

Western Daughters in Eastern Lands: British Missionary Women in Asia

by Rosemary Seton.

(2013). Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.

Reviewed by: Leanne Dzubinski

This is an excellent historical study of women's contributions to world missions. The author traces British women's participation in the work in Asia, focusing on the time period from the late 1700s to the mid-1900s. She explains how women became involved in mission work, how they prepared for overseas service, and the physical hardships of living overseas as a woman in that time period. She also dedicates chapters to the kinds of mission work women did, including education, medical work, and evangelism. India and China are the primary focus of her scholarship, and she includes numerous excerpts from women's diaries and letters to illustrate both their lives and their missiological theory as they sought to carry out the Great Commission.

The book has a number of strengths. First is its sound scholarship. The incorporation of primary documents and photographs adds both color and substance to the narrative. Second, Seton includes careful accounts of the women's work and practice, and also seeks to understand their theory of mission work and their understanding of how their unique work would serve the spread of the Gospel. It is important for the modern reader to understand that the women were not simply carrying out the directions of male supervisors, but actively engaged in developing mission theory and strategy.

Another strength of the book is the attention Seton gives to how the women interacted with the sending organizations and the challenges they faced as women navigating a world controlled by men. As a 21st century reader with more than 20 years of experience in mission work, I find the book encouraging, because it gives me an even greater understanding of and respect for women's contributions to missions over the centuries. I also find it somewhat discouraging, because I see that missionary women today are still struggling with some of the same issues that women encountered 100 years ago or more. For example, in 1908 a woman struggled to understand if women were truly not able to offer leadership in mission organizations, or if men were simply unwilling to share leadership with them (p. 108). Women in today's mission world still struggle to gain leadership roles and a voice to contribute to discussions of strategy and theory. And in 1922 another woman stressed that it was necessary to see and use the gifts of all the members (p. 195), not just men. This is yet another theme that still permeates church and mission organization conversations in 2013.

Seton has written an excellent textbook that contributes substantial knowledge regarding women's contributions to world missions in the past two centuries. Historically, women have comprised more than two-thirds of the missionary work force for well over a century now, yet their contributions remain almost completely unknown. In a world where their contributions have been minimized and often forgotten, Seton offers a refreshing and much-needed account of women's centrality in fulfilling the Great Commission.