

LITTLE MATTERS AND A GREAT MISSION:
THE LIFE AND DIARY OF HARRIETTE
SMITH KIDDER

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WHEN I first approached the diary of Harriette Smith Kidder I knew the private writing only of published writers. I had warmed up to Emerson through the humanity of his journals; I knew Dorothy Wordsworth's artistic meditations and Keats' introspective letters. I was unprepared by my formal training in English Literature for the daily voice of an "ordinary" woman maintaining a religious household and raising five children in New Jersey. But as I gradually learned how to listen to Harriette Kidder, she revealed to me, through her carefully controlled, tirelessly "good" voice, a powerful history of her struggles, demands, and silences.

She wrote in her diary with irregular frequency (sometimes bi-weekly, sometimes only yearly) for 58 years—from 1844, two years after her marriage to Daniel P. Kidder, a Methodist minister, until 1902, six years before her death at 92. During this time, she followed her husband's career, living in Paterson, Trenton and Newark, New Jersey, Evanston, Illinois, from 1857 to 1871, and finally in Madison, New Jersey, where both she and her husband were buried. Harriette's diary, fragile and even disintegrating after so much use, as well as several of her husband's journals, have come to rest in the Special Collections of the Rutgers University Library.

Harriette was unknown, except among her community of friends and family. And yet, her attempts to live up to nineteenth-century prescriptions—to be the humble and righteous wife and mother—are very familiar. Harriette lived and daily recorded her own "religion of domesticity";¹ without knowing it, she was the ad-

¹ Jane Tompkins summarizes the era with this phrase. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she says, "is the *summa theologica* of nineteenth-century America's religion of domesticity, a brilliant redaction of the culture's favorite story about itself—the story of salvation through motherly love." "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History," *Glyph* 8 (1981):81.



HARRIETTE SMITH KIDDER (Special Collections and Archives, Alexander Library)

dressee of Catherine Beecher's "Address to Christian Women of America":

The work to be done is the most difficult of all, requiring not only intellectual power but a moral training nowhere else so attainable as in the humble, laborious, daily duties of the family state.

Woman's great mission is to train immature, weak, and ignorant creatures, to obey the laws of God; the physical, the intellectual, the social, and the moral—first in the family, then in the school, then in the neighborhood, then in the nation, then in the world—that great family of God whom the Master came to teach and to save.²

Harriette began her labors early and worked hard throughout her life. In 1849 she reminisced about her childhood on the family farm in Winchester, Connecticut:

² From Catherine Beecher's *Woman Suffrage and Woman's Profession* (Hartford, Connecticut, 1871).

We were a happy family then. A father, mother, brother, & four sisters comprised our number. Our parents labored hard to provide our comforts and we were early trained in habits of industry. Every day we had *something to do*. "Work first and play afterwards" was the principle our good mother taught us. I think I learned to spin before I was eight years old and it was a part of my daily business at ten years of age, to milk two cows.³

She was a child of the "Second Great Awakening"⁴—an 1830's widespread revival of Methodist evangelism. Brought up on an ethic of work and prayer, she attended, taught in, and became principal of small Methodist women's schools in Baltimore, New York, and Ohio, respectively; she participated in and organized Bible classes, prayer meetings, and a religious maternal association; she founded an orphan asylum in Newark; she raised three children of her own and two from her husband's former marriage; her "extended family" consisted of dozens of regular and occasional visitors—relations (her mother had ten children), Methodist church members and missionaries from all over the country—who would stay for weeks at a time; she quilted, sewed, canned fruit, kept a large vegetable and fruit garden. "I kept about and was the main dependence all the week, though I suffered much & am still suffering from such excessive exertions," she wrote with a voice rushed and anxious in July 1849, when all her family, including her servant and houseguests, were sick with cholera.

Occasionally, Harriette complained in her diary; occasionally she exclaimed about something; yet in most of the 500 pages, she attempted to force balance and composure into even her private thoughts. Rushed as she often was, she rarely wrote an incomplete sentence and, invariably, she followed an outburst of emotion with prayer. "My mind is much disturbed by family cares," she wrote on April 1st, 1849;

. . . I think I have never been so much tempted to impatience and complaining in my whole life as I have during the past six months. But I trust I shall not be tempted beyond what I may have the grace to withstand. . . . I know my Heavenly Father is both able and

³ Unless otherwise cited, all quotations are taken from the Kidder papers in the Special Collections of Rutgers University.

⁴ Nancy F. Cott discusses the religious revival in *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), 132.

willing to keep me. May I be enabled to cast all my care upon Him!

Often, she did not specify what her particular worries were; rather, she brought them under control in an educated prose style, and contextualized them with her overriding faith in God.

Religion served Harriette in a number of ways. It gave her a means to order her life, and it gave her a mastery over worldly matters:

My attention has been occupied wth divers *little* matters. O how troublesome these *little matters* are! . . . I have felt the want of more “means of grace” and last week we commenced our female prayer meeting again at our house. We had an excellent meeting and I felt much profited by it.

—July 18, 1849

Little, domestic, “female” duties were an unwanted diversion from the greater pursuance of a “means of grace”; and she was able to find the relief she needed in the female prayer group, a society of women who were not simply “little women.” In *The Bonds of Womanhood*, Nancy Cott characterizes the ways in which religion freed the nineteenth-century woman, as it allowed her a sense that she was serving vital and greater causes:

Religious identity . . . allowed women to assert themselves, both in private and in public ways. It enabled them to rely on an authority beyond the world of men. . . . In contrast to the self-abnegation required of women in their domestic vocation, religious commitment required attention to one’s own thoughts, actions, and prospects. . . . No other avenue of self-expression besides religion at once offered women social approbation, the encouragement of male leaders (ministers), and, most important, the community of their peers.⁵

The nineteenth-century Christian woman did not feel she was doing menial service for one more “father”; rather, she had found a realm which welcomed her voice and her activity: “first in the family, then in the school, . . . then in the world,” she had power.

Motherhood for Harriette was problematic, for it was a grave responsibility. Parenting was definitely *her* responsibility. As her husband noted shortly after the birth of their first child, “Mrs. Kidder accompanied me on this visit to New York, carrying her

⁵ Cott, 140-141.

babe.”⁶ (The birth of “her babe” had to wait four days before it was recorded in Mr. Kidder’s diary: entries about heated church meetings on dates between intervened.) In this light it is interesting to compare Harriette’s diary with her husband’s. He wrote of “important” matters—his sermons and ministerial duties. In his “order of the day,” he allotted five hours to “domestic and private duties,” but these included his “hour of rising,” marketing, gardening, and meals. Indeed, he rose continuously in Methodist prominence: he translated several Portuguese works of theology; he served as a delegate to national Methodist conferences; he was appointed Professor of Theology at Drew Theological Seminary. His children, though, had to fit themselves into the corners of his highly scheduled day.

Left to his wife, then, was the physical and moral upbringing of their children:

I think I feel more deeply than heretofore, my responsibility as a parent—the importance of training up my children for the Lord—of prayer in their behalf . . . I ask not for them the riches or the honors of the world—I ask not ease or exemption from trials. I desire that they may be *laborers* in the vineyard of the Lord. . . . O may I be aided with wisdom from above, in training these young immortals committed to my hands!

—March 5, 1848

Much as she enjoyed her children as little human beings—she proudly recorded the completion of Katie’s quilt (two weeks before her fifth birthday), and her first day of school; she noted Danny’s first tooth; she wrote that “we all think little Eva a model baby—she is so good natured and has such pretty ways”—nonetheless, her children were “immortals committed to [her] hands.” Repeatedly, she registered her concern over whether they would “give their hearts to God” and join the church of their own volition. And she felt that their salvation was very much her responsibility, as it was her mother’s before her: “Her teachings are still fresh to memory. She moulded the mind which yet bears her impress. How much I owe to that Christian mother!” (Jan. 27, 1856).

One widespread response to the “elevation” of the mother’s role, was the formation of maternal associations. Throughout the country,

⁶ Daniel P. Kidder, diary entry March 14, 1843, Special Collections, Rutgers University Library.

like-minded women met regularly to help each other in the difficult task of moral child-rearing. When the Kidders moved to Evanston, Illinois, Harriette formed such a Mothers' Association there. She seemed to be aware of both the Cult of True Womanhood, a movement which pressured women to be guardians of "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity,"⁷ and the feminist reactions against this cult; when she spoke about her own place, she purposely divorced herself from both positions. Harriette copied into her diary her last speech to the Mothers' Association, in 1871:

Whatever theories are agitated at the present day about the *sphere* of women, we as mothers find in our hearts an instinctive response to the claims which our children make upon us. . . . And whatever other duties may devolve upon us *here* is certainly our mission, and a weight of obligation for which we need the greatest wisdom & the constant help of God. How appropriate then, that we seek to aid each other by mutual conference & cooperation and by united prayer.

Elevating herself above the notion of a worldly "sphere" for women, and saying that her responses were "instinctive" and not socially determined, Kidder attempted to avoid confrontation with both feminism and the Cult of True Womanhood: hers was not, she asserted, a submission to men; it was a mission for God. Thus, too, she rationalized for herself the pleasure of "mutual conference & cooperation"—the importance of women's society and women's culture.

Beyond her immediate family, Harriette Kidder was at the same time "mother," "sister," and religious caretaker to a wide circle of friends and relations; and thus she was very much a part of the world of nineteenth-century American women, especially women within close religious communities,⁸ who spoke of each other as sisters and opened their homes to each other for long visits. A great majority of her diary entries include visiting of some sort; she was away from home as often as she had visitors at home. (Thanks to her husband's profession, there was money for the benevolence, the travel, and a servant to care for the children.) Entries for

⁷ See Barbara Welter on the Cult of True Womanhood, *Dimity Convictions* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 21.

⁸ I refer to discussions of Nancy Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, especially pp. 179-185; and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual," *Signs* 1 (1975).

September 20th through 25th, 1847, for example, represent her whirlwind of female social activity: two women friends paid a visit; she “spent nearly the whole day making calls—when I returned, found Miss Cooke here”; three others dined with the family; she went to New York with three women friends to visit orphan asylums. With great regularity, Harriette recorded such philanthropic excursions.

Important as her services were, we cannot overlook the element of personal adventure and nobility inherent in this female philanthropy. Before their marriage, Daniel Kidder traveled through Brazil, preaching Methodism to natives. The “noble mission” is the same: helping to establish a Sunday School in 1851 in a destitute part of New York, Harriette commented that

29 children assembled in the room. The greater part of them had never been to S. School before and about half the number could not read at all. Many of them were ragged and dirty. As far as we could ascertain, none of the parents of these children attended any place of worship. It seemed almost like heathen ground there. I hope the mission work may be prospered.

—Jan. 5, 1851

Here, among these children, and among the orphans whom she visited and for whom she founded an asylum, she found her “heathen ground”; her efforts could effect real change. Her diary entries about founding the orphan asylum, excited by controversy and dissent within the organizing committee, articulate the sense that *she* was validated by these beneficiary acts:

I again acted as Secretary—made several *speeches* also; notwithstanding the presence of so many gentlemen [clergymen of various denominations and lawyers] did, what I never expected to do, defend a position in opposition to a long speech of a lawyer, in a public assembly!

—Jan. 14, 1848

Almost nine months pregnant with her second child, she wrote that she had been almost constantly occupied with business for the orphan asylum. Clearly, her public activity served her in a very personal way. She was active; she was powerful; she could speak in public: and all was sanctioned, where it rarely would otherwise have been, because she acted on behalf of religious and beneficent causes.

Five years later, Harriette again did what she “never expected

to do”: she actively voiced her opposition to an existing Church policy, whereby only men were hired to teach Bible classes. In 1852, she had traveled to Europe with her husband, who was sent by the Church to study methods of religious education, and upon visiting Wesleyan classes taught by women in London, she became angered by the archaic restriction of women from any active instructional role within her own Church. On her return, she wrote an article for her Methodist newspaper declaiming the appointments “of so many men unqualified for the position” and arguing that

It is very natural to suppose that an intelligent and devoted female understands better than a male the peculiarities of her own sex, their trials, temptations & necessities. . . . Why then should not females fill this office and discharge this duty with us as well as in England? . . . In many instances in our rapidly increasing churches, a man of comparatively little religious experience & little spirituality is appointed leader for want of a more suitable *man*.

Radicalized and given confidence by her church charities, she seemed to discover in herself a voice of protest against the limitations set upon women’s “sphere.” And in May 1854, she was appointed to teach a female Bible class at her Church.

Interestingly, her public voice of confidence took on a note of private panic when the appointment was made: “On receiving the information,” she wrote in her diary on May 3rd, 1854, “my heart sank within me as if oppressed by a burden too great to be borne. . . . The good of the church requires females to be employed in this capacity, but of *myself* I feel wholly inadequate to the work.” Active preparation bolstering her confidence, two weeks later she wrote “I feel much encouraged to try to do the work committed to my hands.” In her diary, Harriette Kidder often reached a level of honesty and spontaneity which cut through even her own religious rhetoric.

Of course, here, too, she contended with an audience. Whom she expected or feared might read her private thoughts on all these matters was absolutely crucial in determining what Harriette wrote. She wrote childhood reminiscences and family histories (as well as a full history of her gallstone attacks) with a public voice and stated audience: she wanted her grandchildren to have these records. But there was much, too, that she must have wanted nobody to read. She wrote nothing about her feelings toward her husband, except

for two anniversary entries in which she wrote how good and kind he was, and how grateful she was to God for this blessing. Often, however, she entered the cursory note, "Mr. Kidder spent the Sabbath away from home," silencing herself with regard to any loneliness or resentment, which very likely resulted when he left her at home with her "little matters" on these special days. She did not write her emotions, but she frequently wrote these notes as if to make them hold, as markers, whatever she could not write.

Throughout, she fought against negativity. She rarely elaborated on her doubts or anxieties; instead, she demanded that they lead her to an even stronger faith, by subsuming all mention of them within ardent prayer. Whether she expected her children, her husband, or ultimately God to "see" her diary, she seemed to insist that this permanent record of herself should never be tainted with anger or ugliness, which she might have reason to regret. Now, to read the story of Harriette Kidder's life is to patch together fragments of days, memories and impressions, allowing her to guide us into her perceived "frame" and then trying to push beyond it. There is a story here, to a large degree captured still in silence, of a woman—a Christian mother of five in New Jersey—who wrote through her role to reveal much more.