Louisa Jane Bryer, Missionary to China

Submitted by Mary Leah de Zwart

Louisa Jane Bryer, known by the family as "Cousin Louie" was my grandmother's first cousin. Her visits to the family farm in the late 1940s were always exciting. Although I was too young at the time to have any memories of her, the stories she told about her thirty years as an Anglican missionary in China became part of family folklore. My cousins remembered Louie shuffling her way to church every Sunday and were convinced that her feet had been bound in China. She told my oldest brother that learning Chinese was very difficult, and that she had to take her bath in public so that the village people would not think she was evil (this seems hard to believe in retrospect). The kids would try to get her to say something naughty in Chinese (for a missionary) and once in a while she would indulge them by saying, "Bring me a glass of water" in Chinese, and then change the tones to mean, "Bring me a dog's head".

The life experiences of Louisa Jane Bryer (1867-1958) capture how young, unmarried Victorian-era women could escape family bonds and expectations. In her long career as a missionary for the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society [CEZMS] Cousin Louie learned up to five Chinese languages, made at least twelve transoceanic crossings; escaped near death more than once, and died happily (so the story goes) eating cookies in her bathtub at the age of 91 in New Westminster, BC.[1]

Louisa Jane Bryer's life started out in an ordinary way. She was the second child of five born to a prosperous farmer, Alfred Bryer and his wife, Mary Hewitt Bryer at Quarndon, Derbyshire, England. Her father Alfred died suddenly in 1877 at the age of 38, and left his widow a considerable sum of money that was mainly used for the education of their children.[2] Both Louie and her younger sister Ellen were sent to the Crossley Orphans' School in Leeds, Yorkshire.[3]

Louisa Jane Bryer, Crossley Heath Orphans School (c. 1881)

The 1891 English census showed that Louie's oldest sister Mary, age 26, was a governess and her brother Alfred was an architect's pupil. Louie's occupation was listed as a student of languages, apparently already showing an aptitude that would serve her well in her life's work.[4] Ellen's death at the age of 15 in 1885 might have had something to do with Louie's missionary vocation. Or maybe she didn't look forward to replicating the lives of her mother, grandmother and aunt who were all widows and lived side-by-side in the same town.

At any rate, Louie was one of four missionaries assigned to Fujian Province, China at the Mildmay Conference Hall, Islington, London on October 2, 1891.[5] Her choice capitalized on a newly acceptable career choice, to become a Christian missionary. Women could gain access to the zenanas or women's quarters that was inaccessible to male missionaries. And in the 19th century, proselytizing India and China took top priority in religious fields.

The women travelled by steamer from England, probably through the Suez Canal, in a month-long journey. They would have arrived in the treaty port of Foo Chow [now Fuzhou], one of the five such ports established after the First Opium War of 1842. As a junior missionary, Louie was placed with Harriet Rodd, a senior missionary at Ciong-Bau, a village in the vicinity of Kien-Ning, the capital city of the Northwest Prefecture of Fujian. Two Church of England Missionary Societies were at work in Fujian Province, CEZMS and the Church Missionary Society [CMS]. The latter was composed of male clergy and occasionally their wives; the CMS did not send female missionaries into the fields selected by the Zenana Society.[6]

CEZMS missionaries, n.d. Bryer is second from right, wearing local dress.

On the first day of the trip to the interior, the women took a steam launch up the river Min. When the river became too dangerous, the travellers changed to a smaller boat in which they journeyed for two more weeks, sitting or lying on the floor of the boat as the sailors poled or rowed through

rocks and rapids.[7] Upon arrival in Ciong-Bau, their tasks were to "itinerate" or make visits to villages to talk about Christianity and perform community services such as simple medical care.

The Reverend Robert Stewart served as both the Superintendent Missionary of the CMS at Kucheng and the Fujian Province Corresponding Secretary of the CEZMS. His wife Louisa was much-beloved by all. One of the first things that the CEZMS missionaries did was to adopt native dress, a policy generally disapproved of by the CMS ladies and senior clergymen.[8] The missionaries also adopted Chinese surnames because their own names were considered unintelligible to the local people. [9]This sometimes resulted in the missionaries sharing surnames with the local people, which provided a potential opening for conversion to Christianity.[10] All missionaries spent their first year learning the local Chinese language and Stewart found Louie to be "peculiarly gifted in language and speaks herself peculiarly well".[11] He also noted how quickly she and Harriet Rodd adapted to local customs, commenting after an 1894 visit,

> These devoted ladies are living as nearly like the native women as possible; no knives or forks are seen in the house. I am told there is one knife kept for any unhappy guest who cannot manage with chop sticks, and though the locality is far from a healthy one, and our C.M.S. missionaries have one after another felt the effects of the malaria, your ladies have wonderfully maintained their strength[12].

Louie wrote long letters home to England and to her brother Edward in Canada with a check-off list of seven or eight names. The last person on the list was supposed to send the letter to the Colonial Secretary for the CEZMS in London, England. While none of Louie's personal letters have been found, some idea of the circumstances under which she worked can be gleaned from the correspondence of Topsy and Nellie Saunders, two young Australian sisters who were missionaries in Fujian Province from 1892 to 1895. They wrote long letters home to their mother, commenting on dress: "In China you must not have a waist"[13]; food customs; "Every morning, instead of porridge, we have a great plateful of plain boiled rice, with buffalo milk and sugar, and it is just tipping! I could not possibly do without my rice in the morning!"[14]; and the sense of safety they felt in China; "How is it that we can and do travel alone through the loneliest places without the slightest fear, and they never touch us?"[15]

Privacy was non-existent for missionaries and Louie commented on this aspect of daily life in several dispatches for *India's women and China's daughters*. She described a visit to a neighbouring village:

> The library was our bedroom...One end of the room was open-worked carving, supposed to be covered over with wall paper for privacy, but the paper was sadly missing, so that end of the room was a very popular one for spectators, consequently when necessary we hung up a curtain, to their universal sorrow [16].

The missionaries often arrived in the villages with only the names of one or two potential candidates for Christianity. They had to wait to be invited into someone's home where they were usually greeted very hospitably.

The choice of transport was riding in a chair sedan carried by four men or walking. Louie, like many of the other women, preferred to walk. When she and Harriet Rodd went on a fifteen-mile distant itineration, it took Rodd several days to recover from the extreme shaking of the chair. [17] The coolies looked after them well, but Louie reported that they took time out for meals or an opium smoke as they pleased. The missionaries experienced China through the lens of Christianity and Louie commented that, "One afternoon we had a splendid time in a high temple devoted to vegetarianism"[18] – was this her dismissal of a thousands-year old Buddhist temple?

Missionary efforts were combined successfully with simple medical care and education.[19] Louie's first convert, reported in *India's Women and China's Daughters*, was an old woman whose son was an opium-smoker and had neglected his wife and two children. When the daughter-in-law became ill Louie took her to the missionary doctor at Nang-wa. When the woman died, the missionaries undertook the costs of the funeral on condition that no "heathen custom should be observed".[20]

Louie's three furloughs to England were filled with presentations and fundraising. On the way back to China from their first furlough in 1897, Louie and Harriet Rodd conducted a mission through Australia, where Louie's translation skills were recognized in a dispatch from *The Western Australian:*

> Miss Bryer especially has distinguished herself in her calling by the translation of the New Testament into the colloquial dialect of the Kien-ning District and by the completion of an Anglo Chinese dictionary.[21]

Ciong-Bau - Louisa Bryer and guest.

Louie's efforts had an effect on women's literacy; she taught village women to read the New Testament in three months and opened two schools during her time in China. [22] The first was a boarding school with twenty-eight girls in Ciong Bau in 1897-98. She put a request in the missionary journal for bed quilts of red Turkey twill lined with dark flannelette so that the girls would not get chills. The second school was a Girls' Day School directed at better-off students in Pucheng, where Louie had to learn a whole new dialect in order to translate the New Testament as she had done before. In order to attend the school, the girls had to unbind their feet and Louie was an unyielding disciplinarian:

> You will be amused to hear of the breaking-in of a new girl of sixteen. On being told she must conform to the school rules about hair-dressing and unbinding the feet, she sat roaring at the top of her voice and refusing to obey. Miss Bryer, on hearing the frightful noise, went to see the cause, upon which the roaring became more uproarious, and there was nothing for it but to conduct the girl to our own house for a caning. She was so taken aback, that the roars instantly ceased. [23]

Louie found Pucheng more amenable than her previous placement in Ciong Bau. She resigned herself to being a constant object of interest:

> During the day we are gazed at continually as we eat, study, etc., the windows being low and the walls abounding in cracks. However, this only tends to bring us in closer touch with the people and will make us more grateful for privacy when at last we secure it.[24]

A wry tone was often used by missionaries in their dispatches to England. Fundraising for the missions was critically important for their maintenance and it would not do to make circumstances seem particularly trying. At the same time, danger was present and attacks possible. Despite frequent assertions of the safety of the missionaries, one case is particularly tragic. Ian Welch, a scholar of Anglican history, relates how Robert and Louisa Stewart, Topsy and Nellie Saunders and eight more missionaries were murdered by a rebel Chinese sect, in what became known as the Flower Mountain massacre, at Hwa-Sang [Huashan], not far from Kucheng [Gutian]. On the morning of August 1, 1895, eighty men armed with spears and swords stormed the missionary compound. The six women in the courtyard thought they were going to be abducted and begged to get their umbrellas. Instead they were murdered. One woman, Flora Codrington, survived by feigning death in the pile of bodies. She had been inducted into the CEZMS at the same time as Louie, who was upcountry at the time of the murders. Two of Robert and Louisa Stewart's children were also killed as well as the children's nurse. Three Stewart children amazingly survived and in their adult lives returned to China as Christian educators.[25]

In 1899 civil disturbance forced Louie and several other missionary women to flee Ciong –Bau to Nang-Wa, leaving in the evening and arriving after midnight, walking twelve miles on narrow pathways in darkness and torrents of rain.[26] The continuing unrest before the 1900 Boxer Rebellion that attempted to expel all foreigners from China resulted in Louie's re-assignment to Singapore, but she was back in China by 1903. Louie had warm feelings for Chinese people but she was also an uncompromising evangelist bent on reforming the world to her way of thinking. [27] When she had to leave China in 1900, she wrote how she longed to be back in the thick of the fight again; "How little these poor blind men realize that it is a vain thing to fight against God and against His Church".[28]

Louie's brother Alfred had moved to Hong Kong and became a successful architect in Hong for the firm of Leigh and Orange, responsible for designing the University of Hong Kong Main

Building and living in a mansion he called "Quarndon" after his home town.[29] The CEZMS Roll of Missionaries noted that Alfred had called at the London Office in 1916 to ask for more help for Louie in Pucheng.

The Great War did not slow down Louie's transoceanic crossings; she retired from the CEZMS in 1917 and returned to England, where her brother Alfred and sister Mary had purchased a large house in Hildenborough, Kent, England. She took a trip to Canada in 1919 to visit her brother Edward in New Westminster and escorted his son Edward Milton back to England to go to school. In 1920 Louie returned to Canada to work for the Colonial and Continental Church Society at the Saskatoon Teachers' Hostel, with a well-known local teacher, Ella Bashford.[30] When that stint was over, Louie returned to England and in 1924 returned to China to complete one more two-year missionary term. Louie offered to go overseas again if needed in 1934 but by this time she was 66 years old and her offer was not accepted.

In 1938 Louie immigrated to Canada and spent the last twenty years of her life with her brother Edward and sister-in-law Carrie in New Westminster, BC. She was in great demand as a speaker and fundraiser for the Anglican Church in New Westminster, having rigged up an old camera to show "lantern slides". Although there was a strong local Chinese community in New Westminster, Louie did not associate with it. She was close to her brother Edward's children and grandchildren. Her great-niece remembered her as both frugal and thoughtful; she saved old calendars to give as presents because she wanted others to see the views. Her wants were few; she ate very sparingly, mostly chicken, rice and milk and dressed very plainly. On her visits to see her cousin Edith in Alberta, she always made the rounds to see all the children and read Bible stories and sang hymns to them. Her visits were an occasion of interest.

Louisa Jane Bryer and the Milligan children

Louisa Jane Bryer's experiences confirm various interpretations of the work of female missionaries in Asia. It also brings to question many assumptions of missionaries: what were their intentions, how can their work be understood through post-colonial eyes; how did they contribute to imperialist and economic ambitions of countries such as Great Britain.

Bryer's work was part of the Inland Dream as described by Bickers in *The Scramble for China.*[31] According to Bickers, missionary work was aimed at disrupting the family, not in towns and cities, but in the countryside. This is different from Andrew Porter who questioned the assertions that Christian missionaries spread cultural imperialism and argues that distinctions can be made in types of missionary service. [32] He distinguished among missionary presence, missionary influence and missionary imperialism.

Bryer and her colleagues' adoption of local dress and food customs supports the CEZMS mandate to fit into Chinese village society, unlike missionaries in some parts of the world where a dress

code was imposed.[33] Another example of Bryer's willingness to adapt was her acceptance of the lack of privacy and being able to see a moral reward in doing so.

Louie also had a role in the early feminist movement although she probably didn't see it that way. Most female missionaries to China went as helpmeets to their missionary husbands and were not paid. Single women like Louie had to be paid in order to support themselves. Female missionaries might have had some effect on the emancipation of Chinese women, but they were mostly conservative in their outlook. Footbinding provides an example of this; it was outlawed in 1911 but it still existed in the countryside for many more years.[34]

While most of Louisa Jane Bryer's Canadian cousins knew that she had spent thirty years as a missionary in China, few knew that she had learned at least two Chinese languages and possibly up to five and her translation work is still recognized by various sources; that she had been personally acquainted with Anglican martyrs; that she had started two schools and made at least ten Atlantic and Pacific ocean crossings; that she had actively participated in freeing Chinese women from the practice of foot-binding; and that in an era of restrictions on women's activities, she had lived out her convictions in a long and rich life. Cousin Louie's interests were an eclectic mix of familial love and ecumenisms right to the end of her life. Her will, made in 1946 through Lloyds' Bank of Hong Kong, distributed fifty pounds each to her nieces and nephew (the children of her brother Edward) and the same amount each to CEZMS, the British and Foreign Bible Society, and the British Jews Society.[35]

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[1] Interview with E. Jackson, Victoria, BC, 19 August, 2011.
[2] Probate for Alfred Bryer. Ancestry.com
[3] 1881 Census. Ancestry.com. It was common for children of relatively well-off families who had lost their fathers to be designated orphans and sent to special schools. Louie's younger brother Edward Trafford Bryer and cousin Edward Eaton Walker were in attendance at the same school in 1891.
[4] 1891 census of England. Ancestry. com
[5] Irene Barnes, *The Story of the C.E.Z.M.S. Work and Workers in China*, 1895. Online November 21, 2011 at http://scans.library.utoronto.ca/pdf/1/11/behindthegreatw00barnuoft/behindthegreatw00barnuoft_bw.pdf Bryer is incorrectly identified as "Miss Beyer".
[6] Ian Welch, *The Fuh Kien Missions Report by the late Rev. R. Stewart*, (The Age, Melbourne. 7 August 1895). Online December 4, 2011 at http://hdl.handle.net/1885/7273

[7] Mary Darley, *The light of the morning: the story of C.E.Z.M.S. work in the Kien-Ning Prefecture of the Fuh-Kien Province, China*. (London: Church of England Zenana Missionary Society: Marshall Brothers, 1903) 23. Online December 4, 2011 at http://www.archive.org/details/cu31924023068574

[8] Ian Welch, *Amy Oxley: Letters from China: An Australian Missionary Nurse of the Church Missionary Association of New South Wales, Fujian Province, China 1895-c1920*. (ANU Missionary History Archives Project, 2004). Online December 4, 2011 at http://anglicanhistory.org/asia/china/welch_oxley.pdf

[9] Mary Darley, *The light of the morning: the story of C.E.Z.M.S. work in the Kien-Ning Prefecture of the Fuh-Kien Province, China*. (London: Church of England Zenana Missionary Society: Marshall Brothers, 1903) 185. Online December 4, 2011 at http://www.archive.org/details/cu31924023068574

[10] Ibid.

[11] Mary Watson, *Robert and Louisa Stewart: in life and in death.* (London: Marshall Brothers, 1895) 104. Online December 4, 2011 at http://anglicanhistory.org/asia/china/stewart/06.html

[12] Ibid.

[13] D.M.Berry, *The sister martyrs of Ku Cheng Memoir and Letters of Eleanor and Elizabeth Saunders ("Nellie" and "Topsy") of Melbourne* (Melbourne: James Nisbet & Co., 1896), 17. Online December 4, 2011 at http://www.archive.org/stream/sistermartyrsofk00berriala/sistermartyrsofk00berriala_djvu.txt

[14] Berry, p. 97

[15] Berry, p. 147

[16] In and Around Pucheng. *India's Women and China's Daughters: Missionary Journal of the CEZMS [IWCD]*.(1914, p. 177).

[17] A Visit to Ching-Ho. *India's Women and China's Daughters: Missionary Journal of the CEZMS.* (1908, – p. 46-48)

[18] Ibid., 47.

[19] Jennifer Morawiecki, *"The peculiar mission of Christian womanhood": The selection and preparation of women missionaries of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society, 1880-1920.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Sussex, Falmer, East Sussex, U.K., 1998. p. 21

[20] First fruit of Su-bu-Cheng. *IWCD.* (1894, p. 559).

[21] Deputation experiences. *IWCD.* (1898, p. 152).

[22] Darley, 40.

[23] Progress at Ciong-Bau. *IWCD.* (1903, p. 20)

[24] Tidings from Pucheng. *IWCD.* (1909, pp. 126-127).

[25] Welch, I. The Flower Mountain murders: a "Missionary Case" data-base. Online April 20, 2011 at http://hdl.handle.net/1885/7273.

[26] Darley, 158-163.

[27] Tidings from Pucheng . *IWCD.* (1910, p. 74-76).

[28] A Letter from one of our Kien-Ning Missionaries. *IWCD.* (1899, p. 252). It is important to note that the missionary dispatches were intended for a select audience. Rowbotham suggests their writing had to be as realistic and also as emotional as possible, and therefore should be viewed critically. J. rowbotham, 1998, "hear an indian sister's plea".

[29] Alfred Bryer. Carl Smith Card Collection. Old Hong Kong. Online December 4, 2011 at http://gwulo.com/node/9139?page=0Info-Al

[30] St. James the Refinery Anglican Church Arts and Spirit Centre. Online December 4, 2011 at http://www.stjamesrefinery.org/history-1

[31] R. Bickers, *The scramble for China*, Penguin Books, 2011.

[32] Andrew Porter is Professor Emeritus at King's College, London, England, and well-known for his writings on imperial and commonwealth history. http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/history/people/staff/emeritus/porter.aspx

[33] The following article provides an analysis of the imposition of British values upon Ghanaian society and puts the efforts of Bryer and her colleagues into an almost benign category compared to parts of Africa. J. Allman, (1944). Making mothers: Missionaries, medical officers and women's work in colonial Asante, 1924-1945, History Workshop Journal, 38, 33-47.
An example of dress is the "Mother Hubbard" dress instituted by missionaries in Polynesia and Hawaii. See The religious life of dress: Global fashion and faith, by Lynne Hume (2013).

[34] M. Schiavena, The peculiar history of food binding in China. https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/09/the-peculiar-history-of-foot-binding-in-china/279718/
[35] Louisa Jane Bryer. Carl Smith Card Collection. Old Hong Kong. Online December 4, 2011 at http://gwulo.com/node/9139?page=0