

# AJWS

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## **Instruments in the Hand of God: Missionary Women in Malaya, 1815-45**

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Christine DORAN

### **Keywords**

Malaya; Britain; women; missionaries; motives; beliefs

### **Abstract**

Most previous research on female missionaries in the Asia-Pacific region has dealt with the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and/or has concentrated on American women. In contrast, this article explores the motives and experiences of British women who were actively involved in mission stations in the Straits Settlements in Malaya, working under the auspices of the London Missionary Society; and it examines the early period of missionary activity in the region, from 1815 to 1845. The paper focuses on a key, but previously neglected issue: the women's motives for becoming involved in missionary endeavor. These women created a notional space for themselves as mission workers, firstly by means of ideas about being useful instruments in God's work; and secondly by asserting a direct relationship with their God, unmediated by male missionaries or the officials of the missionary society. This conceptual strategy gave them scope for maneuver within gendered power structures and thus some degree of social and political leverage.

## Introduction

In 1815 Rachel Milne sailed from China to Melaka on the Malay Peninsula to help found a mission for the London Missionary Society (LMS), the first LMS station in the Malay region. Previously a successful milliner in Aberdeen, Milne had decided in 1812 to devote the rest of her life to missionary labour. On the long voyage from Europe to the LMS base in China, she had ample opportunity to reflect on the commitment that was taking her so far from Scotland. She prayed for her life to be spared so that she could become an “instrument in the hand of God” for “doing some good among the Heathen.”<sup>1</sup> The phrasing was significant. Rachel Milne was driven by a desire to be useful, to be instrumental in the work of God. Moreover, she saw her commitment in terms of a direct individual relationship with her God, with no need for mediation by her missionary husband or by other members of the missionary society. In this paper it will be argued that in these respects Rachel Milne’s motivations were representative of the thinking of the women who became involved in British missions to the Malay region during the early nineteenth century. Ideals of religious dedication inspired, indeed empowered, these women to take an active part in the missionary enterprise, fostering a strong determination to be useful, as well as a sense of a personal covenant with God.

This paper examines the motives and experiences of women who worked under the auspices of the LMS in the British colonies in the Malay Straits in the early nineteenth century. The analysis focuses on a key issue: the motivations and beliefs which brought them to mission work in the region. The women’s relations with indigenous women or men is not a primary focus of attention in this paper, although some relevant evidence is presented. Whenever possible, emphasis is given to accounts left by the women themselves, which are mainly to be found in the archives of the Council for World Mission in London. Regrettably, female missionaries reported to the directors of the LMS less frequently than their male counterparts, especially during their years of child bearing and rearing. Nevertheless, sufficient evidence is available to gain an understanding of their

beliefs and responses, their ideological and emotional commitments, the mission archives representing a little used resource for reconstructing women's history.

In this paper it is argued that female missionaries were driven principally by a desire to make themselves useful as God's instruments in the missions, regarding their enterprise in terms of a direct relationship with God. Interwoven with this were other motives such as the desire to "rescue" Asian women and the urgings of British patriotism. From a reading of the letters and other records of the missionary women of the period, these emerge as the salient driving forces behind their participation in mission work.

### **Context: A Brief Historical and Historiographical Overview**

During the early nineteenth century, British imperialistic activity in the Malay region was focused on the Straits Settlements. The official term Straits Settlements was used to refer to three British colonies: the islands of Penang and Singapore and the sometimes Dutch, sometimes British colony of Melaka on the Malay Peninsula. Penang was acquired by the British East India Company in 1786. Singapore was founded as a British colony in 1819. The Dutch colony of Melaka was governed by the British from 1795 to 1818 after reverting temporarily to Dutch control; it was ceded to Britain under the Anglo-Dutch treaty of 1824. Melaka was then included under the Straits Settlements administration. The three settlements were connected by the sea lane of the Straits of Melaka, from which their collective name was derived. Until 1858 the Straits Settlements were administered for the British by the East India Company.<sup>2</sup>

The LMS was the most important missionary society operating in the Straits Settlements in the early nineteenth century. Apart from the LMS, three other missionary societies were involved in the Malay region in this period to a much lesser extent: the Church Missionary Society, the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions, and the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church of America. The LMS was formed in 1795, with firm roots in the

evangelical revival of the late eighteenth century. It was officially inter-denominational, but in fact dominated by Congregationalists (Piggin, 1985: 107-110).

Missionary activity under the auspices of the LMS began in the Straits in 1815 with the establishment of the mission at Melaka. Working in conjunction with and receiving advice from Robert Morrison, a leading LMS missionary based in China, William and Rachel Milne set up the Melaka station as a branch of the China mission. By 1820 an Anglo-Chinese College had been constructed, which remained for many years one of the most impressive buildings in Melaka. The mission continued to operate there until 1843, when its personnel were transferred to China which had recently been opened to Europeans as a result of the Opium Wars. Another mission was set up at Penang by Walter and Eliza Medhurst in 1819 and consolidated by the arrival from Melaka of the Beighton and Ince families. The Penang mission came to an end in 1844 with the death of Thomas Beighton. LMS missionaries established themselves in Singapore shortly after its founding as a British colony in 1819. The numbers of personnel at these mission stations were quite small. During the period dealt with by this study there were approximately twenty male staff and twelve female missionaries, including ten married and two single women.<sup>3</sup>

At all these mission stations schools were established, religious services conducted, Christian tracts distributed and mission chapels built with public subscriptions and government assistance. In 1813 the East India Company had overturned its previous prohibition against missionary activity in the British colonies that it administered in Asia. From the beginning the LMS missions in the Straits Settlements received financial support and official encouragement from government and should thus be seen as integral to the British imperial project in the region. The population of the Straits Settlements included Malays, Chinese and Indians and the missionaries adopted different approaches to the various community groups (see Cooke, 1966; Sng, 1980).

Within these missions women performed a wide variety of duties ranging from proselytising, organising meetings and raising

funds, to running schools, writing and publishing religious tracts, and smoothing social relations between the mission and the rest of colonial society. Their foremost area of activity was teaching. However, despite their wide-ranging and active contributions to missionary enterprise in the Straits, female missionaries have been severely neglected by historians. In the available historical studies of missions in the Malay Straits, little or no mention has been made of the efforts of women (for example, Sng, 1980; O'Sullivan, 1984). Nor have missionary women figured in educational histories dealing with this period, even though they pioneered many schools for indigenous girls (for instance, Cooke, 1966; Ai, 1981). Indeed, in general little has yet been published on female missionary activity in the Asia-Pacific region in the early nineteenth century. There have been historical accounts of female missionaries in the larger fields of India and China, but they have dealt mainly with the late nineteenth or the twentieth century (Forbes, 1986; Hunter, 1984; Davin, 1992). One of the few treatments of women's contribution to missions in the early part of the nineteenth century is Patricia Grimshaw's account of American missionary wives in Hawaii, which provides useful points of comparison with the present study (Grimshaw, 1989). Less research has been done on British women missionaries than Americans. Much less has been written about female missionaries before 1850 than at the end of the century, when they actually began to outnumber males within British missions. Nevertheless, as this study shows, British women were active in the early part of the century in the Straits Settlements of Malaya.

### **Women's Motives: Useful Instruments of God**

The motives of male missionaries of this period have been analysed in depth (for example, Piggin, 1985; Gunson, 1978). In view of the general neglect of women's contributions to the missions, it is not surprising that their aspirations have not received similar attention. This article is intended to fill this lacuna in the literature. For purposes of analysis, the salient motivational strands will be dealt with

separately, but it should be remembered that they were always intertwined in complex ways in the thinking of individual women.

### ***Religion and the "Separate Spheres"***

The very presence of women, especially single ones, working in remote missions, seems to contradict the notion of "separate spheres." This is the idea, generally accepted within feminist historiography that in nineteenth century Britain there was a dominant domestic ideology based on clearly demarcated gender roles, with women restricted to the private sphere. In *Family Fortunes*, an interpretation of the role of gender relations in the making of the middle class in industrialising England, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall offered an explanation of this apparent contradiction, together with an analysis of the social context from which missionary women drew their impetus. Davidoff and Hall conceptualised this period of rapid social change as one of relative flexibility in gender roles, before the division into "separate spheres" solidified during the Victorian era. In particular, they showed that in the early nineteenth century Christian authorities were ambiguous about the proper roles of women in social life and within church organisation: "It was clear that women were subordinate, yet they had influence; it was evident that the home and children were their sphere, yet sometimes they had to engage in male pursuits and help to support, or indeed entirely support, a family" (Davidoff and Hall, 1987: 117). Christian doctrine might maintain the social and sexual subordination of women on the grounds that God had created them different, but it also recognised women's spiritual equality; moreover Protestantism stressed individual responsibility for the soul's salvation and a direct, unmediated relationship with God.

Thus Christianity could offer a way to circumvent the constraining assumption that women should always be contained within a family, under the control of a male household head. Women might suggest instead that their primary allegiance was to God and place themselves notionally directly under His control while endeavouring to do His work. Religion could be used to justify women's undertaking active public roles outside those prescribed by convention. Patricia Crawford has similarly noted that in early modern England

religion could "sometimes serve a woman as her best alibi for incursions into the male domain" (Crawford, 1993: 10). This opened up space for social action outside the home, making possible women's large-scale entry during the early nineteenth century into missionary work broadly defined, including local charitable work, visiting and nursing the sick, attempts to "rescue" prostitutes, anti-slavery campaigning and temperance activity, as well as overseas missions (Pope, 1977: 296-324). In evangelical thinking in this period, no sharp distinction was drawn between missionary efforts within Britain and abroad, so that scope given for women's involvement at "home" was also extended to overseas missions (Thorne, 1997).

Davidoff and Hall's idea of ambiguity surrounding women's roles in the churches has much to offer for understanding the position of British women who went out to the Malay Straits to staff the missions. Their role was never officially defined. They and their male colleagues interpreted their position in varying ways, partly in response to changing circumstances. Ambiguity about their role as Christians gave women room to manoeuvre, allowing a degree of flexibility and scope for negotiation. The fluidity of the situation allowed them to create a niche for themselves—though not a very secure one—from which they could accomplish some of the things they believed in.

### *Moral Reform and "Usefulness"*

One of the basic tenets they shared was the strongly motivational belief that women had a useful religious and social role to play as moral reformers. It has been shown that during the eighteenth century the predominant image of woman, reflected in literature and letters, changed to one of strong moral virtue, replacing previous imagery of woman's unbridled sensuality (LeGates, 1976: 21-23). The unsettled decades following the French revolution of 1789 added a sense of urgency to the widely held belief that women should enact this ideal and, by assisting in the moral regeneration of British society, help to avoid the revolutionary calamity which had befallen France (Myers, 1982: 199-200). This reformist pressure, along with significant economic and cultural shifts, including expanding female



education, the increasing dominance of middle class ideology and the growing influence of evangelicalism, led to the emergence of a new conception of woman's role (*ibid.*: 199).

In the early nineteenth century, woman's role was increasingly seen as one of active moral reformism, based firmly in the domestic sphere, but with scope outside the home for a broad range of philanthropic activity. Hannah More, for instance, one of the most popular evangelical writers of the period, insisted upon the redemptive potential of female "usefulness." "Downgrading the ornamental and pleasing to magnify the useful and moral" (More, 1799/1974: 201-202). More subtly opened up a wider social ambit for women in the role of moral crusaders, enjoining a strict regime of "wholesome occupation, vigorous exertion, and systematic employment" (*ibid.*: 126). From this cultural milieu came the female missionaries who went to work in the Straits Settlements. Driven by a strong moral imperative to reform the world, they were impelled by Christian piety along with rather contradictory notions of female agency and feminine self-sacrifice in a greater cause. They thought of themselves self-consciously as agents of change, imbued with a religious and social impulse for reform (A. Beighton to LMS, 9 December 1838; A. Davies to LMS, 11 December 1838; M. Dyer to LMS, 9 July 1844, Penang 1805-35).

These ideas were reinforced by contemporary missionary publicists, who couched their discussions of the roles of female missionaries in terms of "usefulness." After spending about a year visiting the LMS missions in the Malay region, David Abeel, who was an agent of the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions, commended the teaching in Malay and Chinese being undertaken by female mission staff. The various schools at Melaka, Singapore and Penang, he enthused, "afford a fine sphere for female usefulness. They have been much blessed with the influence and efficient labors of active ladies" (Abeel, 1834: 271). To promote further educational programs by British women in Asia, Abeel delivered lectures and sermons in London, thus giving his views on the importance of women's contribution wide currency in religious circles even before the publication of his book. Another missionary traveller