South African Women Missionaries in the Diamond Fields and Their Work amongst Migrant Workers

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Abstract

In the late 19th and early 20th century, following the discovery of diamonds in what is now known as the Northern Cape, many flocked to the Diamond Fields in the hope of finding employment. The mines within these areas made use of residential compounds to house and control the migrant labour force which they employed. This was proposed as a means by which any theft of diamonds could be curtailed. The result of this strategy was a closed community of men from different areas who would return to their home communities once their contracts had come to an end, usually after a three-to-six-month period. As the Dutch Reformed Church became aware of this situation, an opportunity for mission work was perceived. In response, several of the Women's Missionary Union missionaries were sent to Hope Town, Saulspoort, Beaconsfield, and Kimberley in order to work among these migrants, as well as the other locals of the area. The perspective of these women missionaries with regard to their experiences among the migrants offers an interesting and previously overlooked insight into the ways in which the church engaged with mission work to migrants, as well as how different groups of missionaries approached the topic. This paper will engage with archival documents such as the Mission News Letter (the Huguenot Mission Society's newsletter, which was written and administrated by women) as well as the missionary records of the Woman's Missionary Union with the aim of examining the mission work which was done among the mine workers in the Diamond Fields from the viewpoint of women missionaries, with the aim of bringing their narrative to the fore.

Keywords: Diamond Fields; Kimberley; migrant workers; women missionaries; Women's Missionary Union; South African women.

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Introduction

Between the years 1888 and 1893, several women missionaries who were supported by the Women's Missionary Union of South Africa were active in the Diamond Fields located in the Northern Cape of South Africa. These women, who were for the most part trained by the Huguenot Seminary in Wellington (the institution from which the mission union had been founded and grown), and their missionary efforts among the migrant workers of the Diamond Fields are largely absent from the more popular published missionary reports of the time, despite the widespread acknowledgement among Dutch Reformed ministers that the Diamond Fields were in desperate needs of missionaries. Thus, the recovery of the work done by a marginalised group such as women missionaries has much to offer in terms of new perspectives on the current narrative of the migrant workers in the area, as well as new insights into the ways in which women missionaries completed their work, and the ways in which they wished this work to be presented.

For the purpose of this study, the Mission Newsletter, a women-run publication run which was linked to the Huguenot Mission society, from which the Women's Mission Union was formed, will be examined. The focus will be placed on the issues published between 1888 until 1893 which can be found in the Dutch Rerfromed Church archive in Stellenbosch, South Africa. This sample size of the first five years of the Mission Newsletters operation provides insight into both the initial impression of the Diamond Fields, as well as the ways in which the missionary union presented this new mission field within their published work. Firstly, a general overview of the Diamond Fields and its conditions during this time period will be examined, followed by a brief examination of the state of women's mission at the time. Then, the Mission News Letters and the women's own views of their work will be investigated with the aim of contributing to the recovery of the narrative of South African Women Missionaries.

The Diamond Fields

The Diamond Fields and the surrounding areas within the Northern Cape were named as such following the discovery of diamonds in the area. The first diamond, a 23.25-carat gem named Eureka, was found on the banks of the Orange River near Hopetown in 1866. Following this discovery, the second and more renowned diamond, the 83.5-carat Star of Africa (which would be presented to Queen Victoria shortly following its discovery), was found nearby. After the discovery of the second diamond, the Diamond Rush in Southern Africa officially began (van Zyl 1986, 20-21).

In the 1870s, the search for diamonds largely took place in an individual capacity, with many men working along the Vaal River in search of the gems. This shifted in 1871 when diamonds were discovered on a farm owned by the De Beer brothers. Fleetwood Rawstorne sent one of his miners to dig a few hundred meters away from his peers, close to a *koppie* (a large hill). The next day, the miner is reported to have returned with

a handful of diamonds, following which Rawstorne gathered a company of miners from Colesburg known as the Rooipetmaatskappy and began to dig in earnest at the *koppie*, one of the richest diamond mines discovered to date. In the years following, several other mines were established on farms in the surrounding areas, such as Benaauwdheidsfontein, close to Dutoitspan (Harlow 2003, 220).

Within the first month of the De Beers receiving the news of the presence of gems in the area which is now known as Kimberley, the Colesberg Kopjie (which later would become known as the Kimberley Mine) had 900 claims cut into it, on which close to 3000 men had begun to dig. By the mid-1870s, over 50,000 workers had converged on the Diamond Fields in hopes of gaining money, either through finding diamonds independently or as labourers in the mines. The large majority of people who took part in this influx were male migrants who were recorded never to have remained for any extended period of time (Harlow 2003, 220).

These mines initially fell under the management of the Orange Free State. However, this was short-lived as the British imperialists turned their eyes to new interest in the area following the news of the discovery of diamonds. Britain gained control of the Diamond Fields by means of a ruling at the Griekwa court where Nicholaas Waterboer laid claim to the region West and North of the Orange River. Although this claim was rejected by both the Orange Free State and the Cape Colony, both of which had clearly marked territories in the land demarcated by this claim, Waterboer was supported by the court by Hay, Barkly, and Southerly (the main members of the court). Following their support, a request was issued for British protection from the "aggression" that they were facing from the Free State. As a result of this, Count Kimberley, the British minister of colonies, was informed of the claim in a manner as if it had already been accepted and thus proceeded accordingly (Harlow 2003, 220). Although such an unjust ruling sparked natural disappointment, the Orange Free State was, however, in too weak of a position to take any further steps to fight the claim by means of a show of force and thus had no choice but to acquiesce to the British claim over the Diamond Fields. The area was thus rebranded as a British territory under the name of Griqualand-West. It was, however, only in 1880 that the region would officially become a part of the Cape Colony. It was under British rule that the name of the area containing the Colesberg-koppie and Vooruitzigt was changed to Kimberley and the mine to the Kimberley mine, as it is still known today (van Zyl 1986, 22).

The Kimberley mine, which had a depth of over 30 meters in 1874 and measured up to just over 300 meters long, was the richest mine in the area. The deepening of the mine increased the risk of rockfalls and flooding, and by 1874, it became clear that machinery would be needed in order to further the excavations by means of drilling through the hard bluestone, as well as to pump out the water. Ordinary diggers did not have the capital for such equipment, and in addition, the standard mining claim did not allow for enough space for such machinery to operate. It became clear that more cooperation between miners was needed in order to draw any further profits from the Kimberley

mine. In response to this, the limit of two claims per person, which had been instated by the mining authorities, was raised to ten. This, however, marked a shift in the diamond industry as now investors and larger companies turned their eyes to the mining business, and the formation of joint stock companies became possible. In 1879, there were 12 companies that owned capital of over two million pounds which owned the richest claims in all four mines. As diamond fever grew, the number of companies increased dramatically to 71, with a total capital of eight million pounds. In the face of such well-funded opposition, the majority of miners sold their claims, with some becoming directors within the companies (Newbury 1987, 2-3).

New shafts were dug into the mines, and tramlines were built to and from the mine. With the increased funds which were offered by the companies who held the monopoly, the Kimberley mine was sunk to a depth of 400 ft. However, the rise of these companies allowed for new issues to take shape in the diamond business. The competition between companies resulted in a surplus of diamonds, which threatened to lower the price of the previously scarce gem (Newbury 1987, 5-6). Many of the companies also poorly planned their mining strategies, which resulted in a steep increase in production costs. This, coupled with the depression of the 1880s, resulted in many companies going bankrupt, with their assets being either bought by other companies or seized by the banks. In 1885, only 42 public companies were left among the four mines.

The need for cartelisation of the diamond industry began to be realised, and its largest supporter, Cecil John Rhodes, began to call for the amalgamation of the various companies in order to raise efficacy, as well as to avoid the issues which had arisen in the past as a result of the competition between many companies. His proposal was that a unified amalgamation of the companies would result in safer mining, more efficient underground work, and, most importantly, a monopoly over the diamond mining industry, thus ensuring maximum profit for his company. A side goal of Rhodes was to utilise the company to expand his property and authority within the British imperial system in Southern Africa. His plans came to fruition as he became the chairman of the De Beers mining company, the largest in the area. As head of the company, he acquired the majority of shares of the Kimberley mine. A new company, De Beers Consolidated Mines, emerged in 1888 with a capital of £100,000 and consisted of a minority of shareholders who had remaining shares in the Kimberley mine. The company quickly used their monopoly over the two major mines in the area to stabilise production and allow the price of diamonds in the world market to rise due to the renewed “scarcity” of the gem (van Zyl 1986, 23).

The Mine Workers

As the trend of individual surface miners died out and mining companies took over with greater production capabilities as a result of their growing capital, the need for new workers arose. Initially, workers from the area met the call with men arriving largely of Griekwa, Korannas, and BaThlaping descent; however, as production rose, new

labourers were needed, and the companies began to search elsewhere in Southern Africa. The search did not last long, however, as rumours of the mines paying the highest labour wages in Southern Africa (10s to 15s a week) as well as providing food attracted African workers from regions as far as North of the Zambesi who flocked to the diamond fields in hopes of finding employment (van Zyl 1986, 45).

Initially, the individual miners were still operational; these labourers had the freedom to come and go from the area as they pleased and could reside in a place of their choosing (although away from the "white" town centre). This changed in 1874, however, with the rise of closed compounds around the mines, which served as living areas for the miners. The compounds were introduced in response to the large number of incoming workers as a means by which labour and immigrants could be controlled. These compounds, although they had already been introduced in Southern Africa in response to the Namaqualand copper mines, became commonplace and were viewed as a typical standard in the Diamond Fields.

These compounds were conceptualised as a means by which groups of mine workers were able to move around from their living spaces to the mine itself while not being able to leave the immediate area until such a time that their contracts (usually for three- or six-month periods) had ended. This was proposed as a means by which to curtail any theft of diamonds, which was thought to have been inevitable. The compounds were several acres in size and were fenced in with overhead wires in order to prevent the throwing of diamonds to the outside. Simple sleeping quarters made of wood, as well as other structures, were erected within the space, such as shops and hospitals, were erected within the space (van Zyl 1986, 45). By the close of the 1800s, there were 17 compounds, of which 12 were owned by the De Beers company, with the largest housing of 3000 workers (Newbury 1987, 4)

The compounds were presented as a great benefit to the workers despite the lack of freedom of movement. The largest drawing factor advertised was the idea that a few months in the compounds would allow the men to save enough funds in order to buy a rifle and ammunition, which was one of the most sought-after items for men during this time. Another stated positive of the compounds was the lack of access to alcohol, which the miners in the area often abused, and later those within the compounds as it became available despite the limited movement of those within (van Zyl 1986, 45).

Kimberley itself had many canteens and bars. The population who resided outside of the compounds, due to loneliness, the limited water supply, the harsh environment, and the lack of other opportunities for leisure time, turned to the canteens for distraction. This resulted in alcohol consumption in the areas surrounding the mines rising to worrying levels for the local administration. Hand-in-hand with this came gambling as another source of distraction for the local populous. Roulette was the game of choice in many of the canteens, and fights over money often arose as a result of the gambling. A third issue which arose within the local communities was prostitution. Very few women

had accompanied their husbands to the Diamond Fields, and, in time, many single women also travelled to the area in search of employment (van Zyl 1986, 29).

The result of the compounds, as well as how leisure time within the town was organised, was a community of men from different areas who would return to their home communities once their contracts had come to an end and who would take part in questionable practices for the duration of their time around the mines. Or as James Anthony Froude, a visitor to the area in the 1880s, commented in a less than complimentary manner: "bohemians of all nations …. gathered there like vultures about a carcase." (van Zyl 1986, 29)

In this gathering, however, the churches of South Africa saw an opportunity for mission work. The Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa also had a vested interest in the compounds; however, it seems they were lax to send a minister to work in the area. Thus, it was the missionary women who were sent to the Diamond Fields by the Huguenot Mission Society, and later the Women's Missionary Union, in order to work with the men in the compounds in order to educate and train evangelists with the hope that they would continue to evangelise once they had returned to their home communities. They also worked with the women in the area, many of whom were uneducated and had come to the area either following their husbands or seeking employment. These missionary women were a formidable face in the missionary efforts within the Diamond Fields, both before as well as after the Boer war, which resulted in the temporary closing of mission stations in the area. Their work and views thereon will be discussed in the following section.

The Women Missionaries and Their Accounts of the Diamond Fields

Women Missionaries in the Late 19th Century

In the mid-19th century, they remained a society with many biases when it came to gender roles. Stereotypical images of the "women missionary" were already in place, with the most common being the character of the long-suffering minister's wife, who had followed her husband to the mission fields. When it came to the idea of single women missionaries, the description of "the spinster in her unstylish dress and wire-rimmed glasses, alone somewhere for thirty years teaching 'heathen' children" (Whitehead 2021, 445) is often seen to be used in non-official documents which referred to women missionaries. While these caricatures are exaggerated, there remains some truth within them with regard to the place that these women occupied within the field of mission work at the time. Historical documents that document women within the missionary sphere often present them as being reactionary figures on the sidelines or as taking on a largely supportive role in the missionary venture as a whole. Within this, one finds women who are primary or secondary figures who retain their own agency within the narrative to be few and far between. In South Africa during the 1800s, women were largely seen to be primarily housewives, daughters, or sisters, with their main realm of focus being the care of their family. However, this began to slowly change as

new challenges and opportunities emerged in the mission fields, which required a rethinking of the older structures of gendered positions within mission work (Robert 1998, xvii).

During the period between 1858 and 1887, the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa began to change its stance on the exclusion of women and began to recruit women as missionaries. This, however, was not without contradiction and in the 1880s, women remained excluded from preaching the gospel, even in a missionary capacity. This resulted in women focusing on other mission-related fields, such as teaching and translation (Midgely 2006, 338). This initial acknowledgement of the benefits of the contributions of women to the mission field, however, opened new questions regarding the workload of married women who took on these tasks. It was believed that their domestic responsibilities resulted in them being unable to commit to the time needed in order to evangelise fully. This brought the discussion of single women as missionaries (such as those who would eventually be sent out from the Huguenot Seminary) to the fore within the Dutch Reformed Church. The sending of trained single women became an attractive strategy, especially when missions in areas with a gendered form of segregation forming a part of the society, such as India, were considered. The decision to move forward with this new plan carried with it the implication that not only men would be needed to preach the gospel if it was to reach women in populations such as these, and thus, it became viewed as possible that single women could also be called to the missionary task (Stock 1899, 124-125).

This forward momentum resulted in single women in South Africa being able to be trained specifically for mission work. It was, however, during the late 19th century still considered inappropriate by the Dutch Reformed Church to employ women directly for this task. Thus, they were rather employed through separate female-led organisations and societies, such as the Huguenot Mission Society. This organisation, which was formed by the teachers and students at the Huguenot Seminary in Wellington, Cape Town, to promote missionary interest among the women in the institution, later would grow in size to become the Women's Missionary Union or the *Vrouenzendingbond.* The Women's Missionary Union, still operating from the location of the Huguenot Seminary in Wellington with the support of the Dutch Reformed minister and theologian Andrew Murray and his wife Emma Murray, who was the president of the society, was largely responsible for the women who travelled to the Diamond Fields with the aim of doing mission work. The relationship between the Women's Missionary Union, Huguenot Mission Society and the Huguenot Seminary is stated clearly within in the published annual report of the Seminary:

> "[The Huguenot Mission Society] is so much one with the Women's Missionary Union that I can hardly tell you of the one without the other. Our missionaries are theirs; our mission class is theirs, and believing that you will be interested in all the work, we will not try to draw boundary lines (Spijker 1922, 2)"

Due to this close link, the Women's Missionary Union and the work it promoted largely focussed on the educational aspect of mission work, a field considered even by the conservative standards of the time to be well within the feminine sphere of society (Stanley 1990, 78)

The origins of this shift came from the Huguenot Seminary, which was established in 1874 by Andrew Murray in his attempt to address the overwhelming lack of trained women educators within the country. As a result of this focus, the women missionaries who were sent by the Seminary's linked mission societies took on mission work, which remained within the realm of education and teaching tasks. This allowed the opening of the missionary task to unmarried, usually single women, due to the role of educator and schoolteacher being seen as resting firmly within the feminine sphere along the gendered lines of the time. As a result of this, the missionary work which was done in the Diamond Fields by women also took the form of education. However, the various facets which are available within the scope of educative tasks also allowed for a far broader spectrum of work than that of only a Sunday school teacher (Robert 1998, xii). This enlargement in the scope of what it meant to be a missionary, as well as the activities which fell under the description of being mission work, as one can see when one considered the work which was done by the women missionaries in the diamond fields which will be discussed in the following subsection, with specific attention to the way in which they presented themselves and their work within their publications.

Accounts of Mission work done by the women in the diamond fields

Women missionaries who were sent by the Women's Missionary Union are recorded to have been based in Kimberley, Beaconsfield, Hopetown, and Saulspoort. Many of these missionary women sent information enclosed in letters to the society itself, documenting their experiences in the mission field, which were published in the Mission Newsletter, the monthly publication of the Huguenot Mission Society. As this information was sent in letters, they were often published within their letter format, giving the impression that the missionary was addressing the wider audiences of the Newsletter with their correspondence. These published letters are of special interest due to the lack of other documentation detailing the work which these women undertook in the Diamond Fields.

The information which is given in these letters was clearly written with the intent of being shared and published within the Mission News Letter. If these missionaries sent out any more private or separate correspondence remains unknown, with the content of any unpublished material being lost to time. Due to this, it remains important that the nature of these letters, as having been written with the knowledge that they would be published, either in full or as excerpts, entails that the information within must be approached with an understanding that bias is certainly present. Nonetheless, the information remains valuable in its presentation of the approach and reception that these women had of the missionary work among the migrant labourers in the Diamond Fields. The ways in which the various missionary tasks which these women undertook were relayed and reported on within the Mission News Letter offers an interesting insight into

the manner in which the mission work among migrant labourers was being approached by women missionaries as well as how the Union wished others to view the work as well. The manner in which the labourers were spoken of within a publication whose target audience was other women who perhaps would be interested in joining the missionary effort also offers an interesting insight into the mindsets of these missionary women.

As has been discussed in the preceding section, following the trend of most instances of women missionary works within Southern Africa during the late 19th and early 20th century, the majority of the missionaries' activities came in the form of educating and training. Due to the prominence of gendered norms within South African society during the time, the concerns of missionaries remained delegated along gendered lines. While the work of male missionaries would often focus on preaching and evangelising work, women, who were not able to preach in the formal sense, were initially seen as supplementary agents to the male missionary's work in the form of Sunday school leaders and, following the example set by Emma Murray and the work which she had done in establishing women's circles in both Woester and Wellington, facilitators of women bible meetings. A shift that occurred as a result of the Huguenot Mission Society and the subsequent formation of a women's missionary union was the opening of mission work to unmarried women (Robert 1998, xii).

The first mention of the Diamond Fields, which one finds within the Mission News Letter, comes a few editions prior in the form of a call for prayer and funds. Within the February 1888 edition of the newsletter, A.P Ferguson, the president of the Huguenot Seminary, refers to the situation in Kimberley and implores that the readers offer prayers so that the "thousands of natives gathering there may find Christ" (Mission News Letter Febuary 1888, 7). Ferguson goes on to explain that the Transvaal government had recently called for the removal of all the "natives" to other locations or to be divided among the farms within the area. She comments that this may seriously affect the missionary efforts in the Transvaal and expresses her wishes that it may be overturned, interestingly not due to the humanitarian concerns of forced removal but rather out of a theological concern for the reach of the gospel.

In November of the same year, Kimberley is mentioned once again within the newsletter in a small report on the formation of a small mission society similar to that which had already begun in Graaf Reinet. This society was comprised of white women who wished to keep up to date on missionary happenings as well as to offer support, often in the form of donations (Mission News Letter Febuary 1888, 1). In Beaconsfield, a similar society was also formed and pledged to give 4 shillings a year in order to support missionary work. These societies formed a part of the larger missionary union and operated as branches of the main Women's Missionary Union, which operated from Wellington in the Cape. This may also be one of the reasons behind the keen interest in the Diamond Fields, which is displayed in the Mission News Letter (Mission News Letter Febuary 1888, 1-2). With some branches of the missionary union offering funds

for mission efforts being situated within the Diamond Fields themselves, reports on the mission work being done in the area became items of much interest. This was likely being done in order to garner more support for the overall missionary enterprise, as well as to secure funds, a continuous topic of attention for the smaller mission societies of the time.

Within this November edition of the missionary newsletter, a piece dedicated to the Diamond Fields themselves appears, seemingly having been written by Abbie Park Ferguson, the president of the Huguenot Seminary. The piece opens by means of a comment that she had visited Kimberley during the previous Christmas period and, since that time, had found the Huguenot Mission Society interested in the opportunities for mission work which had opened up in the area, and comments on the events of their visit. The first place of interest listed is the De Beers compound. A recent accident which had occurred at the compound is also spoken of. The author comments that there had been a fire within one of the mine shafts, which had endangered the lives of 800 workers, of which 200 lost their lives, who had been below the level of the fire at the time. "It was still smoke-begrimed, reminding one of the horrors of those terrible days" (Mission News Letter Febuary 1888, 1) is the sympathetic comment given by the author on the current state of the mine in question. Following the events of the fire, the 2400 workers who had been present at the De Beers compound found their numbers greatly reduced, with many leaving after the disaster.

The author of the piece then moves to give a snippet of their experience of the compound, which also offers insight into the common conceptions of missionaries during this time, as well as their perception of closed compounds such as those found surrounding the De Beer's mine.

> "They seemed very jolly as they made way for the three strangers. Their faces were a great contrast to those of the natives outside, who have free access to the canteens. The natives find it hard to be shut up in the compounds accustomed as they are to a free, roving life, but one need only to look into their faces to see the safeguard it is to them, and to rejoice that they are being kept from the many demoralising influences outside. I longed to speak to these men, but could only give them the Sesoto and Zulu greeting, to which they responded heartily." (Mission News Letter Febuary 1888, 1)

The above quote offers insight into how the compounds were presented to the general population of the area for the safekeeping of those within rather than as measures to prevent stealing as they were originally proposed to serve. The viewpoint of the author, however, is interestingly not devoid of compassion; there is an acknowledgement of the loss of freedom within the compounds despite the positive explanation of their lack of "demoralising influences". It is also displayed that while a largely more compassionate depiction of the compounds and their residents than is typically seen within other written reports, the same prejudice of the time remains present. It is also likely that this prejudice formed a part of what prevented missionaries from protesting the compounds and their conditions, as it was seen all in aid of the "fight against drunkenness" (Mission

News Letter February 1888, 1), which formed a large portion of the missionary cause within the more industrialised potions of mission fields.

This is displayed further within the author's description of the conditions outside of the compounds, as the main street of Beaconsfield is described. The author comments on the large numbers of "natives" who crowded the main street who were "flocking to the many canteens to spend their hard-earned week's wages, and that late in the afternoon the street often becomes a pandemonium" (Mission News Letter Febuary 1888, 2). It is also shared that many are arrested for drunkenness, and sentences are handed out at trials during the first few days of the week for having broken what the author deems as "the first laws of the land" (Mission News Letter Febuary 1888, 2).

The first mention of evangelist mission work in the Diamond Fields also comes in this piece in the form of the arrival of Paulus and Zacharias, two "native" evangelists from Monjali, whom Mr. Kriel, the DRC minister of Beaconsfield, had requested. Interestingly, it is reported that these two men were only allowed inside the compound to conduct mission and evangelisation work if they themselves entered as workers. For this reason, it is commented that missionaries typically discouraged evangelists from travelling to both the diamond and the gold fields. Paulus and Zacharias, despite also being required to work in the mines, are reported by the author to have made large strides for the missionary cause, with a prayer meeting being attended by 250 workers at the time of the author's visit. During this meeting, Mr Kreil relayed the gospel to the attendees, with Paulus acting as a translator. This information is shared with a great air of excitement, and many mentions are made of prayer, and the ways in which the Lord had worked to further the missionary efforts and prayers to help the "heathens" had been answered.

Following this, three missionary women were sent out by the missionary union with the aim of working among the inhabitants of the Diamond Fields area. At the meeting during which their sending was announced, Ferguson gave a speech which was recorded and published in a later edition of the Mission News Letter. In this speech, one can see the views that the union had on the Diamond Fields, as well as the work which was expected to be accomplished by their chosen missionaries:

> Three of you are being led of God to enter upon a new work at the diamond fields.
>
> You have seen there a need that has stirred your hearts to consecrate yourselves to this work. Multitudes are gathering there, Europeans, Cape natives, and Kaffirs. Amount the Europeans there is much of sin, much of poverty and suffering.
>
> The cape natives, away from the helps they have had in the colony, have drifted; but that which has stirred our hearts especially has been the tens of thousands of heathen gathering from all tribes of South Africa, from the Zambezi to the Transkei, they may learn if Christ and carry back the good tidings to their people. It's calculated that about

> 30000 pass through the diamond fields every year, remain for. Few months, and then are gone, giving place others.
>
> Yours will be largely a work of seed sowing, and you way see little in the way of result. You will need long patience, as the Kaffirs say. You will need large faith in him who has said 'my word shall not return unto me void; it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.' But that Word is sure and you may go forward in the strength of it.
>
> You will need much wisdom to know His will and make the most of the little time which is given to you, to be taught how to plant the seed and to nourish it, so that when the people are beyond your reach the seed shall not die. I believe the time will come when God will permit us to follow these people back to their homes, to continue the work begun at the diamond fields, and that God only can measure the possibilities and wide-spreading influence if this little work, begun in human weakness and feebleness by. Few women, but with all the power of the almighty god behind it, and with all the far reaching possibilities of a work that god himself takes in hand. May you be chosen instruments yielded completely to his hand and walking continually in the very narrow path of His will. (Mission News Letter April 1889)

Within this same edition, one finds some of the first published letter excerpts from the missionary women themselves in connection to the work in the Diamond Fields. A letter from Leonora du Toit appears in which she comments that she is ready to go to the mission field of Saulspoort and is eager to begin her work as a missionary teacher (Mission News Letter November 1888, 1). Miss du Toit is mentioned once again in a newsletter that was published in April 1889. She is commented to have been welcomed in Saulspoort but will soon travel on to Maculi, where she will learn Sechuana for a time in order to better conduct her work as a missionary (Mission News Letter April 1889, 2).

In the same November edition as the initial letter from Miss du Toit, another letter from Saulspoort appears written by Deborah Retief, who was already working as a missionary teacher in the area. Within this letter, she comments on the state of her mission work, as well as her difficulties. The harsher reality of the Diamond Fields is clearly displayed in Miss Retief's letter as she describes the grieving which had taken place within Saulspoort in response to a young local who had travelled to work in Kimberley, having passed away in the mines. This description, though vivid, is presented without further comment by the missionary herself, likely also due to the nature of her letter being to garner support for the mission work while not damaging the cause by means of speaking against the mines or the companies which ran them (Mission News Letter April 1889, 3).

Miss Retief quickly moves on in her report and goes on to relay that the king in the area is enthusiastic about the construction of a new church and has spoken to his people on behalf of the missionaries in order to raise funds for the building. She details an interaction which she had with the king:

> "The king came in this afternoon and sat down, and had a long talk. He asked me to read Luke xviii to him and explain the first verses about prayer. I said to him 'Moressa, do you prey?' he said, 'Nya missis' in such a plaintive way that it priced my heart. He said 'I wish that you would all pray that God would help me to finish the church well'" (Mission News Letter April 1889, 3).

Miss Retief also goes on to comment that her own work among the Griqua people of the area has been progressing. It does not mention exactly what this work is; however, from her descriptions, it seems to have been connected to her work offering evening and Sunday school sessions to the various local communities. She comments that a Griqua minister who arrived from Mafeking who has been holding services on Sundays for the locals whom she has also been supporting in his work (Mission News Letter April 1889, 2).

In January 1890, a new report dedicated to the Diamond Fields and its missionary potential was published. Within this report, it is shared that Mary Murray will be leaving her work in Mochuli to travel to the Diamond Fields in order to aid Miss Retief in her work. It is commented that Miss Murray is largely looking forward to working among the large numbers of women and children who reside in the area just outside of the compounds. Miss Ferguson, who authored this report, comments, "it will be hard work, a work in which there is much seed sowing, and it may be the fruit will be found only after many days" (Mission News Letter January 1890, 5). She goes on to give some insight into the way in which these mission fields were viewed through the eyes of those in mission society. "… our earnest desire is that they may learn of Christ there and go back to their people knowing that there is something better than their miserable degrading heathenism." (Mission News Letter January 1890, 5) Upon her arrival in the Diamond Fields, Mary Murray writes about her first impression in a piece that appeared two months following the announcement and comments: "Some of you know I have left Mochuli for the Diamond Fields. When I was there, I was much struck with the amount of work and the lack of lady workers. (Mission News Letter March 1890, 2)"

Spreading the gospel and educating were not the only tasks which these women undertook. In an excerpt from a letter written by Miss Retief in June 1890, the already mentioned issue of the high levels of alcohol consumption by the locals outside of the compounds is presented as another pressure point that they felt was important to address. To this end, Miss Retief describes one particular instance where her colleague, Miss Hugo, implored a white woman who they had found inebriated on the street to attend church and attempt to break her habit of drinking. She goes on to comment that "it seems quite a new thing to the people that our church should take up such work; but is it not this just work we ought to do, and which our church has failed to do so long?" (Mission News Letter August 1890, 2) This offers an interesting view into the work which the Women's Missionary Union placed importance on, as opposed to male missionary structures, with a clear example being the instances of ministers in the Cape who had offered brandy to those who attended missionary church services as a means by which to secure attendance (Whitehead 2021, 446)

Across subsequent editions of the Mission News Letter one finds more frequent mention of calls for funding and prayer. One such interesting call comes from Miss Ferguson, which reads: “we ask our friends not to take shares in the mines, but shares in a home for the workers where we hope many precious souls for the master will be gathered.” (Mission News Letter August 1890, 2). As was the norm at the time, in many similar calls with relation to the mission fields, which one can see are aimed at women, a call is made to compassion. While the views of white missionaries of both genders during this time remained focused on the trope of “saving the heathen”, a clear, sympathetic tone can be seen in the reports of these women missionaries. One such reference to this work offers some insight into the optimistic tone with which they reported their efforts: “yes there is a beginning of a good work in the diamond fields in various directions. The Lord has kindled a light which shall not be put out.” (Mission News Letter August 1890, 2).

In December 1890, Miss Murray returned to the Diamond Fields after having travelled to Natal in order to secure a Zulu-speaking evangelist to aid in translation work in the Diamond Fields. Within this letter, she details her approach to mission work in the Diamond Fields. Her initial plan was to hold an evening school twice a week at the Basuto church. She also held prayer meetings twice a week, as well as regular visitations to the sick and poor in surrounding areas such as Wesselton (Mission News Letter December 1890, 9-10).

A letter from Miss Retief follows in which she comments on the progress which was being made within her work. She shares that the governor, lord Elphinstone, had also taken an interest in their work and had visited recently. It is remarked upon that he was quite shocked to find two women living and working alone in such a remote location and subsequently pledged a donation to aid her missionary efforts (Mission News Letter December 1890, 10). This seems to have not been the first instance of their presence in the mission fields being met with surprise, there are several mentioned encounters across the mentioned preceding letters in which other parties were taken aback to find two women in the harsh conditions of the Diamond fields, and working among the men there. In terms of Miss Retief’s work, in particular, she was holding bible classes that had an attendance of 30 young men. These classes were held in the evenings due to the work responsibilities of the men during the day—another reason which is given for these classes taking place at this time (Mission News Letter December 1890, 10).

The next mention of the Diamond Fields within the mission field was in the August of the following year. The piece opens with a triumphant report of the many teachers who had taken up work in the Diamond Fields over the course of the previous months. “One realised as they are gathered in assembly day by day the power that is in their hands moulding and guiding the lives of the young” (Mission News Letter August 1891, 1). Miss Retief moves on to list various aspects of their work, with specific reference to Mrs. Schoken, the wife of a minister in the area, who was responsible for a Sunday school which was held within a wagon house and which had an attendance of fifty

Malay children. Another Sunday school was also held for the black children following this. A monthly prayer meeting was also held by Mrs. Schoken, who is reported to have had a good rate of attendance (Mission News Letter August 1891, 1-2).

In the December edition of the Mission News Letter, several letters from women in the Diamond Fields appear. Miss Hooper comments on the work which had been done among the railway employees in the form of prayer meetings. She comments on one such meeting during which a man had jumped off a narrow flight of stairs in order to give the woman a way to pass, resulting in him suffering a broken leg. Miss Sheasby, in the following letter, provides a deeper insight into this event and comments:

> It was strange, I had just been telling them that it was quite uncertain when they would die, death might come to them the next day, and I urged them to decide for Christ, and just as we came out that man of whom Miss Hooper wites met with the accident, I went to see him in the hospital the next day and found him very cheerful. The doctor had little difficulty with his leg, as I placed the bone, straightened the leg, and put it in rough splints. I never thought I could do such a thing, but one never knows what one can do in case of an emergency. (Mission News Letter December 1891, 3)

This excerpt also displays the multifaceted nature of the work which these women were doing in the mission field. Alongside the educating and prayer meetings, Miss Sheasby found herself setting a bone and splinting an injured man's leg. Accounts such as these would often be missing from a more general mission report, with the focus being placed on a number of conversions or school attendance. The Mission News Letter, however, with its focus on letters and target audience of other women, allows one insight into events such as these, which reveal the true scope of these women's work, as well as their influence.

A report of the work being done at Kimberley and Beaconsfield appears in the December 1893 edition of the newsletter at the close of the time period on which this paper focuses. This report offers insight into the scale of the work which was being done at this time, as well as how the missionary enterprise in the area had grown under the influence of these women missionaries. In Kimberley, Sunday morning services for children had an attendance of 130, and the outdoor meetings, which had a similar level of attendance, had also become more frequent. A formal school had begun, with six teachers and 60 pupils, and an evening school, held three times a week for poor white children with 30 attendees. On Tuesdays, the women would visit the compound, and prayer meetings would be held. A catechism class was held for young girls on Wednesdays, and a girls' working class took place on Thursdays with 30 who attended to learn needlework was held the following day. Also, on Thursdays, visitations and prayer meetings were held among the black women residents of Kimberley (Mission News Letter December 1893, 2).

In Beaconsfield, evening schools with similar levels of attendance to those in Kimberley and a soup kitchen at the missionary house had been established. There were regular

services held in the two nearby compounds, as well as prayer meetings which were held twice a week. The day school had 63 children in attendance, and the Sunday school had an attendance rate of 70 pupils. There were also visitations among the poor white residents of the area, as well as to the coloured population, with 100 being visited throughout the week. Meetings were also held every Sunday at the canteens, usually among men who were already inebriated (Mission News Letter December 1893, 2). Through these reports and the preceding examination of the accounts of work which had been done by the missionary women in the diamond fields, one can see the development of women's mission work in the area, as well as the insight into how these women interacted with the residents from a new perspective unique to the voices of these women, which has previously been largely absent from the historical narrative.

Conclusion

The Diamond Fields, in terms of mission work and the Dutch Reformed Churches response, have received little attention, especially in relation to the work of the women missionaries who were sent by the Women's Missionary Union. The restoration of their narrative and voices to the historical conversation allows for new insights into both the story of migrant workers in the diamond fields and that of South African women missionaries during the late 19th century. Missionary women in areas such as the diamond fields also often trained and worked alongside African evangelists, whose own narratives are also absent from formal historical records.

Therefore, a resource such as the Mission News Letter, which is discussed in this article, due to its format largely addressing a target audience who wanted "stories" rather than reports, offers a valuable opportunity for such mentioned gaps to be filled and once this has been done, for further studies into this portion of history to build upon. The uncovering of the voices of these women also allows for a new insight into the ways in which mission work was done in these areas, as well as offers another perspective on the missionary effort in general. Their accounts, often presented in an emotional and optimistic light, play a role in adding a humanising element to the historical accounts of the migrant labourers with whom they worked. Thus, these sources and the investigation of the work done by women missionaries, as well as how they themselves wrote regarding their efforts, are a valuable resource when the history of the church's response to migrant labour in the diamond fields is being examined.

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