

Ruth Compton Brouwer. *New Women for God: Canadian Presbyterian Women and India Missions, 1876-1914*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990. Pp. xi, 294. (The Social History of Canada, No. 44) \$40.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.

This is the first published monograph on the involvement of Canadian women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Protestant missionary movement. Within the growing literature on missions and missionaries it makes its own contribution to the toppling of stereotypes. In purpose and scope it invites comparison with Jane Hunter's fine account of American women missionaries in China, *The Age of Gentility*, and does not suffer thereby.

Following a succinct outline of the origins of the missionary movement in the "North Atlantic triangle," Brouwer devotes a lengthier chapter to the foreign missions of Canadian Presbyterians, especially of the Woman's Foreign Mission Society, Western Division (WFMS), established in 1876. From the beginning, the legitimization of missionary activity by women rested on the view that only women could carry the gospel to the isolated and oppressed women of Africa and Asia. The commonly held belief that Christianity was the source of the higher status of women in the

western world compared to non-Christian lands carried with it the corollary that Christian women had a unique responsibility to minister to their "heathen sisters."

The Foreign Missions Committee (FMC) of the Presbyterian Church of Canada directed the mission work of the whole church and the WFMS was authorized only to raise money and support the work of women missionaries; the women had no mandate to participate in shaping policy. In the women's missionary societies established in most congregations, thousands of women were engaged in activities new to them, such as serving on the executive, or giving a talk on missionary activity in some faraway land. In 1898 the WFMS held the first of its annual national meetings, where several hundred women conducted the business of the society with an efficiency that astonished male observers already amazed by the women's prowess as publicists and fund-raisers.

The expansion and success of the WFMS inevitably complicated its relations with the FMC. The women naturally wanted more influence, especially in the selection and preparation of women missionaries, and this they secured in effect before the turn of the century when the men made some informal concessions to avoid a more direct attack on their authority.

After describing the marshalling of missionary zeal at home, Brouwer

proceeds to discuss the content of the missionary calling presented to Canadian Presbyterian women and to analyse the characteristics of those who responded. Clearly the motives of volunteers were mixed, including desire for adventure and for the prestige of the missionary at home. Acknowledging that "romantic fantasies and self-serving ambitions" played a part, the author assigns primary significance to the religious imperatives presented to Protestant church-going women in the late nineteenth century, who were constantly reminded of the unique obligations of educated single women to obey Christ's commandment: "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."

Brouwer analyses the backgrounds of the 122 Presbyterian women who went overseas before 1914 and presents the details in a useful appendix. Women from modest rural communities or small towns were more likely to answer the call than those in larger and wealthier urban congregations, whose membership included the leading WFMS executives; their daughters rarely found their way to the mission field. Some areas in Nova Scotia and southwestern Ontario, usually where the population was mainly of Scottish origin, produced a disproportionate number of volunteers. Compared with their contemporaries, women missionaries had a significantly higher level of education. By far the largest group had been teachers, but unlike most Ontario teachers a substantial majority had been to Normal School. Ten were nurses, fourteen were university graduates, while fifteen had taken

medical degrees, often specifically to qualify as medical missionaries.

Canadian Presbyterians sent their emissaries, including women, to other areas, notably Trinidad, Formosa, Korea, and China, but it was in Central India that "woman's work for women" was most visible. From the founding of the mission (1877), women outnumbered men and grew more dominant with the years, the usual pattern on the mission fields of North American churches. Initially in Central India the women missionaries devoted much of their time and energy to visiting Muslim and high-caste women in the seclusion of their zenanas. Before long it became evident that zenana visiting would yield few conversions, partly because a large majority of the women of Central India were not zenana women as the early missionaries had mistakenly believed. Brouwer is skilful in tracing the process by which women missionaries in Central India came to emphasize institutional and social services over direct evangelism, thus giving a distinctive character to their work.

In a society where there was virtually no education for women, schools for girls were the first priority, followed by hospitals, clinics, and dispensaries. When a great famine and then cholera swept through Central India at the turn of the century the resources of the medical missionaries were pushed to the limit. For awhile famine relief and the establishment of industrial homes for widows, and orphanages for boys and girls, became missionary pre-occupations. These rescue homes proved to be more effective instruments of evangelism than

any other, for the combination of social service and religious instruction dispensed to captive audiences produced a gratifying number of converts.

One of the best chapters in the book shows that "gender politics" was a constant factor in the mission field. Although the foundations of the Central India mission were laid by two very able women, the ordained male missionaries who arrived later and failed to "put them in their place" eventually secured their dismissal on a variety of charges ranging from sexual misconduct to resistance to the authority of the all-male Mission Council. In the ensuing years a majority of women missionaries contended that they ought to have direct control over their own work, their trump card being that the men could have no close knowledge of life in zenanas, women's hospitals, and girls' schools. When an ordained missionary, for his own political reasons, made himself the women's spokesman, a joint "equal-rights" council was created by the FMC but opposition from the male missionaries and a minority of the women ensured it a brief life. Subsequently, for the sake of relative peace everyone concerned reluctantly accepted the establishment of a separate Women's Council.

As Brouwer notes, the vocabulary acceptable to Christians of that day prevented them from speaking of "self-fulfillment," but many single women had highly rewarding careers on the mission field. Their satisfaction rested on the belief that their work expressed God's will for their lives, and often on the realization that within certain limits, which most of them ac-

cepted, they enjoyed careers more independent, adventuresome, and honoured than any open to well-educated spinsters at home. Although converts might be few, they could find satisfaction in the knowledge that they were laying the foundations for educational and medical services and for career opportunities in those fields for Indian women. In the vicissitudes of missionary life they were sustained by close female friendships, often lifelong, a few of which Brouwer comments on at some length. Further, more frequently than their male counterparts, female missionaries established supportive friendships with Indian families and in the world of British officialdom.

Finally, Brouwer demonstrates that "new women" in India, and their home supporters, so single-mindedly devoted to a "woman's sphere" overseas, were scarcely "new women" in Canada. Despite the fact that Presbyterian men were often strong advocates of women's suffrage, members of the WFMS were rarely associated with the suffrage movement, and declined affiliation with the moderately reformist National Council of Women; nor did they press for formal representation in church courts.

A review cannot do full justice to this thoroughly researched and closely argued, yet well-written and readable book. For both content and style it deserves better than the stereotypical "missionary drab" cover of the cloth edition.

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