

PUBLISHED VERSION

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Missionaries abroad

The Encyclopedia of women and leadership in twentieth-century Australia, 2014 / Smart and Swain, J.S. (ed./s), Ch.n/a

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THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WOMEN & LEADERSHIP IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AUSTRALIA

SITE MENU

THEME

Missionaries Abroad

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Australian women served as missionaries across the world during the 20th century. They demonstrated their leadership working in a number of aspects of missionary work but most particularly in the provision of education and health services for women and girls of colonised peoples. Women outnumbered men in the missionary field. Single women flocked to missionary work from the later 19th century and, added to missionary wives who shared in missionary work, their numbers exceeded those of male missionaries. Historian Janet West estimates that, between 1880 and 1914, Australian women overseas missionaries outnumbered men by two to one (West, 227-8). Up to 1938, 193 single Australian women joined the China Inland Mission (CIM) compared with 144 men, many of whom were married (West, 217). However, men dominated the leadership of missions, particularly those representing established Christian denominations, but also the inter-denominational faith missions, such as the Poona and India Village Mission (PIVM) led by the charismatic and autocratic Charles Reeve. Although the CIM was founded as late as 1865, its leadership was very male dominated and its activities were very gender segregated (Paddle, 70). It attracted less-educated missionaries, but even women trained as doctors and nurses were not able to take on leadership roles in their areas of expertise (Brotchie, 1999). Women with leadership ambitions, like Florence Young, found no place for themselves in it (Griffin, *ADB*).

Only women-run organisations, such as the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Association (PWMA) or Union (PWMU) and religious orders, such as the Society of the Sacred Heart, which Mother Mary Sheldon led in Japan from 1917 to 1954, afforded broad opportunities for leadership (Percy-Dove, 130-61). However, within some male-led organisations, such as the more progressive London Missionary Society (LMS), women carved out leadership roles in medicine, nursing and education. These women enjoyed broader responsibilities and higher positions than they could ever have in Australia. As historian Anne O'Brien has noted, the opportunities that all missionary women enjoyed flowed from their position as white women.

'The assumption of race superiority opened up many more opportunities than were possible at home. Of all the work that Australian women did in Australia's modernising period, missionary work allowed them more scope than most: to travel, to live in different cultures, to work with a considerable degree of independence, to

exercise leadership.'(O'Brien, 162)

Saving Girls

Work for women motivated many women into mission. They often worked in societies where women were valued less than men. Hannah Dudley came to Suva, Fiji, in 1897, after serving in India where she had learned Urdu. She worked with the Indian community in Fiji and soon adopted nine girls who had no family and two boys. She did not submit easily to the mission leadership but showed the need for an orphanage, which began in 1905. This became the Dilkusha Girls School, which was led by Methodist missionary women from 1905 until 1969, after which local women took over its leadership. In Korea, too, in 1891, missionaries like Isabella Menzies rescued homeless girls who were in danger of becoming prostitutes or sold as kitchen slaves. Soon she was running an orphanage and teaching the girls, for whom she founded the Il Sin Girls School in Pusan. Menzies worked as a Presbyterian missionary in Korea for thirty-three years, until 1924 (MacKenzie). Numbers of Australian women joined the Mukti Mission, founded by Pandita Ramabai, the Indian feminist Christian, in 1889. Here they worked to convert, educate and train Indian women and girls, many of whom had been abandoned by their own families.

Educating Girls

Education was a key element in missionaries' work for women. Setting up schools was an arduous business, particularly where girls were usually kept in seclusion. Eleanor Rivett (LMS) ran the United Missionary Girls High School in Kolkata from 1907 to 1938 (Godden, *ADB*). Once girls matured, parents withdrew them from school. However, when Rivett organised a 'purdah' bus to bring the girls to school, new educational opportunities were opened for them, and soon they were matriculating for Kolkata University (Allen, 51). Rivett and other missionary school principals sought to open new careers for their students as teachers, pharmacists and doctors. Often their achievements in providing primary, secondary and tertiary education for women were attained at great personal expense. For example, Miss Tephe Garrard, in Uganda with the Church Missionary Society (CMS), wrote home: 'I can't get a cook, and that means I'm doing double work, for I've got the school, [visiting the] the women, and the cooking to do' (*Examiner*, Launceston, 25 October 1928, 9). Nevertheless, by 1932, she had trained seventeen women who were teaching in village schools (*Examiner*, Launceston, 16 February 1932, 3). Similar problems confronted Gertrude Bendelack MA Dip.Ed., who was in China with the Church Missionary Society (CMS) from 1909 to 1934. In 1916, she was the founding principal of St Hilda's School for Girls, which was often short-staffed. In 1919, she wrote:

'This term I have had 100 pupils, of whom about 75 were boarders. People keep writing that they hope I am not over working. How can I do anything else with that family to teach from 8.45 a.m. till 4 p.m., to doctor at 6 a.m. and 9 p.m., give music

lessons from 1.30 to 7 p.m., and to train, mother, nurse, scold, &c., all the rest of the hours? And long after they are in bed prepare for the next day, correct work, do accounts and correspondence.' (*Gippsland Times*, 28 April 1919, 4)

It is not surprising she had to take leave to recover her health. Yet, despite the long hours and strains, working as educators offered women leadership opportunities lacking in Australia. After twenty years in Korea working as a primary teacher and the principal of a vocational school for destitute women, Edith Kerr returned home to Melbourne in 1941 because of the Japanese occupation. Despite being the first Presbyterian woman to gain a divinity degree in Australia, she was not accepted as a ministry candidate (Porter, *ADB*; Francis, 'Kerr', *AWR*).

Australian women also opened up tertiary education for women in the countries where they worked. Eleanor Rivett was principal of Women's Christian College in Madras during the difficult decade encompassing the war years and the Quit India Movement (1938-1947), chaired the Central Advisory Committee for Women's Education in Madras from 1941 and served as the only woman member of the Madras University Inspection Commission from 1946 to 1947 (Allen). Jessie McLaren taught at and was on the management board at Ewha Women's University in Korea, while others set up and taught at teacher training institutions.

Training for Church Leadership

A number of women missionaries saw the need to establish training facilities in pastoral and evangelical work for local women in order to combat the male-dominated nature of the indigenous churches. For example, Eleanor Rivett set up such a missionary training centre for Indian Christian women, known as Christa Seva Vidhyalaya (Allen, 58).

Women Doctors and Women's Health

Women medical graduates were crucial in providing medical care and medical training for women. On the mission field, their opportunities for leadership and for clinical work were almost boundless, and a number made significant contributions to women's health and career opportunities.

Dr Effie Stillwell of the Zenana Bible and Medical Mission was in India from 1905 to 1937, providing health care for women who could not see male medical practitioners. For many years, she was in charge of 'the Duchess of Teck Hospital at Patna - a large hospital for the Purdah, the secluded women of India' (*Advertiser*, 7 April 1937, 10). Dr Ethel Ambrose was at the PIVM for most of the period from 1905 until her death in 1934. She built up the hospital at Pandharpur in western India (Henningham, *AWR*). Dr Laura Hope also had a long tenure in India, from 1893 to 1934, though with occasional furloughs in Australia and Europe. With her husband, she worked as a missionary doctor associated with Baptist Missions in Bengal and later at the Presbyterian St Andrew's Colonial Homes, Kalimpong, which housed over five hundred children (Jones, *ADB*; Francis, 'Hope', *AWR*). Dr Flora Innes began medical work at the

Presbyterian Mission at Sholinghur, near Chennai, in 1911. Here she built on the work of a chemist, Miss McNeil, who had arrived in 1898. Later Dr Innes moved to the Christian Hospital and Medical College for Women at Vellore, which had been founded by the American, Ida Scudder, in 1918. This remains an important centre for training Indian women as doctors and nurses.

A notable Catholic medical missionary was Sister Mary Glowrey (1887-1957), the first president of the Catholic Women's Social Guild in Melbourne and a medical graduate who had done further studies in obstetrics, gynaecology and ophthalmology. She went to India in 1920, joining the Society of Jesus, Mary and Joseph as a medical missionary. She was the first nun-doctor missionary, having gained special permission from Pope Pius XI to practise as a medical missionary, and, for thirty-seven years, she worked as a doctor at St Joseph's Hospital, Guntur, and also trained Indian women as nurses, midwives and dispensers. In 1943, she formed the Catholic Hospital Association of India and worked towards the establishment of a Catholic Medical College (McKinna; Heywood, *AWR*).

Women Nurses

While, as has been noted, trained nurses with the CIM had few opportunities to lead, other missionary societies were different. Anna Christiansen went to China in 1914 with the LMS, where she was the first trained nurse and matron at the Tsangchou (Cangzhou) hospital, China. In 1921, she founded a nursing school and, in 1937, there was an up-to-date hospital and nursing school there. However, with the Japanese invasion, the Chinese staff fled and Christiansen had to return home to Australia (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 October 1937, 22).

Maud Pethybridge (1892-1986) was a CMS missionary in Kenya for thirty-nine years. A double-certificated nurse, she believed one of her greatest achievements was the establishment of 'a 23 bed hospital which she ran by herself with the help of African men and women nurses whom she had trained' (Cole; Cole & Pethybridge). Other Australian nursing sisters who served with the CMS in East Africa ran six CMS hospitals in Tanganyika (now Tanzania). They were May Dobson, Narelle Bullard, Gladys Hampel, Violet Payne and Marjorie Paul. By 1941, along with Dr Paul White, they had introduced Truby King methods in relation to domestic hygiene and childcare, training forty African women as midwives (*Australian Women's Weekly*, 18 October 1941, 2). Narelle Bullard worked in Tanganyika from 1928 to c.1960 and was appointed MBE for her service. These nurses helped lower Tanganyika's infant mortality rate (O'Brien, 155-62).

Erna Marlienne Thomson went to India in 1964 as a nursing sister and teacher. She was at the Christian Medical College and Hospital, Vellore, South India, for almost thirty years, holding the position of assistant nursing superintendent from 1976 to 1982. In the last decade of her term there, she was responsible, working with a multidisciplinary team, for the care of HIV positive patients throughout the 1,500-bed hospital (Secomb, *AWR*).

Philosophies of Mission

The 1910 World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh marked a turning point in missionary

philosophies. Now there was a greater respect for, and appreciation of, local cultures and Eastern religions. Rather than a single-minded pursuit of conversions, missionaries sought to demonstrate Christian qualities and to render service to local communities. Indeed, in the first decades of the 20th century, the Australian Student Christian Movement (ASCM) was deeply involved in missionary activity and many highly educated people embarked upon a missionary career (Howe, 2001). Missionaries also sought to work with local Christians to encourage the growth of indigenous forms of Christianity and to build up local leadership in the church. Certainly there were some conservatives such as Amy Parsons of the PIVM (in India 1888 to 1948), who through her long missionary career continued to condemn and denigrate Hinduism and determinedly sought conversions, but numbers of Australian women missionaries, generally university graduates, saw themselves, as ASCM historian Renate Howe has commented, as 'a new type of missionary' aiming 'to build up Indigenous resources in church and society' (Howe, 2001, 317). Eleanor Rivett was enthusiastic about these new approaches, but there was no question that she or women like her would hold leading positions on the Indian National Christian Council, which worked to advance the Edinburgh agenda. Rather, she sought to advance its work with her activities in her school and in the YWCA of India, Burma and Ceylon (Allen).

Educating Australia about Asia

Australian women missionaries led the way in educating the Australian public about Asia. They helped to forge a public opinion more open to non-Western peoples and cultures as Asian nationalisms grew during the 20th century and as the colonial powers departed. As Renate Howe has remarked, these women were important intermediaries and were often called upon for informed comment when they were in Australia (Howe, 2001). Many women missionaries rejected the dismissal of Asian and African cultures and societies as uncivilised, a view that had been perpetuated by missionary and colonial discourses in the 19th century. They promoted more nuanced and complex views of Indian family life than their predecessors. Thus, in 1909, Marie Gilbert, by then an independent missionary in Kolkata, said, 'though at times, one hears of hard mothers-in-law, I must say I've heard of more than I've ever met. I know hundreds of happy daughters-in law' (*Brisbane Courier*, 15 September 1909, 13). Gertude Bendelack challenged notions of the unchanging east, telling Australian audiences, 'You might think that China is fossilised, but two-thirds of the girls have bobbed hair; they wear dresses to the knees, elegant shoes, and have beautiful silk-stockinged legs' (*Mercury*, Hobart, 9 February 1929, 8).

Intermediaries Between Two Societies

Some missionaries conveyed the views of colonised peoples they served to Australians. Thus, in 1920, Marie Gilbert, still working as a missionary in Kolkata, reported that the Maharani of Cooch Behar, 'a well-educated and cultured lady', had sent a message through her to Australian women about the Australian Immigration Restriction Act. She had said to Gilbert, 'Will you tell the ladies of Australia from me how we feel this indignity which Australia imposes upon Indians? We are British subjects' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 August 1910, 9). Australian missionaries' contacts with important Indians made it possible for them to report their opinions back to the Australian community. Thus, in 1910, Gilbert also referred to the

opinions of the Honorable K.G. Gupta, a member of the India Council, who, in light of the White Australia policy, advocated an Indian boycott on Australian trade and also sending all the Australian missionaries home, requiring that 'they first learn the meaning of "brotherly love"' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 August 1910, 9).

Nina Brentnall spoke of the campaign against 'untouchable' status in Travancore in 1931, giving 'a vivid account of an exhibition of "passive objection" which had been shown, when thousands and thousands of these untouchables lay along the roads blocking the routes' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 July 1931, 3). She also praised the work of educated Indian women: 'They are successful in law, science and medicine, and are doing great work in extending the scope of infant welfare centres' (*Advertiser and Register*, 7 July 1931, 14).

Gertrude Bendelack's letters, published in the press, gave detailed commentary on the turbulent politics of China in the 1920s. Teaching the rising Chinese generation, already deeply involved in these political debates, was challenging. She wrote:

'Just imagine my teaching the matriculation class history the Boxer riots, Russo-Japanese War, opium war, etc. I have a lively time. British expansion in nineteenth century is also a delicate subject to deal with, for their greatest cry is: Down with British Imperialism.' (*Gippsland Times*, 8 February 1926, 5)

Eleanor Rivett wrote articles over many years in the Australian press and spoke when on furlough in Australia, taking a positive view of Indian nationalism and the achievements of Indian women. In 1926, she described Gandhi as 'the greatest man in Indian today' (*West Australian*, 9 April 1926, 13). To members of the Lyceum Club in Brisbane in 1938, she said that: 'Australians should help people realize that India was a self-governing dominion' and could manage its own affairs and that Indian women were playing an active part in this. She spoke of the All-Indian Women's Conference, where Indian women and those from abroad 'worked together without any question of creed or cast', before going on to talk about individual women, such as the first woman cabinet minister in Bengal and her work in public health (*Courier-Mail*, Brisbane, 17 March 1938, 35).

Even when Rivett was back living in Australia after the Second World War, she was telling Australian audiences that Australia, 'associated historically with one and geographically with the other, could play an important role as interpreter between West and East' (Barrier Miner, Broken Hill, 7 April 1949, 4). She worked 'for closer India-Australia relations' (*Smith's Weekly*, 29 January 1949, 1). She went out of her way to be friendly to visiting Indians and to those who came to study or settle in Australia (Allen, 59). Her rhetoric was often cleverly crafted to position India and Australia as equal partners in the world, 'sister dominions' facing similar problems. Her words could challenge the notion that Australia was advanced while India was backward in all aspects of life. In 1949, she wrote: 'With a woman Governor, a woman Ambassador, and a woman Minister of Health in the first year of Independence, India is ahead of us in

this Dominion of the Sunny South' (Allen, 60). During her retirement in Australia, she was also able to advise the Australian government about the establishment of the Colombo Plan to bring Asian students to study in Australia.

Others investigated the rich cultural heritages of the land of their adoption. Jessie McLaren (née Reeve) 1883-1968, an MA graduate of Melbourne University, was travelling secretary for the ASCM and then spent a year with her father at the Poona and Indian Village Mission in India. Her marriage to Dr Charles McLaren led to thirty years in Korea 1911-1941, where she worked for women's advancement, starting a night school for women and a kindergarten. She taught at Ewha Women's University, where she was on the Board of Management, as well as landscaping the gardens at their new premises. When ill-health saw her house-bound for a number of years, she translated Chinese Confucian texts and Korean poetry. She collected a number of books, including a number of old and rare editions, dating from the 16th until the early 20th centuries, which now form a significant part of the Korean collection in the National Library of Australia. Her books included works in classical Chinese, Japanese and Korean scripts covering literature, philosophy, religion, dictionaries, grammar, geography and cooking (Gosling).

From 1945

After the Second World War, missionary work became more contested. In 1951, all foreign missionaries were required to leave China. After independence in 1947, the Indian government was less welcoming of Christian missionaries. From 1960, the Malaysian government would allow missionaries a residence of only ten years. However, in 1951, the Pope called for a new emphasis upon mission with an approach that valued local cultures and was supported by workers in health and education. The Sisters of Mercy in Australia sent 178 sisters to Papua-New Guinea from 1958 to 1981. They worked beyond Goroka, commencing ministries of teaching and nursing. They established primary and secondary schools, some with boarding facilities, health centres, maternal and child health clinics and a maternity hospital. The Mercy sisters moved into providing teacher education, including at Holy Trinity Teachers College at Mount Hagen between 1968 and 2010 (Flaherty, 5). A good part of their energies were directed to work for women and girls and, in 1963, they established a girls' secondary school, Mercy College, at Yarapos near Wewak. With their emphasis upon women's participation, they helped to train women to be leaders in the newly emerging polity and also in the church. Mercy sisters took an active role in the establishment of the Xavier Institute of Missiology for Women Religious of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands in 1971 and spearheaded the Union of Women Religious (Flaherty, 8). In Pakistan, from 1981-c.2009, the Mercy sisters carried on the type of activities that Australian women had been doing throughout the 20th century, establishing schools, services to families and a teacher education program at the Notre Dame Institute of Education in Karachi.

The work of Australian Presbyterian Missionaries continued in South Korea after the war. Thus Dr Helen MacKenzie was superintendent of the Australian Presbyterian Mission Hospital in Pusan, Korea, from 1952 to 1975 (Francis, 'MacKenzie', *AWR*).

In India, Olive Stillwell, who had become principal of United Missionary Girls High School, Kolkata, in

1938, finally retired in 1954, after thirty-eight years at the school.

Conclusion

As the 20th century progressed, Australian women missionaries may have had less success in making converts, as many of those with whom they worked resisted conversion, but they led efforts to change the education and life chances of colonised women.

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- [Kerr, Edith Amelia \(1893 - 1975\)](#)

Work on *The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia* was undertaken as part of the Australian Research Council's Linkage Projects funding scheme (project number LP100200304).

Published by the Australian Women's Archives Project 2014

ISBN 978-0-7340-4873-8

<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0442b.htm>

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