GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The relationship between missionaries and European imperialism is complex and much debated. In many respects, the history of missions seems deeply embedded in the record of imperial rule in Africa, Asia and elsewhere. Yet the establishment of missions often occurred before the arrival of direct colonial control. They also survived its ending, continuing to operate in decolonised societies. Moreover, many missions were founded beyond the reach of imperial administrations. Here, China is perhaps the prime example. But if there is a chronological problem, there is also an interpretative and qualitative one.

Some scholars have seen missions as a vital auxiliary to imperial rule – even if missionaries did not always see themselves in this role. They disseminated cultural and social norms as a central part of the proselytisation process. They offered medical and educational services that were often of great value to developing colonial regimes. They invariably knew that they were in the business of supplying people who were sufficiently acculturated and educated to fill significant sectors of employment in the colonial state. These ‘mimic men’ (and women) often filled what in the West might be termed lower-middle-class positions in clerical work, lower-level teaching, nursing, and minor supervisory roles in commercial and transport concerns in the Westernised parts of the local economies.

Other scholars have pointed to the fact that missionaries were seldom slavish supporters of imperial policies and norms. Often critical, they distanced themselves from imperial administrations and colonial populations of European origin, whether in the ‘dependent colonies’ or in territories of settlement (which in some parts of Africa overlapped, as in Kenya, Northern and Southern Rhodesia, Nyasaland – Zambia, Zimbabwe and Malawi – and other parts of southern Africa). If missionaries were ambivalent, so too were administrations who often found missions to be problematic in sometimes disrupting the supervision of indigenous peoples. Settlers seldom liked missionaries, seeing them as giving ‘natives’ ideas above their station and causing problems for white-settler dominance. Moreover, missions had direct lines to the metropolitan power, where reports were sent to their respective societies, information was fed to a missionary or even a more general press, and where visiting missionaries travelled to give lectures and stir up controversies when they deemed them to be necessary either to their interests or to their views on the ethnical manner in which imperial

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power should be exercised. They even became involved in nationalist developments in the twentieth century, often lending their support to nationalists (whom they had frequently educated) in attempting to overturn the imperial state. In short, this was seldom an easy or straightforward relationship.

All of these issues thread their way through this book, but it has several claims to originality. The first is that it is dealing with Burma, now known as Myanmar, a country which has received very little attention from missionary historians. The second is that it considers the Methodists who have, perhaps, received less attention than the missionaries of other denominations, and no attention at all in the case of Burma. Mike Leigh has family connections with his subject, but this has in no way coloured the approach he takes to this missionary history. On the contrary, his work and analyses are fundamentally based on a wide range of primary and secondary sources, and the author takes a balanced judgement of the missionaries who received a 'call' to travel and work in this in some ways unlikely missionary field in Asia.

It was unlikely both because of the strength of Buddhism in that country and because here was a society which enjoyed both the carapace of an ancient culture and a degree of remoteness that rendered both physical and cultural penetration rather difficult. Yet Methodist missionaries, whether we see them as brave or as foolhardy, headed for Burma from the late nineteenth century (in this case after the British had established their authority in Upper Burma) and remained there for some years after independence. They went to a country where the climate was often hostile and disease rife. They endured hostility as well as many privations. And they also found much social and political turbulence, not to mention the massive disruptions of the baleful combination of economic problems, Japanese invasion and occupation, and nationalist power struggles. Yet, as well as mission stations, they sought to provide Western education and medical services where they thought they were necessary. Through all of this many conducted themselves with great devotion and bravery, while still often inhibiting their activities by 'in-fighting' and personal rivalries, not least in such key areas as the establishment of a 'native ministry'.

The conversions they achieved (from their own point of view) were less likely to occur among the majority Buddhist population. They tended to work most successfully amongst the hill peoples who were geographically, socially and economically marginal to Burmese society. It is perhaps indicative that Christianity continued to expand even after the missionary withdrawal (or expulsion). Hill peoples today often mark out their distinct ethnicity through adherence to Christianity, and the contemporary military dictatorship continues to persecute

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them. This cannot of course be placed at the door of the missions. It is clear that such hill peoples themselves freely embraced an alternative world religion and continue to do so as a badge of their difference and their opposition to the harsh rule of some elements of the majority. Anyone wishing to understand these phenomena should read this book. It offers background to these events which Leigh unveils in both a moving and a critical manner. Whatever we may think of the extent to which missionaries may have been deluded, the evidence of this book illustrates the extraordinary tenacity and courage through which they sought to achieve their objectives.

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