

Introduction

Mary Sumner: Her Life and Work, Perspectives, Sources, Interpretations

‘What a wonderful life it has been!’ exclaimed the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Randall Davidson in his foreword to *Mary Sumner: Her Life and Work*. Published in 1921 as a combined edition with *A Short History of The Mothers’ Union* shortly after Mary Sumner’s death, the book served as a eulogy and memorial to the woman who, for over forty years, had personified the organisation that she founded. The Archbishop’s congratulatory tone was understandable given that the Mothers’ Union had at that point attracted a transnational membership of nearly four hundred thousand. The Mothers’ Union commemorates its origin as 1876, the year in which Mary Sumner issued membership cards to attendees at her parish mothers’ meeting. However, it was her extemporised speech at the 1885 Portsmouth Church Congress that was the catalyst for the adoption of the Mothers’ Union as an official organisation by the Diocese of Winchester.¹ The biblical motto ‘train up a child in the way he should go’ encapsulated Mary Sumner’s intention that the Mothers’ Union should promote the role of mothers in the religious education of their children. By leading their families in ‘purity and holiness of life’, mothers would contribute to the improvement of national morality and hence redress social ills.²

The Mothers’ Union followed the Girls’ Friendly Society (GFS), established in 1875, as the second religious organisation to be established for women run by women to be sanctioned by the Church

1. Mary Porter, Mary Woodward, and Horatia Erskine, *Mary Sumner: Her Life and Work and a Short History of the Mothers’ Union* (Winchester: Warren and Sons, 1921), 21-24.
2. Mary Sumner, *Home Life* (Winchester: Warren and Sons, 1895), 10. MU aims were expressed as ‘Objects’. Object 2: ‘To awaken in mothers a sense of their great responsibility as mothers in the training of their boys and girls (the future fathers and mothers of England)’

of England.¹ Drawing on traditions of class patronage and against a context of a proliferation of women's engagement in philanthropy, the Mothers' Union grew rapidly in numbers and geographical reach over the following decades. By 1892 membership had reached 60,000. In 1896 the Mothers' Union became centrally organised. Mary Sumner served as its Central President until 1909 and continued in office as Winchester Diocesan President until 1915.² She died in 1921, having lived to see the Mothers' Union become the dominant organisation for women in the Church. Her achievement merited an obituary in *The Times*, which reported that her funeral in Winchester Cathedral attracted 4,000 mourners.³ The Mothers' Union today claims four million members drawn from eighty-three countries in the worldwide Anglican Communion. Mary Sumner's grave, which attracts visits from Mothers' Union members who find spiritual inspiration in her story, is behind the eastern end of the cathedral. She and her husband George, who served the diocese as Archdeacon and later Bishop of Guildford, are also commemorated by plaques on the cathedral buttresses and in Old Alresford Church.

Mary Sumner was the author of three full length books and a short volume, *To Mothers of the Higher Classes*, published in 1888. *Home Life* (1895) was a collection of material reprinted from journal articles concerned with promoting the Mothers' Union.⁴ *Our Holiday in the East* (1881) and *George Henry Sumner, D.D., Bishop of Guildford* (1910) were respectively a travel diary and a memoir.⁵ *Our Holiday* presents an account of an extended family tour of the Holy Land. The memoir, written when Mary was recently widowed, describes George's career as a clergyman and, although very much a eulogy, it gives attention to married life and the MU, and like other perspectival sources signals the possession of attributes considered by the author to be desirable.

1. Mary Heath-Stubbs, *Friendship's Highway; Being the History of the Girls' Friendly Society* (London: Girls' Friendly Society, 1926); Agnes Louisa Money, *History of the Girls' Friendly Society* (London: Wells Gardner, Darton, 1902). The GFS intended to protect the chastity of girls and young working women by educating them in Christian values and behaviour.
2. Porter, Woodward, and Erskine, *Mary Sumner*.
3. *The Times*, 'Obituary of Mary Sumner', *The Times*, August 12th, 1921.
4. Sumner, *Home Life*.
5. Mary Elizabeth Sumner, *Our Holiday in the East* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1881); Mary Sumner, *Memoir of George Henry Sumner, D.D., Bishop of Guildford: Published for His Friends by Special Request* (Winchester: Warren and Son, 1910).

Mary Sumner was also the author of pamphlets, speeches and articles intended for publication in *The Mothers' Union Journal* and *Mothers in Council*. The absence of personal papers, which were destroyed on her death in 1921, leaves a gap in her archive. Despite some material relating to Mary Sumner in family memoirs, this means that remaining sources, including correspondence, largely represent documentation collected in the construction of official archives or materials produced with the intention of promoting the Mothers' Union. *Mary Sumner: Her Life and Work and a Short History of the Mothers' Union* (1921) and *Fifty Years* (1926) all fit into this category and valorise Mary Sumner as the 'foundress' of the society.¹ Early histories of the GFS such as *The Girls' Friendly Society*, first published in 1902, and *Friendship's Highway* (1926), which pertain to Mary Sumner in her network of philanthropic Anglican activists, were produced with a similar promotional agenda.² These perspectival sources illuminate the key messages that Mary Sumner and Mothers' Union officials wished to present in their preferred version of archive. Through drawing upon material produced by, or relating to, members of Mary Sumner's networks beyond official Mothers' Union sources, this book seeks to give contextual location to this material and to align the sources as representative (or not) of the social and religious category to which Mary Sumner belonged.³

A sympathetic narrative of Mary Sumner and her husband was published in 1965 by Joyce Coombs, a former London Diocesan President of the MU. *George and Mary Sumner: Their Life and Times* locates the careers, religious views and family life of George's relatives, his uncle, John Bird Sumner, Archbishop of Canterbury, and father, Charles Sumner, the Bishop of Winchester, in a historical context. Coombs includes Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, the distant kinsman of the Sumner family, and identifies the links of patronage between them. Coombs does not attribute her sources, some of which are anecdotes from anonymous eyewitnesses.⁴

1. Porter, Woodward, and Erskine, *Mary Sumner*; Lady Horatia Erskine, 'A History of the Mothers' Union' in *Mothers' Union* (Lambeth Palace Library, 1919); *Fifty Years* (Westminster: The Mothers' Union, 1926).
2. Money, *History of the Girls' Friendly Society*; Heath-Stubbs, *Friendship's Highway*.
3. June Purvis, 'Using Primary Sources When Researching Women's History from a Feminist Perspective', *Women's History Review* 1, no. 2 (1992): 276. See also Maria Tamboukou, *Sewing, Fighting and Writing: Radical Practices in Work, Politics and Culture* (Lanham: Rowman Littlefield International, 2015).
4. Joyce Coombs, *George and Mary Sumner: Their Life and Times* (Westminster: Sumner Press, 1965), 88. Coombs notes the contribution of Mrs Carlyon Evans, the daughter of Mary Sumner's daughter Louisa Gore Browne.

Mary Sumner's significance has been marked by Brian Heeney and Sean Gill in their work on *Women and the Church of England from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* and *The Women's Movement in the Church of England 1850-1930* respectively, and her participation in the Girls Friendly Society has been noted by Brian Harrison.¹ The most substantial scholarly reference to Mary Sumner to date is in Cordelia Moyse's *A History of the Mothers' Union: Women, Anglicanism and Globalisation 1876-2008* which is highly authoritative in its reference to official archival sources. However, in this officially authorised work, Moyse's primary interest is in the development of the corporate Mothers' Union and her focus is on the spiritual empowerment of MU members worldwide within the Anglican Communion.²

The significance of religion as a mediating factor in the negotiation of constraint and agency has formed a rich strand in scholarship concerned with understanding women's lives in the period concurrent with Mary Sumner's life trajectory and activism.³ Religious institutions are a socio-cultural construct, related to sites of power and informing assumptions of value and contingent understandings of, and hierarchies of, knowledge. In this book I explore how religion mediates authority, identity and opportunity and how religion relates to education, gender, class, race and nation. I put Mary Sumner at the centre and offer a new perspective on her life and work by drawing on the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, who understands social reality as a relational interplay between agents [persons] and social structures [family, institutions] to analyse the cultural forces, notably, religion and education, nuanced by class and gender that framed and informed Mary Sumner's identity, values, horizons of possibility and claims to authority. The book deploys Bourdieu's analytical thinking tools of habitus, capital and field to situate Mary Sumner in her informal and formal networks and explore her activism in relation to the values and practices of dominant social, gender and religious categories. Bourdieu's theory of reproduction, which sees dominant groups seeking to maintain their position through

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1. Brian Harrison, 'For Church Queen and Family; the Girls' Friendly Society 1874-1920', *Past and Present* 61 (1973).
 2. Cordelia Moyse, *A History of the Mothers' Union: Women Anglicanism and Globalisation, 1876-2008* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009), 28, 29, 32.
 3. See, for example, Gail Malmgreen, *Religion in the Lives of English Women, 1760-1930* (London: Croom Helm, 1986); Sue Morgan, *Women, Religion, and Feminism in Britain, 1750-1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Sue Morgan and Jacqueline de Vries, *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2010).

the assertion of their preferred values as legitimate, is deployed to locate Mary Sumner as an agent of, or recipient of, domination and position her in relation to the reproduction or negotiation of power.

Mary Sumner's life trajectory, her activism through the Anglican Girls' Friendly Society and the discourse of motherhood she promoted through the Mothers' Union were framed against a background of evangelical religious revival, stimulated by evangelical enthusiasm across denominations. In the field of religion there was a sustained contest over matters of doctrinal authority as the privileged position of the Established Anglican Church was pressurised by the demands of other Christian denominations for more equitable treatment.¹ The 'ownership of the goods of salvation' was also contested by factions within Anglicanism which placed different emphases on the interpretation of doctrine and forms of worship.² Mary Sumner's activism occurred against this contested context in which a defensive Anglican Church sought to maintain its status and authority.

The Established Church was patriarchal in excluding women from positions of power and in asserting biblical authority to legitimise their subordinate position.³ Religion was significant in informing gendered female identities and was drawn on to legitimise activism in philanthropy.⁴ The civil, legal and financial status accorded to women (despite some amendments) throughout much of Mary Sumner's lifetime also involved exclusion, constraint and prohibition. Yet as a woman from a dominant class, personally connected to high-status clergy and socially advantaged women, who exercised patronage over others and agency towards self-realisation, she cannot be categorised exclusively as an oppressed victim of her biological sex.⁵

1. Owen Chadwick, *The Victorian Church Part I 1827-1859* (A&C Black, 1966); *The Victorian Church Part 2 1860-1901*, 2nd ed. (London: A&C Black, 1972).
2. Terry Rey, 'Marketing the Goods of Salvation: Bourdieu on Religion', *Religion* 34, no. 4 (2004).
3. Sean Gill, *Women and the Church of England: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1994), 11-38, 76-89.
4. Frank Prochaska, *The Angel out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2002); Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); Susan Mumm, 'Women and Philanthropic Cultures' in *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940*, ed. Sue Morgan and Jacqueline de Vries (London: Routledge, 2010).
5. Susan Morgan, ed. *The Feminist History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2006), 3. I interpret Mary Sumner's social status as upper-middle class and use upper and/or middle class to refer to the diverse positions amongst the

Mary Sumner's activism also played out against, and engaged with, the growth of the British Empire. Religious preference was a significant element in legitimising imperial rule, codifying hierarchies of race and mediating the relationship between metropole and periphery. This book is distinctive in exploring Mary Sumner's experience as a traveller in the Middle East in relation to informing her response to race and religion, and contextualising her activism with regard to empire and transnationally. I use the concept of mission to position Mary Sumner in relation to varieties of religiously inspired activism 'at home' and overseas. Mission concerns missionaries and missionary societies seeking converts overseas which invites consideration of identities (racial and gendered), relations and transactions of meaning and power between 'home' and overseas, in diverse spaces and contact zones.¹ The term mission, evocative of valorous spiritual endeavour, was drawn on to sanctify by association women's performance of gendered roles within the home. It also applied to philanthropic activity beyond the home legitimised by religious authority, much of which was educational in that it sought to modify behaviour.² The expression 'women's mission' was used in both these senses by Mary Sumner, her network associates, and other contemporaries, to refer to the performance of home duties and philanthropic and to religious outreach 'at home'.³ The notion of a

social milieu to which she claimed allegiance. See David Cannadine, *Class in Britain* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1998). Cannadine discusses the nuances of class and the notion of respectability.

1. Catherine Hall, *Cultures of Empire: A Reader: Colonisers in Britain and the Empire in Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1-45, notes the transactional relationship in terms of identity between metropole and periphery; Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 6-7. 'Contact zone' and 'transculturation' describe meaning drawn from encounters across space and culture. I use the term overseas to refer to this diversity of locations.
2. Alison Twells, *The Civilising Mission and the English Middle Class, 1792-1850: The 'Heathen' at Home and Overseas* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 5. uses the terms 'missionary philanthropy' and 'civilising mission'; Jenny Daggars, 'The Victorian Female Civilising Mission and Women's Aspirations Towards Priesthood in the Church of England', *Women's History Review* 10, no. 4 (2001): 625.
3. In *Friendship's Highway; Being the History of the Girls' Friendly Society* (London: Girls' Friendly Society, 1926), 82, Mary Heath-Stubbs quotes Mary

‘civilising mission’ encapsulates the assumption of superior values and standards of behaviour and an assumed authority to impose them on groups categorised as deficient.¹ This book considers Mary Sumner’s interplay with mission through these three interconnected strands, domestic, philanthropic and engagement with distant spaces.

The inception and growth of the Mothers’ Union occurred at a time when educational provision expanded and reformed in ways that were contested. It was also a period in which the understanding of childhood was subject to change. Mary Sumner’s views on the nature of childhood and pedagogy have received little attention. Her activism, via the MU, relates to key themes in education, the contest for power in the educational field between the Established Anglican Church, other denominations and the state in mass elementary education.² Her advocacy for the home as a site of religious education and for the mother as a religious educator also occurred in the context of expansion in the provision of schooling for middle and upper-class girls and the articulation of aspirations for higher education amongst women. This involved the negotiation of gendered identities and roles and the development of contingent curricula deemed to be appropriate. The expansion of professional and voluntary roles for women within the sphere of education, whether as mistresses in middle-class schools, elementary teachers or as philanthropic ‘workers’ and members of school boards, was related to women’s increasing pedagogic

Townsend, the GFS founder, discussing the ‘missionary element which is the secret of our society’. Angela Georgina Burdett-Coutts, *Woman’s Mission: A Series of Congress Papers on the Philanthropic Work of Women by Eminent Writers*, facsimile reprint, Portrayer Publishers 2002 ed. (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Company, 1893). Mary Sumner’s ‘Responsibilities of Mothers’ was one of the papers; Mary Sumner, *To Mothers of the Higher Classes* (Winchester: Warren and Sons, 1888), 5. She asserts the ‘exalted mission’ of child rearing ‘the sphere which God has appointed for her in the home’.

1. Gill, *Women and the Church of England*, 131-145; Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women: 1850-1920* (London: Virago, 1985), 36. ‘Underpinning all women’s work was a sense of religious commitment’.
2. James Murphy, *Church, State and Schools in Britain 1800-1970* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971); W.B. Stephens, *Education in Britain, 1750-1914* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 6; Terence Copley, *Spiritual Development in the State School: A Perspective on Worship and Spirituality in the Education System of England and Wales* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 17; John Hurt, *Education in Evolution Church, State, Society and Popular Education 1800-1870* (London: Rupert Hart- Davis, 1971), 20; Murphy, *Church, State and Schools*.

authority and thus bound up in the negotiation of the purpose and practice of women's education. Religion mediated women's educational experience in several ways. It informed assumptions about women's spiritual, emotional and sexual nature, as well as their intellectual capacity, and it legitimised domesticated roles and the notions of self-restraint and service. In so doing it framed responses to the purpose and practice of education for women.¹ These issues can be located against a context of increasing literacy and mass print communication, in which media were used to assert contested religious and secular orthodoxies.² Mary Sumner qualifies as a popular educator according to a definition that encompasses informal means such as philanthropy and the dissemination of materials intended to change behaviour amongst the populace.³ In this book I explore and locate her educational ideas in context and analyses the strategies she deployed in the dissemination of her educational message.

Mary Sumner's identity was informed and her activism was negotiated in relation to other agents and to social structures invested with power that included the family, the Church and philanthropic organisations. She can be linked with a number of significant individuals through kinship, social milieu or affiliation to interest groups. Her life trajectory intersects with a number of 'churchwomen' of distinction,

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1. Dale Spender, *The Education Papers: Women's Quest for Equality in Britain 1850-1912* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 10-31; Sara Delamont, 'The Domestic Ideology and Women's Education', in *The Nineteenth-Century Woman: Her Cultural and Physical World*, ed. Sara Delamont and Lorna Duffin (London: Croom Helm, 1978); Joan Burstyn, *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), 99-118; Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing up in Late Victorian and Edwardian London* (London: Routledge, 1981); Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 18-19, 78-79; Gill, *Women and the Church of England*, 112-130.
 2. Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998); Sarah C. Williams, "'Is There a Bible in the House?': Gender Religion and Family Culture", in *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940*, ed. Sue Morgan and Jacqueline de Vries (London: Routledge, 2011).
 3. Sjaak Braster, 'The People, the Poor, and the Oppressed: The Concept of Popular Education through Time', *Paedagogica Historica* 47, no. Nos. 1-2 (2011); Alejandro Tiana Ferrer, 'The Concept of Popular Education Revisited – or What Do We Talk About When We Speak of Popular Education', *ibid.*, no. 1-2; Harold Silver, 'Knowing and Not Knowing in the History of Education', *History of Education* 21, no. 1 (1992).

including novelist Charlotte Yonge, educationalist Charlotte Mason and imperialist Ellen Joyce, who exemplify the religiously inspired philanthropic or educational activism that was a characteristic feature of women's negotiation of agency at the time. A situation that affirms the relevance of Barbara Caine's advocacy for looking at individuals in the context of their familial and social networks in order to illuminate the intersecting boundaries of private lives and public action. The incidence of connected lives also suggests the utility of an approach that draws on prosopography to identify shared attitudes or attributes common to a given group.¹

Mary Sumner's Mothers' Union and The Girls Friendly Society, as networks of women with common goals seeking to influence public policy via lobbying and the distribution of information, exhibit characteristics that can be located within Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink's category of 'advocacy network'. Their claim that network actors contribute ideas and offer discourses which may serve to change perceptions of the category they represent, thereby mediating behaviour towards them in state and society, is of interest to an analysis of Mary Sumner that seeks to position her activism in relation to agency and change in relation to women's horizons of possibility.² Eckhardt Fuchs identifies 'exchange theory', which assumes that organisations establish voluntary relations for the transfer of desired resources, as in the case of Keck and Sikkink's category of advocacy network. He also notes the contrasting 'power dependency theory' which asserts that relations are based on competition for advantage and thus involve conflict and power.³ Both categories may be applied to advocacy which seeks to win adherence to one view in opposition to alternative perspectives, as is the case with Mary Sumner's Mothers' Union. For Fuchs, a key purpose of the study of networks is to illuminate the interaction between individuals and structures, both social and organisational, and the unofficial social interactions which consist of less well documented or quantifiable data,

1. Barbara Caine, 'Feminist Biography and Feminist History', *Women's History Review* 3, no. 2 (1992); Peter Cunningham, 'Innovators, Networks and Structures: Towards a Prosopography of Progressivism', *History of Education* 30, no. 5 (2001). Short biographical notes on women mentioned in the text, are included in Appendix 2.
2. Margaret Keck and Kathryn A. Sikkink, *Advocacy Networks in International Politics Activists Beyond Borders* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 2.
3. Eckhardt Fuchs, 'Networks and the History of Education', *Paedagogica Historica* 42, no. 2 (2007); Keck and Sikkink, *Advocacy Networks*, 8-10.

notions in accord with Caine's advocacy for seeing a life in context and pertinent to the examination of Mary Sumner's negotiation of agency, and claims to authority in relation to the Anglican Church and in a gendered and socially stratified social context.

Interpreting Mary Sumner's life requires a conceptual framework that accommodates the perspectival nature of the sources; positions her activism in the context of social structures, institutions and significant others; interrogates assumptions of value and belief; and engages with the negotiation of agency and considers on whose behalf it was enacted. I draw on the conceptual tools and theoretical stance of Pierre Bourdieu to address the challenges of understanding Mary Sumner's negotiation of constraint and agency, and her position in upholding and transacting power across domestic, local and global spaces in relation to the fields of religion, mission, and education with motherhood as a connecting theme. In the following chapter I outline my interpretation of Bourdieu's key concepts and relate his 'thinking tools' to the analysis of a temporally situated subject.

I then begin to 'think with Bourdieu' in order to examine Mary Sumner's life trajectory not as a linear narrative but in relation to the strands of religion, mission and education which form an organising framework for analysing aspects of her activism. These strands are seen as related, for doctrinal preference provides and informs a mandate for activism in support of religious goals via mission, and mission itself, in seeking converts to religious knowledge or religiously authorised conduct, is educational in intent and practice. Furthermore, religious preference defines what constitutes legitimate knowledge and mediates who has access to it. In Chapter 2, I focus on exploring Mary Sumner's experience of religion in family life and locating the Anglican faith that underpinned her MU activism against a context of evangelical revival and competition for allegiance amongst rival denominations. Chapter 3 also focuses on doctrinal preference but moves the focus outward to consider notions of good womanhood, the role of women in the Church, and Mary Sumner's strategies for establishing the Mothers' Union in the Anglican religious field. Chapter 4 explores Mary Sumner's formative experience of understandings of mission in relation to gendered roles and philanthropic traditions in family life. The chapter engages with Mary Sumner as a traveller and gives further context to her activism through the MU by documenting the views and practices of the GFS in relation to 'civilising mission' through philanthropy and engagement overseas. Chapter 5 takes the theme of 'Missionary Mothers' and explores how notions of mission and constructions of identity drawn

from transactions between the British imperial metropole and periphery informed MU practice and claims to authority. Mary Sumner is positioned as an advocate for empire, and the MU as an imperial organisation is related to Church power. Chapter 6 introduces the theme of education with a focus on Mary Sumner's personal experience of education and attitude to the education of women encountered in family life. The chapter also explores her understanding of childhood and views on child rearing. The following chapter considers Mary's strategies through the MU to promote education of the populace and positions her and her organisation in relation to state-sponsored mass elementary education, denominational education and higher education for girls. The book concludes by thinking with Bourdieu to reflection on Mary Sumner's life and activism in relation to power agency and change.

SAMPLE