

**“Others might have buckled ... famines and droughts, floods, fire and native customs:” perspectives on British missionary women c. 1800-1950s**

My quotation comes from Anita Desai’s novel *Clear Light of Day* (1980). In the novel, the girl Tara found the elderly spinster missionaries who ran her mission school “...awesomely brisk, cheerful and resourceful .... They had gone through experiences others might have buckled under – wars and blitzes, riots and mutinies, famines and droughts, floods, fire and native customs– and had then retired ...to the running of a sober, disciplined mission school with all their confidence, their cheerfulness and their faith impeccably intact.”<sup>1</sup> Desai had herself attended such a school, Queen Mary’s School in Delhi, so wrote from what she knew. Other commentators have been less favourably disposed to the missionary cause. Many take the view, in our post-colonial world, that the thousands of Christian missionaries who went out from this country and others to engage in a global endeavor to convert Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and adherents of other faiths and belief-systems to Christianity were essentially wrong-headed. Their proselytizing efforts should not only be disregarded but also denounced as yet another tainted colonial episode of Britain’s past.

Yet to deny this history, to make no attempt to understand or unravel its various strands, or how it evolved and changed over the years, is to omit a fascinating and complex chapter of our fairly recent past. The encounter between missionaries from Britain’s towns, cities and villages with people in Asia, Africa, the Pacific and elsewhere was an unusually close and prolonged association, requiring careful scrutiny to assess its cultural significance and impact. It was a role closely identified with colonialism yet also detached from it.

Missionaries could be, and often were, critical of colonial administrators and also of the lifestyle and conduct of their fellow British subjects living overseas. Nor was the missionary movement monolithic. Missionaries came from all walks of life and from a variety of denominational backgrounds: high and low-church Anglican, Baptist, Congregational, Methodist, Presbyterian, Quaker, and also from interdenominational groups such as the Salvation Army. The majority of missionaries from the British Isles were Protestant but of course many, particularly those coming from Ireland served as members of Catholic orders and communities. The part played by **women** in the missionary movement from 1800 onwards forms an absorbing and rich subject of study in its own right. Women missionaries present in small numbers at first were by 1900 the predominant force. Their commitment to the missionary cause and that of their many female supporters for well over a century raises a

many questions, among them the very obvious - Why did they go? How were they trained, organized and supported? What was the nature of their work and how far did this differ from that of male colleagues? What was their position in a missionary movement predominantly led by men? Many of the women were single. How did they manage to live and work, often for decades, far from familiar home circles? What, if any, was the impact of their efforts on the societies in which they worked and how was this integrated with society at home? A short paper like this cannot possibly furnish all the answers but I hope to provide an overview of the development of the women's missionary movement from the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> to roughly the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as looking at the lives and contributions of individual women.

Today very few, if any, missionary women are household names – a situation which contrasts with that of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when many were hailed as missionary heroines. Perhaps Mary Slessor and Gladys Aylward have some claim to be well known. They have attracted a fair quota of biographies and, in the case of Aylward, a popular and glamorized film version of her life. Mother Teresa, an Albanian by birth, is another. But the lives of countless others remain hidden and obscure. In part, there has been a deliberate act of omission since these women served in a movement which, for reasons already stated, many people nowadays prefer to forget. Within the movement itself reportage and historiography gave prominence to male missionaries who carried out what were seen as the essential tasks of the missionary enterprise— preaching, converting, educating and training an indigenous male clergy, and the building and establishing of churches. The role of women – educating girls, providing medical and welfare services for women and children, and training women evangelists – was seen as far less important. Women's lack of prominence in the missionary movement is reflected in published histories and in much of the surviving documentation. Nonetheless valuable research materials can be found, often after some digging, in published and unpublished biographies and memoirs, missionary magazines, personal collections, correspondence and papers in the missionary society archives as well as photographs, other visual materials and mementoes.

### **Hannah Marshman, the first woman missionary?**

Hannah Marshman has some claims to be called the first woman missionary. Together with her husband, Joshua Marshman, and their two children, she left England in 1799 in a party of

reinforcements for the Baptist mission in India which been founded a few years earlier by William Carey. Hannah Marshman was initially most reluctant to leave home and country, but was persuaded by her strong religious faith to join the party. After an uncomfortable voyage, during which she was frequently unwell, largely due to her advanced pregnancy, they reached Calcutta in October of that year. Unable to land because of the East India Company's ban on missionaries they established themselves at Serampore [Shrirampur], then a Danish enclave, a few miles upriver. On arrival Hannah Marshman took firm charge of the domestic arrangements for the whole settlement. One of her letters describes a meal for sixty — “four very large dishes of boiled rice piled up in a heap; four dishes of curry, three or four joints of meat, sometimes eight or nine large fish, seven or eight dishes of vegetables from our own gardens, three tureens of soup with bread..... We make tea in two large urns”. Nor were meal-times prolonged, sociable affairs, Marshman claiming that “we scarcely ever sit more than twenty minutes.”<sup>2</sup>

Her activities ranged beyond her domestic responsibilities which also included the missions' accounts. As part of a fundraising enterprise for the Mission, she and her husband ran schools for Eurasian boys and girls. Later on, schools for Indian children were also opened including, in 1807, one for girls.<sup>3</sup> These flourished, impressing the pioneer American missionary, Ann Judson, when she visited in 1812. “I hope no missionary will ever come out here, without a wife, as she, in her sphere, can be equally useful with her husband. I presume Mrs Marshman does more good in her school than half the ministers in America.”<sup>4</sup> Despite her initial fears Marshman, who was to survive until her eighty-first year seems to have taken to missionary life with gusto. She described herself on the eve of her thirty-sixth birthday as “well in health, and sound in constitution, I may also add as full of activities and spirits, as at any time in my life. Had I been born in India, the country and climate could not have suited me better; nor the work more congenial with my spirit than I find it.”<sup>5</sup>

### **The first woman missionary in mainland China**

Mary Ann Aldersey, the daughter of a prosperous wholesale stationer in Hackney, began taking Chinese lessons in 1824. Her teacher was Robert Morrison, himself a missionary temporarily back in England, who was keen to send out to China “unmarried ladies of experience and education ... [to teach] English and the principles of our religion to pagan girls.”<sup>6</sup> For a number of years Aldersey was unable to leave the country because of family responsibilities. However by 1837 she found herself free to go, establishing for the time being

a school for Chinese girls at Batavia [Jakarta]. With the partial opening of China in 1842, the intrepid Aldersey decided to move to one of the Treaty Ports on the Chinese mainland where she set up a girls' school at Ningpo. She rented a large building in the centre of the town and began to acquire pupils who lived in the school as boarders. Her chief method of recruiting was to enter into an agreement with the parents who handed over their daughters in return for a financial inducement. A few of her pupils were orphans. Despite protestations, allegations and hostile demonstrations her school soon proved so successful that she asked for an assistant to be sent out. This was Miss Selmer, who reported on her superior's single-mindedness in the following terms:

Imagine thirty-five children screaming at the very top of their voices, all repeating different words. The discordance and the shrillness of these sounds are beyond description, and no human beings but Chinese could produce them. Dear Miss Aldersey does not perceive the unpleasant disturbance ... her whole soul, and all her thoughts, are entirely wrapped up in the one great aim, that of making known to these poor heathens the way of salvation. <sup>7</sup>

Aldersey continued her labours for fifteen years when, at the age of sixty-four, she handed her work over to another mission, and retired to live with her nieces in Australia. There, feeling that she "had been a person of one idea in China with no time for flowers or butterflies" she enjoyed both in her new surroundings. <sup>8</sup>

The numbers of women missionaries sent out prior to the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century were low, perhaps a couple of hundred in total. The view of many was that it was entirely improper for single women to be sent alone to live and work overseas. Outright opposition came from a very authoritative source - Daniel Wilson, Bishop of Calcutta who declared: "I object from my experience of Indian life, and indeed upon principle, to ladies coming out unprotected to so distant a place with a climate so unfriendly and with the utmost certainty of marrying within a month of arrival.... and that no unmarried female would have thought of a voyage of 14,000 miles to find out a scene of duty."<sup>9</sup> Opinions began to change by the 1860s, not least, because the missionary cause had not been as successful or fruitful as its pioneers had hoped. A consensus began to emerge that it was *the women* who were holding back progress. One learned advocate asserted that "until a way is opened for the free intercourse of the educated mothers and women of Europe ... with the mothers and women of India in

their own homes ... Christianity will make little progress.”<sup>10</sup> The need to gain access to the *zenanas*, the closed apartments for women in better-off Indian homes now acquired an urgency which led directly to the wider deployment of missionary women. Frequent appeals for ladies “of some culture, education and refinement” to minister to *zenana* women now appeared in missionary periodicals, including those of the main denominational societies, hastening to join in the new work. Adding to the momentum was evidence that *zenana* teaching met a need increasingly felt by many Indian families, particularly those of the urbanized elite. One missionary reported that “the only difficulty has been how to take up the homes that have been opened to us. The ladies in the *Zenanas* nearly all wish to learn English ... and many ask to be taught to play some instrument, especially the harmonium.”<sup>11</sup> One big obstacle was the religious element of the teaching which missionaries felt compelled to introduce. Some families were happy to tolerate an element of Christian teaching as part of an educational ‘package,’ or felt able to accept passages from the Bible simply as stories.<sup>12</sup> Many more orthodox homes, however, kept their doors firmly shut, as did most Muslim ones. Dr William Emslie, an Anglican medical missionary working in North India, thought he had the answer to this problem, publicising his view in a popular missionary magazine that where the offer of education could not effect an entrance to Indian homes then perhaps offers of medical aid could.

Opportunities now began opening up for energetic religious women and their supporters in a gender-defined overseas project which they were free to organize, pray for and raise funds for at a time when the Church and society in Britain allowed few options for meaningful activity outside the home.<sup>13</sup> This women’s mission developed along a three-fold path – education, medical assistance and evangelism: yet, at the same time, educational provision for girls in Britain was poor; medical instruction unavailable and the notion of respectable women as evangelists unacceptable. Many women responding to the various appeals for missionaries were found unsuitable, chiefly because of a poor educational background. Of 25 applicants to the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in one year only 8 were found to be suitably qualified while the London Missionary Society routinely rejected nearly half of all applicants.

Secondary education for girls in Britain markedly improved during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century commencing with the pioneering efforts of Miss Buss and Miss Beale and continuing in the 1870s with schools set up under the Girls’ Public Day School Trust while by the early 1880s Colleges for women had been set up in Cambridge, Oxford and London. A number of

these pioneering institutions were strongly imbued with religious zeal and were openly sympathetic to the missionary cause. At Miss Buss's North London Collegiate School, for example, a missionary union flourished and many 'Old North Londoners' went out to Africa, India and China to serve as missionaries. One of these was Dr Mary Pailthorpe. Entering Camden School for Girls, a school intended by its founder, Frances Buss, to provide inexpensive education for girls up to 16, in 1872 she gained a place at the more prestigious North London Collegiate School in the following year. In 1877 she won a three-year scholarship to study mathematics at Girton College, Cambridge where she obtained the equivalent of a first class honours degree. She went on to take a medical degree with distinction at the London School of Medicine before sailing for India as a fully-qualified medical missionary in 1887 where she remained until her death in 1912. Ever afterwards a photograph of Miss Buss had a prominent position on the walls of her room. The founders of Westfield College, London, (later absorbed into Queen Mary College) Constance Maynard and Ann Dudin Brown, held strong religious convictions as the motto of the College "Behold the handmaid of the Lord" denoted. A quarter of its first 200 students became missionaries, most of them appointed to mission schools while a member of college staff, Dr Eleanor McDougall, became in 1915 the founding principal of the Women's Christian College in Madras [Chennai].

The first women to offer medical aid overseas were far from fully trained. Priscilla Winter, the wife of a missionary based in Delhi in the early 1860s, for example, set up an outdoor dispensary on the banks of the River Jumna where she distributed simple remedies to the women who went down to the river to pray and bathe. It rapidly became clear, however, that those offering more interventionist aid required both extensive training and practical experience. As one wrote; "whatever I may have done, I should have done better had I been qualified."<sup>14</sup> In 1874 the London School of Medicine for Women offering a full four-year course to MB standard opened its doors. Many of its students went on to become missionary doctors - some 95 during its first thirty years – despite some concerns at the School about combining these roles. One of Britain's pioneering doctors, Dr Edith Pechey, who herself went out to India although not as a missionary, urged women missionaries to go out "with the best credentials and as you belong to two professions, see that you serve both faithfully."<sup>15</sup> A later development – the deployment of missionary nurses – arose out of the crying need to staff the many mission hospitals established by medical missionaries in India, China and, later on, in Africa. Again, well-trained and experienced nurses were required, capable of not

only running an entire hospital but also in training nurses. A Missionary Nurses League was founded in 1903 and by 1916 there were over 500 Western trained nurses serving in Protestant missions overseas, chiefly in India and China. Sister Gladys Stephenson, a Sister in the Wesleyan Deaconess order, arrived in China in 1915 at the age of twenty-six. A tall and imposing figure in her Deaconess uniform, which she wore wrote one “as though it were a battle-dress” she became an influential figure in the development of nursing in China choosing as the motto of the Nursing Association - “With God nothing shall be impossible.”<sup>16</sup> In 1927 she was appointed Principal of the School of Nursing, attached to the prestigious new Union Hospital in Hankow. Here she ran one of the largest nursing schools in China defining the profession as one “based on sanitary knowledge and scientific medical discoveries” providing an “independent self-supporting career for women of education, culture and good social position.”<sup>17</sup>

The wider acceptance of an evangelistic role for women was another factor leading to an increase in the numbers of female missionaries. In the wake of the religious revivals which swept much of Britain during 1859 and 1860, and again in the 1870s and 1880s, there had been a deepening of religious experience. This led not only to renewed enthusiasm for the missionary cause, but also to a greater awareness and acceptance of the spiritual agency of women. Female preaching had by the 1860s become a more ladylike activity, very different from the earlier “‘primitive female preacher’ who as one described ‘puts off her bonnet and shawl and goes at it like a ranter ... says some good things, but without order or arrangement and shouts till the people jump.’”<sup>18</sup> The religious revivals, and the Holiness movement which developed out of them in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, placed an emphasis on “perfect love” and “purity of heart,” areas of religious experience in which women were thought to be particularly competent.<sup>19</sup> One woman greatly influenced by the Holiness Movement was Lilius Trotter, the product of an upper-class English home and a watercolour artist of considerable ability. Writing in 1879 she explained she could not dedicate herself to art in the way her mentor and friend, John Ruskin, urged. She would instead “seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.”<sup>20</sup> Joining the YWCA she first devoted herself to social work in London before going out in 1888, with a couple of like-minded women friends to Algiers. Here they established themselves as the Algiers Mission Band teaching small groups of women and girls and writing and distributing tracts and translated portions of the Bible. Despite much ill-health Trotter remained until her death in 1928 illustrating her letters and journals with miniature paintings and photographs. Another remarkable trio of women were

Mildred Cable and the French sisters, Evangeline and Francesca who went out to China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century as members of the China Inland Mission. Becoming convinced that Chinese Christians could spread the ‘Good Tidings’ much more effectively than ever could a few European missionaries they set up an institute at Hwoochow, in Shansi Province, North China to train Bible women, offering a variety of shorter and longer courses including “a two year course of Bible training and practical experience as evangelists.”<sup>21</sup> They also ran a dispensary and opened an opium refuge for women. By the early 1920s they decided their work in Shansi had been done and sought permission to move on to begin, of all things, an itinerant ministry along the ancient trading routes in China’s outer provinces of Gansu and Xinjiang. Between 1923 and the mid-1930s, when they were well on in middle age, they traversed the length of the Gobi desert five times “searching out innumerable by-paths and exploring the most hidden oases. Whenever we heard of some side-track which led to a hamlet, or even an isolated home, far from the main roads, there we went to deliver our message .... In every Gobi temple which we had touched the priests now owned a copy of the Scriptures.... A tent, a cart or an inn-room was our only home, our guest-room, preaching-hall, dispensary and bookshop.” Distributing portions of Scripture as they went, they found it “necessary to carry books in seven different languages in order that the Mongol, the Chinese, the Turki, the Tibetan, the Manchurian, the Russian and the Arabic-reading *Ahung* should each be supplied with the Gospel in his own tongue.”<sup>22</sup>

By 1916 around two and half thousand single women from Britain had gone overseas as Protestant missionaries. Taking also into account the numbers of married women missionaries there were now more women than men in the mission field. The female predominance does not seem to have been generally apparent. The title of the three-volume CMS centenary history, the *History of the Church Missionary Society: its environment, its men and its work* published in 1899 suggests little regard given to women’s input. Perhaps it is not altogether surprising that its author, Eugene Stock, a leading CMS administrator as well as historian, could write as late as 1917 that “it is a fact little realized that there are more women missionaries in the field than men.”<sup>23</sup> Despite their predominance in the mission-field women had little say on the executive boards of missionary societies. The London Missionary Society was the first to invite women to sit on the Board of Directors in 1891, a similar move in the Church Missionary Society not taking place until 1917. The LMS was also the first society to appoint a woman administrator, Mrs I. Parker Crane who became Joint Home Secretary in 1920, the CMS following with a similar post some twenty years later. By the

middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the numbers of women administrators increased apart from more conservative societies such as the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (formerly the China Inland Mission) which finally opened its boardroom to women in 2001. Even that decision was not unanimous, dissenters adhering to the view that “the biblical teaching on male headship implies that leadership should be limited to men.”<sup>24</sup>

That seems a good place to stop. I am very happy to answer any questions while for those of you who would like to know more about the subject as a whole may I recommend my book – *Western Daughters in Eastern Lands, British Missionary Women in Asia* – copies now cost around £37 – although I still have a few in stock for £18 plus P&P.

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<sup>1</sup> Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day*, (London: Vintage Books, 2001), 124

<sup>2</sup> Sunil Kumar Chatterjee, *Hannah Marshman, the first woman missionary in India*, (Hoogly: S. Chatterjee, 1987), 48.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Weitbrecht, *The Women of India and Christian work in the Zenana*, (London: 1875), 146.

<sup>4</sup> Ann Judson in an 1812 letter quoted in Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: a Social History of their Thought and Practice*, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1996), 44.

<sup>5</sup> Chatterjee, Hannah Marshman, 51

<sup>6</sup> Letter dated 7 Sep 1824, to the London Missionary Society, SOAS: CWM/LMS Archive, South China Correspondence, Box 2.

<sup>7</sup> A F S, ed. Miss Whately, *Missions to the Women of China*. (London, Edinburgh, 1866), 100.

<sup>8</sup> E. Aldersey White, *A Woman Pioneer in China, the life of Mary Ann Aldersey*, (London: Livingstone Press, 1932) 73.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in C.F. Pascoe, *Two Hundred Years of the SPG: an Historical Account of the Society 1701-1900*, (London: Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, 1901), 617.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Richard Lovett, *History of the London Missionary Society 1795-1895*, (London: Henry Frowde, 1899), vol.2, 716

<sup>11</sup> *India's Women*, April 1881, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Geraldine H. Forbes, “In Search of the ‘Pure Heathen’: Missionary Women in Nineteenth Century India,” *Economic & Political Weekly* 21, 17 (1986): WS6.

<sup>13</sup> C.P. Williams notes how Protestantism had reduced “very substantially the openings for women in the Church.” C.P. Williams, “The Recruitment and Training of Overseas Missionaries in England between 1850 and 1900,” M. Litt. Dissertation, University of Bristol, 1976, 300. The mid to late nineteenth century, however, saw the re-introduction into Britain of sisterhoods and deaconesses.

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- <sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Beilby, quoted in John Lowe, *Medical Missions, Their Place and Power*, (London: T.Fisher Unwin, 1886), 191.
- <sup>15</sup> Quoted in Antoinette Burton, "Contesting the Zenana: the Mission to make 'Lady Doctors for India', 1874-1885," *The Journal of British Studies*, 35, no.3, (1996), 15.
- <sup>16</sup> *The British Journal of Nursing*, September 1926, p. 139, Royal College of Nursing online database.
- <sup>17</sup> Gladys E. Stephenson, *A Short Outline of Nursing History*, (Shanghai: The Nurses Association of China, 1936), 67.
- <sup>18</sup> Olive Anderson, "Women Preachers in mid-Victorian Britain: some reflexions on Feminism, Popular Religion and Social Change," *The Historical Journal*, XII, 3 (1969), 471-2.
- <sup>19</sup> Olive Anderson, "Women Preachers," 477.
- <sup>20</sup> Lisa M. Sinclair, "The Legacy of Isabella Lilius Trotter," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Jan 2002, 32-35.
- <sup>21</sup> Mildred Cable, *The Fulfilment of a Dream of Pastor Hsi's; the Story of the Work in Hwochow*, (London: Morgan & Scott, 1917), 160.
- <sup>22</sup> Mildred Cable, *The Gobi Desert*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1942), 276-77.
- <sup>23</sup> Eugene Stock, *Beginnings in India*, (London: Central Board of Missions and SPCK, 1917) Project Canterbury.
- <sup>24</sup> Overseas Missionary Fellowship, *Fellowship News*, 2001.