



## CHAPTER 8

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# The Trials of Sarah Wheeler (1807–1867): Experiencing Submission

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Surely we have abundant reason to be thankful into Him and bless His name when we look back on the mercy that has followed us through all the trials meted out which we still feel to be compassing us about.<sup>1</sup>

The above citation from Sarah Wheeler's letter to Margaret Finlayson after the death of Jane, Sarah's sister, includes repeated features of Sarah's writings. Her life was full of trials, responsibility, and loneliness, but her confidence in the Lord was unconditional.

Sarah<sup>2</sup> was the eldest daughter of Daniel Wheeler Sr., Minister of the Gospel and missionary of the Society of Friends, and she is the main

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<sup>1</sup>ELKA. Central Archive for Finnish Business Records. Finlayson Co's Archive. Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 10 mo. 8/26 1837. This chapter uses the same date system as used in the original letters.

<sup>2</sup>Sarah Wheeler was born at Sheffield (7th mo. 15th 1807). Her father Daniel Wheeler received a membership with the Society of Friends in 1797. In 1816 Daniel Wheeler was recorded as a minister. In 1849 Sarah married William Tanner and used name Tanner. About

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character of this chapter. In 1818, at the age of 11, Sarah left England, her native country, for the next 20 years. Her father had received a job, an extensive land reclamation project near Petersburg,<sup>3</sup> from the Emperor Alexander, Czar of Russia. Daniel Wheeler, his wife, children, their tutor, servants, and farm workers sailed on 22 June 1818 from Hull over to Denmark and the Baltic. The Wheeler family settled on the far bank of the Neva near the village of Ochta, about one and a half miles from the city.<sup>4</sup> Young Sarah lived with her family first in Ochta. They moved to Moscow Road and from 1828 they lived in the isolated Shoosharry estate, several miles from any other houses. Daniel Wheeler described their circumstances in Shoosharry, noting that they seldom saw the face of a visitor of any kind.<sup>5</sup>

Daniel and his wife Jane had six children: William, Joshua, Sarah, Charles, Daniel Jr., and little Jane. At the age of 22, Sarah Wheeler received the inward light of Christ. This spiritual experience changed her life and meant a new beginning. In Quakerism, the primary basis is on inner experience, and this meant transforming experience “convincement”, as the Quakers called a deep conviction, and true worship. The deep conviction in Sarah’s life meant a thankful acceptance of the love and mercy of God.<sup>6</sup> For Sarah, living in a foreign country in isolated circumstances meant family ties developed especially intensively, and her family was her most important emotional community. After ten years in Russia, in the late 1820s and the early 1830s a new phase began in Sarah’s life when the Wheeler family broke up due to illnesses, deaths, and travels abroad. This meant hard bereavements for Sarah, and it changed her life.

family Wheeler and Tanner and the Quaker circle and the connections around these families, see Stanley, *Quaker Women*; Ford (ed.), *Memoir of William Tanner*, 170–172.

<sup>3</sup>Wheeler family called their new city Petersburg not St Petersburg because saints did not belong to the Quaker culture. I will use the official name St Petersburg which was used in the nineteenth century.

<sup>4</sup>From the 1840s has been published many biographies, memories, and studies on Quaker minister and missionary Daniel Wheeler and Family Wheeler’s time in Russia: Greenwood, *The Story of Daniel Wheeler in Russia*; Scott, *Quakers in Russia*; Benson, *Quaker Pioneers in Russia*, 63–66; McMillin, “Quakers in Early Nineteenth-Century Russia, 567–579”; Dunstan, *Sarah Biller of St Petersburg*, 50. See also: Walker, “Enlightenment and Religion in Russian Education in the Reign of Tsar Alexander I”, 343–360. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3685>.

<sup>5</sup>Scott, *Quakers in Russia*, 75; Wheeler, *Memoirs of the Life and Gospel Labours of the Late Daniel Wheeler*, 85–86, 155–159.

<sup>6</sup>Dandelion and Angelle, “Introduction”, 20–21.

In this chapter, I analyse Sarah Wheeler's spiritual life by asking how she lived through her bereavements and how her emotions, like sorrow and fear, gradually evolved into an experience that defined her life and gave direction to her view of her own and her family's future. The hard bereavements in Sarah's life caused emotions like anxiety, fear, and deep sorrow, or at least this is how she expressed herself in her letters. This chapter pertains specifically to ideas of experience as a process in which one evaluates one's own and one's community's encounters with the world according to the cultural script of the Quaker tradition. I will study the process by which she lived her religion and process of experiencing God's presence and mercy in her life. She saw the mercy of God in all her delights, sorrows, and sufferings, and used phrases like "unchanging almighty" in her writings. Tracing the process of Sarah Wheeler's experience in her letters also highlights the impact of her religious community on her experience. The structure of this chapter follows Sarah's life chronologically, focusing on themes of family ties and suffering, creating a religious experience of submitting to God's will.

I will consider Sarah Wheeler's spiritual life and her identity using as source material letters she sent from her home, St Petersburg, Ohta, and Shoosharry to Margaret Finlayson. At the age of 11, Sarah became an acquaintance of Margaret Finlayson (née Wilkie) and she was about 13 years old when Margaret moved in 1820 from St Petersburg to Tampere, Finland. Soon after this, Sarah wrote her first letter to Margaret Finlayson.<sup>7</sup> This chapter concentrates on a short time period, less than ten years in Sarah's life, when she lost her family community and lived in trying times. This study will proceed by presenting first Sarah's pen friendship with Margaret Finlayson and then by following Sarah's bereavements. The key concepts are the sense of bereavement and suffering.

The Quakers suffered for their faith, and there was a common belief that those who suffered the most and under the worst conditions best exemplified a commitment to God. In the Quaker community, suffering

<sup>7</sup>These letters include a wider context in the Quakers' community and to the Quaker's correspondence tradition as the tool for communication, see Scheider, "Introduction", 2–11. Gary Schneider has classified the scholarship of early modern British letters and religion into five groups: studies on women's letters and religion, general studies of epistolary writing (relationship between religion and letters) literary and historical studies of religious topics in which letters are examined or figure significantly in the analysis, studies of individual Churchmen and their letters, religion in the personal letters or in epistolary fictions of literary writers.

had been an integral part of the early Quaker identity, and the correspondence in the Quaker network focused in the late seventeenth century on accounts of suffering.<sup>8</sup> The Quakers had been constantly in trouble with the law, and their interpretation of God's law rather than English law led to them being imprisoned. In the prison letters, the suffering was described as both spiritual and physical in nature.<sup>9</sup> The Quakers understood that it was their obligation to suffer in order to demonstrate their covenant with God. Sarah upheld Quaker traditions by writing of her sufferings and dealing with her own emotions, like anxiety and fear. Sarah's charity, and later her submission to God's will in personal losses, belonged to her conviction and identity formed by the Quakers' cultural script.

The context of my chapter is based on early nineteenth-century Quakerism and the gender system of the Society of Friends.<sup>10</sup> Sarah Wheeler gives an intricate example of a Quaker woman's life in how she lived in isolated circumstances and loneliness, kept up her domestic duties, took responsibility for her younger siblings, and wrote letters and forwarded messages around the world to British missionaries. Sarah was responsible for maintaining the household, nursing the sick, and transmitting information between family members abroad. Sarah stood as an emotional pillar and stayed at Shoosharry when others were moving on. Her other family and emotional community consisted of her Christian friends, whom she kept up contacts by writing and forwarding letters. Her letters prove that she adopted the Quaker women's identity to help the poor and sick in the way that was possible in her circumstances. The early part of the century was a period of intense evangelical activity in Britain. During the nineteenth century, Quaker women participated in social reform movements and engaged in work among poor children and in education and prisons.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup>From the late seventeenth century, the Quakers began to collect and publish accounts of their sufferings. These included detailed accounts on of imprisonments, distraints, and other penalties levied on Quakers for crimes: illegal meetings, non-attendance at church. See Ames, *Margaret Fee, letters, and the Making of Quakerism*, 123–143; Miller, “A Suffering People’: English Quakers and their Neighbours c. 1650–c. 1700”, 71–103. URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3600832>.

<sup>9</sup>Ames, *Margaret Fee, letters, and the Making of Quakerism*, 123–143.

<sup>10</sup>Tarter and Gill (eds.), *New Critical Studies on Quaker Women, 1650–1800*; Stanley, *Quaker Women*; Garman, “Quaker women's lives and spiritualities”.

<sup>11</sup>Rogers, “Quietist Quakerism, 1692–c. 1805”, 111–114; Garman, “Quaker women's lives and spiritualities”, 393–397; Rosslyn, “Women with the mission”.

## SARAH AND MARGARET AS PEN FRIENDS

Sarah sent her first two letters to Margaret Finlayson at the beginning of the 1820s. The correspondence continued sporadically but became regular in the 1830s. When Sarah wrote her last letter in July 1838, she was 31 years old and Margaret was about 62 years old.

Margaret Finlayson was born in Abbey Paisley, Scotland, and had emigrated to St Petersburg in the early 1810s, living there and mixing with the Quaker circle and British missionaries.<sup>12</sup> In Tampere, Margaret's husband, James Finlayson, began a machinery project and Margaret organized her own textile business and worked among the local orphaned children. During these 20 years, Sarah Wheeler grew up, and this correspondence created a friendship between a younger and an older woman. In the summer of 1838, after nearly 30 years abroad, Margaret Finlayson returned to Govan, Scotland, from there to Ireland, and then back to Scotland—this time to Edinburgh—where she died in 1855.<sup>13</sup>

Sarah Wheeler's letters to Margaret Finlayson had several purposes. Every letter included a part where Sarah explained her own relationship to God, and her writings proved how Sarah lived her religion. Her letters to Margaret expressed her relationship to God as the most essential part of her life. In her letters, Sarah took a role as a mentor. The Lord's hand, confidence, and divine blessing were the key concepts in Sarah's world view and she wanted to write to Margaret about them.<sup>14</sup> Sarah processed her faith and she assured herself and her correspondent of divine guidance, protection, and mercy. She also dealt with grief, loneliness, and trials, and these letters served as a diary where she had an opportunity to speak about her feelings. Sarah told how despite her losses, she had gained a strong

<sup>12</sup>About British missionaries and their community in St Petersburg in the early nineteenth century, see Bawden, *Shamans, Lamas and Evangelicals*; Rosslyn, "Women with a mission", 231–236; Dunstan, *Sarah Biller of St Petersburg*, 50–52; Scott, *Quakers in Russia*, 79, 85; Benson, *Quaker Pioneers in Russia*.

<sup>13</sup>Kaarninen, "Margaret Finlayson", 30–31. James Finlayson 1835–1836 sold his mill and Sarah's brother William Wheeler played an important role in these negotiations. He put up one-third of the total capital of 300,000 rubles banco with Nottbeck and Rauch each investing another third. William Wheeler was not listed as a partner in the legal document but the Wheeler family was not connected to the Finlayson company and this relationship gave a new meaning to Sarah's and Margaret's pen friendship. See also Selleck, "Quaker Pioneers in in Finnish Economy Development", 32–41.

<sup>14</sup>Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 4th mo. 30/6 1836.

experience of God's grace.<sup>15</sup> As a Quaker, she understood that her suffering belonged to her life, and her duty was to write about her suffering. The early Quakers had written about their experiences and suffering in prison. In Sarah's circumstances, her own lonely home in a foreign country became her prison. This correspondence gave her an opportunity to write about her thoughts and her relationship with God. Sarah processed her religion and God's presence formed an experience in her life. Additionally, Sarah's letters consoled Margaret in her sufferings. She also felt loneliness and unfamiliarity in a foreign place without friends who spoke her own language.

In her letters, Sarah tries to advance the Quaker mission.<sup>16</sup> Her aim is to convince her correspondent of God's omnipotence so that the correspondent could feel and reach this same experience. This was her duty as a Quaker, where mission work and the practical transmission of news were connected. In this way, Sarah fulfilled her Quaker conviction.<sup>17</sup> Sarah reminded Margaret how the gracious Father would support her when Margaret felt discouraged, and Sarah wanted to make sure that Margaret understood the mercy of God and trust in it.

...it has at some reasons been my sincere and heart felt wish that the Lord would in his mercy, wake thee a rich partaker of those consolations which a sense of his love shed aboved in the soul can alone impart and which He often in boundless compassion is pleased to vouchsafe to his children when in the ordering of his providence he sees met to withdrawn them from bouncers of outward enjoyments. And surely the enjoyments of his presence is a rich compensation for every inferior loss and the more no because in proportion as we are enabled to walk with Him...<sup>18</sup>

In Sarah's faith, the Lord's hand could be seen everywhere. She wanted to convince her correspondent of the indications that the Lord would help Margaret in her work with orphans, and this belief gave her strong confidence in every case and in her difficulties. This pen friendship provided an opportunity to handle contradictory emotions. Sarah recommended to Margaret John Bunyan's famous story *The Pilgrim's Progress: From This*

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 8th mo. 10th 1830, 10th mo. 24th 1832.

<sup>16</sup> Dandelion and Angelle, "Introduction", 21; Ford (ed.), *Memoir of William Tanner*, 170–172.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 10th mo. 24th 1832.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 10th mo. 24th 1832.

*World to That Which Is to Come*, and sent it to Margaret. Sarah wrote that “It is a favourite work of mine and ours that I read some time ago with much interest and I would hope with some profit.”<sup>19</sup> This story meant a lot to her because Bunyan demonstrates the experience of conversion in a story about turning towards God.<sup>20</sup> Sarah did not express in her letter if Bunyan’s story had made her see the light.

Additionally, Sarah’s letters included family news and news from their common friends in St Petersburg and missionaries around the world. Sarah received fabric, thread, linen, and stocking orders from their friends in St Petersburg to be forwarded to Margaret for their production in Tampere. Sarah reported on health conditions (illnesses), the family events of the missionaries, and, most importantly, the state of her father’s mission.<sup>21</sup> She had several pen friends and her correspondence took up much of her time. As the daughter of a Quaker minister, Sarah maintained the Quakers’ letter tradition in the Quaker network. Sarah understood it as her duty to write, copy, and forward letters:

I enclose some extracts from Father’s journal, which we thought some of your member might like to see, thó (though) probably a first of them may have been already at Tammerfors in manuscript. We have also received similar extracts from the journal of James Backhouse & his companion & from others of our Society who have been travelling thró (through) various parts of the continent of Europe. If any of you would like to see these, we will send them with pleasure.<sup>22</sup>

The Quakers had their own epistolary pattern. In seventeenth-century England, the Quakers had taken on the Pauline tradition of letter writing, communicating with fellow “Friends” by writing letters and trying to reach out to potential converts among the mass of human beings.<sup>23</sup> Sarah’s letters to Margaret are identifiable by these Quaker conventions. As Susan E. Whyman notes, the Quakers developed a common epistolary language and conventions, and adapted them to religious purposes. The Quakers’

<sup>19</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 8th mo. 10th 1830.

<sup>20</sup> Machosky, “Trope and Truth in the Pilgrim’s Progress”, 179–198.

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 10th mo. 8th 1830; Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 4th mo. 30/6 1836; Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 2nd mo. 10/22 1836.

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 7th mo. 6/18 1836.

<sup>23</sup> Barbour, “Thomas Brown”, 37–48.

letter writing system protected and promoted their community.<sup>24</sup> The network of letters united the Quakers, who were spread around the world as missionaries. Since the seventeenth century, the Quakers had by a network of letters promoted their community and united the faithful who were physically scattered. The Quakers thought that it was important to copy letters. Authors asked the correspondent to make copies to be sent to specific people or to be circulated throughout the community.<sup>25</sup>

Quaker letters followed the classical form of salutation, narration, request, and conclusion. The letter begins with the words of greeting, “My Dear Mrs Finlayson”, and later Sarah uses the salutation “My Dear Friend”. This is the typical structure in Sarah’s letters to Margaret. All of Sarah’s letters to Margaret followed a similar structure and form. The salutation was followed by the purpose of the letter and it included thanks for the correspondent’s last letter or apologies as to why it had taken so long to answer. Another of the most typical conventions in each letter are the explanations for the reasons of the delay of the letter. “For some time, I have thought I should like to write thee”.<sup>26</sup>

#### “FAMILY AS A SCATTERED BAND”

The Wheeler family followed Quaker traditions. As a Quaker minister, Daniel Wheeler organized meetings of worship for his family and other people in his household. Occasionally, there were British visitors participating in these gatherings.<sup>27</sup> The parents expected that children would experience God’s almighty power, mercy and love like they did, and in the way of the Quaker tradition. The children had to respect their parents, take their advice obediently, and submit to their parents’ will. Daniel wanted to supervise his children’s religious life and to know how they lived religion in their everyday life and duties. For Sarah, this was

<sup>24</sup>In the Quaker letters were not used the names of pagan months and days. A special dating system replaced the names with numbers: 1st month meant first January and 1st day was Sunday. Sarah’s first letter to Margaret is written by child’s clear and beautiful cursive handwriting. She had dated it with the Quaker dating system 1st mo 22nd 1821. In the Quaker letters were used pronouns “thee” and “thy” instead of you. Rogers, “Quietist Quakerism, 1692–C. 1805”, 105–107; Whyman, *The Pen and the People*, 145–151; Ames, *Margaret Fee*, letters, and the Making of Quakerism.

<sup>25</sup>Ames, *Margaret Fee*, letters, and the Making of Quakerism.

<sup>26</sup>Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson Shoosharry 1st mo. 6/18 1838.

<sup>27</sup>Allen, *The Life of William Allen*, 319, 321–322; Dunstan, *Sarah Biller of St Petersburg*, 50.



self-evident and she wanted to be a good daughter. Her father always trusted her.

Sarah encountered a great disappointment when her parents and younger sister Jane decided in the autumn of 1830 to stay the winter months in England because of Jane's health. In the St Petersburg area, the cold winters and repeated influenza epidemics caused serious health problems for the Wheeler family, which in turn made them miss England. British people were not accustomed to the Russian weather conditions. Sarah's letters to Margaret addressed her emotions in the exceptional situation and Sarah sympathized with Margaret, as they both lived in secluded circumstances far away from home and friends. Sarah wrote:

I trust however we shall be united one nor do I doubt that though father and mother forsake us that in infinite mercy the Lord will take us up and watch over us for good as in humbly endeavour to seek his guidance and protection. It seems probable that only William, Charles, myself will remain here. Two of my brothers have been long resident in England and Jane is going to be placed there at school.<sup>28</sup>

The absence of family members was hard for Sarah to take because her affections towards her family were very strong and she had difficulties in making friends in Russia.<sup>29</sup> During the years in Russia, the Wheeler family had many contacts with England. As a Quaker minister, Daniel maintained communion with the Society of Friends in Sheffield.<sup>30</sup> Sarah's elder brothers were sent to study in Britain and later to participate in business there.

The home became quiet after their departure. Sarah's prayer was that the family would be together and no longer separated.<sup>31</sup> Sarah had the feeling that her parents had abandoned them, but her faith in God assured her they were safe. On the other hand, Sarah also trusted her parents' decisions and did not want to challenge them. She trusted that her parents had left them under God's care. Sarah's voice includes depression and

<sup>28</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 8th mo. 10th 1830.

<sup>29</sup> TEMP MSS 366. Daniel Wheeler papers. Volume 4: letters (1817–1839). Box 1: (1/1–1/12) family papers and papers and notebooks relating to his work in Russia. Friends House library.

<sup>30</sup> McMillin, "Quakers in Early Nineteenth-Century Russia", 567–579; Benson, *Quaker Pioneers in Russia*, 48–49; Dunstan, *Sarah Biller of St Petersburg*, 52; Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 7th mo. 6/18 1836.

<sup>31</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 8th mo. 10th 1830.

hopelessness when writing that the family would in the future meet in the after world when God, in undivided grace, had desired and decided.<sup>32</sup>

In 1831, the family received shocking news: Daniel Wheeler informed his family that he felt called by God to go on a missionary journey to the South Seas, Australia, Hobart, Society Islands, and Hawaii. Daniel Wheeler was a forerunner in Quaker missionary work.<sup>33</sup> His vocation and projected long missionary voyage caused Sarah confusion. She described to Margaret the feelings of the family, and she supposed that her father's voyage would be a trial for her mother. However, she admitted that the family was interested in Daniel's work, even though it was challenging for the family and made it now a scattered band. Sarah relied on God and thought that He who had called for the family's sacrifice would still watch and protect them and prove Himself a shield to their beloved father.<sup>34</sup> The situation in the family became more difficult when Sarah's mother died of influenza and Daniel was preparing for the voyage. Daniel began his voyage in the companionship of his son Charles, and it was estimated that their absence would be four years.<sup>35</sup>

Sarah's most important duty was to stay at Shoosharry and to take care of the others, although she had lost her parents and three brothers were far away. Sarah wrote letters to her friends and waited for news from her father's and brother Charles's voyage eagerly. Sarah was ready to admit that her family had richly received things to enjoy and her earnest prayer was that all the proofs of God's love that they had so perpetually received might bind their hearts more closely to the great and gracious Giver of them all. Sarah referred to a Psalm, "He crowned thee with loving kindness and tender mercy", to praise the Lord, which characterizes Sarah's lived religion.<sup>36</sup> She understood the health of family members as a gracious gift from the Lord. Sarah's letters concretized her feelings at Shoosharry,

<sup>32</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 8th mo. 10th 1830. Lord in his unmerited mercy grant that we may all meet at least where we shall be called to part no more and the anticipated separation that waits in this is my most earnest petition.

<sup>33</sup> Stevens, "Travelling ministry", 495–496; Daniel Wheeler to his Children 9th mo. 26th 1832, Daniel Wheeler to Sarah Wheeler 2nd mo. 20th 1833. In Wheeler, *Memoirs of the life and gospel labors of the late Daniel Wheeler*, 109–119.

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 10th mo. 24th 1832.

<sup>35</sup> About Daniel Wheeler's voyage, see Wheeler, *Memoirs of the life and gospel labours of the late Daniel Wheeler*; Beck, *Daniel Wheeler*.

<sup>36</sup> Psalm of David: 103:4.

the anxiety and uncertainty while waiting for news from her father's journey:

And now my Dear Friend I must tell thee we have had a letter lately from my brother Charles—the last day of which is I think 8th mo. 10th 1835. It brings us good tidings of them so far and did not fail to raise in our hearts a feeling of adoring gratitude to Him who has been so graciously pleased to lead about and instruct them and who will I trust still deign to guide and sustain them by his everlasting arm. They were still at Tahiti when my brother wrote but expected to cross to those adjacent island of Maore (Maori). as soon as their sailors who had been ill should be sufficiently recruited.<sup>37</sup>

They have enjoyed almost uninterrupted health and seem to have been mercifully cared for every way, both temporally and spiritually, so that surely both they and we have the abundant cause humbly to thank God and take courage.<sup>38</sup>

Sarah always wanted to fulfil her responsibilities and follow the will of God. Daniel had great confidence in Sarah and he wrote to her to discuss the spiritual lives of his children. He contemplated in his letter to Sarah that his most earnest desire was that his children would not suffer themselves to lose sight of the wondrous mercy that had been so plainly and marvellously extended, nor to let the remembrance of it depart from their minds. Daniel thought that the fear of the Lord kept the heart clean and remain forever.<sup>39</sup> In Daniel's religious thinking, trials guided one to find the right path and peace for the soul. Daniel interpreted that his sons' trials had been greatly blessed in their spiritual good, leading them to seek those things which bring a sense of peace, and support for his soul. Like Daniel, Sarah also worried that her brothers lived abroad without the saving knowledge of the only true God and Jesus Christ. In this way of thinking, suffering was good for the soul and taught thankfulness.<sup>40</sup>

Sarah had no desire herself to enter a world that she saw as polluted.<sup>41</sup> She thought that she was called to tread a solitary path. Sarah wrote that

<sup>37</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 2nd mo. 10/22 1836.

<sup>38</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 7th mo. 6/18 1836.

<sup>39</sup> Wheeler, *Memoirs of the life and gospel labours of the late Daniel Wheeler* (letter to one of his children 2nd month 20th, 1833) 114–115.

<sup>40</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 10th mo. 24th 1832.

<sup>41</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 10th mo. 24th 1832.

she sympathized with people whose trials arose from loneliness, and in this way she told Margaret that she understood her feelings because they both had immigrated and lived in the strange land: “Though it is now nearly 18 years since we first tred in its stone and we still look to England as our home and perhaps the first earthly wish of some of our heart is again to ‘dwell among our own people’ and again take sweet counsel with those with whom we could go to the house of God in company happily the real followers of Jesus are not confined to any country or any home...”<sup>42</sup>

In Sarah’s life, the disintegration of the family and loneliness in isolated circumstances made her seek safety and comfort even more from religion. This led to an experience through which she began to see the repeated bereavements as belonging to her family’s cycle. In her daily life, living her religion gave her consolation and produced the experience which she began to accept as her destiny. Sarah gave her unhesitating submission to the divine will, and living in the middle of her trials, she remembered that her family had received God’s mercies. Sarah was comforted by the thought that every breath depends on the will of the inerrant Father.<sup>43</sup> In the middle of her bereavements and sufferings, she always felt great confidence in the Lord, and she understood she was fulfilling her Quaker conviction.

Sarah felt thankful for the quiet, retired nook that was allotted to her.<sup>44</sup> Analysing her own feelings in solitude, she began to understand some of the peculiar trials that had occurred, but when she contemplated the innumerable mercies that surrounded her family and their utter unworthiness, she felt called upon to bless the Lord and could not desire that their situation would be otherwise. She thought that if she had campaigned against her circumstances at Shoosharry, it would have meant that she did not trust in the divine grace, and that meant unfaithfulness.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 4th mo. 30/6 1836.

<sup>43</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 6th mo. 13/25 1836.

<sup>44</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 10th mo. 24th 1832.

<sup>45</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 10th mo. 24th 1832.

“...EVERY STROKE IS GIVEN BY FATHER’S HAND”: SARAH  
AND THE SAD SHOOSHARRY

In early 1836, at the age of 29, Sarah described to Margaret how she saw the wheel of life carried an irresistible speed, but for her all was unimportant when it does not bear a reference to the eternal future. Sarah thought that it was a mercy that duty and happiness were inseparably linked and most important in her life. She also thought that with steady and persevering endeavours, every duty to the Lord would be performed.<sup>46</sup> Sarah had written about the sickly winter among her countrymen and she always remembered to say how thankful she was when her own family had been permitted to enjoy good health while many were suffering around them.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, she mourned the illnesses and the circumstances of her Christian missionary friends in Siberia and all around the world.<sup>48</sup>

However, the summer of 1836 proved to be a tragic turning point in Sarah’s life and the beginning of a period filled with heavy disappointments and bereavements in a fight against difficult pulmonary diseases in the Wheeler family.<sup>49</sup> William caught a cold and his lungs were affected. Sarah was anxious because William’s health had always been feeble. As the head of the family, William had been responsible for the younger siblings at home as well as for the land-recovery work and his ordinary duties as a foreman.<sup>50</sup> In the following six months, Sarah struggled with the circumstances of William’s illness. Sarah’s letters to Margaret described how Sarah lived her religion during this difficult period and how she saw the Lord’s hand in this tragedy.

During William’s illness, Sarah experienced numerous disappointments. Sarah watched her brother’s declining state of health and his depressed mind. William was passive when he was normally actively engaged in work. Sarah wrote: “I feel that we are still surrounded by mercies that call loudly on our gratitude but I find it difficult at seasons to avoid looking anxiously forward to the coming winter.”<sup>51</sup> She thought

<sup>46</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 2nd mo. 10/22 1836.

<sup>47</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 2nd mo. 10/22 1836.

<sup>48</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 2nd mo. 10/22 1836.

<sup>49</sup> McMillin, *Quakers in Early Nineteenth-Century Russia*, 567–579; Benson, *Quaker Pioneers in Russia*, 48–49; Dunstan, *Sarah Biller of St. Petersburg*, 52; Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 7th mo. 6/18 1836.

<sup>50</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 6th mo. 13/25 1836.

<sup>51</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 7th mo. 6/18 1836.

that only the possibility was to commit the family to the Lord's hand, hoping that He would direct their steps and whatever lay in store for them, be it trial or suffering. Sarah trusted that the Lord would vouchsafe them according to their need, as He had hitherto been rich in mercies.<sup>52</sup> In Sarah's Christian conviction, people would stay healthy if they faithfully followed divine grace.<sup>53</sup>

Sarah was obliged to accept the next severe disappointment when her brother William travelled to England and settled on the Isle of Wight because of his bronchitis.<sup>54</sup> Sarah and her siblings felt in Shoosharry that they had lost their safety after William's departure. Sarah confessed that the loss of William's company left a feeling of emptiness in their enjoyments and deprived the home of one of its most decent and valued inhabitants. She remembered, however, to say that they were still thankful for the many undeserved mercies that yet remained to them.<sup>55</sup> Sarah received a great consolation from her religion when she thought that it was divine will for William to go. Her confidence was not shaken, and she trusted that the same good hand that took William forth would sustain and direct those who remained. However, Sarah admitted that they felt themselves to be a feeble band. Sarah's letter to Margaret illustrates Sarah's thinking in her religion:

I believe I can truly say our trust is in the Lord alone and after the large experience we have had of his unfailing goodness, we should indeed be faithless could we doubt that He will still be with us and grant us light and grace according to our need of watchfulness and a constant looking into Him be but maintained on our past. I feel the indispensable nature of these conditions and humbly hope thro' (through) divine brace to be enabled to perform them and then I cannot doubt that a peaceful resting in His will, will he mercifully vouchsafe even tho' (though) discouragement may often abound. What a mercy is it in this fluctuating world that none of its changes can take away from the soul of the humble pilgrim that peace which was our dear Redeemer's precious legacy to his followers and which we still find to be sickly shed abroad at seasons in the heart by Him who is our faithful to his promises and who remains the same yesterday to day for ever.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 7th mo. 6/18 1836.

<sup>53</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 4th mo. 30/6 1836.

<sup>54</sup> Wheeler, *Memoirs of the life and gospel labors of the late Daniel Wheeler*, 318–319.

<sup>55</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 11th mo. 5/17 1836.

<sup>56</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 8th mo. 17/27 1836.

Sarah hoped that family members and friends would be optimistic about William's health and they should take a cue from his courage. Sarah saw mercies vouchsafed William everywhere, when the Lord had been pleased to raise up for him in his retreat very good friends who seem disposed to give assistance and solace.<sup>57</sup>

Sarah felt a great desperation and contradictory emotions when William stayed so far away. For her, it was difficult to wait patiently and contentedly when her dear brother would have needed her and the assiduous attentions of affection would have been so valuable to him. Sarah would have liked to take care of William, but she understood that her duty was to stay at Shooharry with her siblings Jane and Daniel, especially as Jane—the youngest in the family—needed Sarah's attendance and care. Sarah prayed for grace to cheerfully acquiesce in this situation and to commit her into the Hands of the heavenly Parent, whose loving kindness and tender mercy had been thus far been so conspicuously manifested. Sarah admitted to Margaret that the bitter tear will at seasons fall, but the same she said that these kinds of feelings were weak and faithless and need to be subdued by the power of divine grace until God's will be done “remains to be the only desire of the chastened soul”<sup>58</sup>

William Wheeler died on the Isle of Wight in November 1836. The news of William's death nearly crushed Sarah. She wrote she felt like sinking beneath the weight of nature's anguish and the wound was incurable. The siblings Sarah, Daniel Jr., and Jane were deeply afflicted in Shooharry. Sarah complained that brother Joshua in England had not been with William at the time of his death. Joshua as a family member mourned his brother, and Sarah wrote that she could not but humbly hope that the death of one brother may prove the Divine Blessing—the spiritual life of another.<sup>59</sup> It was Sarah's duty to write letters to their friends and inform them of William's death. The sorrow and great bereavement did not shake Sarah's faith. “I feel that I can now more than ever adopt as my own the language of David:<sup>60</sup> ‘The Rock of my strength, and my refuge, is in God’.”<sup>61</sup> Daniel Wheeler Sr. received a letter with the message of William's

<sup>57</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 11th mo. 5/17 1836.

<sup>58</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 11th mo. 5/17 1836.

<sup>59</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 1st mo. 19/31 1837.

<sup>60</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 12th mo. 29th 1836

<sup>61</sup> Psalm 18: “In God is my salvation and glory: the Rock of my strength, and my refuge, is in God.”

death after six months, when he was on his way to Hobarton (Hobart town).<sup>62</sup>

Sarah's letters tell about her feelings and her deep faith in divine guidance also in the case of the death of her beloved brother and her deep sorrow. Sarah referred again to a Psalm and David's words on the day of his calamity, the "Lord is my stay".<sup>63</sup> In Sarah's lived religion, her family had abundant cause to trust in God in the future and they had found Him hitherto a very present help in every time of need. Sarah thought that the same good Hand which had thus early conducted her brother to his eternal home was still around for those who remained to bless and to give unspoken support.<sup>64</sup> In Sarah's faith, even though she felt extremely depressed under the sense of "the removal" of her beloved brother, she experienced such a realization that he was now at the bosom of the Redeemer.<sup>65</sup> Sarah managed to console herself by thinking that life seems so brief and eternity so near that it seems childish to feel sorrow for a separation.<sup>66</sup>

Jane, Sarah's only sister, became ill a couple of months after William's death. Sarah wrote to Margaret about her new severe trial. Jane had caught a cold, which soon caused inflammation in the lungs, and she suffered from the same illness as William. Sarah spoke about the alarming illness "with which it has pleased our heavenly Parent to visit her". This meant that Sarah's time was taken up with attending to Jane. She informed Margaret that her days and nights were spent watching Jane.<sup>67</sup> In Sarah's thinking, the illness and her trial came from God's hand. Like her Brother Daniel, Sarah feared that there would seem to be every reason Jane would follow their brother William to the grave.<sup>68</sup> Sarah wrote that she had not had time for leisure or rest, and she admitted that at seasons she sank under the deep anxieties that overwhelmed her but she trusted in the mercy of the heavenly Father. In Sarah's world view, she was on the path of duty and this way was predefined for her.<sup>69</sup> The merciful Father would

<sup>62</sup> Wheeler, *Memoirs of the life and gospel labors of the late Daniel Wheeler*, 318–319.

<sup>63</sup> Psalm 18:18–19.

<sup>64</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 1st mo. 19/31 1837.

<sup>65</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 1st mo. 19/31 1837.

<sup>66</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 1st mo. 19/31 1837.

<sup>67</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 3rd mo. 30th 1837; Sarah Wheeler, *Some particulars of the last illness and death of Jane Wheeler daughter of late Daniel Wheeler*, 3–6.

<sup>68</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 3rd mo. 30th 1837.

<sup>69</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 4th mo. 9/21 1837.



not lay more on her than He would give her strength to bear, as Sarah wrote: “At times indeed I do feel very faithless and ready to be overwhelmed but thus far I desire humbly to bless the Lord for all the mercies which He mingles in our cup of trials.”<sup>70</sup> Sarah saw around her the mercies of the Lord when they had friends around who did all in their power to lighten Sarah’s burden.

After an illness of six months, Jane died at the age of 21. This paralysed Sarah, and the sorrow caused a break in Sarah’s and Margaret’s pen friendship.<sup>71</sup> Sarah’s silence lasted about four months, and she finally summoned the courage to take up her pen. Sarah felt unable to return at once to the ordinary duties of life. Afterwards, she wrote how she had gone through a difficult period of severe suffering and she described how every exertion was painful. This was the period Sarah needed to accept the death of her sister and understand the meaning of God’s hand in the bereavements and sufferings of her family: “But, I bless the Lord that he now again enables me to go cheerfully on my way & thó my tears often flow when I call to mind our heavy bereavements.”<sup>72</sup> Sarah felt that consoling assurance was granted them and the mercy of the dear Redeemer gave those who had left them rest and peace and when natures of regrets are silenced. She thought that only they could wish for those they love than blessed commemoration. “I feel that we have rather excuse to thank God and take courage in a review of his mercies to those who are taken than selfishly refine over our own loss in their removal”. Speaking of the death of her brother and sister, she used the concept of removal, and she thought that a glorious reunion awaited them in their Father’s house. Two days after Jane’s death, Sarah wrote: “This scene of suffering has at length closed on our dear Jane for ever, and her purified spirit, we feel an humble confidence, has entered better home, which she so much longed to reach.”<sup>73</sup> After Jane’s death, the impression conveyed to the reader is one of tangible deep sorrow. Later, when she had recovered and had time to grieve, she mentioned the mercy the Lord had given when she had had some of her friends with her during the difficult winter months.

<sup>70</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 4th mo. 9/21 1837.

<sup>71</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 10 mo. 8/26 1837; Greenwood, *The Story of Daniel Wheeler in Russia*, 16.

<sup>72</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 10 mo. 8/26 1837.

<sup>73</sup> Wheeler, *Some particulars of the last illness and death of Jane Wheeler daughter of late Daniel Wheeler*, 27.

After the death of her sister Jane, Sarah waited constantly for news of her father's and brother's arrival in England. She also began to plan her own journey to England—her native country, as she called it. Sarah lived in a lonely place on the Shoosharry estate, where she could feel like a prisoner without parents and siblings; only her brother Daniel stayed in Russia with her. In her deep sorrow, Sarah was anxious to know whether her father had received the letters concerning Jane's illness and death. Sarah's worries continued because she could not forget the dangers of her father and brother's long voyage. Additionally, Sarah felt it painful to send news of Jane's death. It would distress her father, as Sarah wrote that Jane was his favourite child.<sup>74</sup> The situation seems contradictory when Sarah was afraid for them, but she remembered that "He who has led them in safety through so many dangers will still we trust be near them to preserve from every ill and to His guardian providence we desire to commit them". Sarah felt that her brother and father were in the hand of One who cannot err. Sarah seemed to have taken a view that none of them would be surprised if a similar summons would be sent to them and their trials would continue in the future.<sup>75</sup> However, in the future Sarah saw that her duty would be plain: she would be her Father's companion and contribute to the comfort of his declining years.

During Jane's sickness, Sarah had written a diary in which she commented on her sister's status and the progression of the illness. Later she published a booklet, *Some particulars of the last illness and death of Jane Wheeler*. The introduction of this book is dated 1840, but Sarah delivered it as a handwritten copy as early as the spring of 1838 to her friends. This booklet was published in 1867. Several such memory books (accounts) were published in the nineteenth century and were usual in the community of the Society of Friends and among British missionaries.<sup>76</sup> In her diary, Sarah gives detailed information about Jane's illness and her mood day by day. This describes Sarah's emotions in the distressing situation and it is part of her grieving process, but the text has other aims. Sending informative letters, extracts of letters, and journals was part of the Quaker

<sup>74</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 4th mo. 9/21 1837.

<sup>75</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 10th mo. 8/26 1837.

<sup>76</sup> Swan, *Memoir of the late Mrs. Paterson wife of the Rev. Dr. Paterson of St. Petersburg; Memoir of the late Hannah Kilham*.

These memory books present modern religious letter culture in the transitional period in the early nineteenth century. The memory books are a tribute to the dead family member or friend and books belonged to the culture of mourning.

culture of keeping contacts. In the preface, she says that the book was written for the absent members of the family because they were distant. The aim of the later edition was that the book could be instructive for young people of Jane's age. Sarah wrote that the book could lead young people of Jane's age to think in time of health and the will of God.<sup>77</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Sarah Wheeler's relationship with God and faith was an inseparable part of her personality and her Quaker identity. Her writings have been described in the context of the Quaker letter culture and they are lauded for her genuine submission to the divine will and acknowledgement of all the mercies experienced in the midst of such great and complicated trials.<sup>78</sup> God was present in all her daily duties and Sarah's deep faith defined her relationship to her parents, siblings, and friends. Young Sarah was shy, and as an adult, she has been remembered for the beauty of her character.<sup>79</sup> Additionally, her husband William Tanner writes how Sarah had a force of character, with a deep tenderness of feeling.<sup>80</sup> Sarah wrote about her trials and sufferings, and this was the way she lived her religion and Quaker conviction.

Sarah's letters convey how the sense of bereavement developed in the experiences. Sarah was dispirited and her bereavements influenced how she now looked at her life and her future. This process of constructing experience in the middle of deepest sorrow directed her more towards the Kingdom of God than her life on Earth. She began to see more clearly the frailty and the vulnerability of life. Sarah wrote that the last five years had brought her different feelings because she had not earlier realized the uncertainty of life. The trials made Sarah familiar with death and the shortness of life. Through her bereavements, Sarah felt that she would not be surprised to be summoned, and she would desire to live "with the wing guiding and the lamp burning so as to be ready to go forth and meet her

<sup>77</sup>Wheeler, *Some particulars of the last illness and death of Jane Wheeler daughter of late Daniel Wheeler*, 3–6.

<sup>78</sup>About family Tanner and the Quaker circle and connections between the Quaker families, see Holton Stanley, Sandra, *Quaker Women*.

<sup>79</sup>"Introduction: Letters to Daniel Wheeler in England from his family in Russia 1832–3", Daniel Wheeler archive. Friends House, London.

<sup>80</sup>Ford, John (ed), *Memoir of William Tanner, compiled chiefly from autobiographical memoranda*, 194.

Lord when He pleased to call her”.<sup>81</sup> Her bereavements processed her experience of submission to God’s will and her thankfulness for all the mercies they had received earlier was connected to this submission. In this situation, Sarah began to think about eternal life and mercy, and now she thought that she was but a pilgrim and a stranger and eternity was at hand. This was the way she lived her religion, into which she had been raised, which she had learnt, and which she had experienced. As a Quaker woman, she had always known how suffering belonged to life and the Quaker identity, but now she had learnt and experienced suffering and come to understand it through her tragic losses.

In her letters, Sarah described her strong faith in God, and she tried to strengthen Margaret’s faith and teach her how she should feel. Sarah wanted to guide Margaret to find God’s almighty power and to be ready to receive His mercies. Sarah’s letters to Margaret present individual emotions in the middle of sorrow and distressing circumstances, as well as how Sarah began to process this as an experience. In the larger context, her feelings and experiences present a daughter’s duty and status in the Quaker community in isolated circumstances during the time of British evangelical activity connected to British imperialism. Sarah’s letters to Margaret and British missionaries around the world as well as the memory book of her sister Jane transmitted Sarah’s experience to a much larger audience. In her letters, Sarah gave written form to her emotions, suffering, and experiences, and she forwarded them to Margaret Finlayson and the Quaker network. Her individual experiences would give a model of how to live through the trials and how to continue life and to prepare to receive bereavements in the future.

Planning her future, Sarah wrote that everything was in the Lord’s hands, and she thought about the life that she would desire to live so as to be ready to go forth and meet her Lord when He pleased to call her.<sup>82</sup> Sarah left Russia in the summer of 1838 and met her father and brother in England. Her bereavements were not over, and within the next ten years she lost her father and three brothers. Sarah married Minister William Tanner in 1849 and had a happy marriage. She participated in her

<sup>81</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 10th mo. 8/26 1837.

<sup>82</sup> Sarah Wheeler to Margaret Finlayson 1st mo. 6/18 1838, 3rd mo. 25 1838, 5th mo. 7th 1838.

husband's religious work in the Society of Friends and even occasionally spoke at the meetings.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Ford, (ed.), *Memoir of William Tanner*, 194.

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