The Legacy of Helen B. Montgomery and Lucy W. Peabody

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The missionary enterprise is more than the involvement of persons directly engaged in evangelical ministries. It is also the educational, promotional, and spiritual work that provides support for preaching, healing, and social witness. In North America in the early nineteenth century a "benevolent empire" of agencies assumed leadership for the support of missions. Prominent among these, from the very first, were women's organizations. In the last quarter of that century, there was a coalescing of "women's work for women" that may be directly attributed to singularly gifted leaders. Two of those leaders were Helen Barrett Montgomery and Lucy Waterbury Peabody, who left a joint legacy of publication, promotion, and prayer on behalf of women across denominational lines and particularly among Baptists.

Helen Barrett was born July 31, 1861, in Kingsville, Ohio, the eldest of two daughters and a son born to Adoniram Judson Barrett and Emily B. Barrows. Owing to her father's job as a schoolteacher, the family moved to western New York, then characterized religiously as the "Burned-Over District." Her childhood was spent in Lowville, New York, a village north of Albany; most of her adult life was spent in the city of Rochester. By her own admission, her father was a dominant influence on her development.4

A. J. Barrett was heir to a long line of Baptists, hence his being named in honor of the pioneer Baptist missionary to Burma, Adoniram Judson (1788-1850). Deeply devoted to education, Barrett taught in several academies as a self-trained person with a keen interest in the classics. Later in his career, and at great personal sacrifice, he attended the newly formed University of Rochester. In 1872 he responded to a call to Christian ministry and entered Rochester Theological Seminary. Rochester was a newer, prorevival school under the aegis of the young and gifted theologian, Augustus Hopkins Strong (1836-1921).5 Barrett, his wife, and three children knew the seminary faculty intimately, and he prospered in the student body. In 1876 upon graduation he became minister at Lake Avenue Baptist Church in Rochester, which became a prestigious congregation in the city's Baptist community. There he remained a beloved pastor until his sudden death in 1889 following an extended overseas tour. Helen later compiled a memorial book to her father and she helped to establish the Barrett Bible Class at Lake Avenue in his honor, which she taught personally for over four decades.6

Like her father, Helen sought a good education and pursued literature and classics at Wellesley College. Following her graduation from Wellesley in 1884, she took an M.A. degree at Brown University. Of her collegiate studies she said, "I knew what it was to be a poor girl in college, and I have as my richest possession the memory of four years that were the inspiration of my life. I believe in education with all my heart and soul. . . . I am told that I am a college woman. Yes, I am."7

Helen was a superior student and took high commendation to her first position as principal at Wellesley Preparatory School in Philadelphia in 1887. Her time in Philadelphia was brief for she soon married a wealthy industrialist named William A. Montgomery (1854-1930), seven years her senior. The couple decided to move to Helen's hometown, Rochester, New York, where William continued his business interests.8 She was remembered by friends in the 1880s as a tall, graceful, attractive woman who commanded attention in every gathering.

Early in their marriage, William Montgomery pledged to Helen his support for her far-reaching interests in civic life and Christian mission. This proved to be a considerable commitment of funds for travel and support of missionary work around the world, plus sharing his spouse for extended periods of time with speaking tours and administrative assignments. Montgomery busied himself with building a thriving subsidiary company to what became the General Motors Corporation; he was also on the board of trustees of Rochester Theological Seminary and served as chairman during the period when merger negotiations with Colgate Theological Seminary were completed. With Helen's encouragement, William quietly contributed the funds for construction of the new president's home, later named Montgomery House.9 Together with their adopted daughter, Edith, the couple lived in a modest home in Rochester, choosing to give much of their income to missions.

From 1890 to 1900 Helen divided her time between parental care for daughter Edith and a growing interest in civic and institutional life in Rochester. It would prove to be good experience for her later career in Christian endeavor. In 1893 at the urging of her friend, Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906), she helped to form the Women's Educational and Industrial Union to assist women in self-improvement and working conditions. This was to be a persistent interest throughout her life. Her stake in the women's movement amounted to a massive educational campaign:

The greatest foes that menace the womanhood of America are the pagan ideals that are coming to dominate our theatres and social life. Luxury, easy divorce, indulgence and indulgence can make American women sources of temptation and objects of contempt like their sisters in the buried civilizations of the past.10

She took on two projects that brought her much attention in the city press. In the late 1890s she chaired a committee to open a women's college at the University of Rochester (a Baptist-related institution) and raised $100,000 to launch the program. In 1899 she became the first woman to be elected to the Rochester City School Board, thereafter spending a decade advocating manual training, vacation classes (summer school), art education and teacher training programs, especially for women. A sympathetic editor in Rochester's principal newspaper remarked that Helen had "more than a woman's tender heart and fine tact; . . . she has breadth of mind, earnestness of purpose, energy of execution, and high ideals".11 An elementary school in the city was later named in her honor.12

Active in the Lake Avenue Baptist Church, which licensed her to the ministry, and in the regional Monroe County Baptist Association of churches, Helen began to expand her religious

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horizons. Lucy Peabody recalled that their debut as platform speakers occurred at the 1887 Monroe Baptist Association meeting in Penfield, New York, where they both nervously anticipated their new responsibilities.

From that time on Helen was frequently in demand at Baptist and then ecumenical meetings where she organized support for women's mission organizations and overseas projects. In 1914 she was elected the first president of the newly unified (east and west) Woman's American Baptist Foreign Mission Society (W.A.B.F.M.S.), following similar roles in the predecessor state and regional bodies among Northern Baptists. Except for the year she served as president of the Northern Baptist Convention, Helen was the uncontested presidential choice for the W.A.B.F.M.S. for a decade. She wrote countless editorials, filled pulpits, and presided over meetings that sought to organize women's work in local church circles, associational bands, and in a national network.

A few months older than Helen Barrett Montgomery, Lucy Whitehead McGill was born in Belmont, Kansas, March 2, 1861, the daughter of John and Sarah Hart McGill. Like Helen, Lucy was raised in a Christian home in Rochester, New York. She was graduated from high school in that city and, as an "eclectic student," attended classes at the University of Rochester, which was then closed to women degree candidates. At age twenty she partly realized her Christian ambitions by marrying Norman Mather Waterbury. The couple had met at Lucy's church, East Avenue Baptist, while Norman was a student at Rochester Theological Seminary and Lucy taught at the Rochester School for the Deaf. In 1881 Norman (with Lucy) was appointed a missionary to India by the American Baptist Missionary Union and they took up residence as Telugu specialists at Madras. After five and a half years' work, Norman Waterbury died in India; Lucy and two of their three children, Norma Rose and Howard Ernest, returned to the United States, first to Rochester then to Boston.

The Woman's Baptist Foreign Mission Society of the East soon recognized Lucy's considerable administrative skills and appointed her in 1887 to the position of home secretary, a post she filled in Boston, Massachusetts. This allowed her to provide adequately for her children; she spent over eighteen years in the position. During this period she took charge of the Society's literature production and edited the popular Helping Hand and Everyland juvenile mission papers. Part of her responsibilities also included recruitment of new female candidates and the supervision of children's education. Her official photographs portray her as a person of medium stature with an intense but pleasant disposition.

In 1906 Lucy resigned her secretaryship to marry Henry Wayland Peabody of Beverly, Massachusetts. Peabody was a wealthy Salem import/export merchant twenty-three years her elder. The couple had met during Henry's service on the board of the American Baptist Missionary Union. Henry promised faithful support for his spouse's mission interests which accorded with his own philanthropic pursuits. He died, however, in 1908, leaving her again a widow. She spent several months compiling a biography of her late husband and then returned to active mission work.

The Central Committee on the United Study of Foreign Missions provided the structural context for an important component of the joint legacy of Helen Montgomery and Lucy Peabody. Beginning in 1900 as a committee of the New York Ecumenical Missionary Conference, and sponsored by the Woman's Union Missionary Society, the committee drew together from across the United States representatives of all the women's missionary efforts.

Its purpose was to coordinate information about the needs of Christian women worldwide and to provide publications and educational events that would rouse women to the missionary cause. Commencing with $25.00 capital, and Lucy and Helen in its membership, the committee produced a steady flow of two study books per year for twenty-seven years (publishing a total of four million volumes), earning it Pierce Beaver's assessment as the most successful publisher of mission books. In addition, annual summer conferences were developed at Northfield (Mass.), Chautauqua (N.Y.), Chambersburg (Pa.), and Winona Lake (Ind.), where missionary speakers had close exposure to vacationing laypersons. Lucy was chair of the committee and Helen was its most popular author, providing a dozen books and a million copies to its ministry. Helen's best-known book, Western Women in Eastern Lands (1910), sold over 100,000 copies.

Lucy and Helen also shared in the development of the International Jubilee of Woman's Missions, which occurred in 1910. Lucy Peabody said the Jubilee was an uprising against everything involved in militarism, oppression, and violence.

Helen had originally proposed the idea in her book, Western Women, and she was one of the major promoters. Lucy later described the year of activities of the Jubilee as a spontaneous uprising of the womanhood of the United States against the entire conception of society as a selfish, sectional, material paganism. To everything that is involved in militarism, oppression, violence; here was a pointblank answer—arrangements for the care of mothers, for the upbringing of children, for the kindly progress of the community under the influence of Christ.

Helen made a whirlwind coast-to-coast speaking tour, at one point delivering 197 addresses in a two-month period! Everywhere she challenged the "privileged educated woman of leisure to form a great sisterhood of service and league of love."

A second important achievement in the legacy of Helen and Lucy was their firsthand awareness as missionary educators and promoters of overseas work. For Lucy, of course, this knowledge stemmed from her own missionary experience in India in the 1880s; Helen had looked forward to an extended trip since her father's European tour in 1888. When John R. Mott announced a meeting in 1913 of the International Missionary Council in Amsterdam, Holland, Helen and Lucy decided to make an around the world tour. Accompanied by their daughters (recent college graduates), the two women journeyed from London to Tokyo in just over six months, November, 1913 to April, 1914. In Amsterdam, they enjoyed a personal interview with Queen Wilhemina, who received special editions of Helen's books. From Holland they traveled through Central Europe to the Middle East.

Throughout Asia Helen assessed the needs and possibilities for women's education. At Vellore, the two Americans conversed extensively with the famed Ida S. Scudder, who gave to Helen a plan for village education, girls' high schools, and a medical college for Indian girls. In Burma they visited sites associated with the three Judson wives of a former generation, and in South China...
they focused on the work of the William Ashmores, Baptist missionaries known to them from Rochester days. Finally, in Japan the great Christian statesman, Nitobe, appealed to the women missionaries known to them from Rochester days. Finally, in Japan they focused on the work of the William Ashmores, Baptist missions including soul competence (the capability of the individual to approach God without human intermediary), voluntary cooperation, and world evangelization. She criticized confessionism, defended denominational promotion, and called for a renewed commitment to the convention's goal of one hundred million dollars for the Northern Baptist New World Movement. President Montgomery was especially vocal in her support of academic freedom in Baptist schools, a point of bitter contention for the Fundamental Fellowship.

Following a year of speaking engagements as NBC president, Helen was set free to return to her first loves, overseas women's work and her enlarged writing ministries. She traveled abroad to address the Baptist World Alliance on the role and work of women and she continued to raise funds for institutional projects. In Czechoslovakia and Burma she dedicated "Peabody-Montgomery Homes" for convalescing women patients; elsewhere she raised money for women's colleges in India and China, in several cases inducing the Rockefeller family to make substantial matching grants. The social historian follows with interest Helen's (and Lucy's) support for the Volstead Act during Prohibition—Helen applied her missionary strategies to organizing public opinion of women on the issue through the religious press.

Perhaps Helen's greatest literary achievement came in 1924 when Judson Press published her Centenary Translation of the New Testament, the first ever completed by a woman scholar. Using suggestions from D. L. Moody (1837-1899) and A. T. Robertson (1863-1934), plus her own fresh nuances, Helen reproduced a superior translation in the eyes of important critics. Proceeds from the sale of the translation went directly to mission projects.

Lucy Peabody followed a somewhat different course from Helen's in the 1920s. Lucy was drawn into the moderate wing of the Northern Baptist fundamentalist movement and she campaigned heavily for certain issues. Her daughter Norma had married an American Baptist medical missionary, Raphael C. Thomas (1874-1956), who was the administrator of the Baptist Hospital at Jaro, Iloilo, Philippines. A disagreement over personnel issues ensued between the Thomases and the board, eventuating in Raphael's resignation in 1927. Lucy used her considerable influence and organizational skills to help start a new, independent "historically Baptist" agency, the Association of Baptists for Evangelism in the Orient. Their plan was to continue an evangelism-based ministry in the Philippines. Under heavy lobbying from convention loyalists, who several times tried to induce her to return to mainstream mission work, Lucy defended her separation as a necessary response to the rigid control of the mission board:

After more than forty years' association with the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society and the women's board, it was not easy for the writer to separate from them. . . . Our missionaries are a noble company, with few exceptions. Authority vested in a small group in a small mission with bureaucratic control at home and wrong dispositions account for the acute situation in the Philippines. Add to this undue emphasis on the minor work of education and neglect of Bible-trained evangelists and pastors and you have a mission that has lost its way.

In 1927 Lucy Peabody actually walked out of the Northern Baptist Convention meetings at Chicago and resigned from all of her Convention responsibilities.

Seven schools in India, China, and Japan benefitted from Helen and Lucy's advice on fundraising.
Even in the new doctrinally orthodox mission organization, Lucy could not avoid difficulties. Following the lead of the Thomases (who became the senior missionaries of the new association), Lucy contended with dispensationalists on the board and in the Philippines. Her postmillennial position was ultimately marginalized by a doctrinal statement that was "premillennial, Baptist, fundamental, faith mission." Yet another troublesome issue was the "matriarchal" leadership of Mrs. Peabody; a significant number of supportive pastors and some of the missionaries were opposed to female leadership. After seven years as founder and president of the Association of Baptists for Evangelism in the Orient, Lucy relinquished her position. In her letter of resignation she wrote:

My major reasons for resigning are the propriety and wisdom of electing a man to fill this important office since it deals with churches and pastors, as well as with questions which properly belong to masculine leadership in the church.

After 1934 Lucy reduced her involvement in mission work to writing, editing, and support services on behalf of missionary personnel.

In the half century of their joint involvement in Christian mission, Helen and Lucy persisted in creating a firm theological basis for a globally emerging womanhood. Both argued that in the New Testament women found a new sense of value: "Jesus Christ is the great Emancipator of women," wrote Helen. Further, He alone among the founders of the great religions of the world looked upon men and women with level eyes seeing not their differences, but their oneness, their humanity... In the mind of the Founder of Christianity there is no area of religious privilege fenced off for the exclusive use of men.

Lucy went on to list areas of achievement in the church which women could naturally pursue. These included caretakers of children, teachers, doctors, nurses and organizational directors. In a broader context, Lucy also believed that women are responsible for conditions in their communities, the religious life of churches, and for public decency and morality, as illustrated in amusements, the press, and literature.

Helen and Lucy agreed that "so democratic a body as the Baptists should be among the first to further and to recognize the emancipation of women." Helen was in fact much less tolerant of paternalism than Lucy. She was wary of denominational proposals to merge women's mission agencies with the larger male-dominated boards because, she reasoned, women would soon become fundraisers for men. Helen seriously questioned whether men—particularly Baptist men—were prepared to work with women unless the women were subordinate to the men. She argued that the "caste of sex" could be broken by a laymen's missionary movement parallel to women's work.

In their twilight years, Lucy Peabody and Helen Montgomery continued to write "from under the orange blossoms," as Lucy put it, on their cherished concerns. Helen lent her name to several fundraising projects in mission and in the mid-1920s Lucy became a major advocate and board member with her close friend, Marguerite T. Doane (1868-1954), of the Houses of Fellowship, later to become the Overseas Ministries Study Center.

Both women also believed that the sphere of Christian womanhood was larger than the church, for, as Helen wrote, "some women should be selected in each circle whose duty it will be to keep watch on the course of state and national legislation, to circulate petitions." Close to the progressive Republican political tradition, Lucy and Helen opposed military conflict, gambling, child labor abuse, and exploitation of women. Both women idealized international disarmament in the "treaty of Bethlehem," by which they meant that the angelic declaration at Christ's birth should have an impact on foreign policy.

Lucy and Helen found, however, that the 1930s were a different era both for women and social activism, from the pre-War years of triumph. Helen, still vigorous, with dark hair at seventy-three, died October 18, 1934. Lucy survived her to age eighty-eight; she died on February 26, 1949.

The enduring legacy of Helen Barrett Montgomery and Lucy Waterbury Peabody lies not in the positions they each held in the mission enterprise, or their roles in the tumultuous battles of the 1920s, nor even in the many dollars each raised. Rather, their legacy was a burden for the international plight of women and the power of concerted action by women in being faithful to the Great Commission.

Notes

2. The story of perhaps the first such organization among the Baptists is Albert L. Vail, Mary Webb and the Mother Society (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1914).
4. In her autobiography, Helen reminisced, "To this child, God always looked like her father": Helen Barrett Montgomery, Helen Barrett Montgomery: From Campus to World Citizenship (New York: Revell, 1940), p. 22. Hereafter cited as HBM.
7. Montgomery, HBM, p. 87.
9. Montgomery was chairman of the Rochester Theological Seminary Board 1928–1930 and spearheaded the reunification of the two schools.
which enjoyed a common parent in Hamilton Literary and Theological Institution. The merged seminaries were called Colgate Rochester Divinity School, for which a new campus was constructed in 1929-30 on Mt. Hope in Rochester.


12. City School Number 50, located at 301 Seneca Avenue and known as Helen Barrett Montgomery Elementary School, was opened in 1956.


14. The ABDU, later known as the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, did not appoint women and yet expected male missionaries to find a suitable spouse. Lucy, therefore, was technically not a missionary!

15. One of their children, a daughter, died on the return journey. Lucy briefly taught school in Rochester in 1886-87.

16. Lucy’s anonymous biography was entitled Henry W. Peabody: Merchant (West Medford, Mass.: M. H. Leavis, 1909).


25. Yearbook of the Northern Baptist Convention, 1921, p. 47.

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Montgomery, Helen B. From Jerusalem To Jerusalem. Cambridge, Mass.: Central Committee, 1929.


Montgomery, Helen B. Helen Barrett Montgomery: From Campus to World Citizenship. New York: Revell, 1940.


30. Ibid., p. 761.


32. Quoted in Ibid., p. 36.


35. Quoted in Beaver, American Protestant Women . . . , p. 183.

36. Lucy W. Peabody, “Under the Orange Blossoms,” Watchman-Examiner, April 26, p. 1934. Lucy whimsically referred to the plan to merge the women’s societies with the male-dominant societies as “the New Deal.” She was no Rooseveltian!

37. This friendship had started in Baptist women’s missionary work in the Northern Convention. In 1927 Doane joined Peabody as a major supporter of the Association of Baptists for Evangelism in the Orient. See Robert T. Coote, Six Decades of Renewal for Mission: A History of the Overseas Ministries Study Center formerly known as the “Houses of Fellowship,” established by the family of William Howard Doane (Ventnor, N.J.: Overseas Ministries Study Center, 1982), pp. 11–16.


Works about Montgomery and Peabody


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