

The events which followed the first month of their marriage caused both Susan and Donald to be very aware of the fragile nature of human relationships. From marriage they had expected affection, friendship, comfort, happiness and kindness. They had no expectation that this attachment would be broken by anything other than death, but death now seemed closer than ever before. Donald reminded Susan in January 1852 'to acknowledge the various blessings the Almighty bestows upon you, without his aid what are we my dearest pussy but perishable mortals liable every moment of our lives to be called unto eternity . . .'. Susan wrote in July:

I often think dearest when you are away how dreadful it would be to be sepperated [sic] for ever, one of us must leave the other but I hope my dearest husband the parting will be but short and that we will soon meet again to spend our endless eternity together in that world of happiness where our dear Mother has gone. . . .⁴⁹

Each of them feared that in their love for the other they might be in danger of forgetting God 'who has blessed us by making us one'. McLean even suspected that Susan's miscarriage was 'chastisement from the Almighty' for their being 'too much wrapped up with each other'.⁵⁰

Although both Susan and Donald professed to find true happiness in marriage it is obvious from their correspondence that true happiness, conflict and disillusionment were in some sort of tension. The overt criticism came mainly from Donald who had fixed ideas about the appropriate behaviour for his wife. A good wife was dutiful, affectionate and obedient. She had to live up to his standards of industry in her 'proper department' as he considered 'idleness a great evil as well as a sure precursor of want'; through marriage women attained 'a certain dignity and respect' which they had to uphold by 'well regulated prudence and discretion'.⁵¹ He based these beliefs on the demeanour of one or two women he knew, mainly women older than Susan, and in particular on Helen Wilson.

On his return visit to Taranaki in 1852 McLean realised that Helen Wilson, then nearly sixty, had virtues Susan lacked. He much admired her 'lady like manners and behaviour'. She made him feel perfectly at ease, yet he had to conduct himself 'with great propriety'. Mrs Wilson was 'a quick discerner of character' and McLean felt 'flattered by the affectionate notice' she paid him. According to Donald, Helen Wilson took the 'lead' in New Plymouth society despite the presence of women of greater wealth. More tellingly he commented that Susan would be surprised 'how she anticipates every wish of the Doctors and how devoted she is to