

Introduction

In the period between the two world wars, the phrase “women’s work for women” increasingly fell into disuse as a way of representing women’s work in overseas missions. Departing from the separate spheres approach of an earlier generation, some women in the mainstream Protestant missionary enterprise entered work worlds where their colleagues and clients were mainly men. This book is about three such women: Canadians Belle Choné Oliver (1875-1947), Florence Jessie Murray (1894-1975), and Margaret Christian Wrong (1887-1948). In calling them “modern,” I am using the term neither in a strictly literal nor a mainly ironic sense, as the pages that follow will show. As for the “modernizing men” in the title, it refers to those Western men whose response to changing times and whose commitment to efficiency in interwar missions enabled them to work in more or less collegial – if not fully egalitarian – relationships with women like Oliver, Murray, and Wrong, either in foreign “fields” or from office desks in Britain and North America. It also refers to Asians and Africans who were colleagues or protégés of these women, associating with them from motives that reflected shared religious and professional commitments, personal or nationalist ambitions, or some combination thereof. Regarding Asian and African men, it is perhaps unnecessary to point out that, at the same time that Christianity was being jettisoned by many self-conscious moderns in the West, it was serving as a modernizing vehicle among various colonized and non-Western people.

Choné Oliver, the daughter of a small-town Ontario businessman, and Florence Murray, a minister’s daughter from Atlantic Canada, began their medical missionary careers in overseas missions of the Presbyterian Church in Canada (after 1925, missions of the United Church of Canada). Arriving in India in 1902, Oliver left hospital work in 1929 for the world of missions bureaucracy, becoming the first full-time secretary of the Christian Medical Association of India (CMAI) and undertaking as her chief project the upgrading of Christian medical education. Its timing influenced by

Indian nationalism and a new theology of medical missions, that project became a crusade for the remainder of her life, as Chapter 2 explains. In Japanese-ruled Korea from 1921, following a period of professional preparation much different from Oliver's, Murray, too, fostered the upgrading of missionary medicine but in a direct and "hands-on" way as the superintendent of a general mission hospital. That stage of her career, which came to an end in 1942, is the main focus of Chapter 3. Margaret Wrong, the most privileged of the three by background and education, came from a Toronto Anglican family with important links to church, state, and university. Like Oliver, she entered the world of missionary ecumenism in 1929. Working out of London, England, she travelled tens of thousands of miles through sub-Saharan Africa as secretary of the International Committee on Christian Literature for Africa (ICCLA), a subcommittee of the International Missionary Council (IMC). Under Wrong, "Christian Literature" came to include a wide range of literary materials, secular as well as religious, and Africans came to be envisaged as writers as well as readers, as Chapter 4 demonstrates.

Although in taking up these careers they entered work worlds that privileged men, and did so as "modern" women, Oliver, Murray, and Wrong demonstrated what we would now call a feminist consciousness and also a strong Christian faith.¹ They were in sympathy with causes such as female suffrage and ordination at home, and they were moved by the plight of marginalized groups of women in their fields of work. Yet they eschewed careers that would have had them labouring for causes exclusively related to their own sex. In this respect they were part of a larger contemporary pattern in the West, one especially evident among professional women. One scholar has identified it as a hallmark of "modern feminism."² Other aspects of these women's relationship with interwar modernity were characterized by the uneven, unstable quality that one would expect of well-educated women in their line of work: too worldly wise to retain all the old certainties, too faithful and conventional and morally engaged for the new skepticism and smartness.³ Beyond these generalizations, the patterns of social behaviour and religious expression in the three women's lives were strikingly different – and non-linear. Indeed, such patterns seem to have been functions of temperament, background, and working environment to a greater degree than of age and chronological timing.

Only twelve years younger than Oliver and seven years older than Murray, Wrong had a more modern sensibility in all the ways that are most easily perceptible. Where Oliver, for instance, spoke reverentially of "Mr. Oldham," the first secretary of the IMC (to which both her organization and Wrong's were linked), Wrong spoke casually of "Joe" and saw nothing untoward in sharing dinner and wine with him when both were at meetings in Germany.⁴ Likewise, she had no taste for the intense religious language that

seems to have been as natural for Oliver as comments about the weather. As for Murray, while she outgrew her youthful uncompromising disapproval of drinking and dancing as grievous sins, she seems never to have been tempted to try such behaviours herself.⁵ And if, unlike Oliver, she did not wear her faith on her sleeve, the evidence in private correspondence and from colleagues who remember her nonetheless bespeaks serene religious convictions. Wrong did not become cynical about religion even after the death of one brother in wartime France and another at Oxford in 1928, but she moved in a social world where religious cynicism was becoming a new norm, and these family tragedies were severe tests. Yet if the three women were dissimilar in their familiarity with and ability to accommodate the social and intellectual challenges of modernity, they nonetheless shared a broad commitment to the modernizing of missions in ways that would incorporate both new techniques and technologies from the West and the special gifts and goals of indigenous Christianity.

The segments of the three women's careers featured in this book may be read as case studies of a missionary world in transition. Their work reflected changes taking place in the mainstream missionary enterprise, which, in turn, reflected larger changes in the West and in Asia and Africa. The reality – and the perception – of secularization and materialism, and the increased importance attached to professional training in the West, had a significant impact on the international missions community, as did the demands of nationalizing and Westernizing young men in mission settings. These broad patterns of stimulus and response in the missionary enterprise are discussed in Chapter 1 in order to provide the necessary context for subsequent chapters on Oliver, Murray, and Wrong.

Missions in Asia and Africa were generally located in formal colonies; their relationships with their colonial hosts ranged over time and according to circumstances from symbiotic to ambiguous to hostile. During the last few decades, postcolonial studies and scholarly studies of missions have flourished. Regrettably, they have developed largely as separate spheres. Dane Kennedy's 1996 injunction to conventional imperial historians to broaden their "methodological horizons" by taking account of postcolonial scholarship, notwithstanding its empirical shortcomings and "theoretical excesses," is equally apt for missions historians.⁶ In the realm of women and missions, for instance, we have sometimes been too inclined to read the discourse of missions-minded women uncritically, interpreting a progressive language of sisterhood as proof of egalitarian practice while minimizing their personal investment in stereotyping and dramatizing the "plight" of "Oriental womanhood."⁷ Andrew Porter's interrogation of the concept of "cultural imperialism" illustrates the benefits to be derived when an imperial historian with an interest in missions responds methodically to issues raised in postcolonial critiques. Brian Stanley's *The Bible and the Flag* is also attuned

to such critiques, at once a rigorous work of scholarship and a forthright statement of a faith position. Written from yet another angle, the introduction and some of the essays in a recent collection edited by Mary Taylor Huber and Nancy Lutkehaus suggest that valuable insights may be drawn from a cross-fertilization of missions, gender, and postcolonial scholarship.⁸

If historians of missions have been slow to draw on the insights of postcolonial scholars, postcolonialists have been even less inclined to undertake, or engage with, research on missions. Neither the most seminal works of postcolonial scholarship nor those that have followed in their wake have devoted much attention to close-grained, discrete studies of missions, or of indigenous Christian groups and their relations to colonialism.⁹ Among postcolonial scholars who have taken women and missions as their subject matter, a few seem almost embarrassed about having done so, given what Susan Thorne calls “the missionary project[’s] ... present state of postcolonial disgrace,” and hence are at pains not to appear as apologists for women missionaries’ activities.¹⁰ One also finds a widespread assumption that mission Christianity was just another expression of colonialism’s praxis, the missionary perhaps nicer than the local colonial authority in his or her relations with “the native” but with the same ultimate goals in view.¹¹ Missionaries often emerge from such studies as men and women incapable of change, too rigid or obtuse to learn from new circumstances.¹² That some of them *were* like that is unlikely to be disputed by anyone who has spent much time in mission archives. But the same records also reveal individuals who changed considerably in the course of their careers and provide evidence of significant generational differences in missionaries’ attitudes to their cultural environment. Fortunately, studies of missionaries and their relationships to colonialism and indigenous culture that allow for complexity and change are beginning to emerge in postcolonial scholarship.¹³ Meanwhile, much valuable and relevant research defies any neat historiographic label. By the breadth of its range and sympathies, Terence Ranger’s work on Africa, for instance, serves all scholars with an interest in interactions between indigenous people and colonial and missionary interveners.¹⁴

Even if it is increasingly recognized that missions had an agenda distinct from formal colonialism, the question remains: was missionary activity imperialism in a cultural dress? Missionaries, it could be argued, were cultural imperialists par excellence, seeking as their ultimate goal nothing less than to win the souls of another people, a change more fundamental than anything envisioned by colonial lawmakers or Western profiteers. As a result of constraining circumstances and their own increasing diffidence, missionaries often stopped short of that ultimate goal, or quietly abandoned it, especially in the period featured in this book, and confined themselves on a daily basis to working for specific social and material changes. Did that make them less “imperialistic”? The paradoxical nature of their endeavours

is highlighted in an argument made by Brian Stanley and William Hutchison, among others: that as liberal missionaries became increasingly involved in trying to improve here-and-now conditions for the missionized rather than “saving” them for the hereafter, it was they, rather than more narrowly focused proselytizers, who were closer, in practice, to “cultural imperialism.”¹⁵ Andrew Porter, on the other hand, finds “cultural imperialism” unhelpful as a label for what Protestant missionaries sought to do in the high imperial era. Following the logic that applies the concept to all missionary interventions, he argues, all “externally induced reform ... can be seen as part of cultural imperialism ... Only if it can somehow be shown that change involved no external ingredients and occurred in the absence of imbalances of material or social power, could we perhaps presume otherwise.”¹⁶ If the concept is to be useful for the interwar era it must, at a minimum, take account of the fact that by that time many participants in the missionary movement were seeking to function as cultural gatekeepers. In that self-appointed role, they sought to sustain and even vivify various aspects of “tradition” rather than to substitute Western culture wholesale. Meanwhile, many of the missionized were showing considerable agency in adopting only what they wanted from the menu of missionary offerings, and a few were agitating vigorously for deletions and additions.

The tendency in scholarship dealing with missions (from whatever “school” it comes) has been to focus on those missions located in colonies of the European powers and especially the British Empire. There have been few attempts at systematic comparisons of differences in broad aims, strategies, and outcomes in locations where the missionaries and the colonial power were, and were not, united by their cultural and religious backgrounds, although T.O. Beidelman long ago pointed to the need for these and analogous types of comparisons.¹⁷ *Good Citizens: British Missionaries and Imperial States, 1870-1918* provides this sort of perspective by looking at the relations of British missionary societies with French, Belgian, German, and British colonial administrators and their policies.¹⁸ But what was the nature of the relationship between missions and the colonial power when the colonizer was neither Western nor Christian? *Good Citizens* deals only briefly with this question; the present work makes no pretense of answering it fully. Yet the research on which Chapter 3 is based suggests that missionaries in Japanese-ruled Korea pursued essentially the same kinds of goals and institutional strategies as their counterparts in British colonial settings, while necessarily working under particular constraints.¹⁹ What is striking, however, is that there could also be significant advantages and opportunities for missionaries who worked in a setting where the colonizers were not cultural kin.

The relationship between missions and colonialism is an important subtheme in this book, but its central concern is changing gender roles and

relationships. Mine is not the first book on women and the overseas missionary movement to note the waning of the separate spheres phenomenon.²⁰ To my knowledge, however, it is the first to foreground that phenomenon and explore its significance in specific mission settings. How representative was the experience of my three subjects in this respect? So few case studies of interwar missionary activity have been undertaken to date that other accounts of shifts in gender roles and professional responsibilities are largely unavailable. Margaret Prang's biography of Caroline Macdonald, a YWCA secretary turned prison and labour reformer in Japan, seems to illustrate the "modern women modernizing men" phenomenon, but Prang does not speculate on the possible representativeness of Macdonald's career evolution.²¹ An in-house account of the establishment and functioning of the IMC and its ancillary bodies showed women enthusiastically and successfully taking on non-gendered roles, and as I will explain in Chapter 1, some missionary modernizers advocated coeducation at advanced levels.²² (As studies of gender and interwar imperialism appear, instances of secular women working with, and mentoring, men are also emerging, Margery Perham being the outstanding example.)²³ It is certainly too soon to say that these kinds of developments signalled wholesale change across mission sites. However, what cannot be denied is that the once-dominant paradigm of separate spheres lost its salience as changing Western and colonial contexts, and new personal and professional ambitions, coalesced in a modernizing project that allowed (indeed, bade) women like Oliver, Murray, and Wrong to enter work worlds where their colleagues and clients were mainly men.

It is important to emphasize that the chapters on Oliver, Murray, and Wrong are not intended to serve as biographies. In introducing each chapter, I have tried to provide sufficient biographical information to make sense of what follows. But by choosing to focus on a particular aspect of the career of each of the women, I have necessarily omitted or given short shrift to topics worthy of further attention: Oliver's social hygiene work, for instance; Wrong's involvement in the early 1920s with the European Student Relief branch of the World Student Christian Federation; Murray's event-filled years in postcolonial Korea; and the private lives of all three women. Nor are their Canadian origins and ties given much attention. While their nationality seems to have made Oliver and Wrong attractive candidates for their respective positions in missions bureaucracies by virtue of Canada's unexceptionable role in the mission version of the North Atlantic triangle, neither woman made much of her Canadianness on the job or was controlled by made-in-Canada funding or policy decisions. Wrong's Canadian identity was obscured by her long residence in England and her ties with organizations based there. Significantly, when in 1942 she attended the eighth conference of the Institute of Pacific Relations, held in Quebec, she

was part of the United Kingdom rather than the Canadian delegation. Murray's Canadian identity – and also, in her early years, her Maritime regional identity – were certainly important to her and frequently expressed in acerbic anti-American comments, even in the Cold War era. Yet she, too, was a product of an era when international “brotherhood” and Christian internationalism were concepts as salient for mainstream Protestant missionaries and their supporters, as they were for many of their counterparts in the nascent world of Canadian diplomacy and international relations.²⁴ Ecumenism took all three women beyond nationalism as well as beyond denominationalism. Nothing, perhaps, illustrates the ecumenical and cosmopolitan nature of their working lives more tellingly than the fact that although Oliver and Wrong seem to have known each other only in passing or by reputation, they had many international contacts in common, among them prominent spokesmen for Asian and African Christianity.

As aware as they were of the growth of secularization in the West in their own era, and of the enthusiasm for evangelism among many indigenous Christians, Oliver, Murray, and Wrong could scarcely have imagined the changed patterns that would have emerged by the end of the twentieth century. The numerical strength and the vitality of Christianity have shifted decisively from Europe and North America to the Southern Hemisphere, and the typical “missionary” both comes from and evangelizes there. In spite of restrictions or outright bans on European missionaries in many newly independent countries in the postcolonial era, Christianity was able to spread “as a people’s movement.”²⁵ To be sure, missionaries are still going from the North to the South, and in surprisingly large numbers. But they are mainly American evangelicals, committed not to the causes featured in this book, but rather to meeting what some of them call “the unreached people’s challenge.”²⁶ As for the United Church of Canada, the Canadian denomination with which all three of my subjects had their most significant professional links, its Board of World Missions has long since been transformed into the Division of World Outreach; it works on development issues with overseas “partners,” religious and secular, much like other non-governmental organizations.²⁷ The chapters that follow are part of the history of that transformation writ large and, perhaps in a small way, provide insights into ongoing challenges in global good works and gender issues in development.