Gender Matters: contributions of New Zealand women to overseas missions

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The great Edinburgh World Missionary Conference in June 1910 was undoubtedly male-dominated. Of approximately 1200 delegates a mere 200 were women and there were only 14 women among about 160 members on the preparatory commissions. The conference did however acknowledge women’s contribution to the missionary movement through fundraising and other forms of support, and through the work of women missionaries in the field. Conference reports affirmed that women’s work for women was essential to the missionary endeavour, noting that this was more and more carried out by single women. By 1910 single women were in fact the majority of workers in many missions, providing an increasingly well-educated and professionally trained workforce. What was true internationally was also true in New Zealand: single women in the Protestant churches were heavily involved in overseas mission fields. These single women missionaries are the topic of this paper. After an overview of the 19th century beginnings of their work I survey the lives of three women who together give us some understanding of the diversity of women’s contribution prior to the Second World War.

Nineteenth Century beginnings

The first single woman missionary was a Miss Thorn. All that is known about her is that she joined the British-based, interdenominational Indian Zenana Bible and Medical Mission in 1875 and served in Benares. The same year Elizabeth Colenso joined the Melanesian Mission on Norfolk Island, where she was to spend twenty-three years. Although married to William Colenso, disgraced (Anglican) Church Missionary Society missionary, Elizabeth, herself the daughter of CMS (CMS) missionaries, had been separated from him for a number of years. In 1885 the New Zealand Baptist Missionary Society (NZBMS) was founded for missionary work in India and in November 1886, Rosalie Macgeorge, its first missionary, set sail for Bengal. Rosalie was a twenty-six year old teacher from the Hanover Street Baptist Church in Dunedin. Speaking at a crowded farewell she expressed her confidence in God’s grace, saying that she did not expect to return to New Zealand trusting that she would be spared many years to labour in India. After five years however her health failed and she was sent home but got only as far as Colombo where she died. Hopestill Pillow and Annie Newcombe both went to India in 1887. Hopestill died in Calcutta in 1895 and Annie was invalided home after a few years. Annie Bacon and Emma Beckingsale were both nurses from Hanover Street Baptist Church. Annie went to India in 1890 and nine years later married an Australian missionary with whom she worked for the New South Wales Baptist Missionary Society. Emma Beckingsale arrived in Calcutta on Christmas Day 1895 and served until 1935. She set up and ran her own dispensary.

The New Zealand Church Missionary Association (NZCMA) was founded in 1892 to send out and support its own missionaries in the mission fields of the CMS in England. The following year it accepted its first two missionaries, Marie Pasley of Blenheim and Della Hunter-Brown of Nelson, both for Japan. Alice Wilson went from Auckland to Nigeria in 1894, Violet Latham from the Waikato to Agra in North India in 1895, Florence Smith from Nelson to South India with the sister organisation, the Church of England Zenana Mission Society in 1899 and Isabella McCallum to Nablus in Palestine, also in 1899. During the same period only one male missionary was sent overseas. Florence Smith, a teacher, spent thirty-eight years in South India. On one occasion she walked thirty-two
miles through country abounding in tigers, panthers and wolves to nurse a sick catechist. As the first white woman to be seen in the region she made the most of her opportunity, speaking to 3,000 people in a fortnight.

In 1891 Annie Harrison, a New Zealander, went with an Australian group to China to work with the China Inland Mission (CIM). Annie, who was 22 and probably a teacher, spent 28 years in China. Founded in 1865, the CIM was an interdenominational agency which accepted candidates based on a statement of faith and a willingness to work. This provided wide scope for single women, including those from the working class. In 1894 the CIM was established in New Zealand and that same year sent Sister Jane Blakeley as its first recruit to China. Jane had been an active member of Pitt Street Methodist Church and then worked for the Helping Hand Mission in Auckland, becoming Auckland’s first deaconess. She served nine years in Central China but married while on furlough in 1904 and remained in New Zealand. Others who served with the CIM in the 1890s included sisters Hannah and Lilias Reid, and Edith Searell, all from Christchurch. Edith Ellen Searell came to New Zealand as a child. Raised an Anglican she became a Methodist and was accepted by the CIM in spite of her age – she was over 30 – and chronic asthma. She went to China in 1895 and worked with another woman in the Shanxi region, teaching, caring for opium patients, and visiting villages with a Bible woman. The Boxer Uprising of 1900 targeted Christian missionaries and converts and by June the two women knew they were in danger. Edith wrote to a friend: “‘A mighty fortress is our God’ and in Him we are safe for time and for eternity. Shall we murmur if we have less of time than we expected?” Two days later, on 30th June, while kneeling in prayer, she and her companion were beheaded.

The first New Zealand Presbyterian woman missionary was Helen McGregor who like several others went to India under the auspices of the United Free Church of Scotland Mission (UFCSM). Before going to India in 1892 Helen was a member of Columba Church, Oamaru, where her father was the minister. After its formation in 1896 the Presbyterian Women’s Missionary Union (PWMU) contributed to her support until the Presbyterian Church established its own mission field in the Punjab in 1910. Helen continued working in India for the UFCSM till 1926. Alice Henderson, a teacher from Lyttleton, who went to Madras with UFCSM in 1896, was also supported by the PWMU. (Alice came from a remarkable family. Of her three sisters, Elizabeth Reid McCombs was the first woman member of Parliament, Stella Henderson pioneered a path for New Zealand women in both journalism and law, and Christina Henderson was a teacher, editor, and social reformer who worked with Kate Sheppard in gaining votes for women.) Unlike Helen, Alice transferred to the Punjab Mission where she opened the school out of which the Girls’ Schools in Jagadhri grew and during the First World War took responsibility for the whole of the Jagadhri evangelistic work. Kate Fraser and Mary Moore, both teachers, attended Knox Church in Dunedin. Influenced by John Mott and a Mrs Anderson who visited New Zealand to recruit women for Church of Scotland missionary work in China, they went with Miss E Smith, a nurse from Port Chalmers, to work in China in 1897, teaching and evangelising women and children. Kate stayed till about 1926, Mary till 1948. Five Brethren missionaries left for Malaya in 1898. Four of them were single women: Miss Dron and Miss Shirtliff from Nelson, Miss Davies and Miss Reeve from Palmerston North. Davies, a nurse, and Reeve, had to return within a few years for health reasons. Elizabeth Dron was only 22 when she left New Zealand. Although not a trained teacher she taught in a very isolated situation in Penang until 1902 when she married British missionary George Wilson and with him helped establish an orphanage and school in Ipoh. Sarah Shirtliff began a ministry to leprosy patients near Kuala Lumpur. Apart from a few years in India she remained in Malaya till 1947. Four of her sisters, Bessie, Clare, Kath and Julia all became missionaries, serving in Malaya and India. Miss Hankins from Wellington went to Singapore in 1900 but after only a few months died of cholera.
Beatrice and Amy Harband were sisters who belonged to the Trinity Congregational Church in Christchurch. Both gained BA degrees and went to India to work with the London Missionary Society (LMS), Amy in 1893 and Beatrice three years later. Beatrice, who had to leave after eight years for health reasons, wrote a number of books based on her experiences. Amy too was invalided home after 21 years. Jessie Inglis, a third member of the congregation, joined the LMS in India in 1901, married an Australian missionary, and served till 1935.

The Poona and India Village Mission (PIVM) was like the CIM a faith mission. In the 1890s at least 21 women and 19 men went from New Zealand to West India but acceptance was easy and many did not stay long. New Zealand women who served with the PIVM included Emily Beale, a Baptist from Napier, who went to India in 1897 only to die three years later of cholera. Agnes Kay, a Brethren member, joined in 1898. In 1903 she married William Irvine, a fellow New Zealander and with him helped run a boys’ orphanage. Louise Simpson, working as a Sister of the People at the Methodist Central Mission in Dunedin, joined the PIVM in 1897, and some years later she too married.

The twentieth century

Prior to 1922 New Zealand Methodist missionary work was under the wing of the Australasian Overseas Mission Board. A few Methodist women served in Papua in the early 1900s, among them May Jenness of Lower Hutt who was funded by the Dunedin Methodist Women’s Missionary Auxiliary. Others went to Fiji where Hannah Dudley did pioneer work among the wives of Indian indentured labourers. Mary Ballantine went in 1900 to teach at the Matavelo Girls’ Boarding School, where the wives of Fijian pastors were trained. Despite her own limited schooling she successfully taught basic subjects and ran a laundry, giving the girls practical training as well as raising funds for the school. After battling ill health she died at Matavelo in 1918. In 1922 when the Methodist Church took responsibility for mission work in the Solomon Islands the pioneer party of five included two deaconesses, Sisters Lillian Berry and May Barnett. For five years, before the arrival of a missionary doctor, Sister Lillian, a nurse who had done midwifery, Karitane, and dispensary training, took total medical responsibility in the Solomons. She set up the first dispensary and general hospital and gave the first injections for yaws.

The early twentieth century saw a number of developments in women’s missionary work. There were more sending agencies and more destinations, more women missionaries. The Baptist Women’s Missionary Union (BWMU) was founded in 1903 by Annie Driver, the former Annie Newcombe, missionary to India. Two years later the Presbyterian Women’s Missionary Union (PWMU) was founded and in 1915 the Methodist Women’s Missionary Union (MWMU), both uniting a number of smaller, local groups. In 1903 the Presbyterian Church took over a private missionary training establishment in Dunedin, founded by Annie Driver and her husband. The Presbyterian Women’s Training Institute (PWTI), later Deaconess House, also trained women missionaries from other denominations although Anglicans generally went to Melbourne or Sydney.

Annie James

Of the many New Zealand missionaries who served in China one of the most remarkable was Presbyterian Annie James, the longest serving missionary of the Canton Villages Mission (CVM). The CVM originated in the Revd Alexander Don’s work in the Otago goldfields with Chinese miners, most of whom came from the Canton region. The first CVM missionary arrived in China in 1901. While the CIM focussed on itinerant evangelism, the CVM engaged in evangelistic, medical and educational work.

Annie Isabella James was born in April 1884 at Herbert, North Otago. One of twelve children, she left school after standard six to help on the family farm. Later she worked in Dunedin as a domestic servant and attended St Andrew’s Church where the minister was
the Revd Dr Rutherford Waddell. Annie wanted from an early age to be a missionary in China but at first she was rebuffed on account of her background and lack of education. She persevered, was accepted, and after two years at the Presbyterian Women’s Training Institute was ordained as a deaconess. She arrived in China in 1912, at the beginning of the Republican period. As with all missionaries, her first task and first challenge was to learn the language. Five years later she was still studying to gain fluency, while at the same time involved in itinerant evangelisation in the villages. Health problems forced her return to NZ in 1914 and she took the opportunity to train in midwifery. She then spent several years working mainly with women and children in evangelistic and medical work. While on furlough in 1921 she did the Karitane training course in Dunedin and qualified as a maternity nurse. In 1922 Annie began work as a medical missionary, based at a large, modern hospital which the CVM had opened at Kong Chuen as a centre for both medicine and evangelism. Annie worked first as a district nurse and then in maternity work, treating as many as 450 babies in a year. She wrote that “The joy of working for these Mothers and babies grows as time goes by. My main trouble is that I don’t get enough time and opportunity to follow them up in their homes”. 1 During her third furlough Annie took a course in child welfare work in Melbourne and soon after her return was posted in 1931 to the town of Kaai Hau, 40 miles from Canton. She remained there for the next 20 years. At Kaai Hau Annie established Po Wai Wi Yen, the Hospital of Universal Love. A cottage hospital with six beds and a dispensary, it was usually staffed by three nurse aids and a mission-trained nurse. In March 1934 Annie reported that over the previous 18 months there had been 2,000 cases treated in the dispensary, 43 in-patient maternity cases, and 48 out-calls. Annie had also held ward services, weekly study groups with the nurses, and worship services with the aid of a local preacher. Bronchial pneumonia, tetanus, and wrong feeding were the main infant ailments, with babies often brought to hospital as a last resort. The hospital followed lines laid down by Truby King and Annie wrote a Cantonese handbook on infant feeding and hygiene. Out-calls were common and Annie noted the difficulty of maintaining aseptic conditions with “a buffalo in one corner, a pig in another and fowls running around one’s feet”. 2 The hospital was well-supported by the local people who gave Annie the Chinese name Tse Koo, meaning Beautiful and Peaceful.

In 1937 the Japanese invaded China and in September bombed and occupied Kaai Hau. Annie had to abandon the hospital and for seven years lived a difficult and dangerous life, so cut off from the rest of the world that for a time she was believed to be dead. She refused to accept the advice of the British Consul-General that she should return to Canton, inspiring him to write to both the British Ambassador and the Governor-General of NZ, praising Annie for her “courage and her determination to continue her work in spite of all difficulties”. 3 In recognition of her outstanding service, Annie was awarded the MBE in 1942 but had to wait till 1952 for formal investiture.

With the advent of peace Annie, now in poor health, returned to New Zealand for furlough in 1946-7 and then went back to China, hoping to rebuild the hospital. Political instability followed by the communist takeover made her work increasingly difficult but before she could leave as planned in February 1951 she was interned and charged with a child’s death. This trumped up charge was dropped but followed by others and for many weeks Annie endured extreme physical and mental hardship, thinking she might die or be killed. She was suddenly released in May and joined other members of the mission in Hong Kong. Annie then worked in an orphanage for refugee children and although she officially retired in March 1953 continued assisting in the orphanage till she finally returned to New Zealand in 1961. Of her five adopted children, all orphans, only one was able to come with her. Annie James died on 6 February 1965. Described as small, slight and unassuming she had led a heroic life of dedication and service.

Gwen Opie
Gwen Lilias Fanny Opie was born at Glentunnel, Canterbury in December 1886, the third of eight children. 4 Both her parents were teachers and Gwen was an able student, winning a number of scholarships. She graduated from Canterbury University College with a MA with second class honours in Mathematics and Mathematical Physics followed by a MSc in Chemistry and Physics, and a Teachers A Certificate from Christchurch Training College. In 1911 she began teaching at Invercargill Girls’ High School. Two years later, aged 26, she applied to the NZ Church Missionary Association (Anglican). Her referees described her as academically able, a good teacher, conscientious, diligent, sincere, devout and earnest, but very shy. According to one, “She does not give the appearance of being of gentle birth – and is evidently not – but she seems quiet and gentle, and as shyness wore off certainly improved in manner”. 5 Following her acceptance Gwen did a course of theological reading under the supervision of the bishop of Nelson, no further training being deemed necessary. In February 1915 the CMS in London cabled her appointment to Ceylon and later that year Gwen sailed from Australia on a troop ship to take up a position at the CMS Ladies’ College in Colombo.

The Ladies’ College, founded in 1900 in response to a government invitation to establish ‘a superior school for girls’, was run along the lines of an English public school. The first principal, Lilian Nixon, resigned suddenly in 1914 as she opposed the CMS decision that the college become a Grant-in-Aid School, that is one funded by the government. Gwen began as vice-principal of the school, which had about 200 pupils ranging from kindergarten to sixth form and soon gained a reputation for hard work and single-minded devotion. Her first task was to prepare for an important government inspection. This was successfully completed towards the end of 1916 and a few months later Gwen was appointed as principal, a role she held until her death in 1945. All did not go smoothly at first and after only two and a half years, Gwen was ordered to take six months rest, diagnosed as suffering from ‘tropical neurasthenia’. One cause of this was the considerable friction between herself and the woman in charge of the boarder’s hostel, resolved by bringing the boarders under Gwen’s authority. Other stress was probably caused by what was noted in Gwen’s probationary report of 1917 as her “extreme sensitiveness”, “hypersensitive nature” and inability to accept criticism.

The college grew rapidly under Gwen’s leadership. During the 1920s she bought property and undertook a major building programme resulting in new classrooms, boarders’ quarters, a science laboratory, a library and a chapel. The number of students and staff grew, as did the number of courses and extra-curricular activities. After Ceylon University College was established in 1921 many former pupils of the Ladies’ College went on to tertiary study there as well as in universities abroad. In 1929 the Church of Ceylon became fully independent from the CMS and during the next decade Gwen was involved in numerous important church and CMS committees. In spite of all these commitments Gwen remained took an active interest in all her pupils. One wrote “She sheltered us with a vigilant eye and the love of a mother”. 6

In the early 1930s Tamil and Sinhalese societies were formed to encourage the study and enjoyment of indigenous drama, music, dancing and literature. During a malaria epidemic the college undertook relief work in a village and later supported Christian evangelism there – rather unsuccessfully. The college also supported a Church of England Zena Society missionary and the College Christian Union encouraged forms of practical service to the sick and the poor.

Outside the college the 1930s were marked by growing nationalism and anti-colonial sentiment, the resurgence of Buddhism and Hinduism, and political challenges to the church and the colonial state. Constitutional changes included the granting of universal suffrage in 1931. The Ladies’ College, recognised as one of the leading English schools in Ceylon, a pillar of the colonial establishment, was in a difficult situation as Gwen explained in a letter written in August 1938:
For all schools of our type the future seems to hold trouble. Politically we are no longer important, as we do not serve the villagers, who, with adult suffrage, become the most important people . . . The people whom we serve are a small minority. English education is threatened with decreased grants, and a big effort is being made, in every possible way, to prevent non-Christians from attending Christian schools. If this effort is successful we shall lose many children, for nearly 50% of our children are non-Christians.\(^7\)

The following year an Education Ordinance stipulated that non-Christian pupils were not to attend scripture classes and school prayers without the written permission of their parents – and schools were not allowed seek this permission. Changes in the grants system meant that the college had to raise considerable funds. Gwen had been pleased when girls converted to Christianity, even though this usually meant they were withdrawn from the college. However she did not see conversion of non-Christians as the main role of the college and with increasing difficulties in attracting such pupils she believed the emphasis should be on educating Christians who, in her words, “must supply the live material, on fire itself, to set the church on fire”\(^8\).

In late 1940 Gwen had a severe attack of diphtheria and had to take six months furlough in India. After her return the college was increasingly affected by the war and the threat of Japanese invasion. The boarders were moved to Kandy and day pupils combined with those from three other schools in those buildings which had not been requisitioned by the army. The resultant strain was too much for Gwen who died of heart failure in January 1944. She was 58 years old.

**Lina Jones**

Lina Maude Jones was born in Christchurch in 1890, the fourth of five children. Her father was a fitter and turner, and her mother was thought to have ‘married beneath her’. The whole family was actively involved in the Methodist Church, the temperance movement, and sports. Lina gained a free place to secondary school and then trained as a teacher. She taught at Glen Tunnel and Wharenui schools, gaining valuable experience in teaching new entrants. At a Bible Class Easter camp at Timaru in 1923 Lina heard an appeal for a skilled person to teach little children in the Solomon Islands. She wrote that “Somehow it seemed as if it was pointing at me. Then the next day’s Bible study finished with the words ‘Go ye therefore and teach . . . and lo, I am with you always’”. Lina’s application was accepted and it was agreed that she needed no further training. In March 1924, having recently turned thirty-five, Lina sailed for Sydney. There she spent two months, attending lectures on teaching, visiting schools, and meeting a number of missionaries from the Solomons, with one of whom she began studying the Roviana language. She also learned a system of teaching reading using handsigns which was to be a basis of her own early work.

In June 1924 Lina arrived at Roviana, the head station of the Methodist Mission in the Solomons. There she lived with three or more other single women, all called missionary sisters, in the Sisters’ House. One of the sisters’ chief tasks was caring for young women being trained for marriage to Melanesian catechists and children who were abandoned, orphaned, sick or handicapped. A dozen or more of these young women and children lived in the Sisters’ House which as a result was crowded and noisy. The heat and the mosquitos were trying, the community was small and isolated, the electricity supply was limited, communications were poor, and ships bringing supplies were often delayed. Lina made light of the difficulties, including lifting her pillow to find a rat chewing her nightdress.

The missionaries were ruled by the Revd John Frances. Goldie, described as “an autocrat in decision making and arbitrary in his likes and dislikes”.\(^9\) While schooling was theoretically important, in practice it was treated by Goldie as secondary to most other things and girls’ education was particularly unimportant. Once he had approved a project he did however allow it to proceed without interference and fortunately he approved Lina’s
plans to establish classes that became known as Kinda, the local abbreviation of Kindergarten. Lina was thus able to pioneer a method of teaching young children, while at the same time teaching older school children, training assistant teachers, and helping to care for the children and young women in the Sisters’ House. “Imagine me,” she wrote, “walking the floor at night with a few months old baby!”

During the first years of Kinda, Lina experimented until she found the method of teaching Roviana reading, English reading, and arithmetic that was most suitable for both the children and the untrained teachers who assisted her. The Kinda curriculum included Bible reading, geography, folk dancing, mat weaving, crayon drawing, maypole dancing, story telling, and singing, as well as playing games. Lina introduced a sewing class for the Kinda girls and a Sunday School. Numbers increased until in 1927 there were 60 or more children attending Kinda, although attendance was often irregular.

Lina went on furlough for six months in 1927. The years after her return were difficult. Lina was busy, adding translation work to her other responsibilities, and writing and producing text books in Roviana. New helpers constantly had to be trained. The Depression meant that the Mission budget was cut. Lina suffered increasing back trouble, diagnosed as rheumatism. Goldie, who had been appointed President of the Methodist Church in Australia, was away from January 1929 for almost eighteen months, during which time there were major epidemics of polio and measles. In Goldie’s absence local leaders began to express some of the resentments that they dared not state to him. A new generation of islanders was rising, some were asking difficult questions about the Mission structure, and there was an increasing restiveness among the students and specially among the young women and girls in the Sisters’ House who more and more resented the strict discipline imposed on them. Tensions rose with newcomers to the staff who saw Lina as representing the old guard and very conservative in her ways.

In 1935 Lina went on furlough again and after her return at the beginning of 1936 enjoyed a better time. Her health had improved and she had the support of two trained teachers. Goldie had first asked her to take a Sunday service in his absence in 1933, breaking with Roviana and mission custom. Now she began to preach frequently and this was accepted by the local community, perhaps partly because of her age. She was in constant demand for translation, particularly of hymns. The work of the Kinda had attracted the attention of other circuits and Lina spent a good deal of time preparing teacher aids for the whole mission district. She created a syllabus for schools, an English book, a Roviana story book, and an arithmetic text book.

Lina returned again from furlough in 1939 at a time when world events were beginning to impact on the Solomons. The situation was tense and when early in 1942 the Japanese bombed Rabaul in Papua New Guinea, the District Officer panicked and evacuated the Solomons mission staff. Lina wrote, “We left with sad heavy hearts. We did not want to come but there seemed nothing else for it. We just brought what we could in a suitcase or two.”

Lina worked in the office of the Foreign Mission Board till she returned with other missionaries to the Solomons in 1945. She retired in 1950, just before her 60th birthday, and lived in NZ, active in Methodist circles, until her death in 1979.

Goldie called Lina “one of the most devoted, unselfish and effective workers we have ever had on this Mission Field”. Her contribution to education in the Solomons has been widely acknowledged. W C Groves, a visiting educationalist from Britain, reported in 1940 that the Methodist Mission education system was considerably in advance of the other Missions. This was largely due to Lina’s work. The Annual Conference in 1949 wrote that her “contribution to the educational side of the work has been unequalled in the history of the Mission, and her gifts of organisation and spiritual leadership have been of a high order”. There may well be questions about the appropriateness of the education that she
developed for the islanders. There can be no question about Lina’s ability, commitment, and devotion. The same is true of Annie James and Gwen Opie. All three women, and so many other single women missionaries, lived in the spirit of words which Lina wrote in her diary: “The glory of life is to love not be loved, to give, not to get, to serve, not to be served.”

End notes

1 Annual Report of Annie James 1927, quoted in Dalzell, p 97.
3 Ibid, p 103.
4 Her three sisters were also involved in missionary work: Vivienne, a nurse, in North India 1919-56; Rita, a teacher, at the Ladies’ College, Colombo, 1928-56; Winifred, a teacher, headmistress of Te Wai Pounamu Maori Girls’ School, 1910-23.
5 Miss C Bourdillon to Lawrence Kimberley, C.M.A Secretary, 16 September 1913. Anglican Archives, Kinder Library, Auckland.
6 Anne Abayasekera, “Gwen Opie”, Sunday Times [Colombo], 6 December, 2009. Abayasekera was a pupil of the school during Opie’s time.
8 Ibid.
13 Ibid.

Bibliography