

Report on the Workshop on Women on Missions, 8-9 March 2013
Sponsored by the ASSA in conjunction with Griffith University
Parliament House, Brisbane

The Women on Missions Symposium was held in Brisbane in Parliament House on the occasion of International Women's Day, 8 and 9 March 2013. It was funded by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia in conjunction with Griffith University, and convened by Professor Regina Ganter of Griffith University and Professor Patricia Grimshaw of the University of Melbourne. Both of these historians have long-standing research interests in the history of missions in Australia, and this was their first collaboration, bringing together perspectives and networks of both these researchers.

Of the ten presenters at the symposium three were from Germany and Britain and seven from around Australia. Three were professors and five were early career researchers, two were historians who had denominational connections, and two were direct descendants of the two best known Lutheran missionary figures in Australia. The latter were Dr Susanne Froehlich, a great granddaughter of the Reverend Johann Flierl, founder of Hopevale on the eastern coast of Cape York and the Lutheran missions in Papua New Guinea; and John Strehlow, grandson of the Reverend Carl Strehlow of Hermannsburg. They spoke on the mission wives, Luise Flierl and Frieda Strehlow, respectively. Four invited observers also attended: Olga Roennfeldt, a granddaughter of the Reverend Georg Reuther, whose collections of Dieri material make up a substantial part of the ethnographic collection in the Museum of South Australia; Pastor Ivan Roennfeldt who directed the Queensland Lutheran Mission Board for many years; Beth Graham, a former missionary worker in Arnhem Land; and Dr Prue Ahrens, a new member of staff at Griffith with an interest in missionary photography.

The early career presenters included Dr Joanna Cruickshank of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Deakin University; Dr Felicity Jensz who following her doctorate at the University of Melbourne took up a postdoctoral fellowship in the Centre for Religion and Politics in Pre-Modern and Modern Cultures at Munster University, Germany; and Laura Rademaker, a PhD candidate at the Australian Centre for Indigenous History at the Australian National University. Other participants included Katharine Massam, Professor of Church History in the Centre for Theology and Ministry, MCD University of Divinity; Dr Vicki Grieves, ARC Indigenous Research Fellow in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney; Dr Bill Edwards of the University of Adelaide; and the conveners. The papers ranged across Moravian, Presbyterian and Lutheran missionary wives and female missionary workers in Catholic, Anglican and independent pietist faith missions in Australia from the 1880s to the 1960s. This spans a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds, and there was ample discussion and a great sense of learning through this exchange. Many of us had focused on particular denominations in our research, and now had an opportunity to reposition our knowledge in respect of other denominational backgrounds. For example, the research of Patricia Grimshaw and her former students tended to focus on Moravians in Victoria, while Regina Ganter had established a network in Lutheran mission historiography with a focus on Queensland.

We found that looking at missions through the lens of women's experiences directs attention to the fine-grained interactions and close relationships that made up ordinary lives in these institutions at the frontier of race relations. On missions everyone lived out their private lives in the public eye of the mission community, and women's domestic lives - marriage, fecundity, parenting, care-giving and housework - were acted out in a public sphere. Such entanglements between the public and the private make women on missions particularly interesting historiographical subjects. Here we see the grand governing concepts of their age, on gender, race, authority, and religion, acted out through daily interactions and the everyday burden of living in confined communities.

Through women's lives the everyday fabric of family and affection becomes accessible and brings into focus the ambivalent role of missions: Missions were homes, and places of refuge and training, as well as sites of dislocation, discipline and cultural erosion. The tremendous changes that were imposing themselves on indigenous lives under conditions of colonisation were facilitated through missions. They cushioned the relatively small number of indigenous people whom they could reach from the most brutal impact and also expedited social reform to erode the indigenous life-worlds that were becoming unsustainable. Women attracted families and young females to missions and created the conditions enabling their success. Conversely, the failure of missions can often be directly linked to the absence of a white missionary wife, or, in the case of Catholic missions, of nuns. The sense of domesticity and home created by women's presence on missions fostered the long-term anchoring of people in place.

Some missionary wives in this collection became missionary workers, and some missionary workers became missionary wives, and these help to redress the often vexing invisibility of women in mission historiography. But whether or not they played a public role in mission work, women on missions contributed through their domestic presence. Like indigenous mission assistants, they engaged in constant negotiation of their place in the mission hierarchy of authority and their contribution was often overlooked. The women's perspective helps to reposition the indigenous experience in this vital space in the contact zone, where interpersonal relations and the continual negotiation of meanings were absolutely central, and it is the 'small interactions' that defined the lives on missions.

At the final session of the symposium it was resolved that a number of participants may form a panel in the World History Association Conference in Fremantle later this year, and an invitation to participate at the Australian Association of Mission Studies conference in September 2014 was extended by the Reverend Dr. Bill Edwards. Regina Ganter asked participants to consider writing a biographical entry on German mission women for her forthcoming website on German missionaries in Australia, including Susanne Froehlich on Luise Flierl, John Strehlow on Frieda Strehlow, Joanna Cruickshank on Louise Hagenauer, and others.

All speakers are keen to develop their conference papers for consideration for inclusion in an academic publication. The conveners are currently negotiating with the editors of an Australian journal about the possible publication of the papers in a special edition on women on Australian missions.

The contributions were as follows:

Professor Regina Ganter, Griffith University

The invisible women

Dr Felicity Jenz, Münster University

Child Loss

Dr Joanna Cruickshank, Deakin University

Mothers, Wives, Daughters: Women and the meanings of 'family' at Ramahyuck Mission, Victoria

Dr Victoria Grieves, University of Sydney

Paragons of whiteness?: Retta Dixon Long of the Aborigines Inland Mission (AIM) and the recruitment of Aboriginal and white women for the Lord

Laura Rademaker, ANU

Longing to be able to speak the language:

Judith Stokes' translation mission for Groote Eylandt, 1952-1973

Prof Pat Grimshaw, Melbourne University

Memoirs of a Presbyterian Missionary Wife: Geraldine MacKenzie at Aurukun, Cape York, 1925 to 1965

Professor Katharine Massam, Centre for Theology and Ministry, UCA

Spanish Benedictine Women in the Kimberley, Drysdale River, 1931-1942.

Reverend Dr Bill Edwards, Adelaide

Not always treated equally, but more than equal to the task:

Women missionaries at Ebenezer and Ernabella.

John Strehlow, London

Women's Work - the significance of Frieda's time at Hermannsburg

Dr Susanne Froehlich, University of Giessen

Louise Flierl's everyday life as a missionary's wife in New Guinea and Australia. New evidence from 32 letters.

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