

**‘Oh! for a blessing on Africa and America’  
The Mount Holyoke System and the Huguenot Seminary,  
1874-1885<sup>1</sup>**

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***Abstract***

In November 1873, at the invitation of Andrew Murray, two American teachers arrived in the Cape Colony to establish a school to train middle class Dutch-Afrikaans girls to be teachers and missionaries. The two women were both alumni of the Mount Holyoke Seminary, and the institution that they founded in Wellington – the Huguenot Seminary – was modelled on the so-called ‘Mount Holyoke system’ of women’s education. While during Huguenot’s first decade of existence this system was, with very little modification, able to achieve a great deal of success in the Colony – the school was popular with the Dutch-Afrikaans middle class and many of its students went on to teach and do mission work after graduating – in 1884 and 1885, the values and ideals underpinning the existence of the Seminary came under a sustained attack from the pupils at the school. This article seeks, thus, to investigate the implementation and reception of the ‘Mount Holyoke system’ in the Cape during Huguenot’s early years, and then examine why they were so strongly rejected in the mid-1880s.

***Introduction***

On Monday, 20 January 1874, the usually sleepy Boland village of Wellington – about fifty miles from Cape Town – was filled to overflowing with ‘anxious papas and mamas with daughters whose hearts went pity-pat.’<sup>2</sup> The occasion

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1 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 12 April, 1874, Dutch Reformed Church Archive, Huguenot Seminary Collection (hereafter DRCA, HSC), K-Div 615.

2 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington 14 January 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 615.

was the eagerly-anticipated opening of the Wellington Huguenot Ladies' Seminary, a boarding school dedicated to providing a Christian education to the young women of the, predominantly Dutch-Afrikaner, white, middle class community of the Cape Colony.<sup>3</sup> There were other, similar, institutions already in existence in the Colony, but what distinguished the Huguenot Seminary was that it was founded by the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) specifically to train teachers and missionaries, and, as a result, had a particularly close relationship with Rev. Andrew Murray, the hugely influential moderator of the DRC between 1862 and 1897. Indeed, the Seminary had been Murray's project ever since he had read Fidelia Fiske's biography of Mary Lyon (1797-1847) – the founder of the Mount Holyoke Seminary in South Hadley, Connecticut. In 1873 he wrote to Mount Holyoke asking that a teacher from that school be sent to South Africa to found a similar institution in his parish. The Huguenot Seminary was, almost literally, an exact copy of its American model: its first two teachers, Abbie Ferguson and Anna Bliss, who were alumni of Mount Holyoke, brought to Wellington the curriculum, rules, roster, traditions, even the architectural plans, of their alma mater and met with resounding success. The Huguenot Seminary was constantly in need of extra room to house its overflow of pupils, the girls came near the top of the Colony's teaching examinations from 1875 onwards, and the Seminary was the first institution in South Africa where young women could study for university degrees. My focus in this paper is the reception of the so-called 'Mount Holyoke system' in the Cape Colony in 1874 and 1875 and the extent to which it was able to maintain this particular collection of rules, values, and practices in its first decade of existence.<sup>4</sup>

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3 I take the term 'Dutch-Afrikaner' from Marijke du Toit's "Women, Welfare and the Nurturing of Afrikaner Nationalism: A Social History of the Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereeniging, c.1870-1939" (D.Phil. thesis, University of Cape Town, 1996) to refer to the Cape's middle class Dutch population – consisting of a growing number of professionals, successful shop-keepers, and wealthy farmers – as it negotiated an identity that was no longer exclusively European, yet distinct from the English-speaking and indigenous inhabitants of the Colony during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

4 I am currently engaged in researching the production of an alternate form of middle class Afrikaner femininity at the Huguenot Seminary between 1874 and 1910. My project begins with an analysis of the reception of the so-called 'Mount Holyoke' model of women's education in the Cape Colony during the first decade of the Huguenot Seminary's existence, and then moves on to a broader discussion of the production of a variety of discourses on middle class femininity within the Seminary and, later, College, during the late nineteenth century. I conclude with a discussion of the philanthropic movements connected to Huguenot and their relation to notions of 'Englishness' and 'Afrikaansness' at the school. While the sources for this paper are, predominantly, the voluminous letters written by the Huguenot Seminary's two founders – Abbie Ferguson and Anna Bliss – which are available in the Huguenot Seminary Collection of the DRC Archive in Stellenbosch, I make extensive use of the institution's annuals and official documents in later chapters.

### ***The Age of Atonement: Evangelicalism and Women's Education***

It is necessary to understand the founding of the Huguenot Seminary within the broader context of the nineteenth century evangelical movement and its particular attractiveness to women – and, thus, its impact on women's education. The evangelicalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, frequently described as the 'Age of Atonement',<sup>5</sup> was a sustained and powerful trend within Protestant churches which brought about a fundamental shift in Christian dogma.<sup>6</sup> The impact of this movement extended beyond the congregations participating in the awakenings, making itself felt in the politics, economics, and social dynamics of the period.<sup>7</sup> Very broadly, this evangelicalism was characterised by a reliance on the Bible as the ultimate religious authority, a focus on Christ's redeeming work as the heart of Christianity, and an energetic, individualistic approach to religious duties and social involvement.<sup>8</sup>

Evangelicalism's popularity was largely a result of the tensions within a rapidly modernising western world: its emotionalism ran counter to the rational ideals of the Enlightenment,<sup>9</sup> the simplicity of its vision afforded a sense of security to those bewildered by the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution.<sup>10</sup> In America, and especially in the northeast, it responded to an agricultural depression,<sup>11</sup> as well as to the economic and demographic shifts which occurred as a result of the American Revolution.<sup>12</sup> The first major evangelical 'revival' in the Cape Colony during 1860 occurred after a period

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5 BB Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785-1865* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, [1988] 1995), pp. 3-7.

6 MA Noll, DW Bebbington, and GA Rawlyk (Eds.), "Introduction," *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 3-5.

7 For a thorough discussion of the wide-ranging influence of evangelicalism in, especially, Britain, see B Hilton's *The Age of Atonement...*

8 MA Noll, DW Bebbington, and GA Rawlyk (Eds.), "Introduction," *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 6.

9 D Beales, "Religion and Culture", TCW Blanning (ed.), *The Eighteenth Century: Europe 1688-1815...* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 166; J.A. Sharpe, *Early Modern England: A Social History 1550-1760* (London, Arnold, 1987), pp. 252-253. For a detailed discussion of the origins of English evangelicalism and the position of the Church of England and the Puritans before the 1730s, see GV Bennett and JD Walsh (Eds.) "Origins of the Evangelical Revival", *Essays in Modern English Church History in Memory of Norman Sykes*, (London, Adam and Charles Black, 1966), pp. 132-162.

10 GD Walsh, "'Methodism' and the Origins of English-Speaking Evangelicalism", in *Evangelicalism: Comparative studies of popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and beyond, 1700-1990*, (London, Adam and Charles Black, 1966) pp. 24-28, 33; B Hilton, *The Age of Atonement...*, p. 3.

11 JA Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement: Calvinism, the Congregational Ministry, and reform in New England between the Great Awakenings* (Washington, Christian University Press, 1981), p. 23.

12 JA Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement...*, pp. 184-185.

of rapid change, beginning during the 1840s, as the Colony, drawn into the British imperial network of trade and administration, entered the modern world economy, and, developed what André du Toit calls a more 'regular' civil society – a community, in other words, in the process of establishing the institutions and structures of government typical to capitalist societies.<sup>13</sup>

While providing its congregations with a means of coming to terms with radically changed realities, it also encouraged them to enter into work that would spread the evangelical gospel. Yet, simultaneously, and almost paradoxically, it exalted the family – the private sphere – as the centre of its vision for society – and women were of central importance in ensuring that family life remained Christian.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, for many women, evangelicalism was a means of empowerment: not only did the movement stress that all people – both men and women – were innately sinful and, hence, equally able of being saved, but that women, who were believed to possess a 'latent moral superiority,' could achieve a closer relationship with God.<sup>15</sup> Evangelicalism emphasised those qualities – obedience, piety, self-control, self-denial, and charity – which were already an integral aspect of middle class femininity in Britain, America, and the Cape,<sup>16</sup> celebrating and elevating a state with which a sizeable proportion of women were intimately familiar,<sup>17</sup> and encouraging them to move outside the domestic space – as philanthropists, (the wives of) missionaries, and teachers – to assist in disseminating the evangelical message. Evangelicalism, then, contained both conservative and liberal elements – emphasising that the 'natural' place for women was in the realm of the domestic, while persuading many to lead lives of relative independence and responsibility – and this was

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13 A du Toit, 'The Construction of Afrikaner Chosenness,' *Many are Chosen: Divine Election and Western Nationalism* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1994), p. 128; N Worden, E van Heyningen, and V Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town, the Making of a City: An Illustrated Social History* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1998), pp. 159-160; André du Toit, "'The Cape Afrikaners' Failed Liberal Moment, 1850-1870", *Democratic Liberalism in South Africa: Its History and Prospect* (Middleton and Cape Town, Wesleyan University Press, 1987), pp. 37-38; Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a people* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2003), pp. 201, 207-208.

14 FK Prochaska, *Women and philanthropy in nineteenth-century England* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 8, 12-13; Jane Rendall, *The Origins of Modern Feminism: Women in Britain, France and the United States 1780-1860* (London, Macmillan, 1985) p. 79.

15 J Rendall, *The origins of modern feminism*, pp. 74-75.

16 For an analysis of middle class femininity in the Cape Colony, see Edna Bradlow, "Women at the Cape in the Mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century", *The South African Historical Journal*, vol. 19, 1987, pp. 51-67; M du Toit, "Women, Welfare and the Nurturing of Afrikaner Nationalism", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29 (1), March 2003, pp. 21-24; LM Kruger, "Gender, Community and Identity: Women and Afrikaner Nationalism in the *Volksmoeder* discourse of *Die Boerevrou* (1913-1931)" (M.A. thesis, University of Cape Town, 1991), pp. 103-107; K Schoeman, *Olive Schreiner: A Woman in South Africa, 1855-1881* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 1991), pp. 209-219, for discussions of Dutch-Afrikaner femininity during the late nineteenth century.

17 L Prochaska, *Women and philanthropy in nineteenth-century England*, p. 10.

particularly evident in the evangelical interest in education.<sup>18</sup> By placing the onus on women, as mothers, charity workers, or missionaries, to nurture and raise good Christians, it appeared necessary to allow them a form of education ‘as a means of enhancing and enforcing their spiritual authority’.<sup>19</sup>

In Britain and, particularly, in America, schools were founded by evangelists to provide young women with the kind of training it was believed would prepare them to prepare their children for lives as productive, Christian citizens, or would train them to teach – and spread the gospel – to the ‘heathen,’ either at home or abroad. What justified their education, thus, was that it was ‘useful’ – that it would benefit others. One such institution was Mary Lyon’s Mount Holyoke Seminary, founded in 1837. Lyon had five chief objectives: the inculcation of a ‘social and domestic character’ in her pupils; the encouragement of a physical culture, as she believed that women could do nothing unless physically strong; and the encouragement of an ethos of ‘disinterested benevolence’ (or charity) within the school’s community. To this she added the desire to convert each member of the school’s family to evangelical Christianity, as well as provide her pupils with as thorough an academic education as possible.<sup>20</sup> What underpinned each of these goals was a belief that women should be made useful for the service of God – either as missionaries or in preparing the way for the second coming. Even the body was taken up in this aim, as, in keeping with the Enlightenment’s understanding of the relationship between the corporeal and the intellectual, a strong physique indicated a sturdy, hard-working character.<sup>21</sup> All this emphasis on discipline – of the spirit, the mind, and the body – was intended to prepare the Seminary’s pupils for lives as, preferably, teachers or missionaries. Indeed, in Lyon’s view, the role of the male missionary and the female teacher was identical: to encourage the conversion of the unsaved. While she believed that women were naturally less adept at holding positions of leadership than men, and had a special duty to be wives and mothers, she did not see why awakened women should be disqualified as missionary teachers – for Lyon, the biggest

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18 M Rendall, *The origins of modern feminism*, pp. 75-77.

19 LD Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990), p. 14.

20 DL Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon, Mercer University Press, 1996), p. 96.

21 Interestingly, in his publication *Primitive Physik* (1747), J Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, pointed out the need for good Christians to possess healthy bodies to house awakened souls. See R Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason: How the Enlightenment transformed the way we see our bodies and souls* (London: Penguin, [2003] 2004), pp. 229-230.

social division was not between the genders, but between the saved and the unsaved.<sup>22</sup>

In perpetuating these aims, she insisted that the girls take responsibility for cleaning the school; instituted a rigorously academic course of education (her pupils studied a range of subjects, from arithmetic, geometry, and rhetoric to botany, astronomy, and ecclesiastical history); made charity work part of the curriculum by requiring the pupils to donate money to foreign missions and inviting missionaries to speak to the school; held regular ‘revivals’ in the school to encourage each student to profess the desire to be ‘born again;’ and worked closely with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Between 1838 and 1850, 82.5% of Mount Holyoke’s graduates went into teaching, and nineteen percent of the pupils during this period never married;<sup>23</sup> by 1887, the Seminary had produced 175 foreign missionaries working in eighteen countries.<sup>24</sup> During the whole nineteenth century, Mount Holyoke supplied ten per cent of the Board’s women missionaries.<sup>25</sup> The Seminary developed a reputation for encouraging young women to delay – or refuse entirely – marriage, leaving the school with a ‘pious zeal to change the world.’<sup>26</sup> It was nicknamed the ‘Protestant nunnery’ for its piety and discipline – as well as the ‘rib factory’ for the number of girls from the Seminary who married theology students.<sup>27</sup>

Andrew Murray found this vision particularly appealing, believing that girls should be educated because, as future mothers of children, they would be primarily responsible for taking the gospel to the next generation. Moreover, women teachers would be particularly useful as ‘handmaidens of the kingdom [of God],’ (missionaries).<sup>28</sup> Accounting for his appeal to found the Huguenot Seminary, he wrote,

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22 DL Robert, *American Women in Mission*, pp. 97, 100.

23 DL Robert, *American Women in Mission*, p. 97.

24 DL Robert, “Mount Holyoke Women and the Dutch Reformed Missionary Movement, 1874-1904”, *Missionalia*, 21(2), August 1993, p. 107.

25 J Campbell, “A Real Vexation”: Student Writing in Mount Holyoke’s Culture of Service, 1837-1865, *College English*, 59(7), November 1997, p. 769.

26 DL Robert, ‘Mount Holyoke Women and the Dutch Reformed Missionary Movement,’ p. 107. For a discussion of spinsterhood in New England, see Zsuzsa Berend, “‘The Best or None!’ Spinsterhood in Nineteenth-Century New England”, *Journal of Social History*, 33(4), summer 2000, pp. 935-957.

27 DL Robert, “Mount Holyoke Women...”, *Missionalia*, 21(2), August 1993, pp. 106-107. There is some suggestion that Lyon was involved in matchmaking certain of her pupils with young missionaries – many a prospective missionary was urged to pay a social call on Mary Lyon before setting out to Africa or Asia; DL Robert, *American Women in Mission*, pp. 105-106.

28 J du Plessis, *The Life of Andrew Murray of South Africa* (London, Marshall Brothers, 1919), p. 276.

The chief consideration which has given birth to this undertaking is the need for efficient Christian instruction in our land. And in addition to the general dearth of capable teachers, it is clear to us that an institution in which young girls can be trained for educational work is absolutely indispensable.<sup>29</sup>

As in America, the cause of girls' education was given a purpose and not instituted simply for the sake of academic study. Like Mount Holyoke, where Mary Lyon was a follower of Joseph Emerson, an evangelist preacher and teacher, the Huguenot Seminary was closely aligned with the DRC's evangelical movement in its association with Murray. While much of the Huguenot Seminary's popularity (it was filled to capacity from its opening, and was in constant need of extra room) was probably due to its close connection to the influential and respected Murray the values that it held must have appealed to the parents of the girls who attended the school.<sup>30</sup> How, then, were the tenets of Lyon's system received in the Cape Colony?

### ***'we hope a number of souls were born':<sup>31</sup> The Huguenot Seminary 1874-1875***

The first problem dealt with by Ferguson and Bliss was the issue of domestic work. Ferguson explained,

The perturbation in reference to domestic work is often very funny. One mother said her daughter was not accustomed to standing in the water and she hoped she would not be asked to wash [linen]. The washing is done in the rivers here. The women standing knee deep in water and beat the clothes in sacks. The young ladies are anxious to know if they will have to scrub, mopping is an unknown thing. We feel something as Mary Lyon did that domestic work is to be a kind of sifting process that will give us the finest of the wheat.<sup>32</sup>

During the first week of school, Ferguson explained to the girls why domestic work was an aspect of the routine at Mount Holyoke and, when asked to vote on the issue, all agreed to set aside half an hour on Wednesdays to clean the school. Mount Holyoke's strictly-organised timetable – regulated

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29 J du Plessis, *The life of Andrew Murray of South Africa*, p. 276.

30 ME Rothmann, *My beskeie deel: 'n Ouobiografiese Vertelling* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1972), pp. 51-57. Although she attended the Rhenish Institute, M.E. Rothmann's sister was sent to the Huguenot Seminary, and both girls received their primary education at the Swellendam Seminary run by a group of Mount Holyoke alumni during the 1880s; one of whom, Miss Colby, became the headmistress of Bloemhof in Stellenbosch.

31 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 28 January 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 615.

32 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Rondebosch, 23 November 1873, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 615.

by the ringing of bells every five, fifteen, or thirty minutes – was accepted so quickly that less than a month after opening, Ferguson was able to say to her sister ‘It is recreation day today, and as I shut up my eyes and listen to the sounds through the building I have no trouble in imagining myself at Mt. Holyoke’.<sup>33</sup>

The curriculum, though, proved more of a problem. Besides the fact that it was ‘considered quite [a] wonderful thing for ladies to study Algebra’ by the local population,<sup>34</sup> Ferguson and Bliss discovered that the pupils ‘are mostly very backward. Some hardly speaking English’. While many possessed ‘an earnest desire to learn’<sup>35</sup> the two Americans had to tailor their system to a group of girls who had, generally, had little access to formal education before arriving in Wellington. The Seminary seems to have had great incentive to produce well-trained teachers. In February 1874 it received a visit from a representative of the DRC who offered to pay the school for every girl who agreed to teach for three years.<sup>36</sup>

What remained was to ensure that the girls could adhere to the school’s disciplinary code, as well as become ‘true’ Christians.<sup>37</sup> Ferguson and Bliss brought with them Mount Holyoke’s disciplinary system whereby pupils were required to keep a record of, and report, their own transgressions and it appears as though the system worked in fits and starts; all would go well until the girls forgot to note their rule-breaking – and then Ferguson would call them together and would speak to them about the necessity of being truthful. After this, pupils would troop into her office – frequently in tears – to apologise. In presenting the rationale for the system to the girls, Ferguson invoked religious imagery, asking them to model their behaviour more closely on Christ’s. Besides for monitoring themselves, the girls were encouraged to look out for one another. After a bout of naughtiness, she ‘had a very earnest talk with them...taking for my text “We that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak,” and trying to show them how they are each other’s keeper.’<sup>38</sup> This system was, thus, justified entirely on religious grounds.

Indeed, it was impossible to escape the school’s evangelical aims. From the second week of the first term, those who believed themselves to be Christians

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33 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 28 January 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 615.

34 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 13 February 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 615.

35 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 28 January 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 615.

36 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 13 February 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 615.

37 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 7 June 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 615.

38 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 7 September 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 615.

were asked to meet in Ferguson's room, while the others were to congregate elsewhere. Fourteen 'declared themselves on the Lord's side'.<sup>39</sup> This was met with a mixed reaction; accustomed to meeting for prayers once a week, many of the girls found it strange to pray as frequently as four times a day and believed, perceptively, 'that it was wrong to draw lines and [that this] would certainly lead to self-deception on the part of some.'<sup>40</sup> Whatever doubts Ferguson had about the genuineness of the girls' conversions, and she admitted that they were 'impressionable, [and] easily influenced',<sup>41</sup> were dismissed with 'One is tempted to doubt and fear that some may be mistaken, but it is the Lord's own work and we can leave it in His hands.'<sup>42</sup> Meetings were held on Thursday evenings where the converted prayed with Ferguson for the conversion of the unawakened and N.J. Hofmeyr, one of the professors of the Theological Seminary in Stellenbosch, visited several times to preach to the girls about being saved until, about a month after the first Thursday meeting, they 'gathered a united family on the Lord's side.'<sup>43</sup> Yet the emphasis on maintaining as close a relationship with God as possible did not relent after this first revival at the Seminary; the prayer meetings continued; periodically, the pupils were separated into groups – the converted and those desiring conversion – and urged to pray for one another; whole days would be set aside for prayer and contemplation.<sup>44</sup> Of course, much of the heightened religiosity within the Seminary was connected to the awaking occurring in Wellington, Worcester, and Stellenbosch during the period. Towards the end of 1874, Ferguson commented on the ever-increasing numbers of those attending church services, and noted that that the school was in a particularly good position to benefit from the revivals. One pupil explained that she had chosen to attend the Seminary so as 'to fit herself to work for the Lord.'<sup>45</sup> On another occasion, Ferguson said, 'As the fruit of the recent revivals there are a number offering themselves for the Lord's work.'<sup>46</sup>

By the 'Lord's work' Ferguson meant teaching, and missionary work. For Murray and Ferguson, the two activities were inextricably linked. In a

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39 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 13 February 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 615.

40 Huguenot Seminary Journal, 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 622.

41 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 7 September 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 615.

42 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 25 February 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 615.

43 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 25 February 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 615.

44 For a lengthy description of a revival held at the Huguenot Seminary during the 1890s, see P van Heerden, *Kerssnuitsels* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1963), pp. 120-122.

45 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 13 February 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 615.

46 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 28 October 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 615.

special sermon to the pupils after returning from an epic fund-raising tour for the Seminary throughout the Colony, Murray

showed the importance of the education of the children being a Christian education. He said that sometimes he had felt tempted to leave the ministry and become a teacher the work was calling so loudly, and then he showed them that the influence of the teacher was stronger than that of the pastor and the relationship a closer one. He spoke so earnestly of the responsibility, the blessedness and the glory of the work that the girls were thrilled by it, and some of who[m] [who] had not felt ready for the work before, were led to look upon it as a privilege. I do so hope we may send out earnest godly teachers to care for the lambs.<sup>47</sup>

In fact, the girls' first experience of teaching was in the Sunday school established by the Seminary for the coloured children of Wellington in April 1874. Beginning with thirty pupils, the numbers swelled to over a hundred by the end of the year. Besides for lessons in reading, writing, and arithmetic, the children were taught to pray and to ask Jesus to be their saviour. The primary role of the teacher, then, was to be a 'winner of souls.'<sup>48</sup> Outside of the classroom, the girls engaged in charity work by starting prayer groups for women, and organising entertainments for the 'navies' (British railway workers) and their families.<sup>49</sup> As at Mount Holyoke, on Monday evenings the pupils collected money for the missions, and missionaries regularly visited the Seminary— one missionary remarking meaningfully to the girls that, having recently lost his wife, he was seeking another.<sup>50</sup> The Seminary was able to despatch its first missionary, , to work in the interior of the country in 1875, and, three years later, founded the Huguenot Missionary Society, which raised enough money within three months to sponsor another female missionary from the school for twelve months.<sup>51</sup>

It is clear that in its first years, at least, the Huguenot Seminary represented a triumph for Lyon's vision of girls' education. At the 1882 reunion, it was noted that of the 428 students who had attended the school, 119 had passed

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47 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 17 June 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 615.

48 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 11 May 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 615.

49 These 'navies' were engaged to work on extending the railway line from Wellington to Worcester. The pupils and teachers of the Seminary took pity on these workers on their families, who lived in relatively difficult circumstances – they were encamped just outside of Wellington without proper sanitation, cooking facilities, and schools for their children. While there were coloured and black families living in similar, or worse, conditions in Wellington, it would seem that the women of the Seminary felt a particular urgency to attend to these labourers, probably because they were white (although working class). For a brief discussion of the navies in the Cape, see Worden et al., *Cape Town, the making of a city*, p. 163.

50 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 28 October 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 615.

51 Huguenot Seminary Journals for 1875 and 1876, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 622.

the teachers' examination, thirty-two had graduated, and 170 – almost forty per cent – had taught.<sup>52</sup> The only major modification to Lyon's original vision had been to the standard of the teaching. Nevertheless, this was achieved, partly, through the school's 'supercharged spiritual atmosphere'<sup>53</sup> which made it virtually impossible for any girl to resist becoming converted. While the prayer meetings and discussions about finding 'the way' may have fostered a strong sense of family within the school it also had the effect of alienating the pupils from the society around the Seminary. The Seminary Journal for 1874 concludes with the comment that 'we felt that a test time was at hand and that the vacation would be a season of temptation and trial to many who had professed to have found the Lord,'<sup>54</sup> and Ferguson refers to girls saying that the return to the Seminary after visiting friends or family was often a relief. Already separated from their families by boarding at the school, the only contact the girls had with individuals not connected to their education was through the Seminary's charity work. In this way, the pupils' return to their friends and parents at the end of term was a substantial change from the intense religiosity of the school, and could undo whatever religious commitments they had made during term. Moreover, now more educated, and being inculcated with Huguenot's religious vision, the pupils would have had to renegotiate places for themselves within their communities. What Murray, Ferguson, and Bliss had succeeded in doing was instituting not so much a school, but a religious community working to prepare young people to propagate that community's ideals and values.

***'I felt there was a battle going on':<sup>55</sup> Challenge and change at the Huguenot Seminary, 1884-1885***

This achievement was sustained for the first decade of the Seminary's existence and, ostensibly, the Seminary went from strength to strength between 1874 and 1884: it was full to capacity, and employed seventeen teachers by 1884; new buildings were built and acquired in 1874, 1881, and 1886;<sup>56</sup> and it produced

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52 GP Ferguson, *The Builders of Huguenot (Being the History of the Huguenot Institution at Wellington from the intimate papers of the builders)* (Cape Town, Maskew Miller, 1927), pp. 51-52.

53 DL Robert, "Mount Holyoke Women and the Dutch Reformed Missionary Movement", p. 107.

54 Huguenot Seminary Journal 1874, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 622.

55 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 8 April 1884, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 616.

56 AM Cummings, 'Material Growth of the Huguenot Seminary,' *The Huguenot Seminary Annual*, no. 4 (1898): pp. 16-18.

its first graduates in 1878 and nearly every year had entered candidates for the teachers' certificate examination.<sup>57</sup> Yet Ferguson concluded 1884 with

I feel as if I had been having a fellowship with my Saviour in suffering, during this last year, such as I never have had in the same way before, suffering through contact with sin, and now the year is well nigh ended, and my whole heart is full of thanksgiving that the Lord has been with us and delivered [us] out of so many evils<sup>58</sup>

1885 was no less difficult. What Ferguson complains of is a series of disciplinary infractions which plagued the school throughout 1884 and 1885. For the first time in its existence, the Seminary's self-reporting system almost collapsed, as a large minority of girls refused either to report themselves or their fellow pupils for breaking rules. In a sense, the Seminary's success was partly to blame for this situation. The school was considerably bigger than it had been ten years previously, causing the teachers – many of whom were also involved in philanthropic work in the community – to be too busy to lavish the personal attention on the girls as they had been able to do in 1874.<sup>59</sup> The Seminary's links to the DRC seem no longer to have been as much of an attraction to the parents who sent their daughters to the school. Although it was still the obvious choice for the daughters of ministers or the particularly devout,<sup>60</sup> many attended the Seminary because of its academic achievements.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, it was simply one of many good institutions for girls in the Colony. In this way, the girls entering the Seminary were no longer as prepared to convert as they had been previously. It is little wonder that discipline suffered. Ferguson was acutely aware that fewer numbers of pious Christians meant infractions of the rules,

There is an unusually large number who are not Christians, and some who say that they are, [and] live very half and half lives. Often [one] would not know that they belonged to Christ unless they told you. Externally all is very prosperous. The school full, buildings extending, all work going on well, and the girls are generally very good and obedient, but we have not been satisfied with this, but have been earnestly asking that the Lord will pour out His Spirit upon us, and that all our children may be taught of Him, and that we may have the joy of seeing them all belonging to Christ, and ready for His service.<sup>62</sup>

In other words, the girls were confessing to having 'found' their Saviour, but had not entered into the introspective self-analysis that the Mount Holyoke

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57 AE Bliss, 'Educational Growth,' *The Huguenot Seminary Annual*, 4, 1898, p. 20.

58 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 11 November 1884, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 616.

59 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Berg River, 21 April 1884, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 616.

60 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 16 March 1885, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 616.

61 Anna Bliss to E.L. Bliss, Wellington, April 1884, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 606.

62 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 15 September 1885, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 616.

system required. This religiosity was not simply a system of belief, but a way of life and the girls were believed only to be 'true' Christians when they demonstrated the requisite Christian behaviour. Obeying the schools rules was believed to be a manifestation of a pupil's Christianity, and it is not surprising that only a month after Ferguson began to worry about the genuineness of the girls' conversions that it became apparent that 'Satan [had] been very busy and there [had been] a very naughty spirit among some of the girls.' She interpreted their naughtiness as a sign of a spiritual 'struggle within', adding that she had never realized [sic] a more critical time' in their religious development.<sup>63</sup> What unsettled the teachers so much was that the girls seemed immune to conversion or, alternately, could not maintain any form of religiosity after having confessed to being converted. This is particularly significant because Wellington and other towns in the area underwent another revival in the second half of 1884 and throughout 1885.<sup>64</sup>

At stake, it would seem, was the very existence of the religious community at the Seminary: the presence of rule-breaking girls was felt seriously to undermine 'the moral tone of the school'.<sup>65</sup> It was for this reason that Ferguson resorted to what she called her 'revolution' in August 1884, during which those girls who were found to have not reported their 'crimes' were placed under the constant supervision of a teacher. Only when they could demonstrate their trustfulness – or their self-control – could they return to the self-reporting system.<sup>66</sup> This 'revolution' had reasserted Lyon's emphasis on self-discipline, but had, effectively, demonstrated that the teachers did not trust the girls and that, secondly, they realised that the self-reporting system was deeply flawed. In 1885, Ferguson was forced to 'show them the difference between tale bearing and a responsibility for the moral atmosphere of the school. There is a sense in which they are their sisters' keepers, and must not let wrong go on in their presence without doing what they can to prevent it.'<sup>67</sup> In a less religious atmosphere, the rationale behind self-reporting and, more importantly, behind reporting one's friends and fellow pupils, was not as clear, as, previously, this relatively disloyal (even dishonest) behaviour would have been as entirely justified if done to preserve the 'moral atmosphere' of

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63 The original is underlined. Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 8 April 1884, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 616.

64 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 10, 17, 22 June, 29 July, 19 August, 2 September 1884, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 616.

65 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 9 June 1885, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 616.

66 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 19 August 1884, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 616.

67 Abbie Ferguson to Maggie Allen, Wellington, 9 June 1885, DRCA, HSC, K-Div 616.

the school. Consequently, the teachers began to keep a closer watch on the girls. This suspicion was the very antithesis of the trust required by the self-reporting system. Nevertheless, the Seminary did not institute a disciplinary code similar to that of other girls' boarding schools – as late as 1910, the girls were still expected to report their own bad behaviour. Writing about her experiences at the school during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), Petronella van Heerden describes the effects of the malfunctioning self-reporting system. She writes that the school:

*was gesellig...maar die plek het my in die war gebring. Ons was op 'ons eer', maar hulle loer om te sien of ons op ons eer bly en luister by ons deure om te hoor of ons gedurende studietyd praat. Mollie Conradie en ek het een aand 'n onderwyseres met haar oor teen ons sleutelgat betrap... Wat my veral gehinder het, was dat hulle so agter jou rug snuffel en jou dan skuins uitvra tot julle jou vas het...hier het ek ordentlik leer lig – darem net vir die onderwyseresse – soos al die ander kinders. Saans het ons bymekaargekom om te sien wie die meeste reels gebreek het.<sup>68</sup>*

Ironically, by the time that Van Heerden entered the Seminary, it would appear that self-reporting actually fostered lying and duplicity instead of discouraging them. She also discusses the revivals which took place at the school, acknowledging that during the religious fervour the pupils were 'onnatuurlik soet trans'<sup>69</sup> (unnaturally good), but pointing out that many of the conversions were the result of peer pressure or of the fear of being eternally damned. Interestingly, she dubs this religiosity 'angs'<sup>70</sup> (anxiety) and remembers that once this fear had subsided after a week or two, the girls would return to their previous (mis)behaviour.<sup>71</sup> Thus it appears that the crisis of 1884 and 1885 had exceptionally long-lasting repercussions. The girls could not be persuaded to maintain the level of Christian self-analysis required by the Holyoke system, so the teachers resorted to spying on their pupils, and, consciously or not, frightening them into submission with fire and brimstone sermons. It is an important point that by 1898, only fifty-one of the, roughly, one thousand pupils who had attended the Seminary had worked – or were working as – missionaries, while in 1895, Ferguson estimated that four hundred girls had received teachers' certificates, while five hundred had taught.<sup>72</sup> This represented a significant failure for the Mount

68 P van Heerden, *Kerssnuitsels*, pp. 117-118.

69 P van Heerden, *Kerssnuitsels*, p. 121.

70 P van Heerden, *Kerssnuitsels*, p. 122.

71 P van Heerden lists dancing in the music rooms, midnight feasts, and nightly raids on the Seminary's apricot trees as examples of their naughtiness; see P van Heerden, *Kerssnuitsels*, p. 122.

72 AP Ferguson, "Development of Missionary Interest", p. 23 and AP Ferguson, 'Our Huguenot Seminary,' *The Huguenot Seminary Annual*, no. 1 (1895), p. 23.

Holyoke system in their terms, but, arguably, points to a success in that it contributed to the formation of a new form of white, middle class femininity which embraced the educated, independent woman.

### ***Conclusion***

If seen through the lens of the evangelical movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – and evangelicalism’s particular appeal to women, and concern for the education of girls – the position, and appeal, of the Huguenot Seminary in the Cape becomes more explicable. The socio-political environment in which Lyon founded Mount Holyoke in the northeastern United States in 1837 bore striking resemblances to the Cape Colony in 1874, when Ferguson and Bliss opened their Seminary. Of course, much of the success of the school was dependent on the DRC’s wholehearted support, but it is, thus, not surprising that Lyon’s vision of women’s education took root so quickly in the Colony.<sup>73</sup> As a result, a small, but well-educated, group of independent middle class Dutch-Afrikaner women emerged within Cape society who, with the blessing of the DRC, took up relatively self-sufficient lives as, predominantly, teachers, but also, to a lesser extent, as missionaries throughout the country. Yet, this social modification was heavily qualified by a religiosity which did not distinguish between the role of the teacher and that of the missionary. While these women were able to achieve a status which permitted them responsibility, freedom, and influence, this was allowed to them because they were deemed to be socially ‘useful.’ This points to the creation of a new feminine ideal within the Cape Colony: the educated middle class woman whose learning, self-discipline, and evangelical piety gave her the ability – and the licence – to delay marriage in order to teach or do mission work.<sup>74</sup> What requires to be ascertained, now, is the extent to which the Seminary was able to maintain this pressure on its pupils to become teacher-missionaries, as the society around it changed drastically during the closing years of the nineteenth century.

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73 Indeed, the Seminary was so popular that it was able to establish branch schools, also run by American teachers, in Stellenbosch, Graaff-Reinet, Worcester, Paarl, Cradock, Somerset East, Natal, the Orange Free State, and Transvaal. M duT Porgieter, “Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk en die Onderwys van Blankes in Kaapland Sedert die Eerste Sinode (1824)”, (D.Ed. thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1961), p. 158.

74 ME Rothmann comments, ‘En met dit alles was onse onderwyseresse na die openbare mening net so belangrik en gesaghebbend as enige hoof van die jongetjies se skool, gelykstaande met die predikante, die magistraat, die dokter en wie ook al! Vir ons het dit duidelik geword dat ’n meisie omtrent alles kennis moet opdoen: ons kan opgelei word om ’n ewe belangrike baan te betree as onse onderwyseresse. Die wêreld het vir ons opgegaan.’ *My beskeie deel*, pp. 53-54.