

Attaining the correct balance: Exploring the challenges and spirituality of single women missionaries in the Victorian era



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This comprehensive account analyses the issues of the role of single women missionaries in the Victorian era. In mission history, the moreover complex place of these women in the whole spectrum of missionary life has been dominated mostly by male authority. We meet several personalities who, in their own person, promised to follow God's lead and to give their utmost energies to accomplish God's highest plans. Recently I saw a leaflet with the names and pictures of all the Africa Inland Mission (AIM) missionaries in Africa and those who are on home assignment. A quick view shows that most of them are single women. This pamphlet affirms the thesis, that of all the missionaries sent to foreign countries, the majority are single women. Having been overlooked for a long time, in the last decades of the 20th century, more attention is being given to their involvement in mission work and the role of single women missionaries is highlighted. Missionary attitude is an essential dimension of the spirituality of these women. This article explores the tensions, the critical issues and direction of single women missionaries in the Victorian era. This serves as a contribution to the continuing research to understand the history of 'half the church'. Being involved in mission does raise special challenges, and women's spirituality should reflect these. Today many people are ignorant of their existence, and it is as though they had noiselessly tip-toed out of the pages of history and had been removed to page-less oblivion. Stanley reports that their contribution was rarely acknowledged, and hence has left little historical record. Murray is also very clear when talking about women's missionary work, namely that their contribution in mission was little recorded, little regarded, and little known. In examining their experiences, I turn to the key theological frames of motivation: call, purpose, vision and suffering in order to make a contribution to the debate about the role of single women in missionary work, and to incorporate their experiences in the debate. These women, for a long time overlooked in the prevailing missionary debate, show a professionalism in missionary issues, which were overlooked for a long time.

Keywords: single women; women missionaries; Victorian era; women's spirituality; missionary life; Africa Inland Mission; missionary attitude.

Pushing at the door

Evangelical mission involvement in the second part of the 19th century became a cultural shaping force in England and in America. One of the main features of evangelicalism was 'the individual or corporate emphasis on religious duties and social involvement' (Shenk 2004:17). A characteristic of this involvement was the explosive growth of the number of missionaries to China, India and Africa. The number of European and American missionaries during their heydays, may have numbered as many as 10 000 and is seen as 'the largest mass movement of women in Britain in the 19th century' (Taylor & Lutkehaus 1999:18). At the end of the 19th century 60% of American missionaries were women (Robert 1997:20; Severance 2011:253). In 1920 half of them were not married (Brown 1987:172). Among them were hundreds of unmarried women, most of them unknown, although some were very well known like Amy Carmichael (1867–1951), a missionary to India and seen as a 'spiritual giant' (Frykenberg 2008:484). For them it was an act of faith, traveling across countries like China and India, and 'two of the four laid down their lives within a couple of years' (Griffiths 2004:323). In most cases they were an integral part to the life of the church in which they served.

The starting point here is not a rethinking of their missionary work, aiming to reconsider the basics of Christian theology and practice in feminist terms (cf. Watson 2002:4), but to search for the

spiritual centre of their religious life. Their missionary work has been done in the 19th century, within the framework of the existing paternalistic theological paradigm.

We want to hear women's experiences of being part of the missionary movement and see them as a constructive and creative factor in the whole missionary arena of that time. The second half of 19th century brought a new emphasis by missionary organisations on the important role that single female missionaries filled, both as evangelists and teachers, or as medical aides. The relative unknown story of these women missionaries in the 19th century, can be attributed to the fact that church history and theology till far in the 20th century, was taught in the West as an 'introspective conscience of the West' (Hindmarch quoted in Stanley 1992:79), or due to the fact that history is 'his-story' (Watson 2002:27). In the 19th century, we experience the tendency to place individual missionary men and women in a hagiographic light. The biography of Mrs. Jennie Fuller (1851–1900), missionary in India, has an appendix of nearly 40 pages filled with an abundance of praises for her life. It was said that she could 'not refrain from turning everything to God's glory' and 'she lived an unselfish life'; 'the fragrance of her memory will live long' and 'many will praise God for the example of her wholly consecrated and devoted life' (Dyer n.d.:160, 164, 172).

While, in the 20th century, the lives and work of the men were highlighted in many mission studies, it took a long time before gender studies became part and parcel in the ongoing missiology research. The role of married or single women, for a long time buried in unwritten stories and scarcely analysed in mission studies, is now in this third decade of the 21st century, fully recognised and treated. Far from our celebrity-obsessed culture where female beauty is something which is idolised and worshipped, the women we are focusing on were far more down-to-earth, with a common-sense approach to their good looks. Aiming to higher service, these women were responsive to God's supernatural direction and their focal point reached beyond the visual horizon. In 1909 there were 4710 unmarried women in the mission field (Barret Montgomery 1910:243), and their deepest motivation an act of faith, but the daily reality revealed in today's biographies lacks the hagiographic details, giving them the place they deserve – as fully recognised missionaries, and not as 'God's second best'.

A confrontation with the stern reality

Due to the distance to the 19th century, missionaries are 'nearly inaudible' and therefore 'the "19th century" missionary is not only inaudible but an "invisible man" or even more, "invisible woman" in the histories of Western and non-Western societies' (Christensen & Hutchison 1982:5). And how can one understand, that while British missions had by far the largest contingent of any nationality, Owen Chadwick's authoritative two-volume study, *The Victorian*

Church, has not a single reference to the mission movement, let alone that the work of single women missionaries is not mentioned (Walls 1991:46). Exactly 100 years earlier, the *Encyclopedia of Missions* mentioned 'the modern uprising of women in behalf of foreign missions'. Missionary memoirs focus disproportionately little on women, and therefore single women received the least attention. The generally accepted role model for missionary women in biographies till the middle of the 20th century was the following: born in a Christian society, conversion and education, preparing for a Christian marriage and motherhood, and even their ability to meet suffering and death with grace (cf. Pruitt 2005:8). At that time, it was the almost universal belief that non-Western peoples were heathens, lost in degradation in sin, and in need of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Evangelical mission agencies shared this thought with the other Protestant and Catholic missions.

We explore the lives of single women missionaries to give them the place they deserve in mission history: women who worked in foreign countries in a battle, an unruly reality. Carmichael (1905:3–4) reveals that they faced the – for us unseen – actual reality, as described by one of them as 'the smoking hell of battle': [...] 'Principalities, Powers, Rulers of the Darkness, Potentialities unknown and unimagined gathered up in one stupendous force'; missionary work 'is not pretty play but stern reality'. The choices women made, gave them emotional, physical, relational, and often spiritual loneliness; however, the examples given, compel many today of a deep admiration for what has been done in the hard places of the missionary world:

... as a love offering to God. Virtually every woman who conducted a professional ministry in the 19th century, testified a special call from God. The call propelled them into the mission. (Tucker 1988b:387)

Scanning the 19th century horizon

Due to the rise of women's higher education in the United States and in Victorian England, the impact of evangelical spirituality on women's identities and activities, the broadening of horizons through Western expansionism, and the growing challenge posed to conservative gender ideologies, women were pushing at the doors of mission organisations. Until the 1830s, 'the presence of women and children in the mission field remained controversial' (Robert 2009:47); however, 60 years later, most of missionary personnel were female. In c.1890 the Episcopal bishop, William Ninde, realised the fact that in the past gender debate, 'with all our gallantry we have treated woman shabbily' (Seat 2008:1). Women going on this unconventional path of mission work, exerted a total change of vision in the world of missions at the end of the 19th century; they then even outnumbered the men. It lasted several decades before the sending churches secured the equality of status. Reading through several biographies of women missionaries of that time, one can agree with the remark that women were often 'seen as adjuncts to men, rather than as historical protagonists in their own right' (Bowie 1993:1).

Unmarried women kept on knocking at the door of missionary societies in order to make their voices heard to be sent to the mission field. Missionary societies like the London Missionary Society (LMS), Church Missionary Society (CMS), and Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) were all working along male-dominated rules, and it lasted several years before they realised the unique God-given possibilities and abilities of accepting single women for their respective missionary work. Faith missions like the China Inland Mission (CIM), however, welcomed them from the beginning heartily among their new workers. They have often pioneered, and what was not possible at home, they ministered in other parts of the world. It was believed that God gave both male and female the same identity to be his image bearers, and he also gave both the same responsibilities, as seen in Genesis 1, 26 and 28 (cf. Custis James 2011:50). The context in which single women were called into missionary work, and the role they played in the 19th century was not one of open arms and without any objections. An American doctor published a research, 'claiming women could not be educated in the same manner as men without causing significant harm to their reproductive organs and their nervous systems' (Prior 2014:19). Single women missionaries, thrilled by the exotic adventurousness in often melodramatic stories, were seen as spinsters (Barr 1972:127), and naively quenching their troubles with choruses such as 'I am a soldier of the Cross', expecting the mission field would give them the possibilities for living their dreams. When Gladys Aylward (1902–1970) expressed her wish to go into the mission, she got the following answer: 'Mission, a job for an old spinster' (Hunter 1974:8). They should desire to distance themselves from a boring country life, or from a patriarchal family and society structure and to live only on a spiritual desire to tell people about Jesus. Careful observance, however, shows another picture in England and America where evangelistic addresses in chapels and evangelistic meetings were at the height. Women, many from nonconformist families, played an active part in these meetings. Of the estimated 9000 foreign missionaries from the British Isles at the end of the 19th century, a significant part sprang from nonconformity (cf. Stanley 1990:83). In the '80s of the 19th century the Keswick Convention had opened the platform for female testimony which was then acceptable to the general evangelical public'. 'Women had considerable influence, especially in the sphere of mission' (Price & Randal 2000:152).

Evangelistic zeal and practical involvement in society

It gave an unexpected dynamic in missionary circles when women were actively involved in missionary work. Abroad, married women were regarded as the home builders for their spouses, and in their own country mostly functioned as fundraisers or as recruiters for mission work abroad. However, since the beginning of the 19th century, independent single women travelled to Africa, the Middle East and Asia, of which several of them went for missionary purposes. They 'pursued religion as an occupation' (Rendall 1985:78). However, going into the mission field was not for gain and fame.

In Wesleyan churches the role of women was to be influential, either as preachers in itinerant work, in hospitals, asylums, prisons or as teachers. Also, the spiritual and social care they gave to sailors, soldiers, vagrants and prostitutes was almost always a female venture. After 1850 in nonconformist churches, especially among Presbyterians and Quakers, women outnumbered men in the regular activities of their patriarchal roles as spiritual mentors (cf. Bebbington 2012:25). At the end of the 18th century, more than half of the East Cheshire Methodists were women, and nearly half of them were not married. This led Bebbington (1989:26) to the remark that 'religion may have provided psychological reassurance, even emotional outlet' [...] 'Christian zeal brought them into prominence'.

A new phenomenon is seen in the middle of the 19th century, with the establishment of separate women's mission organisations. In 1866, the 'Ladies Association for the Promotion of Female Education among the Heathen' was formed, with its own staff, funding and magazine. The first secretary, Louisa Bullock, was 'the pulse of the organisation guarding it from male domination [...] and from any possible charge that its goals, values and personnel were not ladylike' (Rendall 1985:78). On 23 March 1869, Methodist women on the other side of the ocean launched the 'Women's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church' in Boston (Barrett Montgomery 1910:30ff.). The first public meeting was held in May of that year when Isabella Thoburn was adopted as the first missionary. She was not the first single independent lady entering the missionary field, for since 1813, a Miss Chaffin worked in Bengal as a nurse. This as a response on the appeal of William Carey who in 1796 had spoken of the need of female missionaries 'to communicate the gospel [...] in a situation where superstition secludes all women of respectability from hearing the word, unless from their own sex' (Potts 1967:38).

In families of middle and higher status in India, it was not common for wives to live a life outdoors and they mostly lived inside the women quarters of the house, called the *zenana*, where only husbands or brothers could enter. Mission organisations saw that male missionaries, due to this custom, had no access to these women, therefore the call for female missionaries who could make easier contact with women. Marianne Lewis, missionary in Calcutta (India), wrote in 1867 *A Plea for Zenanas*, which was a plea for mission organisations to set aside ladies to work as full time, paid agents in the Zenanas. Most single female applicants were conscious of the qualities and characteristics missionary societies were looking for to be a successful female missionary candidate and marketed themselves accordingly in their applications. The *Zenana Mission* offered women unique chances to enter mission work, and to satisfy their aspirations in preaching, teaching and nursing with real feminine insight. In the second part of the 19th century, single women could have official positions as deaconesses in the Anglican Church, as preachers among the Quakers, the Primitive Methodists, and as officers in the Salvation Army. When a missionary call was first given at the Keswick Convention, 'it was women

who were first to respond' (Bebbington 1989:175). The call to total surrender had attracted women in an age when female submission was axiomatic.

Popularisation of the diakonia

'Gospel work and social concern were rarely divorced in the Victorian era' (Bebbington 2012:3). Evangelism and social action spread all over Europe. Johannes Wichern (1808–1881) and Theodor Fliedner (1800–1864) initiated in Germany a work of evangelism and social action, in which many men and women participated. The term *diakonia* was popularised to do work among the delinquent, displaced, illiterate and sick. Houses were founded to train missionaries for evangelism and for going overseas. Fliedner specifically invited single women and widows to apply 'to make themselves unto useful members as often as possible' (Prelinger 1984:168). In America, women had played a 'heroic part' in the revolution, the world around them interested them, and they sought education and, in religious affairs, they acted often with more zeal than the men. They set an example that would be followed by other new initiatives for female mission societies.¹ Custis James (2011:24) talks about women 'called for a full-orbed gospel'. Amy Carmichael (1932:42) says that God's work is not only to preach and to teach, but also working with your hands, for 'God didn't make you all mouth'.

The public role was not what mission societies had to offer them. Stanley (1992) remarks that how their role was seen, was echoed in the 1842 jubilee meeting in Kettering in the brusque explanation of a certain Mr. Brock telling the ladies in his audience:

... ladies, it is not yours to be supreme, it is ours. It is yours to obey. But though it is ours to be supreme, yet it is a supremacy in which there is to be nothing capricious, nothing tyrannical. You are not to be our drudges today, and our toys tomorrow. You are our companions, you are our helpmeets. (p. 228)

It was the CIM which made it a standard policy to mobilise many lay missionaries, and their leader, Hudson Taylor, was the first Protestant – he was a Brethren – to recruit women as full missionaries in their own value. In the CIM, 'the differentiation between male and female candidates and between single and married female workers did not exist' (Semple 2003:55). Single women received the same language and mission training as men. It was not even questioned whether or not they should preach on the mission field; 'they were expected to' do so (Fiedler 1994:292). It was possible for the women to achieve what, for men, was very difficult. Tucker (1988b) writes about the female missionary in China in Hudson Taylor's time:

... the native catechist never comes to true inward independence at a station where he works under a European missionary; he feels himself to be only the dependent journeyman of the other, and is hardly noticed by the Chinese in presence of the overwhelming superiority of the European. It is quite otherwise when he is associated with a missionary sister; then the whole

1. For a full account on the formation of women missionary societies, see Beaver (1968).

work of teaching and preaching and representing the mission to outsiders devolves upon him; he counts as the head of the mission, and must act independently. But at the same time, he is under the control of the mission sister, who is with him to advise and instruct him, and to report about him. The sister herself has a sufficient sphere of activity in the female part of the heathen population and the Christian church, and if sometimes men also listen to her Bible lessons, no offense is given. Of course, a great deal of tact is necessary for the sister and the catechist to maintain their mutual position. (April 1)

Justification for single female missionaries was expressed in terms of gospel pragmatism. This was characteristic for evangelicals at the end of the Enlightenment era and upcoming Evangelicalism. The Women's Social Services of the Salvation Army offered many women a secure position, for, in the Army, they were regarded as equal to the men. Some of them who were married, undertook similar roles as their husbands, like Miss Ann Adoniram and Miss Newell, who, fluent in the language, organised women's prayer groups. The founder of the Algiers Mission Band, Lilius Trotter (1853–1928), was the first Protestant single woman to found and lead a mission society. Lottie Moon (1840–1912) established over 30 churches in China.

In a few decades of the 19th century, the missionary force changed considerably. Initially, a single woman could only go to the mission field to care for missionaries' children, or to serve alongside the missionary family. In the outgoing 19th century, her role seems to have been fully accepted and expected, rather than being considered either controversial or extraordinary. Either they supervised women's schools, directed the zenana work, or worked full time in medical service. Yet, their effective work was seldom publicised: 'I'm going to plough a lonely furrow' (Thompson 1988:71).

Seton (2013) remarks:

... it is only a sense of vocation that brings out from England women of the best type, intellectual, moral, and social, to take up the very trying work of a teacher in India. (p. 42)

In a time when women's roles were mostly circumscribed by home and family, single women with few professional credentials and no special status went into a life, often heart-breaking and with great toil and achievement. Missionary women proved to be resourceful and managed to adapt their programme strategies to their working context. Overseas ministry called forth inner strength. Only by deep faith in God could these women bear the heavy sacrifices made upon them in this work. Living between two worlds, one of these missionaries with a representative character is called 'strong-willed, independent, robust, determined, nonconformist, convinced of a personal call' – often with the aim to 'raise the women's character to the dignity of rational beings' and ultimately to subdue the world to the obedience of Christ. Women doctors knew that it is of no avail when bodies are healed and the 'souls are not rescued from eternal darkness'

(Shenk 2004:7, 116, 122, 204). Women responding to the appeal to serve in the mission, reveal the power of Christian belief, compassion for the lost ones and a love to heal the wounds of this world. Missionaries in effect dated their call and fully surrender to God while they were at the Keswick Convention. Seton (2013) states that sometimes the awareness of inadequacy for such a high calling was a prominent issue, but looking to God, one could write the following:

I do not feel to have one quarter of the qualities of the ideal missionary. However, I comfort myself with the thought that if the Master needs me in His Foreign Field He will prepare me for it and help me to overcome all difficulties. (p. 33)

The calling to mission work often happened in times of silent listening. Sister Eva of Friedenshort, Lillias Trotter and her friend Amy Carmichael, stimulated thinking about God in silence. Books about mysticism were widely read and the atmosphere of traditional religious orders were propagated.

Contradictory to the widespread expectations of their time, with the rules of Victorian morality in mind, many women with strong convictions obeyed the call to the mission field. The Victorian age with its emphases on religion, morality, family and duty was also infused with benevolence and compassion. This influenced and transformed the general feeling that single women with ambitions other than those generally accepted, could follow their dreams. The spell of only a domestic future dominant in the 19th century era, was broken. Robert (2009) concludes that especially single women faced tremendous opposition:

... in cultures from biblical times to the present, the refusal of women to marry and bear children has been a counter-cultural witness. A women's childbearing potential traditionally measured her worth in patriarchal societies. (p. 119)

In many societies single women were not accepted, for in the eyes of the people, they either were cursed, would steal children or were regarded as a threat to the local women, for they might steal their husbands from them.

Obedience to the call

Unmarried women missionaries were extremely highly valued for their Victorian upbringing, where gospel work and social concern were rarely divorced. With their great love for and knowledge of the Bible, and the concentration in doctrine on the atoning death of Christ on the cross, they were able to communicate the gospel to others. These components sustained them in their sacrificial work in foreign countries. Their personal conviction illuminated their path of duty. It was obedience to the One who has a right to command and said, 'Go' (Taylor 1934:17). Amy Carmichael (1982) writes about her calling:

... there is the Cross. He emptied Himself to the death on the cross. If I am going after Him I must deny myself. He went all the way to the cross. If I am going to be His disciple, I must accept the cross as the principle of all life and service. (pp. 181–182)

These women 'saw beyond the immediate needs and crises to a greater vision for the future' (Griffiths 2004:323). Most women lived in the mission field until the end of their life – however, within a few years, two of four died (Griffiths 2004:323) – but it was also to die from all one's own ambitions. 'God sends us to the heathen for two purposes, to do them good, and to find a grave for a good self', and to whom 'the cross is the attraction' (Carmichael 1895:119; 1951:48).

Various women saw their work as essentially evangelistic. A mission candidate wrote in her letter to the mission committee that she felt called to the heathens 'to go forth and make disciples of our sad and suffering sisters in distant lands' (Seton 2013:33). At Harriet Newell's memorial service – she was the first American missionary to die on the foreign field – someone noted (Severance 2011):

... the woman 'who forsakes all for the name of Christ ...' makes a higher effort and thus furnishes a more conspicuous proof, that her love of Christ transcends all earthly affection. (p. 249)

According to Jane Haggis (Seton 2013):

... combination of obedience to Christ's teaching, a desire to engage in a 'mission of sisterhood' to heathen women, and an awareness of nobility and self-sacrifice of a calling seemed to have been the strongest motivations to apply for missionary service. (p. 34)

Some women responded to the missionary call after having read the biographies of well-known missionaries like Adoniram Judson, David Livingstone or Hudson Taylor (cf. Huffmann Hoyle 1996:62). For many of these women missionaries, the grasping of the importance of contextually appropriate strategies distinguished their work. They started new initiatives, opened new roads and kept their sending organisations on track in focusing on the essentials. Lillias Trotter's missionary work, leading a mission to the Arab Muslim world in Algeria, was the first after the attempts of Raymond Lull in the 14th century.

Women of one vision

In Puritanism there was an increased emphasis on the authority of individual experience in spiritual equality. Such spiritual equality expanded into personal and social equality and in mission circles. By zooming in on the single women missionaries, they identify some characteristic features. They do not articulate explicit theological themes; nevertheless, in their work, we see a strong theological commitment, motivation and ambition. In their often very short life, they burnt themselves out for the Lord. Their distinctive contribution was mostly in the realm of pioneer evangelism, education or in medical services. In those times, seminaries advertised that their purpose was 'to prepare women for usefulness' (Huffman Hoyle 1996:58). They were the outstanding revivalists in their day. Going to the mission field, meant for them to be professionally useful, and they experienced a deepening of their commitment to God.

The call was from a higher power than any earthly one, that is to engage heart and soul in the work of the mission, to cry the glad news to the heathen who were perishing for a lack of knowledge. Their full commitment paved the way for effective service to the people they were sent to. It was service that called for sacrificial giving and renunciation of one's own ambitions. Many unmarried women renounced marriage. This could be regarded as a daily fight to the desires of the self, not admitting to the desire of a sexual relation and motherhood, and to serve God fully, rather than men. In this way of living, they were convinced they could freely cross boundaries and serve others in various types of service, and to witness the Christian faith. Beaver (1968a:75) says that '[s]he showed imagination, initiative and versatility, meet emergency situations, teacher, educational administrator. She was so devoted that she used private money for mission work.' Arrington (2010:287) remarks that 'single women were not society's undesirables, but rather chose, for a number of reasons, not to marry'. Mabel Francis, missionary in Japan, longed for a husband. During a time of discouragement, she wrote (Tucker 1988):

... well, now, if I was married, I could follow on with my husband, but the Lord did not agree. The Lord said, You are on the wrong track. I have a plan for your life and it is not for you to be married. (p. 176)

Amy Carmichael who longed for motherhood and who got several opportunities to marry, renounced marriage for the sake of mission service. One day in Japan – 20 August 1893 – she was a day alone at the mountain Arima where the Lord met her and then she gave up marriage. In the margin of her Bible she wrote (Kommers 2017):

... lonely day. Trusted this. Not only love but also loneliness – yes even so what so the costing. None may ever know, save Thee and me – Thy choice is best. In Thy dear will I rest and lay. By Thou shall I satisfy – satisfied. (p. 128)

The compelling need into evangelistic and children's work in and around Dohnavur (Tamil Nadu, India), made her a mother of hundreds of Indian children saved by the Dohnavur Fellowship.

Two weeks before her planned marriage, Lilian Trasher (1887–1961), broke off her engagement in order to work among the unwanted children of Egypt. At the day of her burial, her biographer (Tucker 1988:135–137) writes: 'In every window, every balcony the procession passed, people stood remembering this great woman who had *loved so deep and given so much*.'

Single women with promising futures renounced nice life prospects to devote themselves to missionary work. Stewart (1958) quoted Liliat Trotter, the founder of the Algiers Mission Band and who could have been England's most famous artist in the 19th century, who once declared:

... to bear His Name with all that is wrapped up in it of fragrance and healing and power, to enter into His life and share His eternal purpose, is a calling for which it is well worth counting all things but loss.

Her missionary life was 'the revelation of a crucified and crowned life' (Stewart 1958:19, 89). Trotter's life of faith and devotion inspired the hymn, 'Turn your eyes upon Jesus'. Due to her devotion to Christ Jesus, she abandoned the life of art, privilege, wealth and leisure, and went to Algeria where she, in a very modest life, served her Lord for bringing the gospel. These women did not talk about hardships (Thompson 1982):

... please don't talk about my 'hardships'. It is a great privilege to be here. And you know, it is not even a trial to me to rough it. [...] We don't seek a smooth path; it is a greater joy to feel that we are pilgrims and strangers. (p. 61)

They derived their principles from the Bible, from active employment and exercise, loving God and the people among whom they worked, without losing their identity. Is it possible to identify the motives of those who were willing to abandon all for the sake of Christ? How was it to walk with Christ in areas of highest risk? They often went to places somewhere in the world, hardly to be found on the map; places that were hostile, difficult to reach, forsaken and dangerous. Faith compelled them to seize the promises of God with a tighter hand grip. Do they not leave us with a character refined, and is not the reality in their lives that in the secret of God's presence, his voice spoke to their hearts? Amy Carmichael's (1955:134) prayer, 'Let the sum of my life be love',² settles all motives in one sentence.

'A true Victorian battle-axe'

The words of Rev. Jonathan Allen at the service in which Harriett Newell (1793–1812) and Ann Judson (1789–1826) were sent to the East, make clear that a paradigm change about the sending of women in missionary service had taken place in the heads of missionary leaders (Kent 2004:103). Beaver (1968) reveals that, for the first time, women were sent into the mission field with an assignment:

... it will be your business, my dear children, to teach these women, to whom your husbands can have little or no access. Go then, and do all in your power, to enlighten their mind, and bring them to the knowledge of the truth. (p. 51)

We see in these women a supreme love for the Lord Jesus Christ, together with a deep love for the Bible. Their motivation could be 'to give to Christ and His service an undivided loyalty' (cf. Taylor 1934:9, 23). Having themselves gone through conviction, contrition and struggling in prayer as a prelude to the happy day of experiencing God's grace and now they wished to tell others who were still in darkness. One of the main motives has been the strong desire to save souls from eternal destruction. Through belief in Christ, man could set free and get eternal life. Margaret King's vision for the girls she taught in China: 'always went beyond the initial step of leading them to personal faith in Christ' (Thompson 1982:79).

2. A striking example of utterly devotion and love is seen in the life and death of the missionary doctor, Eleanor Chestnut. When asked about the scars on her leg, she had brushed the question aside, but later on a nurse revealed that a skin graft for the 'good-for nothing coolie' had come from the doctor's own leg (Hefli 1997:46). Before she was martyred in 1905, her final act of service was to rip a piece of material from her own dress to bandage an injured child (Speer 1909:108, 109).

With many of them there was a sense of activism, a strong commitment to tell the gospel to others. These 'women exceed the men in numbers and are doing in China what young women never did before' (Taylor 1934:163). Kent (2004:103) uses the word *Victorian battle-ax* for this type of missionary.

Ann Judson's mission work was a serving of God 'with distinction' (Tucker 1988:24). Despite physical frailty, she was fully orientated upon her task and led the mission in Myanmar (Burma) during her husband's captivity and was also involved in Bible translation work. Often, we see a sense of obligation to obey Christ's clear command. Mark 16:15 was for Adelaide Locher the decisive text: 'God's command implied His call' (Canfield 2015:33). 'Gospel work and social concern were rarely divorced in the Victorian era', says Bebbington (2012:3), but everything had a strong concentration on the Cross of Christ Jesus (Bebbington 2012:3). Margaret King prayed for the Chinese: 'Lord, by the sight of Calvary, we know how Thou dost feel about even one lost soul. Lord, show me the value of all these souls in China', Taylor (1934:165) reveals.

Although the demands of the work loaded on the pioneer's lifestyle were abundant, they carved out 'a quiet place near to the heart of God', Miriam Rockness (1998:15) reports about Lilius Trotter. Hudson Taylor insisted that women should be recognised as 'equals,' and he saw them as 'the most powerful agency for carrying the gospel into China's homes'. Women can best be 'effectively reached and instructed by their own sex' (Broomhall 1988:233–234). They undertook their work in a paternalistic structure with real feminine insight. Regarding funds, they often relied on God's provision. Margaret King says, as revealed by Taylor (1934:71): 'We have no promised help coming from place or person but look to God alone.'

These leading components of evangelical religion, together with the wake of missionary talk and spirit due to the abolition of slavery (1837), the deep impressive talk of David Livingstone in 1857 in British Parliament, and in the years after his death in 1873, as well as the new wave of missionary issues by the Keswick Conventions, gave strong input and stirring appeals to join the missionary band overseas.

Everything for the sake of the gospel

It demanded a high quality of courage and spiritual conviction for young women from sheltered Victorian homes to embark on a mission enterprise, blazing the trail into the unknown for others to follow. They dealt with the same objections with other missionaries and were often seen as intruders. Their attitudes were of the colonial society they came from. Sometimes they were too clumsy to understand the way of living in the country they worked, often destroying age long customs. Their actions, motivated by love, were not always appreciated. Their relationship

with God who sent them to the mission field was vital, but this relationship was heard and seen in the context of the community in which they worked. It has not been easy to resist the expectations of those among whom they worked, which were not always the same, as they simply saw God's blessing as a result of being busy in the ministry. Frequent daily interruptions in a pioneer situation gave them no objective criteria for decision-making.

On many mission fields, unmarried women were regarded with suspicion. In Buddhism and Hinduism, women were hopelessly inferior and impure, and hopefully by the future transmigration they might be born a man. Their only option often was 'suicide' (Barret Montgomery 1910:48). In those societies, unmarried missionaries were often being viewed as younger, and not quite an adult. Due to their strength of personality, men often felt intimidated by them.

Yet, female singles in missions presents its own challenges such as safety issues, suffering, misunderstanding, loneliness, sexism, misconception by others, cultural oppression in patriarchal societies, temptations for sexual partners, being emotionally manipulated into cross-cultural marriages, torn between family back home, high levels of burnout and grieving the diminishing possibility of marriage. In many mission areas, a blend of friendliness and enmity to Christianity existed.

Biographies and memories of them are embedded into the life fabric of the church. In many ways, women have sacrificed their lives for the sake of the gospel. In general, the age of mission candidates was between the age of 21 and 28. Not having husbands to support them, they often had to support the missions in ways that exemplified idealised Christian femininity, while lacking the important identity of wifehood (cf. Arrington 2010:278). Although often seen as the weaker sex, in this field they refused to make the slightest compromise, which in many situations, cost them their life. Many of them were confronted with unwanted advances or sexual harassment. After the fall of Nanking in 1938, about 8 000 women and girls had been raped in the hell of Nanking (Tillman Durdin 1938:38; Varg 1977:258). In times of persecution, some met their executioners by singing 'He Leadeth Me' (Edwards 1903:9).

In China, Lottie Moon (1840–1912) at the end of her life, gave all her food to the needy Chinese who suffered from a severe famine. Her sacrifice had led to severe malnourishment, and she had to return to America, but sadly died in 1912 on board of the ship taking her back to America. Her dedication and sacrifice inspired many Chinese to go in her footsteps. Single women were devoted to the cause and revealed a common determination to work until the very end. Few of them returned home; the majority died on the field of their labour (Pierce Beaver 1968:75). Life could be very solitary, with none to talk to and to deal in your problems. That time, West Africa was 'still drinking up missionary lives as a sponge absorbs water' (Beaver 1968:75).

Women missionaries who married in the mission field were frequently involved in marital discord, but they dared not admit that their marriage was unfulfilled. The novelist, Pearl S. Buck's mother was married to 'a puritanical, pious and single minded missionary' who was more in love with China than with her. She always struggled with 'her sense of inadequacy', having no one to deal with her feelings and problems. Like many of her sister missionaries, she felt alone (cf. Tucker 1988:45, 57).

Conclusion

The names and stories of the vast majority of all those who went to the mission field, never will appear in any missionary account or mission history. They should be remembered! Working in an established pattern of Christian mission, they were confronted with non-Christian faiths and cultures.

As Christians they found it difficult to reconcile secular success with the kind of service God wanted them to do. They endured many hardships and the miseries of missionary life, and they were vulnerable to depths of depression and self-abandonment. Often in loneliness, they fought alone through their 'situations'.

Demonstrated here, is the fact that missionary tradition encountered today in the life of the church, did not come without tensions caused by gender. Gender is far from being a mark of past missionary practice only. Today's struggles have a genealogy in the life of the church. It deserves to be regarded as part of this larger picture, namely a history of missionary life and practice that has never been devoid of gender, as both are a fundamental given and deep contested. Women cast a long and influential shadow on the entire modern missionary movement (cf. Jayawardena 1995:1ff.). Their influence and the impact of their work can be described as 'resourceful, self-sacrificing, dedicated' (Kent 2004:103). Although not always seen as such, they were key players in almost all areas of Protestant missionary endeavour during the Victorian era.

Their involvement in religious missions in the late 19th century, both at home and abroad, led to a wider acceptance of female spiritual involvement within Protestant religious missions worldwide. Victorian nonconformists and Anglican evangelicals bequeathed an influential legacy for opening doors for women. Somewhere between the dutiful maids and spinster and hagiographical stories, we see women who were ordinary and remarkable. They were women with faith and fear, vision and blind spots, but women who used their unique gifts and strong convictions for the people among whom they worked. From biblical times till today, God so often forges significant inroads for the gospel by beginning with women.

From Jane Judson to many present-day missionary women, all models of women in mission ministry are present in today's Christian church and mission, playing unique roles

in the missionary expansion of Christianity. Ministering in many different cultural settings by fulfilling God's call, they crossed cross-cultural and sexual boundaries. The Dohnavur Fellowship of Amy Carmichael – still operating today – is a unique coexistence of belief and work.

This article reveals distinctive personalities; women pioneers in their own person. Their sacrificial willingness to live and work often in very primitive circumstances for the sake of the gospel, speak to us today. Looking back on 100 years, it is easy to be critical of the motives and decisions of previous generations. They were no saints, but women of fierce convictions with the courage to reach out. We notice a firmness of purpose, which overcame not only physical hardship, but also human weakness and error from which none of us are immune.

To do justice to the memories of these valuable and often pioneering women on the mission field, I plead for a rewriting of missionary history as a women-sustained movement. At home as well as on the mission field, they were and are the backbone of the mission work. Referring in general to the missionaries of that time, Edwards (1984) may be right when he concludes:

... these men and women did more than any other group in all previous history or in their own age to make the Christian Church worldwide; and that made other men dream. (p. 316)

True and faithful spirituality will certainly lead to a transformation in mission. Their motives were mixed, but in their lives of courage, dedication and self-sacrifice, it is undeniable that exceptional love for God and for the people was the *cantus firmus* of it.

As opposed to many of their single sisters today, they did not ask for admiration, nor to be liked many times, nor waiting for applause, for they lived the truest independence. They did not wait for the opinion of the world to know if they were right. They left this world, leaving the result of their work in God's hand. Hopefully our generation will catch God's vision for today's women to stand up and serve in his service. Listening to the voices of women missionaries in Christian mission, can give a strong, direction changing contribution in the field of missiology, the ethic and theology.

Today women's force within the mission is very strong, and their vibrant witness to Jesus Christ continues in our 21st century. The last whispering words of the dying CIM missionary, Fanny Clarke in 1883, were 'Others will come after us' (quoted in Griffiths 2004:93). These words have become a reality.

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Author's contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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