

**“My Highest Motive in Writing”:
Evangelical Empowerment in the Autobiography
of Annie Leake Tuttle**

MARILYN FÄRDIG WHITELEY

On Wednesday evening, the twelfth of February, in 1857, a seventeen year-old girl named Annie Leake underwent a conversion experience at the Methodist church in Parrsboro, Nova Scotia. She saw a vision of Jesus and the devil, and she felt that “*Pardon* was written in golden letters on [her] heart.” Yet that evening and for the next few days she “could not talk much about it.”¹ At a service on Saturday evening she asked for and received the “second blessing” or “baptism of the Holy Spirit.” Years later in her autobiography she explained, “the outcome of it was, the ‘dumb was made to speak.’” Annie could testify: she had found her voice.

Annie Leake was not alone in finding her voice, in being empowered by her evangelical religion. In what has been termed “evangelical feminism,” many women spoke, often stepping beyond the limitation of accepted gender roles. They justified their actions by claiming a religious imperative: they testified, or preached, or undertook innovative forms of service in order to be true to the call of their God.

Some of women’s justification for their activity has come to light through the attempt to write women back into religious history. It is described in studies of Phoebe Palmer’s work in the middle of the nineteenth century,² of evangelical women in the United States at the turn of this century,³ and of Pentecostal preaching women in the 1970s and 80s.⁴ Attention has been given to Methodist women preachers on both

sides of the Atlantic. In Canada, Elizabeth Gillan Muir has recovered not only the stories of the external difficulties faced by preaching women in the Wesleyan tradition, but also in some cases the internal struggles which they could only overcome through confidence in their call to preach.⁵

Others have come at the subject from a different direction, studying women's life-writings, especially their spiritual autobiographies. In these texts, scholars have found evidence of the empowerment of ordinary women who were rarely motivated to take on nontraditional public roles.⁶ The research of Susan Juster is particularly suggestive. She examined conversion narratives of men and women in post-revolutionary America, and observed differences between women's and men's narratives. For women, the experience frequently included a "recovery of moral agency" which was both frequently and aptly expressed in "the metaphor of a loosened tongue."⁷

Marguerite Van Die used a wider variety of women's writing – their letters, diaries and memoirs – in her exploration of the influence of evangelical religion on a number of Canadian women between 1830 and 1875.⁸ This work moves in a useful direction, for there is yet much to be learned about the role of Christianity in the lives of women who neither exercised nontraditional ministries nor wrote religious autobiographies in the conventional sense.

To women's texts and in particular to women's autobiographies, we can bring new critical tools, strategies for learning about women by reading female discourse. Taking as a starting point the autobiographical theories of Georges Gusdorf and James Olney, feminist scholars have mapped out the way in which women create themselves by writing the stories of their lives.⁹ By engaging in the autobiographical act, women inscribe themselves, imposing order and creating meaning as they "understand and construct their lives."¹⁰

Yet this is an audacious act. Centuries ago Julian of Norwich felt called upon – because she was a woman – to justify the narration of her experiences.¹¹ Many women since then have found it necessary to claim permission for what they would otherwise hesitate to do. Women's lives rarely followed the patterns set by those heroic, achieving males whose stories were seen to warrant recording. And so the women developed techniques for justification. Mary Mason argues that some women grounded their identity through relation to a chosen other.¹² Others observe that women have used the available literary script of a spiritual journey or

religious autobiography.¹³ Helen Buss points out that many Canadian pioneer women wrote memoir rather than autobiography; instead of making herself the subject matter of her narrative, the author composed the narrative of a witness to an important past.¹⁴ Thus we are able to read the accounts of women's lives with attention to the literary scripts after which they are patterned, and to their genre. Such reading can serve historians of religion, for it enables us to understand how religion functioned in the lives of believers. In texts written by women, it allows us to recognize and to analyze the evangelical empowerment of women who were conspicuous neither for their public roles nor for their narrowly spiritual writing.

The autobiography of Annie Leake Tuttle is a text that exhibits the empowering effect of evangelical religion. We have already seen that in a very direct sense it enabled her to find her voice: the "dumb was made to speak." This, we shall find, was not a momentary benefit but lasting liberation. But religion did more than that for Tuttle: it gave her permission to write, not simply memoirs, but autobiography – to inscribe the story of her self. Although the life she lived was not by our standards radical, she lived in an age of transition, and she was one of the women who developed a new life script to suit the new era. Thus, finally, it was Annie Leake Tuttle's religion which served as the instrument that enabled her to interpret and develop this new script.

Annie Leake Tuttle's autobiography is not cast in the mould of traditional religious autobiography; it is not primarily a chart of her spiritual progress. It is, or at least it becomes, a religiously-justified autobiography, or a religiously-motivated autobiography. In order to understand it as a tool for looking at her life, we must recognize the shape of that life, and how it was that she came to write the stories, first of her family, and then of her self.

Annie Leake was born near Parrsboro, Nova Scotia, in 1839, the fourth of thirteen children of Thomas Leake and Olevia Lockhart. A carpenter shop and a beautiful but marginal farm offered the family only meagre sustenance, and when she was ten, Annie assisted her family by going to work in the nearby home of an uncle and his wife. At eleven she went to help another uncle, who was a Methodist minister. She spent much of the next five years with his family. During this time she attended three of the series of revival services, but to her own regret and that of her uncle, she failed to undergo the anticipated experience of conversion. That came to her when she was seventeen, and once more living in her parents' home.

Soon after her conversion and “second blessing,” she had another, very different, pivotal experience. She attended a lecture given by the Nova Scotia Superintendent of Education and Principal of the recently-opened Normal School. From him she learned that it was possible to train for a career as a teacher. During the next nine years, she alternated periods of teaching with time spent studying, first at the Normal School and finally at the Branch Institution for Females of the Mount Allison Wesleyan Academy.

When she was twenty-seven, Annie Leake accepted a position as head of the Infant Department of the Model School connected with the Normal School at Truro. She spent ten years there in the training of teachers, and then ten more at St. John’s, Newfoundland, with similar responsibilities in the Model School attached to the Methodist Academy. In 1886 she resigned from the faculty at St. John’s to return home to care for her father during his final illness. He died the following June, and the next January found Annie Leake in Victoria, British Columbia. She was sent there by the Women’s Missionary Society (WMS) of the Methodist Church to become the first matron of a rescue home for Chinese prostitutes.¹⁵

Annie Leake spent five years as a WMS missionary, and a year and a half visiting family members as she gradually made her way back to her native province. Then in January of 1895, she married Milledge Tuttle of Pugwash, Nova Scotia. She was fifty-five. Annie had met Milledge while she was a young teacher; they had planned to marry, but his parents interfered, and he married someone else. Now he was a widower, and his youngest child was eight.

Annie lived on the Tuttle family farm for seven years, until Milledge died in 1902. She spent the next five years without a home of her own, staying with various relatives and friends. In 1907, when she was almost sixty-eight, she moved into the Old Ladies’ Home in Halifax. This was to be her home for twenty-seven years, until she died there in 1934, at the age of ninety-five.

Annie Leake Tuttle began to write the history of her family in 1897, two and a half years after her wedding. She states clearly her conscious reason for writing: “it is a duty I owe, the future generations of our family – to give them what little I know of their ancestors.” Recognizing that she was the custodian of knowledge which might be lost if she did not record it, she exercised the familiar female role of repository and transmitter of

family knowledge.

The fragile nature of this knowledge had been impressed upon her by a recent event: her youngest sister, Olevia, had died just a few weeks earlier. Furthermore, Annie was particularly aware of her family tradition at that time: two days before she began to write, a new Methodist Church had been dedicated in Parrsboro. It contained a large and impressive window dedicated to the memory of her grandfather, John Lockhart, a well-remembered leader within the congregation. Thus Annie sat down to chronicle her family's heritage.

Still another factor in her life made it appropriate, perhaps even necessary, for her to write about her family at this time. When she married Milledge, Annie took charge of a household "of young people, who had lost so lately a mother whom they adored." It was in this setting, living within a family to which she did not truly belong, that she began to write of the Leakes and the Lockharts. And when she wrote, she did not just record family history for her nieces and nephews; she also claimed her family identity for herself. She inscribed herself by writing about her own ancestors while she lived in the Tuttle family home.

Then in 1906 she began to write in the same little book an account that she titled, "The Story of My Life, or Pleasing Incidents in It." Again the moment is significant. She began to pen her story after her husband's death, and before she entered the Home in Halifax. This was a period of dislocation and anxiety. She had previously given up her work as teacher and as missionary. Now she had lost her role as wife, she no longer felt needed as step-mother, and she looked unsuccessfully for "something permanent to do." Her problems were not primarily financial, for she had purchased a government annuity which supplied her needs "wonderfully." But she was lonely, and except for helping those with whom she stayed, she had no role. During the first winter following her husband's death, she wrote to her niece with stoical understatement, "It is not a very comfortable situation to be in homeless in one's old age."¹⁶

And so she set out to write the story of her life, to inscribe herself in this period of acute dislocation. Her account began as a memoir: hers was the testimony of one who saw herself as a witness to a bygone era. In writing about the genre of memoir, Marcus Billson has stated that the memorialist desires "to preserve the thisness, i.e., the historicity, of past historical life."¹⁷ Thus with a strong sense of place and of moment, Annie Leake Tuttle painted word-pictures of her past. Writing with her nieces and

nephews in mind, she described the Leake farm as “one of the most beautiful inland spots upon the face of this continent. Visit it and see what remains of hill and dale, lake and brook, and imagine what it was in its native dress, of trees, wild flowers & fruit.” She remembered sitting on a slab seat in a log school house, “legs dangling in the air”; visiting a MicMac camp one winter evening; and knitting as she read by the light of a tallow candle, for, she explained, “There were six brothers to knit for at this time and all at home, so mother could not spare me time to read without knitting also.” She wrote what Helen Buss has termed a pioneer woman’s memoir.¹⁸

From the beginning of her narrative, she was subject as well as witness. But gradually memoir gave way to autobiography as she wrote less as witness and more as subject. Like the “achievers” identified by Buss, she recorded her struggles and also her personal accomplishments, which were well out of the ordinary for a woman of her day.¹⁹ Yet this was an audacious enterprise for a woman. The memorialist was protected from criticism, for she did not write about herself but instead recorded her times, giving continued life to moments that might otherwise be forgotten. But for a woman to write about her own life! How could she justify putting herself at the centre of her narrative?

For Annie Leake Tuttle, it was possible because of her evangelical religious experience. We have seen at the outset that several days after her conversion, when she received the “second blessing,” Annie found her voice. During this interval, she had overheard her minister’s scepticism about “still born Christians,” and she suspected that he was referring to her because she had not been able to talk much about the assurance she had received. But with the baptism of the Holy Spirit, that changed. Her grandfather, leading the service, asked any receiving a blessing to testify. She wrote, “I arose from my knees, turned to the congregation and talked for some time, not I, really, but the ‘Spirit’ in me talked.” She had received “the liberty to testify.”²⁰

During the following year, before she could locate a teaching position, she found opportunity to use her voice. Her Grandfather Lockhart was especially skilled in leading prayer meetings, and she often travelled with him when he went to conduct services. She explained, “He had me testify as to what great things God had done for me.”

Soon after this, she taught in a village where the Methodist preacher held services only once every six weeks. She often visited the homes of her

students, and at two of them she “was invited to conduct family prayer.” Exercising what she termed her “aggressiveness in religion,” she suggested holding a prayer meeting on those nights that the mail driver remained overnight in the village, and it was done. Her phrase “aggressiveness in religion” appears apologetic as well as assertive: it implies a recognition that her behaviour might be inappropriate for a young woman. But the nineteen-year-old was growing accustomed to the sound of her voice, and she saw this aggressiveness as her “strong help, in [the] first winter in [her] teaching career.”

In May of 1859, Annie Leake was finally able to enrol as a student at the Normal School. Her previous education was severely limited: she had attended school for a total of perhaps three years. She found it particularly difficult to spell and to write. She explained,

I could do nothing scarcely taking notes, but I could comprehend, and my memory was good, so I could often give Dr. Forrester what he wanted from his yesterday’s lecture when others with piles of notes were dumb. Then I had acquired the use of my voice, hearing it in Public without alarm, and truly I got through this first Term at Normal School wonderfully considering.

Annie Leake’s release from silence had not only given her freedom to make Christian testimony: it had freed her voice for other things as well.

Annie Leake’s Christian experience also empowered her to write of her self. She did not directly express any reluctance about self-inscription, but her text offers indirect testimony. The account of her conversion is the first intensely personal part of her narrative. After describing her vision, she wrote, “This is the first time I have written this. I do not often tell it, and more seldom in public, but it is a fact all the same.” Once she had completed the record of this experience, she put down her pen and did not add to her story for nearly a year. It was as if she had disclosed too much.

At last she resumed writing, and increasingly she committed the “autobiographical act.” Now she injected a new note into her writing. It is clearest in her account of one especially brave and anxious episode in her career. In 1866 she turned down a teaching job when she learned how little it would pay. Immediately she wrote to the head of the Normal School, telling him what she had done and asking his help in locating a post. She was surprised when he offered her a prestigious position at the Model

School connected with the teacher training institution. She wrote, “this was far above my highest dreams at that time, and I think my highest motive in writing all this down is to show the wonderful Providence of ‘Our Father’ in thus helping me on from Step to Step in the work, He *wished* me to do.” Annie Leake Tuttle could justify the writing of her life because in so doing, she was giving testimony. Just as she bore witness at her grandfather’s prayer meetings, so in her autobiography she testified to what great things God had done for her. This “highest motive” empowered her, and gave her permission to write about herself.

The autobiography is religiously justified, religiously motivated, yet it is not written according to the script of spiritual autobiography. Although she had fervently desired “the great change” which would be wrought by conversion, she nowhere pictured herself in the role of abject sinner; describing the revival she attended at age twelve, she wrote, “but I was not an immotional [sic] nature. I could not weep as I saw others doing, indeed, I never shed a tear in my life for my sins, I could not say I was sorry, for my sins, and therefore, I would not, and did not, go forward among the seekers.” With her conversion she experienced the certainty that her sins were forgiven, but she did not describe long periods of spiritual anxiety. Much of her failure to be converted she ascribed to a misapprehension concerning what was needed, and her clearest expression of bondage to sin concerned what she recognized as a trivial matter: her brief reluctance to go forward to the church rail because she was not wearing her best clothes.

Nor did she picture in her later narrative the trials of faith which spiritual autobiography often documented. Instead she testified to how God had helped her on from step to step. Only rarely did she confess such weakness of faith as she felt after Milledge died: “[Y]et I had my anxieties, more than I should have had I know had I remembered more constantly of the faithfulness of ‘Our Father.’”

Annie Leake Tuttle read the conversion stories of John Wesley and others; it is highly likely that she had read the *Account of the Experience of Hester Ann Rogers*.²¹ Yet the script which informed her autobiography was not that of spiritual autobiography but that of religious testimonial. This was a familiar feature of Methodist meetings. Following the third revival she attended, she joined a Methodist class believing briefly that she had been converted; in the class meetings she heard the testimony of others, but discovered that she “had no experience” to tell. With much greater success she had testified at her grandfather’s services; and over the

years she continued to participate in those Methodist gatherings where she both heard and made this Christian witness.

And so, familiar with this narrative form, the form in which she had first used her liberated voice, she shaped her autobiography. She formed it not as a continuous exercise in spiritual introspection, but as a narration which she brought into focus from time to time as testimony to the working-out of God's plan for her.

This focusing of her narrative points to the third function of evangelical religion in Annie Leake Tuttle's life. Not only did religious experience free her voice, and justify her autobiographical writing: it also gave her a framework within which she could inscribe her life. It gave her a key to self-interpretation.

In an article titled "The Clear Leadings of Providence," Joanna Bowen Gillespie writes of how the autonomy of early nineteenth-century American women was often "camouflaged in their written musings with the imprimatur 'the clear leadings of Providence.'" Their pious memoirs followed the literary and religious convention of ascribing to Providence a wide range of unusual and daily occurrences. By the use of this convention, the writers "created their own models of behavior inspired and directed by divine authority, whose written conversation with God assisted them in honoring their own inner stages of growth and self-realization."²²

The situation of the early nineteenth-century women studied by Gillespie is different from that of Tuttle, writing a century later. By the time she penned her autobiography, the available life-scripts were beginning to include narratives of achieving women. But Annie Leake Tuttle lived in a transitional era. She had been formed by traditional religious values and experiences, yet her life was nontraditional. She was a pioneer when she opted for a career as a trained teacher, and she rose high in that new profession. She was also a pioneer when she set forth to run the Chinese Home in Victoria: she went there only five years after Martha Cartmell had become the first missionary sent out by the Women's Missionary Society. Annie Leake was a single working woman until she was in her fifties, and she wrote about her marriage to Milledge Tuttle as another "position" which she accepted.

It was religion which gave her a strategy for reinterpreting her life. Her failure to marry as a young woman was part of God's plan for her:

but I have lived long enough to know, that "Our Father" had us both

in His care and things worked out best for us both. He got a wife much better suited for the position she had to fill, than I would have been, and I believe I was called to a mission much more suited to my temperament & ambition. That I had loved and could not “put off the old love and put on the new” was a help to me in my occupation.

There were difficulties connected with her departure from the Rescue Home that she alluded to but never explained; she only said, “circumstances were such that I had to leave my girls, to whom I was much attached, to the care of other hands & hearts.”²³ Later in her autobiography she wrote, “There were circumstances in connection with my having been sent from British Columbia . . . there were many circumstances that led me to believe that it was the Father’s Choice for me.” God’s providential care, which had protected her from fire and “Summer cholera” and shipwreck, had also chosen for her the path of her life’s work. As she wrote the story of her life, this religious interpretation enabled her to invest her past with coherence and meaning.²⁴

Annie Leake Tuttle’s autobiography makes clear the empowerment which evangelical religion gave to one woman. It freed her voice to testify; it justified her audacious act of autobiography by presenting her with her a high motive for writing; and it offered her the key to a reassuring interpretation of her sometimes anxious, sometimes pioneering life. It enabled her to understand herself as helped on, step to step, in the work God wished her to do.

Endnotes

1. All quotations not otherwise identified are from the manuscript autobiography of Annie Leake Tuttle which is in the possession of Rev. J. Ernest Nix of Mississauga, Ontario. I wish to thank him for the generous access he has given me to the autobiography and to the rest of his collection of the papers of his great-aunt.
2. See Nancy A. Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the 19th Century* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984); Charles Edward White, *The Beauty of Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); and Harold E. Raser, *Phoebe Palmer: Her Life and Thought* (Lewiston/Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987).
3. Jeanette Hassey, *No Time for Silence* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1986).

4. Elaine J. Lawless, *Handmaidens of the Lord: Pentecostal Women Preachers and Traditional Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988). Currently Catherine A. Brekus is exploring the activity of women at an earlier time, in the first Great Awakening of the eighteenth century (“‘Let Your Women Keep Silence in the Churches’: Women and the ‘Great Awakening’ in New England and the Middle Colonies,” Paper presented at the Conference on the History of Christianity, University of Notre Dame, March, 1992. This is part of the research Brekus is doing for her Ph.D. dissertation at Yale University).
5. Elizabeth Gillan Muir, *Petticoats in the Pulpit: The Story of Early Nineteenth-Century Methodist Women Preachers in Upper Canada* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1991).
6. See especially Johanna Bowen 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* 5 (Summer 1985): 197-221; Linda H. Peterson, “Gender and Autobiographical Form: The Case of the Spiritual Autobiography,” in *Studies in Autobiography*, ed. James Olney (New York: Oxford, 1988), pp. 211-222; and Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), especially chapters 3 and 4.
7. Susan Juster, “‘In a Different Voice’: Male and Female Narratives of Religious Conversion in Post-Revolutionary America,” *American Quarterly* 41, 1 (March 1989): 57.
8. Marguerite Van Die, “‘A Women’s Awakening’: Evangelical Belief and Female Spirituality in Mid Nineteenth-Century Canada,” Paper presented at the Canadian Historical Association, Kingston, Ontario, 1991.
9. For a discussion built on a critical treatment of Gusdorf and Olney, see Susan Stanford Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice,” in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), pp. 34-62. See also Benstock’s article, “Authorizing the Autobiographical,” in the same volume, pp. 10-33.
10. According to Mary Jo Maynes, for example, autobiography is an interpretive act by means of which writers “impose order, form, and meaning on the facts of an existence” in order to “understand and construct their lives” (Mary Jo Maynes, “Gender and Narrative Form in French and German Working-Class Autobiographies,” in *Interpreting Women’s Lives*, ed. the Personal Narratives Group [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989], p. 105). See also Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the*

Fictions of Self-Representation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 45-46.

11. Mary G. Mason, "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writer," in *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, ed. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 19-44.
12. Mason, "The Other Voice," pp. 21-22. Among the four possibilities sketched by Mason, the "other" can be "another autonomous being" or "one single, transcendent other." In the earlier part of Annie Leake Tuttle's writing, first her father and then her mentor, Dr. Alexander Forrester, play central roles. Yet overall it is her relationship to "Our Father" that provides her primary relation.
13. See Domna C. Stanton, "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" in *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Domna C. Stanton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 3-20. See also Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject*; Peterson, "Gender and Autobiographical Form"; and Mary Jean Corbett, "Feminine Authorship and Spiritual Authority in Victorian Women Writers' Autobiographies," *Women's Studies* 18 (May 1990): 18-29.
14. Helen M. Buss, *Canadian Women's Autobiography in English: An Introductory Guide for Researchers and Teachers* (Ottawa: CRIAW/ICREF, 1991), pp. 10-11. See also Marcus Billson, "The Memoir: New Perspectives on a Forgotten Genre," in *Genre* 10, No. 2 (Summer 1977): 259-282.
15. See Marilyn Färdig Whiteley, "Women Learning to Work for Women: The Chinese Rescue Home in Victoria, B.C.," *Canadian Society of Church History Papers* (1988): 86-96.
16. Letter to Edna Leake Nix, 8 December 1902. The letters of Annie Leake Tuttle are in the possession of J. Ernest Nix.
17. See Marcus F. Billson, "The Memoir: New Perspectives on a Forgotten Genre," *Genre* 10, No. 2 (Summer 1977): 268.
18. Buss, *Canadian Women's Autobiography in English*, pp. 5-13; see also Helen Buss, "Pioneer Women's Memoirs: Preserving the Past/Rescuing the Self," in *Reflections: Autobiography and Canadian Literature*, ed. K.P. Stich (Ottawa: Ottawa University Press, 1988), pp. 45-60.
19. Buss, *Canadian Women's Autobiography in English*, pp. 13-19.
20. "An Old Time Protracted Meeting," undated manuscript in the possession of J. Ernest Nix.

21. Concerning the time after the second revival she attended, she wrote, “I remember searching in some of Uncle’s books such as the life of Wesley to find out how Wesley and others had got converted.” In her description, “An Old Time Protracted Meeting,” she mentioned that Hester Rogers’ book was in her grandfather’s library.
22. Joanna Bowen 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* 5 (Summer 1985): 198. I thank Phyllis Airhart for calling my attention to this article.
23. See Whiteley, “Women Learning to Work for Women.”
24. See Smith, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography*, p. 46.

