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Introduction: writing missionaries

On Wednesday, 14 May 1834, Reverend Robert Burns¹ preached before the London Missionary Society, at the Tabernacle, Moorfields. His sermon, entitled *The Indirect Benefits of the Missionary Enterprise*, sought to explain what he saw as five ‘advantages’ which had come about through nineteenth-century missionary activity. The first advantage, Burns states, is that ‘Our views of man have been enlarged and rectified’:²

Long did the Christian world remain very imperfectly informed of the real nature and effects of heathenism in regard to its blinded votaries. Misled by the theories of some over-refined speculators, and relying implicitly on the statements of certain interested voyagers or historians, we dreamed of the pagan tribes as pure in their manners, and refined in their enjoyments . . . It was not til the Christian world was awakened from its lethargy . . . that our mistakes regarding the actual state of man were rectified, and facts and illustrations, hitherto neglected, brought forward to view in all their revolting reality. A spirit of inquiry into the state of the world at large has been cherished. More accurate accounts of its real condition have been obtained. The causes of man’s misery have been traced out. The theories of a false philosophy have been exploded. (7–8)

Burns positions evangelical philosophies and the lived experiences of missionaries in opposition to Orientalist attitudes of imperial and colonial elites. No longer should Europeans regard India’s ancient civilisation as ‘elegant’ or ‘wise’ or ‘venerable’: missionary activity proved that India was simply ‘heathen’. Nor should the Polynesian Islands be seen as utopian paradises untouched by industrialisation and inhabited by noble savages who lived close to nature: again, missionaries had shown that these were simply sites where the ‘revolting reality’ of heathenism could be witnessed. In a direct challenge to educated, liberal opinion, Burns posits the authority of evangelical philosophy and missionary zeal. The second advantage, Burns asserts, is that ‘missionary enterprise has led to the successful culture of some important branches of intellectual and religious inquiry’ (9), drawing attention to the vast amount of ethnographic, linguistic, and translation

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work missionaries carried out. Third, he argues, 'Missionary efforts have enriched the world with certain distinguished specimens of moral and religious excellence' (13). Missionary celebrities such as John Williams and David Livingstone had provided British evangelicals with figureheads of religious and national stature, men whom all should revere, and attempt to emulate. Fourthly, for Burns 'Missionary efforts have proved highly beneficial in securing the essential rights and liberties of mankind' (16); particularly, for evangelicals keenly interested in humanitarian issues, the abolition of slavery. Finally, Burns postulates, missionaries have been central in introducing the twin evangelical ideals of 'civilisation and christianisation' in Britain's 'heathen' colonies.

It is worthwhile bringing Robert Burns' comments to light again at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Having spent the past eight years researching missionaries, I am well aware that most people have an opinion about missionary work, particularly in colonial contexts. Generally, people are critical of missionaries' actions, seeing them as culturally insensitive and destructive. Some still celebrate them as introducing 'civilized', 'modern' practices to indigenous cultures. Others see them as the benign side of imperialism, providing a kind of moral justification for British expansion, and rightly argue that in some places they stood between the excessive violence of colonial expansion and indigenous peoples. All these images build on representations in histories, popular culture, film, and literature, where missionary figures are generally divested of agency and capacity for self-reflection. Burns' sermon reminds us that nineteenth-century missionaries were in fact highly conscious of the nature of their evangelical projects and their potential effect, both in colonial cultures and back in the imperial metropolis. Burns' five points make clear the pseudo-scientific, highly strategic nature of missionary interventions around the world. Importantly, he illuminates the contribution that evangelisation sought to make to imperial representation and ideology, to British self-fashioning on both an individual and a national scale, and to imperial reform of colonial cultures. Across the Empire, British missionary commentators sought, by their 'zeal', to remake colonial projects in the image of religious conversion. In doing so, missionaries constructed an ambiguous, ambivalent position for themselves within colonial cultures, a position negotiated in the many texts they produced: the 'more accurate accounts' which Burns promotes. This book maps this ambiguous position through the texts which constitute the London Missionary Society (henceforth LMS) archives, texts which provide a fascinating commentary on the complexities of colonial cultures and open up a place where the

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contradictory discourses of nineteenth-century colonialism can be clearly seen.

British Protestant missionaries were prolific writers. Diaries, reports, letters, memoirs, histories, ethnographies, novels, children's books, translations, grammars, and many more kinds of texts spilled from their pens. At a makeshift desk in some remote mission station, or in retirement amongst the comforts provided by their return 'home', the missionary at work was characterised by authorship as much as by daring deeds in foreign climes. The nineteenth century saw the vast expansion of archives filled with information about the world outside Britain, an expansion which grew exponentially alongside Britain's 'second' empire. Missionary texts were a foundational and influential part of this 'imperial archive',³ and they are the focus of this book. Because missionaries inhabited such complex, ambivalent, and uncertain positions within colonial cultures I look closely and critically at the textual archive of missionary endeavours, in order to trace the ways these texts complicate traditional linear histories of imperial conquest and invasion. One of the instigations for this project was that such easy narratives co-exist in both old-fashioned history books and in the most cutting-edge postcolonial theory, as do the neat bifurcation of identities as either colonised or colonising. The LMS archive repeatedly proves that questions of history and identity under colonial conditions are much more complex than this.

Missionary texts are crucial to understanding cross-cultural encounters under the aegis of empire because they illuminate the formation of a mode of *mutual imbrication*⁴ between white imperial subjects, white colonial subjects, and non-white colonial subjects. Through my discussion of mutual imbrication, I demonstrate that the ways in which colonial cultures enacted imperial philosophies were by no means straightforward – colonial experience profoundly altered imperial theories and policies, and had real effects on British ideas both about imperialism and about British domestic culture. More specifically, colonial missionary writing changed the ways in which crucial facets of nineteenth-century culture could be represented. For the LMS missionary archive, I argue that it was primarily through philosophies and practices relative to gender that this mutual imbrication was realised. The kinds of social relations and ideologies embedded in missionary texts introduced a concentration on gender and domesticity facilitating both moral allegorisation of imperial intervention and confrontation with British culture and its assumptions about femininity, masculinity, and domestic relations. By focussing on mutual imbrication, attention shifts from a top-down, colonised versus coloniser model of imperial cultural

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relations to one which reinstates the importance of colonial experience in the self-fashioning of British individuals and culture. In so doing, I aim to disrupt the monolithic logic of imperial history, but to do so from within, by bringing to bear textual and postcolonial theories on a closely bound set of historical relations.

The LMS and its archive form the basis of my analysis, because of the Society's interdenominational nature, its habit of sending married missionaries rather than single ones, and because it was one of the most influential missionary societies in the colonies in which I am particularly interested: India, Polynesia, and Australia. The kind of attention I pay to the texts emerging from the three sites of colonial evangelisation necessarily differs according to the context and nature of both missionary presence and textual history. In places where numerous missionary writers were prolific – notably India and Polynesia – a variety of texts are available for analysis, although volume does not necessarily produce diversity when one investigates the trite, recycled (if not plagiarised) narratives of colonial evangelisation. In Australia, by contrast, the LMS was represented by only a single missionary during this period – as controversial and textually productive as Lancelot Threlkeld was, the nature of that textual archive is obviously quite different. Inevitably, the LMS broad evangelical base produced a specific history differing considerably from that of other, comparable missionary societies: particularly, it speaks of a section of British society overwhelmingly concerned with class and identity. This specific history also produced a distinctive textual environment. Throughout this book, I distinguish the *particularity* of LMS representations, the construction of a discourse which arose because of the peculiar positionality of LMS missionaries in the colonial field and because of the characteristic contradictions inhabiting the assumptions they bear. But I will also trace the ways in which these highly particular representations circulated as 'general knowledge' both in the colonies and in Britain. Missionary representations were circulated strategically by the LMS, in ways which emphasised their universality rather than their particularity, and they were thus highly productive of imperial knowledge about the colonial world. Not only that, but they influenced how Britons saw themselves and their own cultural conditions.

I focus on the period from 1800 to 1860, because this was a critical time of social reform in Britain, when many cultural narratives central to British self-imagining were (re)invented. It is a period in which the evangelical Protestant revival, which had commenced in the late eighteenth century, found its full expression in a renewal of British religiosity, a range of philanthropic movements, and an attempt to dominate the moral agenda. It was

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also a time in which questions about race, class, and gender were important to a British community expanding its territory into, and acquiring knowledge about, other regions and cultures. The first sixty years of the century represented an intermediate stage before the aggressive high imperialism of the century's end, and, as a result, ideas about race, class, and gender were still under negotiation, and vulnerable to the sectional interests of groups like evangelical Protestants. In this time period, my three central colonial locations – India, Polynesia, and Australia – were formally brought under British rule. Britain was learning how to institute modern imperialism, which, as Jenny Sharpe argues, was 'guided by the moral imperative to bring the colonized into civil society' rather than earlier forms of territorial conquest.⁵ The invidious philosophies of nineteenth-century imperialism ensured that morality and territory were intrinsically linked. Evangelical Protestant missionaries, keen proponents of what they termed 'Christianisation and civilisation', were extremely influential in both the material and intellectual realisation of modern colonial projects.⁶

I examine missionary texts about three quite different geographical locations of evangelical activity. My comparative approach enables an understanding of colonial evangelism as a broad-based, globalised project, but carried out in diverse ways in different colonies. These three locations are particularly interesting because missionaries were involved in substantially different types of cross-cultural relations, despite their shared interest in 'universal' issues such as gender. As a consequence, each individual geographical archive brings quite different ideas and influences to bear on both local missionary activity and on imperial philosophies of race, gender, and domesticity. They do not provide a neatly 'representative' survey of LMS writing in this period, nor do they make up a kind of composite synecdoche of colonial administrative/historical modes. Instead, they demonstrate that broader, ill-defined contemporary British ideas about these places informed the LMS textual industry, influencing the materiality of textual production from these sites and the conditions of its production, circulation, and control.

India was primarily an economic and trading interest for Britain, although by the 1860s Britain had added India to its imperial portfolio of colonies and had developed a keener sense of moral responsibility for its Indian subjects. Missionaries in India often battled as much with white colonial elites as with 'blinded votaries' of Hinduism.⁷ The islands of the South Pacific constituted a kind of *de facto* colonial entity, though the British seem to have been reluctant to take any official responsibility for areas like Polynesia until competition with other imperial nations drove them to do

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so later in the nineteenth century. Indeed, for much of the nineteenth century missionaries were acting as surrogate imperialists, though under their own impetus rather than because of any directive to do so from Britain. Missionaries in Polynesia formed their own versions of colonial states. Arguably their interventions to some extent made possible the later wholesale colonisation of the region. Australia is always something of a unique case in colonial/postcolonial studies. As a penal colony, New South Wales was a particularly institutionalised colonial state, one not naturally conducive to evangelical activities. As Australia moved closer to settler colony status, conditions for missionary work were difficult – settlers were frequently more interested in moving Aborigines off valuable grazing land than converting them to Christianity – although missionaries made concerted efforts to evangelise the indigenous population from the 1820s onwards. Whilst there is continuing resistance to including settler colonies under the broad rubric of postcolonialism, careful attention to the localised experiences of imperial policy and colonial enactments of it is crucial to examining the different ways in which postcolonial and colonial discourse theories might assist in deconstructing the totalising potential of imperial histories. The particular politics of each location produced substantial differences in the ways in which missionary activity was carried out and, most importantly, to the manner in which missionaries, their proselytising, and their potential converts are represented in texts.

Although questions central to the practice of history contextualise this book, I concentrate throughout on issues of representation. This is not a history of imperial missionaries, except that it is a type of literary history of a particular archive central to Empire. It is also not a history of colonised peoples' personal or textual responses to evangelical intervention, because my concentration on close readings of British missionary texts provides a very filtered view of the *indigenous* history of missionary encounters. I focus instead on examining the public and institutional role of missionary work and its role within imperial projects, because it is this public, civic image that was crucial to the textual self-representation of imperial missionary enterprise in Britain and in the colonies. I examine only published missionary texts because of their authorised participation in this public discursive domain.

Published missionary texts have their own particular limitations. The first is one of genre. Most texts are the end result of a well-oiled and efficient production machine run by missionary societies and their supportive evangelical publishers. They are thus fundamentally and frankly propagandist in nature. Their aim was variously to inculcate public support for

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missionary endeavours; to ensure an on-going supply of donated funds from individuals, institutions, and governments; to cultivate a community of like-minded British citizens who would stand up for missionary interests in the face of more aggressive mercantile, industrial, or territorial interests; and to encourage a community of potential missionary recruits. As a result, missionary writing conforms to an identifiable set of generic regulations. Unsurprisingly, there is always an emphasis on positive evangelical achievements whilst limited successes or spectacular failures are rarely mentioned. Backsliding missionaries in the colonies – those whose faith was shattered in their confrontation with different cultures, or who abandoned missionary work because they formed attachments to local women or communities, or who left preaching for the rather more lucrative positions of colonial trader, planter, or merchant, for example – slide out of the public textual record. Missionary figures are almost exclusively heroic, long-suffering, and do not experience religious doubts, debilitating diseases, or personal crises. Native resistance is usually depicted as moral decay and intellectual depravity. Specific recurrent tropes of representation will be identified in my analyses of various missionary texts. Gaps between these tropes and the reality of experience become evident throughout my analysis. Identifying the ‘truth’ behind missionary representation is not my aim, but examining the means by which experience could be credibly and consistently narrated is.

The other major limitation of missionary writing is the relative uniformity of authorship – most texts discussed here were written by male missionaries. This is because in the period 1800 to 1860 the LMS was dominated by men, endorsing only male missionaries (with their wives as ‘helpmeets’), and governed by male directors back in Britain. From about the 1860s, women began to be sent to colonial mission stations in their own right, and examining the colonial pressures which brought about this profound institutional change will be one of the major themes of the book. Texts by missionary women were also published, but proportionally few appear in the LMS archive for this period. Their production was dependent upon many factors, not the least of which were the circumstances of each mission location. My work on India can draw upon a range of texts produced by both women and men because the custom of separate women’s apartments within homes (*zenanas*) precluded the entry of male missionaries, though their wives were able to gain some access. Missionary women in India therefore had a particular insight into the details of domestic arrangements and gender practices denied to their male partners and, as a result, they were encouraged to publish accounts of their experiences. But

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in Polynesia and Australia there were no comparable avenues of exclusively female evangelisation, and male missionaries, who were the only individuals formally invested with the authority of the societies in this period, mostly monopolised the textual archive and official publications. Though masculine authors tend to dominate missionary writing and therefore my primary material, questions of gender are important ones in these texts. Whilst remaining relatively silent about female missionary partners, male missionaries were rarely silent about gender, sexuality, and domesticity: in fact they were vociferous.

The role of missionary provided young men, frequently limited by class and education in England, opportunities for social advancement, community standing, and a challenging and exotic career. Intrinsically tied to the development of muscular Christianity, an ideal reaching its zenith in the latter half of the nineteenth century, missionary men both discovered and invented their masculinity through their encounter with other, colonised cultures. Vigorous but pious British manliness was contrasted with depraved native masculinity, and missionary texts anxiously but assertively represented the world in these terms. In parallel, the pious, domestic, British Christian woman was upheld as an embodiment of empire, a role model to which heathen women should aspire. Both of these emblematic figures in missionary texts hid the very recent, and highly contested, nature of such gendered roles within Britain itself.

But the gendered roles of colonised non-Christian men and women were intensely scrutinised. Missionaries are infamous examples of ‘white men . . . saving brown women from brown men’, as Gayatri Spivak memorably wrote.⁸ Both missionary societies and individual evangelists relied heavily on the figure of ‘the native woman’ as a means of justifying their colonial projects. They could do so because, throughout the mission field, images of the degradation of local women by traditional custom were graphically depicted and deplored. In so doing, the supposed deprivations of women became common knowledge in the colonies and in Britain. Gender was thus used as an additional justification of imperial missionary projects. The discourse of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gender relations gave mission societies another language – both literally and figuratively – to legitimise their work by stressing the civility and integrity of colonial missionary evangelisation.

This book demonstrates that through evangelical projects, particularly through the discourses emerging from the missionary archive of this period, fundamental questions about gender, race, and civility were worked out in the colonies. I analyse a range of missionary writing to examine

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exactly how representations of gender worked to subsidise ongoing evangelisation and imperial intervention. Such missionary representations were not so much part of a unitary project, but rather, as Anne McClintock suggests of the dialectic between domesticity and empire in general, 'beset by contradiction, anomaly, and paradox'.⁹ Simultaneously, missionary representations of colonial gender relations influenced debates about gender back in Britain. British suffragists used ideas about Indian women – figured as victims of Indian patriarchy – to make arguments about their struggle for equal rights. The 'licentiousness' of native women and the threat that such sexuality posed to the British social order provided authorities with both institutional models (lock hospitals) and ideological frameworks to regulate working-class prostitution.¹⁰ The 'angel in the house' of the early Victorian period, once she realised the limitations of being a purely domestic figure, found in missionary work a wider sphere for her moral influence. In such ways I trace the mutual imbrication between imperial and colonial subjectivities, and their textual representation.

As an integral part of 'the philanthropic moralizing mission that defined bourgeois culture in the nineteenth century [and] cast a wide imperial net',¹¹ missionary figures are anomalous in a colonial environment. Always conscious of their liminality, missionaries sought to consolidate their precarious position in colonial cultures by mimicking stereotypical imperial practices, of racial superiority for example, and by rigidly enforcing and encouraging colonial versions of them in their 'heathen' charges. Like all colonial projects, these practices were only partially realised and unevenly enforced. Taking account of missionaries, though, pays serious attention to Johannes Fabian's call that not only 'the crooks and brutal exploiters, but the honest and intelligent agents of colonization need to be accounted for'.¹²

It is in missionary texts that the partial, provisional nature of these activities is most explicit. As Nicholas Thomas notes of colonial texts in general, 'even when colonizers surrounded themselves with the persuasive scenery of possession and rule, the gaps between projection and performance are frequently betrayed by the anxieties of their texts, which reveal the gestural character of efforts to govern, sanitize, convert, and reform'.¹³ Missionary texts attempt to stabilise their potentially unsettling effect on empire and its supporting philosophies through their adherence to strictly authorised forms of genre. Inevitably, though, the disturbing nature of missionary work on cross-cultural borders leaks through. Missionary narratives often display ruptures in apparently seamless colonialist textual practices; they worry at potentially inappropriate mimicry by native 'heathens' and Christians; and

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they expose the instability of the missionary position on the colonial stage – an instability measured by its distance from both institutional imperial authority and from native cultures. Ann Laura Stoler argues that in colonial discourses of racialized sexuality, it is the ‘cultural density’ of these representations that is particularly interesting. Like Stoler, I am interested in unpacking this cultural density as it is manifested in the missionary archive, to trace, as Stoler does, the ways in which colonial discourse ‘reverberated between metropole and colony to secure the tenuous distinctions of bourgeois rule’.¹⁴ The density of missionary representations of class, race, and colonial power highlight not the hegemony of imperial systems of control, but ‘their precarious vulnerabilities’ (97).