Like many other missionary wives before her, Jones understood her desire for service in the light of death and eternity. Similar to Newell's contrast between 'usefulness' and 'stupidity', Jones contrasted holy living with sleeping. She believed that with eternity lurking at the door, the unconverted should be able to recognise the Christian for doing more than others. She wrote:

My unfaithfulness, my worldly-mindedness, my neglect of duty during the last two years are presented to my mind, and fill my soul with anguish. Why have I given the enemies of the cross so much reason to say – 'what do ye more than others'? Why do I not live as Jesus Christ lived? as his saints live, or even as I once lived myself? Death hastens on apace; eternity with all its realities will soon be unfolded to my view, my day of grace will soon be over. 'Arise, O sleeper, and call upon thy God.'⁹⁰

Yet, three key differences from earlier missionary wife narratives are important to note. First, Jones did not use the exact term 'useful' anywhere in her pre-departure writing. Though she echoed and included many of the key concepts of usefulness found in other memoirs, the word itself is not present until her correspondence from the mission field.⁹¹ Second, even though the term 'useful' was not present, Jones's memoir indicated a stronger belief in her ability to actually be useful than many of the other memoirs. Jones wrote with greater confidence concerning what she believed God had called her to do. Whereas Harriet Winslow wrote of longing to be a man in order to demonstrate increased usefulness and service to God, Jones wrote eloquently of her equal duty parallel to the

⁸⁷ Ibid. 9–10, 11.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 10–11, 13–16.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 23.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 10–11.

⁹¹ Ibid. 36, 53, 76, 94, 117, 121.

masculine calling of preaching, recalling a similar statement by Newell. In a particularly important passage, she wrote:

Were I a minister of the gospel, commissioned to proclaim salvation to a perishing world, should I wish to leave my work and go home to glory? No, the longest life would then be too short to accomplish all I should wish to do for God and my fellow sinners. But there is within my own sphere of action much more to be done than I can hope ever to accomplish; and shall I let one talent remain unoccupied because I do not possess five?

Shall I wish to be dismissed from my Captain's service and go home, because I am placed in the rear of his army? Let me work while the day lasts, remembering that 'the night cometh in which no man can work'.⁹²

In this passage, Jones clearly stated that she had no less duty than a man to improve upon the talents given her. Even though her position may not have been as exalted as a minister's, she did not have less work or responsibility before God. Newell had expressed a similar belief; yet, as one of America's first three women to participate in the missionary cause, she had to rely on faith for the fulfilment of such conviction. With several generations of examples from which to draw, Jones exhibited a higher degree of confidence that there was actual work to be done by women.

With this in mind, the third distinctive of Jones's memoir is its evidence of the pedagogical success of the Evangelical textual community which first produced Newell's memoir. Jones wrote of reading not only Harriet Newell, but also the writings of Ann Judson and Henry Martyn, as well as 'Parsons and Fisk' in order to weigh her decision to participate in the missionary cause.⁹³ As she contemplated the lives of these missionaries from previous generations, she equated her heroes without distinction given to their sex or work. Both the men and women were viewed as worthy of veneration and emulation and were of equal importance for her decision, demonstrating the success of missionary wife memoirs in making exemplars of their subjects, for recruiting new women to the cause and for disseminating ideas of usefulness. Because she had female exemplars upon which to pattern herself, Jones's sense of self, purpose and calling as a woman contemplating the mission field was markedly stronger than that of Harriet Newell, Ann Judson, Myra Allen or Harriet Winslow.

The idea of usefulness was not unique to Harriet Newell or her memoir. 'Usefulness' was an idea which permeated the New Divinity context and predated the missionary endeavour. What then was the particular significance of Newell's use of the language of 'usefulness'?

Newell's memoir highlighted the ways in which the lived reality of usefulness could often be undefined. She spilled significant ink in her journals and correspondence in describing a search for 'usefulness' and its lived

⁹² Ibid. 18–19.

⁹³ Ibid. 21–2.

application. Though gendered limitations existed for how a woman might live usefully, such limitations were not Newell's focus; instead, she dedicated significant literary energy to understanding and evaluating the perceived opportunities that 'usefulness' granted her. Other than the internal motivations which compelled her to usefulness in the first place, Newell's writings delineated very little regarding female usefulness.

This is what makes Newell's prototypical memoir theologically significant. Her unique contribution was her exposition on the theological motivations by which her participation in the missionary cause were actuated. Because Newell did not do anything either prior or post her departure as a missionary which could be construed as pragmatically 'useful', the only metric by which to judge her usefulness was her motivations. Newell accomplished almost nothing during her life. She did not teach school, she was not engaged in domestic benevolent work and she died before setting foot on the mission field. As a result, it was impossible for the nineteenth-century Evangelical textual community to define her usefulness as anything other than a theological conviction and an intention to live out said conviction.

This lack of specificity regarding 'usefulness' had the potential to powerfully awaken the imaginations of the Evangelical textual community. Rather than being given an exemplar with an entire life upon which to pattern one's decisions, the New England textual community was given an exemplar who demonstrated intentions alone, the details of which could be imagined according to each reader's specific context and reality. In other words, Newell's memoir not only argued for the life of a missionary wife as fulfilling New Divinity concepts of usefulness, it demonstrated that any woman could fulfill the call to usefulness. Upon her death at nineteen, Newell's life was essentially a blank slate; her theological motivations for the decisions she made, however, were not.

Newell's memoir thereby invited readers to imagine themselves following similar calls to usefulness. As the memoirs of subsequent missionary wives demonstrate, the lived realities of female usefulness varied significantly – the women memorialised display a significant variety of personality, skill and ability. Yet each memoir honoured its subject as living out usefulness in a similar literary pattern as that first established by Newell's memoir. Newell's memoir provided an exemplar who left usefulness indefinite in the reader's imaginations beyond theological motivation and intention, creating a significant literary moment on behalf of the burgeoning missionary movement within the Evangelical textual community.

By studying the narrative patterns of conversion and the language of usefulness utilised in Newell's memoir, and the ways this language was repeated in subsequent missionary wife memoirs, we are better able to understand the full force of Newell's memoir as a literary and theological work and its influence on the textual representation of Evangelical women

engaged in mission. 'Usefulness' was an important term for the simultaneously progressive and conservative nature of the literary representation of missionary wives in the rapidly growing Evangelical literature market. On the one hand, the first women to participate in the American missionary movement understood themselves to be doing something new; yet, they interpreted their choices according to older, inherited theological language. The male editors involved with the publication of the work of missionary wives understood the importance of the language of 'usefulness' for aiding the public reception of women in the missionary effort and featured it prominently in their selection of journal entries and personal letters.

Newell's memoir was crucial for disseminating ideas of female usefulness based on New Divinity theology, a vital tool for recruiting subsequent women to the missionary cause. It is important to understand this aspect of the work; though the memoirs of Newell and subsequent missionary wives undoubtedly enticed women to the missionary cause with their descriptions of travel and adventure, this aspect alone cannot account for the impact of the genre on a community so driven by theological ideas. The theological force of Newell's memoir must be adequately accounted for to understand what made it such a significant book in the nineteenth-century Evangelical textual community.

As she desired, Harriet Newell's short life proved to be highly useful to the missionary movement, though certainly not in a way she anticipated or could have imagined. Her search for usefulness was not fulfilled through evangelising the lost overseas; rather, she was made useful posthumously through the effort to publicise her life as an example for countless young Evangelical women to pattern themselves on. Despite her concern over her perceived lack of usefulness prior to departing overseas and despite her premature death, Newell was venerated by subsequent generations as an exemplar of exactly the usefulness she sought.