

# Models of G/race and Boundaries of Gender

## Anglican Women Missionaries in Canada's North 1860-1945

by Myra Rutherdale

*Dans cet article, l'auteure discute des images associées aux femmes missionnaires canadiennes du Nord.*

*Elle démontre comment la perception du rôle des femmes missionnaires correspondait aux notions victorienne anglaises de féminité et elle raconte comment, en réalité, les*

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*They were sent to teach their disciples how to behave like "proper ladies."*

*femmes résistaient à ce rôle.*

The study of missionaries in Northern<sup>1</sup> Canadian Aboriginal cultures has concentrated on male missionaries. Attention has been paid to individual men who distinguished themselves for either their religious fervour or their eccentricities. Compared to their partners and co-workers, 'wilderness saints' like William Bompas, William Duncan, and William Ridley became legends in missionary historiography. Between 1860 and 1945 well over one hundred women, missionary wives included, were sent to the North from both Britain and Canada under the auspices of the Anglican Church to work in Native communities as missionaries. Placed within the context of colonization, these women's lives and stories are important as they reveal much about the construction and negotiation of race and gender during the first years of contact with Aboriginal populations through to the mid-twentieth century. Apart from gaining insights into how these women set about to Christianize Natives, we also learn from reading their letters and diaries, which in some cases were used for recruiting and fund raising purposes, about their impressions of life in Canada's North.

One of the prevailing images of missionary women, and missionary wives in particular, was that they were helpmates sent to the mission field to teach their disciples how to behave like "proper ladies," as defined within the context of British society. Implicit in this assumption was the idea that Native women were somehow inferior and had to be taught womanly behaviour and domestic arts. Their standards of cleanliness, child-rearing, and family life in general came under close scrutiny by the British and were found wanting. By projecting an idealized image of superior womanhood, missionary women could gain power and influence.

Women missionaries were convinced by those responsible for British Victorian gender construction that they were elevated "gentle-women." But, while male missionaries in the mission field maintained their view of the woman as being the "angel in the home," or in this case "the angel in the mission field," a blurring of gender roles occurs. As Denise Riley argues in her treatise, *Am I That Name*, it is obvious that "any attention to the life of a woman, if traced out carefully, must admit the degree to which the effects of lived gender are at least sometimes unpredictable and fleeting." In other words, despite society's fixation with imposing gender definitions there are inevitably transgressions in behaviour. "Can anyone," she asks, "fully inhabit a gender without a degree of horror? How could someone 'be a woman' through and through, make a final home in that classification without suffering claustrophobia?" (6). Women missionaries living in the North did at times feel claustrophobic and many took the opportunity to break free of gender defined categories.

The first woman sent into the Diocese of Caledonia by the Anglican

Church Missionary Society (CMS) based in London arrived at Victoria in August 1860. Reverend and Mrs. Lewin S. Tugwell were greeted by William Duncan who was then the only Anglican Church representative in the North British Columbia mission. From the beginning, the relations between Duncan and the Tugwells were strained. The Tugwells were newly-weds and Duncan expressed resentment toward their mutual absorption and confessed this in his diary: "I see that wives after all may be a great hindrance to a man in diverting his mind from the work before him" (Murray 62).

After their voyage up the coast to Port Simpson the Tugwells began to unload their belongings. Mrs. Tugwell was apparently told by Duncan not to bother with the baggage as he and Mr. Tugwell could manage, but, as there was no bread in the house she could busy herself making biscuits. To Duncan's surprise, Mrs. Tugwell responded by saying that she had never made bread in her life. Mr. Duncan told this story years later to a friend and at that time added, "What do you think of that? The CMS had sent more than five thousand miles, somebody to help me teach the Indians Christian home life, and here I was obliged to make bread for her myself..." (Lillard and Collison 16).

Expectations about the duties of missionary women were especially apparent to male missionaries during the first years of contact. When Rev. J. B. McCullagh first brought his wife to work amongst the Nishga of the Naas River Valley, he wrote back to the Nishga Missionary Union<sup>2</sup> to report how successful she had been and how she was "capable of understanding the why and the wherefore of their racial limitations and imperfections, as well as of appreciating their good points of which

they have not a few.”

McCullagh listed the duties of both his daughter and wife which included the “daily cooking, washing up, brushing and dusting rooms, washing, starching and ironing, and every other thing that has to be done in a house.” He recognized that this routine tested the missionary spirit and admired the way Mrs. McCullagh went about her work.

Looking at her amongst a crowd of Indian women, teaching them to cut and make up articles of wearing apparel, my wife is a source of intense joy and astonishment to me. When one considers how difficult it is to ‘handle’ Indians, the tact, patience

and self-forgetting spirit it requires, to say nothing of the demand on one’s physical energy, it is a wonder to me to find her put in two solid hours of this work and then come away as fresh as the proverbial daisy.

McCullagh, like other missionaries, also resorts to racist rhetoric expressed by most late nineteenth-century British colonizers and exposes as much about his view of Natives as about his perception of the role of missionary wives. His description of his wife as a “proverbial daisy” reminds us of the Victorian construction of womanhood—the quintessential angel in the home. The realities of mission work, including an intensive outdoor life, were neglected by McCullagh.

One very prominent missionary, Selina Bompas, wife of the long-serving missionary and later Bishop of the Yukon, William Carpenter-Bompas, was also very aware of the role and potential influence of white women in the North. Bompas started her missionary work in Fort Simpson on the Mackenzie River in 1874 and ended her career at Carcross, Yukon in 1906. In November 1907, Bompas wrote an article for the *Canadian Churchman* about the type of women who

should settle in the North. She was referring principally to mission work, but made it clear that school teachers, housekeepers, and dressmakers were also needed in the region.

She told women who intended to settle in the North that their behaviour should set an example for Native women. “Dear sister-settlers amongst the Indians,” Bompas urged,

there is power given you from on high which is intended you should use among them or any other race with whom you may be placed—it is the power of *influence*... In your Christian households, in your modest demeanour, in your fair dealings with all let them see what they should seek to copy more than the jewels and costly attire which in their eyes all that is needed to constitute a lady. (739)

Bompas believed that white women could demonstrate to Native women what it meant to be a “lady,” and hoped that Native women would “copy” their behaviour.

There is ample evidence to document the widespread belief that white women were considered superior. However, at the same time, there is some evidence to suggest that the Native culture was not entirely denigrated. For example, Bompas suggested that white women should learn to appreciate some of the Native traditions. She pointed out that:

It should not need many hours of argument to convince you that an Indian baby in a moss bag is a far happier and warmer creature than a poor little white baby with its whole outfit of cotton and wool etc. for the little Indian’s moss is the cleanest, softest, most absorbent of substances and needs only occasional change to keep the baby as tidy and sweet as the baby should be. (737)

Bompas went on to say that despite the fact that the Natives were a “phleg-



Charlotte Selina Bompas  
Courtesy of Anglican Church of Canada, General Synod Archives

matic race," who would not be "inconvenienced by anyone, least of all by a 'Ciciaco' [white newcomer, many of whom were goldseekers]," one must still treat them with patience and kindness. After all, she noted perceptively,

the white man has invaded their territory, cut down their fine forests, slaughtered or driven away their moose and cariboo,



E. Prudence Hockin, St. Lukes Hospital, Pangnirtung, NWT  
Courtesy Anglican Church of Canada, General Synod Archives

and is fast possessing himself of their hidden treasure, is it asking too much of his wife or sister to bear patiently with the Indian's idiosyncrasies [and] to deal gently with their failings... (738)

Although located in this discourse there are still signs of denigration and images of Natives as passive individuals, Bompas does at least recognize that some Native traditions should be valued, and that resources which had, even in her mind, belonged to the Natives, were being exploited by Europeans.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century and throughout the first half of the twentieth century the Anglican Church recruited unmarried women who could preach the gospel and work as school teachers, nurses, and institutional supervisors. These

women were still expected to conform to the Victorian ideal of womanhood, but at the same time adapt to life in the North. Ironically, the Northern Canadian mission field presented opportunities for women to break free of confining gender roles.

To illustrate this point, I would like to refer to an incident that was reported in an official Church Missionary Society document called *The History of the Church Missionary Society, Its Environment, Its Men and Its Work* chronicled by Eugene Stock. Stock gives the details of a report made back to the CMS by the Bishop of Calcutta, Bishop Ridley. During the summer months women missionaries worked at the coastal canneries. In the summer of 1893

Miss West was stationed at Inverness about 12 miles from Metlakatla and as Ridley claimed:

Until Sunnyside [another cannery] could be supplied Miss West held school there once a day and once at Inverness, rowing her own boat over the mile and a half between the two places. Swift are the tides and often difficult the landing on the slippery rocks; but in all weather she pursued her steady course, so that she has become an expert sailor, handling her 16 foot boat all alone as well as any man on our staff. She had it all to learn to her cost. Once she got into serious difficulties, being capsized in deep and rough water, and was half drowned before she could climb back into the boat.

It was a risk to appoint a lady to such a station single-handed where there are some hundreds of Indians, Chinese, Japanese and a band of white men unaccustomed to social or religious restraints. (638-639)

It is striking that although Miss West could handle a boat as well as any man in the mission, she was still described by Ridley as the essence of "true womanliness," combined with "self sacrificing service for Christ" (639). So pervasive were his views on "womanly" behaviour that Miss West's strength and endurance in harrowing conditions went without analysis.

Women missionaries in the North were always expected to be efficient and self-reliant. They often travelled by boat to canneries and lived in Native villages for weeks and sometimes months at a time. They canoed, chopped and piled wood, and at times, gathered food. As a result, over the years, missionary women struck up very intense friendships with each other and with Native women.

It comes as no surprise that by the mid-twentieth century expectations about white women in the North had changed. They were no longer misrepresented by the Victorian rhetoric of "true womanliness." In 1956 the Bishop of the Arctic described a long-serving medical missionary, Prue Hockin, as "the epitome of what a white woman in the Arctic ought to be—efficient, self-reliant, generous of nature, good-humoured and with ever-increasing devotion to her Lord" (Flemming 321).

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<sup>1</sup>In this article I take a broad interpretation of the North. My definition stems mainly from the Anglican Church records. In the nineteenth century the Northern British Co-

lumbia mission stretched from Alert Bay to Metlakatla (near present day Prince Rupert) east to Hazelton and in the early twentieth century further east to the Peace River Region. The Church Missionary Society and other Anglican sponsored societies sent missionaries to present day Yukon and the Northwest Territories as well. <sup>2</sup>In 1905 the Nishga Missionary Union, headquartered in Surrey, Britain, was formed to support Anglican missions in the Naas Valley. At this time, the CMS was beginning to curtail its endeavours in Northern British Columbia. See Rev. J.B. McCullagh, "Aiyansh," *Aiyansh Notes*. April 1908.

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The circle is a powerful symbol. By definition, it is "a single curved line with every point equally distant from its centre". Whenever one of these points is disturbed by violence, all of the points suffer. Respecting ourselves and others is what makes the circle strong.

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