Letter Writing as Storytelling: The Life of Martha Murray as Told in the *Mission News Letter*

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Abstract

Utilising the growing interdisciplinary discourse between literary criticism and historiography, especially prevalent in the multiple genres of life writing, the letters of Martha Murray, the first single missionary in Nyasaland, are read as a story. By communicating using letters in the *Mission News Letter*, Martha Murray is an example of the powerful role that evangelical spirituality played in this young woman's life and her readers. In reading these letters as a story, the elements of a narrative are identified, namely a protagonist, setting, plot, and antagonistic forces. The story told by these letters formed the imagination of the readers and informed them on the vocation of women and the realities of missional life. The powerful role of religion in self-identification and agency is affirmed within the bigger narrative of the late 19th-century and early 20th-century South African public.

Keywords: Martha Murray; *Mission News Letter*; letters; life writing; Nyasaland Mission

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Introduction

This article was developed from a paper delivered at the yearly Church History Society of Southern Africa conference. The conference's overall theme was: "Storytelling in the history of the Christian churches in Southern Africa," which invited a creative reimagining of the different modes of storytelling. This focus on storytelling leads, amongst others, to the navigating of a growing interdisciplinary discourse between literary criticism, historiography, and other social science disciplines, e.g. sociology. This interdisciplinary approach is especially recognisable in the scholarly analysis of a wide corpus of texts classified as life writing.

Life writing itself is a broad, difficult-to-define literary category. Smith and Watson (2001, 253) list no less than 60 genres of Life Narrative that include familiar and more obscure, yet inventive, examples such as diaries, autobiographies, eco biographies, conversion narratives, memoirs, jockographies, etc.

This article focuses on the epistle or letter. The letter in its various forms is both a crucial primary source used in historical reconstruction and has also been the object of scrutiny in the literary criticism field. In this article, both these elements, historical and literary, will be identified. The article will also explore another possibility, namely, that letters contain narratives that have the potential to form perceptions and promote possibilities. It will be argued that letters contain all narrative elements and can be read and interpreted as such. In this format, it becomes a powerful source of creating alternative understandings of the role of women and their vocation in the mission field.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, many women—single and married—were found on mission fields in different parts of the world. The letter was one of these women's most important forms of communication. In these contexts, private letters were used in a public manner, as was seen by the introduction of so-called newsletters that disseminated mission narratives to a broader audience.

The focus of this article is the *Mission News Letter*[1] and the letters of a female missionary, Martha Murray, as it is published in this newsletter. The article starts with an overview of the methodology used and the parameters of this study. This will be followed by an introduction to the *Mission News Letter*, as well as Martha Murray. The last part of the article will evaluate the role of letter writing as storytelling, within the context of the vocation of women in the mission field.

Letters and Life Writing

There exists a complex relationship between historiography and life writing. Life writing is a general term "for writing that takes a life, one's own or another's, as its

1 The original spelling *Mission News Letter* as it was used in the historical texts will be kept throughout. If references are made to newsletters in general the spelling will be "newsletter."

subject" (Smith and Watson 2010, 4). This type of writing has received mixed reactions from scholars, especially historians, because of the porous boundaries of this umbrella term and its perceived subjective nature.

As Smith and Watson (2010, 1) remark:

> What could be simpler to understand than the act of people representing what they know best, their own lives? Yet this act is anything but simple, for the teller of his or her own story becomes, in the act of narration, both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance and contemplation.

Life writing is not interchangeable with biography, but it is also in biography that the boundaries between biography and fiction are sometimes exploited (Smith and Watson 2010, 9). Similarly, fiction and life writing are sometimes confused, as indicated by Smith and Watson (2010, 9):

> Life writing and the novel share features we ascribe to fictional writing: plot, dialogue, setting, characterization, and so on. But they are distinguished by their relationship to and claims about a referential world. We might helpfully think of what fiction represents as "*a* world," and what life writing refers to as "*the* world (Smith and Watson 2010, 9).

In this article, letters will be respected as historical records and vehicles for a story. Letters have always been a prominent primary source in the writing of history, especially from the eras when this was the most prevalent form of communication. This article focuses on letter writing within a specific context, namely that of communication to and from the mission field. The use of letters in a public document, like a newsletter, will be interrogated to understand its role in the formation of an image of mission, women in mission, religious convictions, and how these letters validated a vocational language that formed a part of public discourse surrounding the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa in the late 19th and early 20th century. These letters will be investigated as agents of storytelling (including all the elements of a narrative) and of creating a spiritual language in which vocation makes sense. Letters, in this sense, also have a sense of agency on different levels.

Smith and Watson (2001, 273) define letters as directed, and dated correspondence with a specific addressee and signatory. Letters seem to be private things, "but in the late eighteenth century, they began to be understood as both private correspondence expressing the inner feelings of the writing subject and as public documents to be shared within a literary circle" (Smith and Watson 2001, 273). This meant that letters became "vehicles through which information is circulated, social roles enacted, relationships secured, often in a paradoxical mix of intimacy and formality" (Smith and Watson 2001, 273). Stanley (2015, 245) describes the "porous borders between the letter and other genres," which will be explored further in this article.

Letters became an important means of disseminating missionary information. The recent work of Angharad Eyre (2023) provides a fresh perspective regarding the literary works surrounding the theme of women and mission. In her book, Eyre investigates "how elements of the female missionary character might be present in nineteenth-century novels and life-writing..."

Although her focus is on 19th-century England and its evangelical missionary culture, there are quite a few points of contact with the evangelical mission culture of the late 19th and early 20th-century South African context. The mission work initiated by the Huguenot Missionary Society in Wellington, spiritually inspired by the writings and life of Andrew Murray Jr, created a mission culture not unlike its evangelical counterpart in England.

Eyre's research into a so-called missionary public is very helpful, especially in investigating the different ways of maintaining this public with narratives and testimonies in various genres:

> Maintaining this powerful missionary public and disseminating the mission's influence was the task of missionary writing. Missionaries were prodigious writers; letters, reports, newsletters, biographies and memoires abound in the archives of the mission societies (Eyre 2023, 4).

The English mission enthusiast public was open to these different types of spiritual narratives because many evangelical families frowned upon the reading of fiction. For that reason, biographies and newsletters became the staple diet of this reading public (Eyre 2023, 4). However, Eyre (2023, 4) believes that "female missionary biographies and newsletters have been somewhat overlooked in mission history." Many of these women are not always recognised in the writing of history, or, according to Eyre (2023, 6), their religious experiences are not taken seriously.

Many literary scholars writing on Victorian women from the perspective of secular feminism disregard the role religion played in forming women's identity (Eyre 2023, 6). These scholars would focus on instrumentalist approaches to interpret women's expression of belief (e.g. mission as opportunity, or mission as the sublimation of sexual drives).

> Such instrumental interpretations fail to recognise the authenticity of women's religious experience and neglects to examine the complex ways in which emotion was intertwined with evangelical faith for women in the nineteenth century (Eyre 2023, 5).

Her work reveals religion not just as a patriarchal life force but "an empowering aspect of a woman's life" that must be considered when reconstructing history or reading texts. According to Eyre (2023, 8), some modern-day critical discourses refuse to accept the validity of 19th-century women's affective discourse, therefore missing the inherent potential power that these experiences contain:

> Evangelicalism's emphasis on simplicity and feeling in religion, combined with its privileging of the individual relationship with God, rather than adherence to tradition or authority, allowed women to write and act within the evangelical culture on an almost equal footing with men (Eyre 2023, 8)

Letters give insight into these experiences. Letters in the context of slow communication encourage pondering and rereading. Liz Stanley (2015, 243) calls a letter an uninterrupted presence. Time passes between the writing and the reception of letters. According to Stanley (2015, 244), personal letters have a "simulacra of presence." Even if the author is not an acquaintance and thus unfamiliar, a reader can still become acquainted with him or her through the tone and content of the letter.

Heather Walton's (2015, 3) discussion of "spiritual life writing" can be a fruitful conversation partner with the above. She defines "spiritual life writing" as the spinning of threads "between the sacred and the everyday." For her, it entails "the spiritual potential of writing about experience" (Walton 2015, 7). According to Walton (2015, 7), "a reflexive turn in contemporary culture has generated a new respect for the knowledge that can be gained by turning curious attention to the intense vitality of everyday life" and that the grasp of what is of "utmost significance" is just as likely to be emotional as rational (Walton 2015, 7). A spiritual interpretation of life's events and its subjective character has been an established point of reference through the ages.

Martha Murray's interpretation of events was spiritual, and her writing to a missionary public furthered a spiritual agenda and used a vocabulary that her readers understood.

In the late 19th century and early 20th century in the mission circles of South Africa, the *Mission News Letter* played a very important role in disseminating letters to a wider audience.

The *Mission News Letter*

In 1878, the Huguenot Mission Society was started for students at the Huguenot Seminary in Wellington and other mission supporters. From its inception, the Society, from time to time, sent out an informal newsletter to interested parties. As in the words of the editor Abbie Ferguson: "…those who were forming mission circles, and interesting the young folks in missions, must know about the missionaries they were helping to support, must read their letters, and know of the work they were doing" (*Mission News Letter*, February 1901).

In 1886, a monthly printed *Mission News Letter* became the official newsletter of the Huguenot Mission Society followed in 1888 by the Dutch Version, *De Zendingbode* (which had a wider circulation). This newsletter became the platform for missionaries to share their experiences via letter writing from the various mission fields. Within the parameters of this article, the *Mission News Letter* will be used as the main source,

focusing on the editions published from 1886 to 1906. After 1906, the *Mission News Letter* in this format was not published anymore.

The *Mission News Letter* contained letters from the mission field, news about missionaries' activities and their needs, a section called "Seminary Corner" which contained news on old students and a special section directed to children.

Miss Abbie Ferguson (as she was known) described it as "a messenger that God will use to his glory" and "our little messenger" (Pienaar 2023, 124). She asked for prayers: "And will you dear friends, pray that our little paper may be truly a messenger from the Lord, stirring up the hearts of his people to love and prayer for missionaries and their great work among the heathen" (Pienaar 2023, 125).

Murray (2023, 463) evaluated this newsletter and concluded that it "can be seen as the most significant and valuable source in the research and 'reconstructing' of the mission work of the DRC during 1880-1905." The letters in the *Mission News Letter* were mostly written by female graduates of the Huguenot Seminary, Huguenot University College, and Friedenheim. Letters were also written by male missionaries from the Mission Institute in Wellington, the Boeren Zending Instituut, Worcester, and the Theological Seminary, Stellenbosch (Murray 2023, 463). Miss Ferguson's knowledge of these women formed an intimate link between past and present students and their exploits.

In reading the newsletter, some important aspects have to be taken into account. For example, the time difference between the writing of the letters and their arrival, as well as the time between arrival and printing. The other factor is the possible editing of these letters, where Miss Ferguson sometimes would only share summaries or excerpts with the readers from the letters she received. An average of three months passed between the writing of the letter and its publishing. Family members receiving letters would also pass them on to Miss Ferguson, who would publish extracts.

Martha Murray and Her Letters

This article focuses on the role of letters as a means of storytelling. A female missionary, Martha Murray, and her letters will be employed as a case study to further develop this argument.

Martha Murray[2] was a remarkable woman. She was the first single woman missionary to be sent out by the *Vrouwen Zending Bond* (Women's Missionary Society). The *Vrouwen Zending Bond* was founded in 1890 with the following intent: "*Deze Bond*

2 For the rest of the article Martha Murray will be referred to as "Martha." Because of the intimate character of her letters as well as the various "Murrays" within the same context, it was opted to use her name rather than her surname. Within the bigger argument of this article, Martha is identified as the protagonist which is a further motivation for referring to her by her first name.

stelt hem zich ten doel de samewerking te verkrijgen van de Christen vrouwen van het land, ten einde Evangelie-arbeid te bevorderen onder de vrouwen en kinderen van het heidendom, alsmede van allen die God niet kennen"[3] (Joubert and Murray 2020, 102). With this goal in mind, it focused on the work in Nyasaland, where Martha was sent to teach the young women at Mvera Mission Station and to start a small hostel. The Vrouwen Zending Bond funded her work. To put this in perspective, it can be mentioned that she was the fourth missionary and the first single woman to be sent to Nyasaland. Martha arrived in Nyasaland in September 1893, but the first letter she wrote was in the *Mission News Letter* of January/February 1895. The letter is dated September 1894.

She was sent to teach girls because the mission authorities had realised that if only men were taught, "women would stay behind" (Cronje 1981, 39). Martha started a hostel for girls that with time formed the pattern for other stations (Cronje 1981, 50). In these schools, girls were taught basic reading and writing skills. Another goal of the schools was to lead the girls to Christ and form in them a Christian character, focusing on hygiene, nutrition, and childcare. Four of the first six women who were baptised in 1897 came from this "tehuis" (hostel). By 1910, there were 300 girls in these hostels at different mission stations.

The letters that Martha wrote to Miss Ferguson (some published in the *Mission News Letter*) are multilayered. For this article, the content of the letters will be scrutinised to focus on the following three aspects: her reflection on her vocation and meditations; her sharing of information with regards to geography, work at the station, people and events (which sometimes is found in the Children's Corner); and her prayer requests that focus on difficulties she and fellow missionaries experienced.

These letters are also important because we have so little information on the life of Martha Murray in official sources. It is deduced that she left Mvera in 1906. In the work of Dreyer (1910), who is an important source for information about people active in the Dutch Reformed Church, only a very vague paragraph is found on the life of Martha, referring to her as "*Zij was de eerste van vele vertegenwoordigsters van de Vrouwen Zending Bond die daar een heerlijk werk doen*"[4] (Dreyer 1910, 59). In the period 1895–1906, we find about 18 of her letters as well as references to her in letters of her fellow missionaries at Mvera Station. Although this article focuses on the genre of letters and how it can be read from a narrative perspective, it can also be seen as important because, in these personal letters, a life comes to the fore, which is not recognised in depth in other official sources.

Smith and Watson (2010, 235) provide a "toolkit" or various strategies for reading life narratives. Some of these strategies are valuable analytical tools to employ whilst

3 "The goal of this society is to harness the cooperation of Christian women in the country to further Gospel work under the women and children under the heathen and all that does not know God."

4 "She was the first of many representatives of the Women Mission Board who worked there."

reflecting on Martha's letters, which can be interpreted as a form of self-representation. Smith and Watson explain:

> …[T]he historically situated practices of self-representation may take many guises as narrators selectively engage their lived experience and situate their social identities through personal storytelling (Smith and Watson 2010, 18).

The strategies that will be employed to address Martha's multifaceted self-representation are agency (2010, 235), authority (2010, 236), the narrating I (2010, 238), the role of bodies (2010, 240), the reading public (2010, 243), narrative plots and patterns used to structure the self (2010, 246), and space (2010, 248).

Letters Reflecting on Vocation

In a compelling letter, Martha Murray presents a testimony to her vocation but also a lens for understanding the newsletter as an important vehicle in her own life.

In the *Mission News Letter* of January/February 1895, Martha reflects on a railroad journey she made a year earlier to Oudsthoorn, a few weeks before she left for Nyasaland. She shared the compartment with a "gentleman" who was also an "elder." In hearing her plans for the future, he was quite shocked and "could not understand why a lady should go to distant Central Africa to work among the heathens. It was a work, he said, that men should do, not ladies."

He was concerned that she would miss home or realise that her decision was a mistake. He shared that he would like to receive feedback on her experience. Martha answered him:

> I said he could only do so by subscribing to the *Mission News Letter*, which he gladly promised to do on condition that after I have been a year in Central Africa I should write through the *Mission News Letter* how I liked working among the heathen, and whether I regretted going to them.

Martha then uses this medium to communicate to this anonymous man, by saying:

> And now let me say, just in a few words, that by the grace of God I love the heathen, I love the work, and although through ignorance of the language I have been unable to do as much as I should have wished, yet I rejoice to see and know what is done by those who have mastered the language.

Martha's letter is suffused with vocational language and praise, a language that she assumes her audience would understand. She perceives her calling as a great honour and "that our Lord must have our best," even if it is defective. She formulates her own understanding of the missionary endeavour, integrating the words of Jesus: "If we are

constrained by the love of Christ, we will think nothing of distance, nations or languages" (*Mission News Letter* January/February, 1895).

In the June 1895 edition, she refers to an event where Mr Murray, one of the missionaries, was attacked by a leopard and the decision that he and his wife would go back home for a while. The question raised was whether Martha could stay alone at the station or did she have to go home as well. She opted to stay:

> The dark cloud with which this year opened for us here at Mvera is passing by. We see God's hand in it clearly from beginning to end (*Mission News Letter* June, 1895)

She stayed alone for a while when the Murrays went home

> After much prayer, and assured of a faithful Heavenly Father's care, I have decided to remain here in the new house with my little family and to continue my work amongst the girls, which is becoming more and more interesting. I am perfectly willing to remain alone and happy to carry out much-loved work. It would be hard to leave the work and the dear girls to go back to their old life. And now that I know more of the language I begin to feel that I have a greater hold on them (*Mission News Letter*, June 1895)

In the Newsletter of January 1896, she reflects on the fact that she had been at the mission station for two years: "Tomorrow it will be two years since I have arrived here, and I have had nothing but goodness and mercy all along."

We do not just see something of her enthusiasm in her own words but also in letters that other workers at the Mvera Station wrote and in which they referred to her:

> Miss Murray has trained the girls very well. I was surprised to see how well they do their work. They can wash quite well already. I was surprised to see how attached they are to her and how sorry they feel after having done anything that displeases her (*Mission News Letter* January 1896 - letter from Miss Martha Zondagh)

In a letter from Mrs AC Murray of Mvera reference is also made to Martha's work:

> Miss Murray is to go into the girls' home, as it will soon be ready. She has already one girl of whom she is quite sure, as her mother brought her herself, and says that there is no husband in question (*Mission News Letter* January, 1895).

In the *Mission News Letter* of January 1898, Martha reflects on several years of work:

> My dear Miss Ferguson,
>
> I have so much and such glorious news to tell you which will interest you and the many, many dear friends in the South who have been labouring in prayer these past seven years for our dear Nyassa Mission, that I do not know where to begin.

She refers to testimonies of 21 people who wanted to be Christ's followers, and goes on:

> The Lord has been preparing men, women, and young people these past seven years and now comes the precious fruits. Since last year we have with joy noticed the work of grace in the hearts of some of our dear people, and we have often said to one another the awakening cannot be far off.

In her letters, insight into her own understanding of her role is found, which she communicates in the evangelical language of the mission movement, which entails an awareness of these women's relationship with the Lord. She communicates in the *Mission News Letter* of September 1901: "I asked each one personally whether she had given her heart to God." The spirituality of Andrew Murray and the Huguenot Seminary is deeply ingrained in her language and the work they used in the field:

> We do realize that what we prayed for and claimed by faith during the week of united prayer at the beginning of the year is being fulfilled. We took the subjects given in Rev. Andrew Murray's "Key to the Missionary Problem". We praise God for that book and all it has done (*Mission News Letter*, July 1902).

As time passed, Martha also wrote meditations for the *News Letter*, as is seen in the September 1903 edition (which she wrote on 7 April), with the heading "Mercies Ever New":

> There is not a shadow of a doubt that the Mighty God is doing His own glorious work in our midst, fulfilling His holy purposes in and through each of His children. He is working through the boys in the out-schools. Many write encouraging letters and tell of the blessing in their work.

She refers to a prayer by Dr Andrew Murray for the doubling of their stations in five years:

> It is four years since we commenced asking for it, and we have now doubled our stations. It is good to see how our numbers are extending, and yet there is much, so much, land left in utter darkness. Our faith is in God, and we cry unto Him to pour out His Spirit on all flesh. We join in the prayer for a world-wide revival (*Mission News Letter*, September 1903).

In the above snippets of letters, one can trace the growth of Martha Murray in her almost 10 years in Nyasaland. She narrates the story of the mission but also revisits her own understanding of her vocation. For the readers who have never travelled, her letters also contained images of foreign lands and adventures, which, no doubt, like any good storybook, would have conjured up images of the geographical surroundings of Mvera Station. In describing her geographical surroundings, another element of narrative elements, namely that of setting, can be identified.

Letters Describing the Scene/Setting

As the editor, Miss Ferguson placed snippets from the letters in the newsletter to create an image for the audience—a picture of nature and context. References are also made to the history of specific stations and the people who live and work in them. These images informed the reader's imagination.

Some examples from Martha Murray's letters were placed in the March 1895 edition:

- Mrs Murray and myself were alone for three days last week. The gentlemen went down to the lake to see about a new road, and returned with two reeds and three water bucks.

- Our first rains have begun, and we have had several thunderstorms already, quite a month earlier than last year. The country looks lovely after the rains and the geese and the ducks enjoy the young grass as well as refreshing showers.

- We had our first watermelons and muskmelons last week, the former quite as nice as our home ones. We also have granadillas and papaws in abundance this season.

- Today a big swarm of locusts passed our station and almost entirely destroyed our garden.

- Mr Murray has translated the Book of Esther into Chinyanja. We have only had the New Testament in Chinyanja, but now we have Genesis and Esther as well. The children are delighted by it.

And from the April 1898 edition:

- There is so much to tell you about Nyasaland. We have a beautiful vegetable garden, our own cattle, our own rice, and our own wheat that grows along the lake, and lovely banana farms on its banks. Among the wild animals are the hyenas that often come to the kraal for cattle. Lions are quite near the Station, but we think the leopards are more dangerous than the lions. Then we have elephants and crocodiles. (*Mission News Letter*, April 1898)

Martha also wrote for the Children's section. In her letters, she relates events and episodes and tells stories about the children at the station. In doing this, she creates the scenery and helps children to imagine her context. She positively affirms the children's letters that were sent to her:

> But I have often looked out for letters from some of you, and want to remind you of the words of King Solomon of old, "As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from the far country" (*Mission News Letter*, April 1895).

She tells the children about the schools:

> Whenever, I see the results of the examinations and the names of those who have passed, I think of the great privilege you have in comparison with the children of Nyassaland. If you could only see two or three hundred of these naked children (except for quarter of a yard or less of cloth around the waste), how your hearts would go out to pity them, and I am sure more than one of you would soon be led to say: "Here am I; send me, send me"

> We are hoping and praying that some day we may have our own evangelists from among our own boys, who would be able to go to places where the climate is too unhealthy for Europeans.

These different ways of setting the stage remind us of the importance of imagination and setting in a story. One can imagine that most readers were not well acquainted with Central Africa and maybe had vague notions of this area and its people. Martha plays into this plot of it being a beautiful but also dangerous place, which heightens the plot of missionaries as carriers of the Gospel to other places.

Antagonists and Dangers

Mission life, like a good story, also has its own antagonistic forces. In looking at these letters as part of a narrative, one also detects antagonistic factors within these missionary endeavours. One of these was health issues.

Weaved through Martha's letters is a constant awareness of the health dangers of this tropical climate. References to the health and sickness of missionaries highlight the dangers the climate posed for the bodies of these men and women and the real-life peril they faced daily. The relation of sickness and death was naturally accompanied by a profound expression of gratitude for good health.

Martha writes:

> I can sit down in perfect health to write and tell you of God's goodness in giving us health and strength so as to be able to enjoy our work amongst the heathen whom we learn to love more and more every day (*Mission News Letter*, March 1895).

The other element was the constant possibility of war and violent confrontation. The letters published in the February 1897 issue, written by Domira Bay, where they had to go because of the possibility of an attack, reflect these dangers.

> You can imagine how sad we were to leave our work and break up our school in the middle of the quarter, all our things were packed away in the boxes in the store room. We brought three of our biggest girls with us, and sent the others to their homes, we feel very anxious about them.

To do mission work is to buy into a grand narrative of the evangelical mission context, which was shared by the readers of the *Mission News Letter*. Within this grand narrative,

missionaries are the protagonists who bring salvation to the heathen, but not without dangers. It is these dangers that form the plot of these stories.

Letter Writing as Storytelling

In reflecting on the content of these letters from the perspective of mission history, life writing, vocation, and storytelling, a few avenues of critical reading and construction can be identified. One possible point of departure is the reflection on the role of women in mission and how Martha, as a single woman in the mission field, shaped the perception of the readers regarding this role.

The crucial role women played in the mission is accepted by most scholars, although it is viewed ambivalently. Some scholars pay attention to both the important role that women played as well as the subsumed role in the narrating and reconstruction of mission history. Fiona Bowie (1993, 18) writes: "What [is] clear is that women have been active participators in the modern missionary movement and that their experience cannot simply be subsumed under that of men" (1993, 18). Women were fundraisers, organisers, policymakers, and missionaries themselves and "scholars have paid increased attention to the specific experiences of women missionaries as recorded in their letters, diaries, and other written accounts" (Huber and Lutkehaus 1999, 2).

Bowies (1993, 1) is, however, of the opinion that a lot can still be done as is seen in her remark: "In being seen as adjunct to men, rather than as historical protagonists in their own right, women have been systematically written out of historical and anthropological records." In this article, the argument presented is that the agency of women in letter writing enabled them to become the protagonists in their own and the bigger story.

Circling back to the toolkit that Smith and Watson (2010, 235) provide as strategies for reading life narratives, it is possible to usefully employ strategies with reference to Martha Murray as a missionary and her correspondence. One important element that can be identified is agency. In letter writing, women become agents in writing a story. Identifying letters as self-writing, it shares features with the novel, biography, and history. Further, "it can employ the dialogue, plot, setting and density of language of the novel" (Smith and Watson 2010, 18).

Agency, defined as an individual's capacity to determine their context and make meaning through creative interpretation, manifests itself in telling stories through the available cultural scripts (Smith and Watson 2010, 235). Women and vocation were new territory in the late 19th century, which called for a shift in perception of the role of women in a larger society. In Martha's spontaneous sharing of her vocation and experience, this phenomenon of female vocation was shared with a bigger missionary public. Her voice was given more authority (Smith and Watson 2010, 236) by the editor also placing a letter from her mother in the *Mission News Letter:*

> The Lord has put it in my heart to say a few words to the mothers. Dear sisters, if you have a daughter whose desire it is to go and work for the Lord, do not keep her back. I have given Martha to the Lord, and not yet have I shed a tear of regret. There was always gladness and joy in my heart. I feel very thankful that such an unworthy mother as I am has a child in whose heart the Lord has put the desire to go so far in the heathen world…. I have two more daughters whom I give with a sincere heart to the Lord for Him to use as He has need of them. Whatever we entrust to His care is safe; we shall never be confounded. His word is "yea and amen" (*Mission News Letter*, June 1895).

Agency and authority in writing a narrative can "intervene in existing social and political performances" (2010, 235) because the person is "writing back" by consciously insisting on their interpretation, relevance, and establishment of their own life and life narrative. In retelling the meeting with the elder on the train, Martha spontaneously questions his presuppositions regarding women and mission and literally "writes back" to testify to the validity of her own choice.

An argument can be made that agency can be subsumed under the literary heading of characterisation. In any story or novel, characters are important. As an agent and protagonist, Martha becomes this in her "I-narrative." A narrative that unveils enthusiasm, longing, joy, fulfilment, insecurity, and spontaneity. The question Smith and Watson ask (2010, 245), namely "What narrative plottings or patterns are used to structure the self–narrative?", infers a relationship between narrative plotting and models of identity. In setting herself as a protagonist in the bigger narrative of "converting the heathen", which was a valid spiritual discourse in her time, Martha becomes an agent in her own right, asserting her agentive voice by justifying her vocational choice and its relevance.

This identification of I-narrative links with the identification of the reading public, Smith and Watson (2010, 235) and Eyre (2023), who were most probably women and men who, for various reasons, did not participate in the mission work themselves but supported the missionary goals and had themselves a spiritual worldview. These letters led to participation in this great narrative by "onlookers" interacting with these letters in prayer and fundraising, helping them to move from being an audience to becoming participants.

Any story presupposes a specific setting. The letters of Martha also conjure up the setting in readers' minds. She did this by giving geographical information and glimpses into wildlife and nature as well as the specifics of each station. The people at specific stations formed the characters that the readers got to know by the letters they wrote themselves, as well as references to them from other people stationed at the same station. Smith and Watson (2010, 248) write that "[S]elf-representation involves emplacements of multiple kinds" that can be geographical, physical, or even metaphorical.

The scenes evoked by Martha's letters can also be linked to the identification of the antagonistic forces in the plot. The plot within the bigger mission meta-narrative can be

identified as an endeavour to "bring people to the Lord", and the antagonistic forces were people and events which hindered this. This leads to a spiritual understanding of forces. In reading Martha's letters, however, her naming of the dangers is the real physical reality of sickness within a tropical climate. This brings in the reflection on bodies, sick bodies, and healthy bodies (2010, 240).

Peter Burke (2001,284) reflects on the idea of the revival of the narrative in historiography. This means writing history as a narrative, but also "historians have come to see many of their sources as stories told by particular people rather than as objective reflections of the past." The intimate connection between a story and identity is seen in these letters which functions both as testimony, reflection and the sharing of information, "…[p]eople tell stories to themselves and others all the time in order to make sense of their experience" (Burke 2001, 285) and "social historians have turned to narrative as a means of illuminating structures" (Burke 2001, 292).

By mediating women's voices, the *Mission News Letter* created other possibilities for women. One of them is the powerful possibility of vocation. In returning to the insights of Eyre (2023) shared earlier in this article, the engagement with Martha Murray's letter confirms that the blind spot in studying 19th-century literature, namely religion, cannot be ignored.

As Eyre (2023, 9) argues, "the female missionary character was important for real missionary women's construction of their subjectivities." You get a richly complex character "to explore the possibilities for women within religious ideas of womanhood" (2023,9). In constructing a private self, they constructed a public self.

Eyre (2023, 10) recognises a process of negotiation taking place in the attempts of the women missionaries to express their affective experience using existing forms and tropes but creatively adapting them "to encompass elements of these women's subjectivity not expressed before." It was the inner lives of these women that influenced readers, namely a hungry market (Eyre 2023,48) "for non-fictional, religious texts with interesting narratives" (Eyre 2023, 48).

Concluding Remarks

With the publication of Martha Murray's letters in the *Mission News Letter,* the readers were invited to read the story of a young single woman missionary in Nyasaland. Through her letters, they participated in her reflection on her vocation, her spiritual growth, her joys, and her fears. The readers could imagine the setting and were drawn into the evangelical plot. These letters are not only historical sources for the reconstruction of the missionary movement of the DRC in the late 19th and early 20th century but also literary creations that confront historians and critics with the reality of religious experience that shaped individuals and communities. In this interdisciplinary research on the life of Martha Murray and how this life was constructed through her

letters in the format of newsletters, the narrative character of both life writing and historiography is recognised. This article confronted discourses that refuse to accept the validity of 19th-century women's affective discourse and vocational reflection. In reading about Martha, it was her religious convictions that made her such a powerful figure as a pioneering woman in the Nyasaland mission. The *Mission News Letters* is still an undervalued source for both literary and historical research, and this article invites further research.

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