

# **'Woman's Peculiar Mission to the Heathen' - Protestant Missionary Wives in Australia, 1788-1900**

**Paper delivered to the 'Studying Australian Christianity Conference', 14 - 16  
July 1993, Macquarie University, NSW**

**by**

**Dr Hilary M. Carey  
History Department,  
Newcastle University, NSW 2308**

## Woman's Peculiar Mission to the Heathen - Protestant Missionary Wives in Australia, 1788-1900

There is nothing that is not problematic about the relationship between Australia's indigenous people and the westerners who make up the majority of today's population. One of the most contentious of all grounds is the work of christian missionaries in the colonial period. Few groups have inspired so much derision, particularly among contemporary urban aborigines. Among the work of the eight artists shortlisted for RAKA 1993 (the Ruth Adeney Koori Award) is Lin Onus's painting entitled *And on the Eight Day*. The Australia's art critic, Robert Rooney, describes it as showing 'two bimboesque angels with Malibu Barbie complexions and draped with Union Jacks . . . descending from the stormy heavens bearing such civilising gifts as a hand gun, barbed wire, a Bible and a bottle of Toilet Duck for the unseen desert inhabitants below'.<sup>1</sup> In this image, I was particularly struck by toilet cleaner, because the gift of housework, hygiene and the entire gender order that accompanies the application of toilet cleaner was the special contribution of missionary wives to the aboriginal people. Missionary wives have been an invisible force in this great civilising enterprise and they are the subject of my paper today.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Europe, the United States and Australia witnessed a women's movement of considerable proportions. This constituted an exodus of enthusiastic, educated and pious women to the foreign mission fields of India, China, Africa, the Pacific and, in Australia, to Arnhem Land, the Wimmera, the Murray Darling River systems, North Queensland and Western Australia. They undertook the performance of what one writer called, 'woman's peculiar mission to the heathen'<sup>2</sup>, that is a mission which only Woman, with all the moral attributes peculiar to her sex, was able to perform. In Australia, Protestant women were able to fulfil this mission in three ways: by money,

---

<sup>1</sup> *Australian*, 29/30 May 1993, Review p.13

<sup>2</sup> Mrs E.R. Pitman, *Lady Missionaries in Foreign Lands*, 2nd ed. New York and Chicago, no date, p.vii

marriage or mission, that is (i) on the home front, as money raisers and organisers of mission auxiliaries (ii) as the wives of male missionaries and (iii) as trained missionaries in their own right. Of these three, missionary wives had the highest status in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though members of women's mission auxiliaries far outnumbered them.<sup>3</sup>

Few missionary wives in Australia left personal letters or diaries for the public record, so this account is based on the mission diaries and letters of their husbands and the occasional government report or despatch. There is enough information available to reveal family details and the duties performed by missionary wives on Australian missions. But mission reports are notoriously complex texts and quite unreliable where figures of any kind have been invoked. Missionaries wrote under conditions of great stress for an audience of censorious and miserly funding bodies and for potential donors among the congregations of the evangelical churches. Within these texts, missionary wives exist as reflections in their husbands' eyes and in those of their churches and must be reconstructed by the historian from snippets of information and some statistics. It will be argued that Australian missionary wives are represented in three dominant ways: firstly, as helpmeets, whose feminine presence required protection within the mission house from the native and frontier disorder outside; secondly, as missionary heroines struggling with the heathen in exotic locations and thirdly as partners whose labour was necessary to the functioning of the mission.

## **1. Helpmeets**

Missionary wives were expected to share in their husbands' work and most missionary organisations encouraged, or even demanded, that single men marry before taking up their appointments. This expectation was laid on the wives of the

---

<sup>3</sup> A subsequent paper will be devoted to independent women missionaries from Australia and mission auxiliaries. From now on, 'missionaries' and 'missionary wives' always refer to non-Catholic missionaries.

first Anglican chaplains to the colony of NSW. Samuel Marsden regarded his work in the colony as having a strongly missionary character and he married with this purpose in mind. His was the first of many proposals of marriage which established missionary partnerships to the Australian colonies. The very day he sorted out his official appointment as colonial chaplain, he wrote to Elizabeth Fristan, pointing out that God had opened the way for him to carry the gospel to distant lands and inviting her to join him:

Will you go along with me? Are you willing to take up your Cross and share my Pleasures and my Pains? If, upon considering this subject you answer in the affirmative and say I am willing, then my Heart (as far as it is proper I should give it to the Creature) and all I have are yours.<sup>4</sup>

Although they had no official mission duties to the aborigines, both Mary and Richard Johnson and Elizabeth and Samuel Marsden fostered aboriginal children with the idea of training them for domestic service and, ultimately, baptism.<sup>5</sup> Native servants and foster children were assumed to be one of the perks of missionary life, one which conferred considerable benefit on the children brought into the house. The children rarely stayed for long.<sup>6</sup>

Evangelical Christian missionaries, including the Congregationalists, Methodists, Evangelical Lutherans and some Presbyterians, placed a particularly high value on the loving service of a wife in the mission field. Few single men served as evangelical missionaries in the early period, partly because of the gate-keeper role played by Samuel Marsden. His devotion to his own wife and the marriage bond was exemplary. Marsden refused a post at the Parramatta Native Institution to a young Wesleyan missionary on the pretext that he was not married.<sup>7</sup> Most of the early missionaries married shortly before leaving England for

---

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by A.T. Yarwood, *Samuel Marsden The Great Survivor*, Melbourne 1977, p.20 from Marsden's letter dated 14 Mar 1793, Hassall Correspondence, ML A1677-3, vol.3, pp.1-4

<sup>5</sup> Harris, *One Blood*, pp.41-3

<sup>6</sup> For a review of early attempts to adopt aboriginal children, see Niel Gunson, *Australian Reminiscences and Papers of L.E. Threlkeld* Canberra 1974, Australian Aboriginal Studies No.40, pp.10-11

<sup>7</sup> ie. Rev. William Walker. After Walker married Elizabeth Hassall in 1823 Marsden again refused him the position on the grounds that he was a Wesleyan. Harris, *One Blood*, pp.47-9

service in NSW missions, or married upon their arrival in the colony.<sup>8</sup> Pacific missionaries looking for wives in Sydney had little time to spare, and it was usual for there to be no more than a few months between arrival and marriage. Severe illness or the need to acquire a new wife were the only acceptable reasons for a missionary leaving his post. It was the pressing need to acquire a new mission partner which brought Lancelot Threlkeld to Sydney on his way to England for, after seven years in Raiatea, 'it pleased God to remove the wife of my bosom, and I was left with four Children in a foreign land.' In Sydney in 1824 he married Sarah Arndell, daughter of the colony surgeon.

Among this first group of missionary wives, the most active was probably Ann Watson. It is significant that George Watson is one of the few missionaries to mention regularly his wife's contribution to the work of the CMS mission at Wellington.<sup>9</sup> Watson used references to his wife to contrast his own family and religious life with both the degraded state of aboriginal women and the corrupt European men who passed through the Wellington mission. He considered that it was a great pity that there was no way to constrain aboriginal women to remain at the mission under the care of his wife and Mrs Gunther, 'by whose constant care and instruction, under the Divine Blessing, there is no doubt they would become faithful wives, tender mothers, and useful members of society'.<sup>10</sup> Ann Watson's womanly sensibilities proved their worth in the campaign waged by her husband to secure the removal of the police station and post office from the Wellington Mission. The presence of Europeans was considered by the Watsons to be a major impediment to their evangelisation of the aborigines. Watson reported that one day his wife looked out her window to see a man, 'stript to his shirt, bound to a post and the scourger about to commence punishing the prisoner'. Overcome, she

---

<sup>8</sup> See Table 2 for dates of missionaries' arrivals in Sydney and marriages.

<sup>9</sup> HRA, I.xix passim

<sup>10</sup> 'Fifth Annual Report of the Missionaries for 1837' Rev.Dandeson Coates to Lord Glenelg, 31 Oct.1838, HRA, I.xix, p.662.

fainted as, 'the sight was too much for her feelings.' For Watson, the virtue of his good Christian lady projected like a ray through the window of the mission house upon the disorder and violence outside.

This invocation of the feelings of a middle-class European woman confronted by the ugly side of colonial life could be a potent rhetorical weapon and in this case prompted a government enquiry. But there was little support for the full blown doctrine of womanly purity in the Australian colonies. In 1839 the Police Magistrate at Wellington Valley claimed before the Executive Council that prisoners had never been flogged in front of the mission house and, 'There was not the slightest necessity for any persons seeing the punishments who did not choose to look at them.'<sup>11</sup> Missionary wives, like other European women who came to the frontier, were expected to be tough. All the same, floggings were conducted in future away from female eyes in a barn. Although Watson considered his wife to show natural revulsion in the face of physical violence against a convict, she was also expected to demonstrate an unlimited capacity to nurture the sick. In an account calculated to incite admiration for the work of the missionary heroes of Wellington, Watson writes of an occasion when an aboriginal man whom Ann was supporting in a cart left behind 'pieces of corrupted flesh' when he was lifted out.<sup>12</sup> The worst cases were nursed by the Watsons in their living room.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from marriage, women of the colony's tight-knit group of missionary and evangelical families could further their missionary vocation through their children. Women willing to forego a conventional marriage in favour of the mission field were not easy to find. Not surprisingly, the daughters and sisters of missionaries provided one of the few reliable sources of supply. One of the most

---

<sup>11</sup> HRA, I.xx,p.618.

<sup>12</sup> Watson Diary, 12 February 1834, AJCP, M233. Cited by Harris, *One Blood*, pp.57-58

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. Besides his diary, and official reports, Watson published in the *Church Missionary Paper* and wrote private letters detailing his treatment of the sick.

remarkable demonstrations of this are the family bonds forged by several generations of the 'Duff' missionaries.

The missionary families resident and visiting in Sydney reinforced their bonds by marriage, friendship, correspondence and gifts. The Hassalls, the Covers and the Marsdens all named children after their missionary colleagues and worked actively to encourage their intermarriage. Thomas Hassall and Ann Henry, the two eldest children of the LMS mission to Tahiti, were put under strong pressure to marry. Thomas proposed in 1815, but Ann refused him. He waited another seven years before forming an even more suitable union with Anne Marsden, eldest daughter of the colony's formidable chaplain. The Hassalls produced a dynasty of evangelical missionaries. Their four sons and five daughters made four missionary marriages between them. In the next generation, Eliza Marsden, daughter of Thomas Hassall and Anne Marsden, the chaplain's eldest daughter, founded the Marsden Training School for Women Missionaries in Ashfield, Sydney. Other missionary families outside the Duff group were also prolific breeders of clerics and clerical wives. Sarah and Francis Tuckfield, who ran the Methodist mission of Buntingdale in Victoria from 1838 to 1850, may well hold something of a record in this regard. Of their eleven children, three sons became ministers and three daughters married ministers.<sup>14</sup> The isolation of Sydney in the early nineteenth century was certainly a factor in the close relationships which formed between the LMS missionaries and other evangelicals who came to the colony. But it was the role of the missionary helpmeet to maintain the bonds of support among evangelical families.

When Eliza Marsden was disabled by a stroke, Ann kept up the family correspondence, reporting to London friends of the unfortunate fate of the women missionaries sent out by the LMS in 1812, how Mrs Davis had died in childbirth and

---

<sup>14</sup>

ADB

Mrs Henry, one of the original Duff missionary wives, was also gone: 'My Mama regrets her death very much and is afraid it will be felt severely as she was of a true missionary spirit'.<sup>15</sup>

Two groups of missionary wives can be considered in the period after 1850, the Moravian and Lutherans and the independent missionary wives, including Janet Matthews, Mary Gribble and Friederike Meyer. The Moravian and Lutheran Missionary Boards followed the remarkable practice of sending out brides to their missionaries in the field. Often sisters were sent together to provide company for each other. Since the Moravians specialised in missions in isolated places, these women had little opportunity to change their minds once they undertook the long journeys which took them from Germany or England to mission sites in central Australia, North Queensland and North Western Australia. A brief acquaintance or a formal introduction by the Church was enough to commit couples to life-long attachment. James Ward and Nicholas Hey secured the promise of two sisters from the Moravian Church in the Irish town of Ballinderry before setting out to Australia.<sup>16</sup> The Wards married and came together in 1891 and the future Mrs Hey travelled out a year or so later and married Hey on 7 Dec.1892.<sup>17</sup> The Moravian Mission Board also sent two sisters to marry the Rev.William Spieseke and Rev. Frederick Augustus Hagenauer in the Wimmera in 1861.<sup>18</sup> Most remarkable of all were the marital journeys of the Lutheran wives posted to the Hermannsburg Mission in Central Australia including Wilhelmine Schutz who married Pastor W.F. Schwarz and Dorothea Queckenstedt who married Pastor A.H. Kempe in 1878.<sup>19</sup> It took the brides twenty-one weeks to travel from Adelaide but Kempe could not

---

<sup>15</sup> A.Marsden, 18 June 1813, *Private Correspondence*, p.48

<sup>16</sup> Ward, *Mapoon*, p.31. I have been unable to establish the personal names of these sisters. The Mapoon mission was established in Cape York by the Moravian Mission Board and the Presbyterian Missionary Council of Victoria in 1891.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp.92-3

<sup>18</sup> Harris, *One Blood*, p.195.

<sup>19</sup> *Hermannsburg: A Vision and a Mission*, ed. by Everard Leske, Adelaide 1977, p.14 referring to Kempe's diary.



restrain himself and journeyed south to marry Dorothea at Dalhousie Springs on her way to Hermannsburg. These arranged marriages could prove very close. Dorothea died on 13 November 1891, a few weeks after the birth of their seventh child and shortly before the closure of the mission. Kempe was shattered. Accompanied by five of his children, he had to be carried from the mission in a state of prostration.<sup>20</sup>

Given the appalling conditions, and the record of failure for Australian missions in particular, why did women like take up the marriage offers of their missionary husbands? Marriage to an Australian missionary was not the product of a family alliance or a love match, but a life choice and a religious vocation. For the Moravians and Evangelical Lutherans who ran Hermannsburg the question is simpler to answer. Missionary marriage was an expected outcome of their membership of their respective churches.<sup>21</sup> Marriage provided one of the few opportunities for celebration allowed within evangelical Protestantism. An observer of the Lutheran community at Lobethal in South Australia noted:

'They look upon marriage as the happiest event (as it ought to be) in their lives. There are never any doubts, or 'ifs' about them, as with us. It is a matter of course with them that a marriage must be happy, and I believe they are seldom mistaken.'<sup>22</sup>

There was a commitment and common purpose to these marriages which seems to have ensured their endurance in the face of great trials. Usually the decision to become a wife and set out for the mission field came together, but some married men were converted after marriage and had then to convince their wives to agree to a dramatic decline in their financial and social prospects. The difficulties this might present are vividly presented in John Brown Gribble's account of his wife

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp.20-21.

<sup>21</sup> Gillian Lindt Gollin, *Moravians in Two Worlds*, New York and London 1967, ch.6. Moravians were not allowed to marry without the permission of the Elders and were obliged to marry if they wished to undertake particular professions, including that of missionary. The strict application of these rules was modified after 1800.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted from the *South Australian*, by A. Brauer, *Under the Southern Cross. History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia*, Adelaide 1956 (1985), p.75

Mary's decision to support his missionary undertaking. After some time, 'wrestling with the flesh', John Gribble decided to put the matter to his wife:

The flesh said - "Stay where you are; why impoverish your wife and family, and isolate them from all society?" But the spirit said - "Go and rescue the perishing! Go and build them a home in the wilderness!" At length I said to my wife - "I cannot bear this any longer; I must bring the matter to some issue. I have just been praying about it, and I seem directed to leave the whole matter with you. If you say No, I will not go; but if you say Yes, I will go." Her answer decided me. In her own quiet way she said - "If you think God is leading us amongst the blacks, go, and I will do what I can to help you; but if God is not leading us, don't go." <sup>23</sup>

It might be noted that, like her namesake, Mary Gribble said neither 'yes' nor 'no' to the proposal which was put to her but rather, 'Be it done unto me according to Thy word'. If God was the agent, He certainly chose a hard road for the Gribbles to travel, to the utter amazement of their friends, when He led them amongst the blacks and away from their comfortable rural parish in 1880.<sup>24</sup> Her submission represents a culmination of the wifely virtues admired in Christian women of this period.

The missionary wives of colonial Australia were a diverse group, ranging in status from domestic servants to a former lady-in-waiting to Princess Marie of Prussia.<sup>25</sup> Most came from lower middle class or artisan families with a sprinkling of professional daughters, particularly among the Anglican missionary wives. Their motivation and self assessment of their role also varied considerably. Nevertheless, a key factor for all evangelical women who chose to work as missionary wives was a heightened appreciation of the religious virtues admired in women, including subordination of the will, self-sacrifice, obedience to authority and acceptance of suffering. In a single word, missionary wives were 'dutiful' in an age which valued duty.

---

<sup>23</sup> Rev.J.B. Gribble, *"Black but Comely": or Glimpses of Aboriginal Life in Australia*, London 1884, p.37

<sup>24</sup> There is considerable information about John Brown and Mary Gribble in Christine Halse's University of Queensland Ph.D. thesis about their son Ernest Gribble of Yarrabah.

<sup>25</sup> ie. Martha Taplin and Friederike Meyer respectively.

Some insight into the factors which led to the acceptance of her lot by a missionary wife can be gleaned from a book which bears the signature of Mrs Sarah Threlkeld, now in the Mitchell Library.<sup>26</sup> This well thumbed volume, published in Hobart in 1834, concerns contemplative prayer and was the sort of volume recommended for Sunday reading and reflection. Over seventeen chapters it discusses topics such as Self-denial and taking up the Cross, Mortification, Resignation, Virtue, Conversion and Self annihilation:

Know, therefore, your life must be a continual death to the appetites and passions of fallen nature . . . To suffer, therefore, is your portion; and to suffer patiently and willingly, is the great testimony of your love and allegiance to your Lord.<sup>27</sup>

Threlkeld is not very forthcoming about Sarah in his various writings and it can not be known for certain how much of this she took to heart. When Samuel Marsden married the couple on 20 October 1817 in St. John's Church, Parramatta, Threlkeld expressed no stronger opinion in his public journal than the hope that the 'most high' would ensure that they were 'helpmeets to each other in our Missionary employment.'<sup>28</sup> There is an element of reciprocity in this statement that hints at the new role of missionary wife as partner in the work of the mission, rather than 'helpmeet' and adjunct to her husband, but Martha in fact seems to have had little to do with the mission. In Threlkeld's writings, 'Mrs T.' appears only when she is ill, or when the activities of the aborigines accidentally impinged on the mission house.<sup>29</sup> Like Ann Watson, she appears at her most significant when looking out the

---

<sup>26</sup> *A Guide to True Peace or A Method of Attaining to Inward and Spiritual Prayer Compiled chiefly from the writings of Fenelon, Archbishop of Cambray, Lady Guion, and Michael de Molinos*, Hobart 1834

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.27

<sup>28</sup> L.E.Threlkeld, 20 October 1824, LMS, Australia Journals, No.2; SG, 21 October 1824, cited by Gunson, *Threlkeld Reminiscences*, p.21

<sup>29</sup> eg. during the birth of her first child, or when a fight came near the mission house. On this occasion, the aborigines 'called out to Mrs Threlkeld to get out of the way of the random spears.' Gunson, *Threlkeld Reminiscences*, pp.60, 94. She was also used by the aborigines as an intermediary with Threlkeld. Ibid., p.192

mission house windows, a wife to be protected from the nakedness, noise and violence of native life.<sup>30</sup>

Missionaries who chose to present their wives primarily as helpmeets, had to contend with the disadvantage that this made the support of their family problematic in the eyes of tight-fisted mission funding bodies. Evangelical assumptions notwithstanding, it was in fact by no means clear that married women were an essential component of the mission endeavour, at least in Australia. Catholic missions, it was frequently noted with some Protestant gloom, got on just as well without them and at less expense. In attempting to cater for their thinly settled rural dioceses, the Anglican bishops of South Australia and Western Australia had resorted to the Bush Brotherhoods, single men committed to an itinerant ministry unburdened by a family. The restriction on his family allowance was a key factor in the resignation of the Methodist missionary Ralph Mansfield in Tasmania.<sup>31</sup> Wives and children required houses, and married missionaries were forced to devote considerable resources to the erection of their family home and usually a garden to feed them as well. This necessity could always be thrown in the face of a missionary who was perceived not to have succeeded in the work of establishing a mission or who overran the meagre mission budget. In the bitterly unfair process which led to the termination of the Western Australian mission of John Brown Gribble, the Anglican Bishop of Perth, Bishop Parry wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury with some irritation that, 'He has in fact done nothing in the Gascoyne District on behalf of the natives beyond erecting a house for himself, and has occupied himself otherwise only in writing and speaking against the settlers.'<sup>32</sup> In the hostile climate created by Gribble's attempt to publicise the atrocities involved in the forced labour of aborigines in the pearling and pastoral

---

<sup>30</sup> For Threlkeld's worries about naked aborigines and his family, see *Ibid.*, pp.44-45.

<sup>31</sup> ADB Mansfield married Lydia Fellows (d.1888) shortly before sailing for NSW.

<sup>32</sup> Lambeth Palace, Benson Papers, Vol.40, 1986, Bishop H.H.Parry to Archbishop Benson, 13 Sept.1886, f.358v

industries, Gribble's family became hostages to the local people while Gribble sailed to Sydney to seek supporters. No one would supply them with food and they were reduced to relying on the produce from the mission garden until supplies were sent up from Perth, a distance of 600 miles away, by some well-wishers.<sup>33</sup>

## 2. Heroines

Whilst pious books, such as that belonging to Sarah Threlkeld, supported the dutiful helpmeet role for missionary wives, there were other, less submissive, models available. Most exciting was the image of wives as missionary heroines fighting the hostile forces of paganism in dangerous and exotic locations, bringing their feminine virtue to transform the domestic and gender arrangements of natives everywhere. Popular literature promoting this image was distributed internationally by the mission societies through Sunday Schools, Revivals and Missionary preachers, which celebrated the mission ideal and encouraged vocations. Australian adventures are rare in this literature, but a collection of tales by E.E.Dawson entitled 'Heroines of Missionary Adventure' has the story of the unnamed sisters married to the Moravian missionaries James Ward and Nicholas Hey among the, equally nameless, 'Blackfellows of North Australia'<sup>34</sup> Fear of cannibalism figures prominently in the tale which may have justified its inclusion in this volume.<sup>35</sup> The real target of mission adventures was not potential spouses but the support base of evangelical Protestantism, particularly the children who attended Sunday School and the women who were its main fund-raisers.

In mission adventures, the adventures and sufferings of missionary wives were of a more passive form than those endured by their husbands. Although both

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., Rev.J.B.Gribble to Archbishop Benson, 24 Sept.1886, f.355

<sup>34</sup> Rev.E.E. Dawson, *Heroines of missionary adventure*, London 1909 and later editions

<sup>35</sup> Ward was warned of the danger of cannibalism on his first journey to Cape York. See Harris, *One Blood*, p.488 citing J.E. Hutton, *A History of the Moravian Missions*, London 1922, p.418. Harris notes that cannibalism was reported by missionaries in Western Australia, North Queensland and John Bulmer, but was an isolated phenomenon.Ibid.pp.536-7 .

men and women suffered martyrdom, particularly through cannibalism, women were seen to suffer most because of their frailer physical constitutions and their greater capacity for emotional suffering. Missionary wives were seen as heroic if they died young, were themselves killed by natives, or were forced to continue their husband's work after his death.

Besides their story value, mission adventures provided rational assessments of the value and validity of women's place in the mission field. Mrs Pitman noted in the first place the scriptural and historical justification for women's right to spread the Gospel. Christ was faithfully attended by women in his ministry and when the disciples were sent forth to spread the Gospel to all nations, women, she writes, 'were among the most constant and devoted fellow-labourers of St Paul and his compeers.'<sup>36</sup> Missionary women were treading in the same path as the great Christian women of the past such as Catherine of Sienna (sic), Elizabeth of Hungary, Elizabeth Fry, Florence Nightingale, Mary Moffat and Sarah Martin.<sup>37</sup> These same role models were drawn on for tributes and obituaries to Australian missionary women. Hence, Bishop Gilbert White likened the missionary, Florence Griffiths Buchanan, founder of the Queensland Kanaka Mission, to Catherine of Siena.<sup>38</sup>

The classic justification for women's missionary work was based on the need to expose women as well as men to Christ's message and the general rule that male missionaries were denied access to 'female members of a heathen family'. Only women, Pitman explains, could go behind the veil and have access to hut, harem and zenana, fulfilling at least vicariously the western male fantasy of access to the hidden places of the East. The Christian message, it was repeatedly stressed, was a liberating one for women. This was in Miss Pitman's phrase 'woman's

---

<sup>36</sup> *Lady Missionaries*, p.ix

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> ADB 7 notes G. White, *Thirty years in tropical Australia*, London, 1918

peculiar mission to the heathen', the reason women must accompany men on the mission field:

But when these lay teachers go, bearing the Gospel message, they are eagerly welcomed and besought to come again . . . the knowledge of Christ as a saviour comes to the female heathen with new beauty, because of their saddened and depressed condition . . . But they were debarred from these glad tidings, until Christian ladies made them known, and by so doing, caused such joy to enter Syrian hut, Mohammedan harem, and Indian zenana, as never beamed there before. The spreading of these tidings, in one way or another forms woman's peculiar mission to the heathen.<sup>39</sup>

Although the entire heathen world was often represented as having a female identity<sup>40</sup>, Mrs Pitman argued that just as heathen came in two genders, so their missionaries should be engendered likewise.

### 3. Partners

More prosaically, missionary wives in the second half of the nineteenth century were increasingly presented as mission partners, whose presence and labour was essential to the work of the mission. As mission partners, wives had two main functions: firstly, they performed and directed the practical work of teaching, nursing, cooking and other tasks assigned to the woman's sphere; secondly, they provided role models for aboriginal women ignorant of the proper behaviour of Christian wives and mothers. This was particularly important since it was often argued that one of the chief attractions and glories of Christianity was the high place it accorded women in contrast to their low status in native societies. Australian aboriginal society was particularly reviled for the perceived position of women, who were regarded as being little more than slaves.<sup>41</sup> Missionaries, such as Threlkeld, with helpmeet wives seem to have had little interest in using their wives

---

<sup>39</sup> Pitman, *Lady Missionaries*, p.vii

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, the extended embroidery on this theme from history, literature and personal experience by Trinh Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other!!*

<sup>41</sup> This is a constant theme in European accounts of Aboriginal women. Governor Phillip made a particular point of their subservience in his first despatches to Lord Sydney, HRA, I.i, p.160

to intervene in aboriginal family life. But in the later period, many missions invested more effort in the attempt to establish patriarchal families within Christian villages, or at least to present this appearance in mission reports. In this project, mission wives sought to transform aboriginal gender relations by eliminating prostitution, teaching women to perform domestic work and maintain a household and encouraging men to take on the alien role of sole breadwinner.

Role modelling was an activity which was thought to arise spontaneously in mission wives, and could be performed simply by carrying out their natural duties as mothers and children in view of the native members of the mission. More effort was required to teach aboriginal women to become good housewives. There was strong motivation for wives to teach mission women domestic work because otherwise all such tasks fell to them. The subsidiary status of Angelina Noble, the only aboriginal missionary wife, is indicated by the high level of domestic work she performed, including cooking for the mission children and the staff at Forrest River, Western Australia<sup>42</sup> The ideal arrangement was that described by James Ward at Mapoon. Within weeks of the arrival of the missionaries in 1892 he claimed to have established the usual strictly ordered mission day with work, meals and learning interspersed by prayers and singing.<sup>43</sup> The male missionaries conducted family prayers and directed work. Mrs Ward taught the girls sewing and cooked for the brethren and the workmen.

The practical work most frequently performed by missionary wives was school teaching, including the taking of Sunday School and the training of women and children in domestic and craft work. School teaching was appropriate for women because it was regarded as a less important activity than evangelisation.

---

<sup>42</sup> ADB entry for James Noble, Angelina's husband.

<sup>43</sup> Arthur Ward, *The Miracle of Mapoon*, p.69: 'Ward's diary begins on 1st January, 1892 - that is, twelve days after he landed. If it were not impossible for any mistake to have occurred, seeing that it is continued to within a few days of this death, one would be inclined to suspect that it was wrongly dated, and that a year must have elapsed before such a perfect routine of labour and matter-of-fact treatment of the new life could have established themselves.'; J.E. Hutton, *Moravian Missions*, London 1922, p.426



When the Duff missionaries retreated from Tahiti to Sydney in 1788, they were sent a letter by the LMS suggesting, very tactfully, that some of them, particularly the women, might consider school teaching among the poor and the aborigines of the colony as a way of demonstrating the mission spirit:

In some cases, missionary wives took on more responsibility for the mission in the case of a husband's death or retirement. This was only possible if the mission was privately run, as was the case with the activity of Janet Matthews, or if there were other missionaries present to share the work, as was the case when Mrs Ward continued at Mapoon after the death of her husband. But however important or whole-hearted her involvement, missionary wives were never given official recognition, funding or thanks for their contribution. There was little opportunity for a widow, such as Elizabeth Shelley, who wished to continue her life's work in the mission field once her husband died. Caroline, the second wife of Methodist missionary John Bulmer, married in 1862 and worked with him at Lake Tyers Mission in Victoria from 1863 till his death in 1913. Shortly after this date she was evicted from the mission by the secular manager appointed by the Aborigines Protection Board because her 'misplaced sympathies' weakened his control over the aborigines.<sup>44</sup>

Although official plaudits were few, missionary wives were usually depicted as being rewarded by the affection of the people of the mission. Aborigines who attended missions were expected to treat the married couples who directed them as parents, respecting and obeying the male missionary as a father and loving his wife like a mother. Arthur Ward notes carefully the name of the first man who called Mrs Ward 'mother' at Mapoon, observing that this was the name by which she was usually known to the mission inhabitants.<sup>45</sup> Friederike Meyer at Encounter

---

<sup>44</sup> Harris, *One Blood*, pp.207-20

<sup>45</sup> Arthur Ward, *The Miracle of Mapoon*, p.86

Bay was also known as 'mother' to her charges.<sup>46</sup> In the face of the repeated failures of missions to the Australian aborigines, mission reports often focussed on expressions of personal regard for the missionaries themselves. In their turn, missionary couples treated aborigines as children, physically restraining them for their own good, chastising them if they transgressed and mourning when they left the mission to follow their own lives.

Women could assemble meetings in their husbands' absence, take Sunday School and lead hymns. But they could not lead Sunday service or preach except in the most exceptional circumstances.<sup>47</sup> At Lake Tyers in South Australia, George Taplin maintained the mission with a narrow view of Christian conversion linked inextricably to Europeanisation, particularly the abandoning of nakedness for western dress. Besides assisting with the daily regime of the Mission, including dispensing rations to the sick and meals to everyone, Martha was Matron of the school with responsibility for making, washing and mending the clothes the children were required to wear. Even Taplin admitted this task, 'came heavily upon her'.<sup>48</sup>

All missionary wives were constrained by the decorum of the woman's sphere, the personal views of their husbands, his missionary colleagues and the funding body responsible for the training of her husband and funding the mission. The rhetoric may have moved on from helpmeet to partner in mission work, but the words lacked any official support and wives remained essentially subordinate. It is difficult to assess the impact of missionary wives on the Australian aborigines they sought to convert, particularly since their number was so small and many did no more than some part-time teaching in mission schools. Certainly, there is little evidence of equal or cooperative interchanges between black and white mission

---

<sup>46</sup> Harris, *One Blood*, pp.328-30

<sup>47</sup> At this period, only the Unitarians and some Quakers allowed women to preach. The eighteenth century view is well summed up in Samuel Johnson's famous witticism.

<sup>48</sup> Taplin, *Narrinyeri*, p.60. Quoted Harris, *One Blood*, p.363

women in colonial Australia. Indeed, the ethos under which Protestant missions operated made such interchanges unthinkable. Their closest bonds were reserved for their fellow missionary wives, and, for those who had to serve in more isolated circumstances, their husbands and children.

The missionary wives discussed in this paper were not typical or ordinary women. They can be admired as missionary heroines, marching in the footsteps of the early Christian virgins and martyrs. But their experiences throw into relief the ideology of Christian marriage and gender relations which structured the lives of all European women who came and lived in Australia in the colonial period. Missionary wives responded to this ideology in the most dramatic way available. Some achieved considerable independence as mission partners, others remained locked into a subsidiary and domestic helpmeet role that provided little outlet for their mission vocation. In their husbands' eyes they submitted their will to that of God and assisted in the meritorious work of Christian evangelisation and social assistance to a dying race. In their own terms, they earned merit and would anticipate the gratitude of a people converted to Christianity and westernised under their care.

### **Afterthought**

I like to imagine some of the missionary wives discussed in this paper attending the exhibition of Koori Art mentioned at the beginning of my paper. How very disappointed they would be that despite all their heroic efforts the anticipated gratitude has not been forthcoming. Indeed 'woman's peculiar mission' to civilise and establish Christian family life among the heathen was notably unsuccessful and unappreciated in Australia. As far as I know this is the first historical investigation of missionary wives in Australia, and this, such as it is, must be their memorial.