

PRESEBYTERIAN WOMEN AND THE INDIANS

by

John Webster Grant

In books with such titles as Anna and the Indians and Frances and the Crees the Canadian writer Nan Shipley has narrated the adventures of several Methodist women who devoted their lives to some form of missionary service among the Indians of Canada, and I suspect that she provided the suggestion that I unconsciously picked up in proposing a label for this paper. The story I have to tell is considerably less packed with dramatic incident, although I hope that it will not be without interest. I propose not to describe the work of Presbyterian women missionaries, or even to assess its effectiveness, but rather to discuss how the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church in Canada (Western Section) came to sponsor such a large share of Presbyterian work in this field.

That the contribution of Presbyterian women to Indian missions was unusually significant is not open to doubt, although one would scarcely guess its extent from the few references to it in the annual reports of the Foreign Mission Committee. My curiosity about the topic was aroused, indeed, by coming across a statement by Dr. Andrew B. Baird in 1895 that for several years the members of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society have borne the entire cost of that part of the work which is

especially directed to women and children, and this, since it includes the building and maintenance of schools, the payment of the salaries of matrons and teachers, and similar expenses, has amounted to about two-thirds of the Committee's whole revenue. ¹

The importance of their role is underlined by the fact that Presbyterians, more than any other denomination, concentrated their efforts among the Indians upon educational work.

The women of other denominations responded with equal alacrity to appeals for their involvement in Indian missions, and comparison of actual contributions is made difficult by different methods of accounting. The Methodist Woman's Missionary Society, formed in 1881, was involved from its inception and thus anticipated its Presbyterian counterpart. ²

By 1911-12 its givings to this branch of the work were roughly two-thirds of those of the Presbyterian W.F.M.S. ³

The Women's Auxiliary to the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Church of England in Canada, formed in 1893 and affiliated in 1902 with the Missionary Society of the Canadian Church, gave priority to Indian work from the start and was pressed to increase its support as the Church Missionary Society gradually withdrew its aid to Canada. By 1912 it may have been contributing as much as its Presbyterian counterpart. ⁴ Methodist contributions were almost entirely directed to a few institutions in British Columbia, however, while Anglican support was scattered over many phases of an enterprise that was in total bulk much larger than that of either Methodists or Presbyterians. Of neither Anglican nor Methodist society could have been said what the Board of Home Missions conceded when it took over responsibility in 1913, 'To the W.F.M.S. must

be given the credit for the success that has been attained in this branch of the work.'⁵

The Woman's Foreign Missionary Society came into being at a meeting of women called together on 17 February 1876 at the request of the Foreign Mission Committee of the newly formed Presbyterian Church in Canada.⁶ Professor William MacLaren of Knox College has been credited with inspiring its formation,⁷ and the wives of Knox faculty members were prominent from the outset on its board of management. American precedents must have been very much in mind, for on 2 February 1877 the society invited the president of its American counterpart to address its first annual meeting and on 7 May it instituted a long-continued practice of exchanging visitors with the Woman's Board of Foreign Missions of the North West United States, apparently a midwestern body. At first the society was designated the 'Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of Toronto', but after the formation of auxiliaries elsewhere it was allowed to style itself as of 'the Presbyterian Church in Canada (Western Section)'.⁸

The constitution of the society contained some definite restrictions. It was to be auxiliary to the Foreign Mission Committee, which was to make appointments and allocate money in all fields while the W.F.M.S. would raise money and seek to recruit 'female labourers'.⁹ Funds were to be used for 'work among women and children in heathen lands' or for the support of female missionaries, and for no other purposes. At first the society was exclusively concerned with work in India, where it supported two women missionaries under the

American Presbyterians before the Presbyterian Church in Canada became formally involved. The provisions of its constitution reflected conditions in that country, where women were segregated in zenanas and thus approachable only by women missionaries, but they were carried over into other fields as the work of the society expanded.

Indian work in the Canadian northwest from its inception in 1866 was the responsibility of the Foreign Mission Committee. There was, however, no suggestion when the society was inaugurated or for some years thereafter that the W.F.M.S. might include it within the range of its operations, although the opening of a Presbyterian field in Formosa was quickly followed by society support for it. In 1879 Lucy Baker became the first Presbyterian woman missionary to minister to the Indians, but she went to Prince Albert as a missionary of the committee and not of the society. It was evidently felt either that despite their connection with the F.M.C. Indian missions were not quite foreign enough or that the pattern of segregation that was held to justify a special role for women in India and Formosa did not exist among the Indians. This situation was to change so quickly, and yet so inconspicuously, that by 15 April 1885 the board of management could state as its policy that 'efforts in the future as in the past shall be directed to the evangelization of women and children in heathen lands, including our own Indians of the North West'.

Expansion of missionary interest was, in the main, a natural and spontaneous process. A regular feature of early

meetings of the board of management was the reading of missionary letters, and while correspondence from India held the place of honour there was from the outset evidence of keen interest in reports from the New Hebrides and Trinidad missions of the Eastern Section of the church, as well as in occasional letters from American missionaries in such countries as Ceylon and Turkey. In a way it is surprising that the first letter from the northwest, the beginning of a series by George Flett of Okanase, appeared only on 5 November 1878. Even in this correspondence one may suspect some deliberate attempt to involve the W.F.M.S. more deeply, for it was instigated by Mrs. George Bryce of Winnipeg, wife of a professor at Manitoba College who frequently advised the Foreign Mission Committee on Indian matters and herself the first woman president of the Manitoba Historical Society.¹⁰ In any case it must have had some effect, for it was reported to have 'directed our thoughts and prayers¹¹ into new and important channels'.

Two personal contacts during the early 1880s may have given at least marginal encouragement. On 1 November 1881 a monthly meeting was addressed by Miss Emma Baylis, a Montreal Congregationalist who had worked among the fishers of Labrador before transferring her dedicated although somewhat neurotic energies to the Ojibwas along the north shore of Lake Huron.¹² She was noted as having 'aroused much interest and sympathy' and, perhaps significantly, as being known already to some of the ladies. Then at the annual meeting of 12 April 1883 a delegate of the newly formed Methodist Woman's Missionary Society brought not only greetings

but an account of work among various peoples including 'Indians on the confines of Alaska'. It would not be surprising if the effect were to stimulate Presbyterian women to emulate their efforts.

The actual decision to become involved was taken without warning at the tag end of what must have been a long meeting on 5 June 1883 in the form of a resolution 'to state to the Foreign Mission Committee that we will gladly bear any expense in connection with the children of the Indians in our North West under the care of that Committee and also that Mrs. Harvie [the corresponding secretary for foreign fields] correspond with Miss Baker at present teaching in Prince Albert'. This action was followed by such a long silence in the minutes that one might be tempted to regard it as stillborn, but such was not the case. On 6 November a letter was read from George Flett listing educational needs, and by the next year the society reported that it was aiding all schools in the northwest.¹³ Thus without fanfare the W.F.M.S. entered wholeheartedly into a new field of labour.

A new type of aid was inaugurated in response to an appeal received on 7 October 1884 from the Rev. Hugh McKay for boxes of clothing for needy Indian families. This might not seem to women of the 1970s the most creative form of involvement, but there can be no doubt of its attraction for Victorian mothers and aunts. Reserves were allocated to presbyterials or auxiliaries, which set to work with a will and sent during the first year supplies valued at two thousand dollars.¹⁴ This effort had the effect of drawing

a further flood of letters from the field, expressing profound gratitude but also in many cases attaching detailed statements of educational needs.

So far the W.F.M.S. was merely assisting work carried on by others, but on 4 August 1885 it was noted that Miss Isabella Rose of Woodstock was applying for appointment as a missionary of the society in the northwest and on 1 September that she had been accepted by the Foreign Mission Committee. Miss Rose, who was thus the society's first representative in this field, had already spent some time in the west and had acquired some knowledge of the Cree language. By the next year it was reported that other ladies were applying.¹⁵ Meanwhile Lucy Baker, later described in an official history as 'our honored first missionary of the W.F.M.S. to the Indians'¹⁶ had been in Prince Albert since 1879. On 1 September 1885 the society expressed renewed interest in securing her services, but she left the west for a time exhausted after the North-West Rebellion and appeared on the society's list of missionaries only in the 1888 Annual Report. Even then the lack of Indian students at the Nisbet Academy where she was teaching gave rise to questions. On 2 October 1887 the board agreed 'for this year' to pay salaries at the academy, but thereafter Miss Baker's name disappeared from the list for another two years.

Increased involvement led to more frequent contacts, which in turn stimulated further interest. Letters of thanks for clothing bundles began to outnumber those from India, especially after Miss McGregor, the society's most prolific

correspondent there, was summoned home as the result of personal difficulties with other missionaries. On 6 July 1886 Hugh McKay was present at a meeting of the board of management, and his possession of considerable personal charm was made evident by the solicitude thereafter shown for his school at Round Lake. Miss Rose began to correspond, calling attention to the 'touchingly painful lot of the Indian women and girls' (5 October 1886). Deepened interest suggested still greater involvement. On 7 April 1885 the society voted \$600 out of its surplus to Indian work. Similar action was taken at the next two annual meetings, the sum voted on 5 April 1887 being \$2,000 for school buildings at Round Lake.

On 7 June 1887 the W.F.M.S. agreed 'that the Foreign Secretary write to the F.M. Committee asking for the usual estimates for our work for the present year and stating that we will be glad to support all the schools under the care of our Church among the North West Indians, and will undertake to bear all the expense of maintaining the pupils at the school at Round Lake'. Although it is not altogether clear from the wording that the society intended to accept responsibility for the total support of all educational work among Indians, this interpretation seems to be assumed in all subsequent correspondence between the W.F.M.S. and the Foreign Mission Committee. With this resolution, therefore, our narrative may well come to an end, for later developments constituted simply the implementation of this decision. For some years it represented a hope rather than an actuality, and indeed the division of labour was never enforced with

precise accounting. By 1895, however, as we have noted, Baird was able to refer to this policy as one long taken for granted.¹⁷ In 1908 the Indian work received approximately \$16,000 from the society, \$11,000 from the Foreign Mission Committee, and \$14,000 from the Department of the Interior, indicating that the proportion given by the women had been whittled down by the transfer of some responsibility not to the church as a whole but rather to the government.¹⁸

In reading reports and minutes one is left with the distinct impression that they do not tell the whole story, that many decisions reached in camera were merely rubber-stamped by meetings, and indeed that some of the most important ones may have resulted from private conversations between husbands and wives. Nevertheless, the record contains enough clues to give us a fair understanding of the main factors that impelled the W.F.M.S. into an unintended line of work. In some ways these constitute the most interesting part of the story.

1st. Beginning as a group of women in Toronto who met monthly in conjunction with the board of management to hear missionary letters, the W.F.M.S. expanded rapidly in both membership and givings as branch auxiliaries were formed in other cities and then in congregations. Before long, money was pouring in much faster than was required for the society's initial commitments. Within the first ten years, indeed, the budget rose from \$1,000 to \$13,000.¹⁹ The result was a growing surplus that enabled the society, gradually and indeed accidentally, to institute what was later to become a proudly self-conscious policy of budgeting

on the basis of money on hand rather than borrowing²⁰ against expected revenue. In the first expansive years the surplus was sometimes so great that it was felt necessary to authorize supplementary expenditures, as we have already noted for 1885, 1886, and 1887. During the 1880s the society thus had more money than it knew what to do with and was actively seeking new uses for its resources. The members of the Foreign Mission Committee, several of whom were husbands of women active on the board of the W.F.M.S., must also have been aware of this untapped source.

2nd. These early years coincided with a period of expanding opportunities for involvement in Indian education. A report by the Canadian journalist Nicholas Flood Davin in 1879 recommended that the government should embark on a program of promoting industrial and other schools for the newly settled Indians of the plains and added, significantly, that contracts should be made²¹ with the churches to provide them. The Presbyterians, with fewer commitments to existing mission stations than some other denominations, were in an unusually favourable position to take advantage of the opportunity thus offered. In 1882 William MacLaren, the convener of the Foreign Mission Committee, visited most of the Indian missions in company with Hugh McKellar, who had been Nisbet's successor at Prince Albert. Their report suggested no new global policy, but its general tone was that of a call to build new schools and enlarge existing ones, to hire additional teachers, and to seek out new areas of work.

In 1883 the committee sought government aid for Indian schools through a strong subcommittee that included the Honourable Alexander Morris, former lieutenant-governor²³ of Manitoba and the North-West Territories. In 1885, in the wake of the North-West Rebellion, it took the further step of resolving that 'the mission work in the North-West be extended as rapidly as possible consistently with economy and efficiency'.²⁴ Here were tempting prospects for a society with money to spend.

3rd. We must not forget that the W.F.M.S. was aware of having a special mandate for work among women and children. The society saw their needs as justifying its separate existence, and there are hints that it occasionally suspected the Foreign Mission Committee of treating its contributions merely as subsidies for its regular work. On 5 December 1882 it asked pointedly, in relation to India and Formosa, whether all of its money was being used in fact for work among women and children. The education of Indian children met the requirements of the W.F.M.S. constitution, especially since unlike its Anglican counterpart the society had no prejudice against work among boys. The presence of Lucy Baker in the west may have been a further predisposing factor, for the other purpose of the society was to support women missionaries. It may not have been without significance that the initial resolution to participate in Indian work was accompanied by a decision to enter into correspondence with her. The society also liked the satisfaction of paying in full for the work it sponsored, and 7 February 1882 was one of

several occasions on which it sought estimates of the total cost of the work for which it was responsible. Once involved in Indian education, therefore, it preferred to undertake its entire support.

4th. The W.F.M.S. was frequently subjected to the criticism that it was diverting money from the regular schemes of the church and was under constant pressure from some of its members to extend its charter to include home missions. Evidence of sensitivity to this criticism comes mainly from later decades, when presidents' addresses devoted considerable time to charges that even included a lack of Canadian patriotism, and on such occasions the extent of involvement in Indian missions furnished a ready answer.²⁵ It may not be fanciful, however, to see some connection between the beginning of Indian work and an agitation in the Ottawa branch that came to a head on 3 June 1884 in an appeal to the society to counteract the success of Roman Catholic agents in the northwest. Certainly in the following year there was a minor flood of requests from auxiliaries for greater efforts in Canada. As auxiliaries were formed in western Canada, too, there was spontaneous local interest in Indian missions; the school at Portage la Prairie was founded by an independent women's society there. This reluctance to see so much of the society's money going abroad may, at any rate, help to account for a later statement (3 July 1898) that missions among the Indians were 'popular with our ladies'.

5th. This last statement is, however, susceptible of another explanation. Supporters of missions have argued for

many years the relative merits of a unified budget and local choice of projects to be supported, and the issue is by no means settled yet. The W.F.M.S. insisted firmly on centralized control, urging that only thus could money be allocated fairly to different branches of the work, but the good ladies of Toronto were unable to prevent grumbling in the boondocks. The logistics of packing and mailing boxes for the Indians were such, however, that there seemed to be no feasible alternative to assigning individual reserves to particular auxiliaries and presbyterials. Local groups thus were given the personal contacts with the field they craved, and in many cases correspondence with the local missionary ensued. These contacts were clearly not responsible for the society's involvement in Indian work, for they began only after the crucial decision had been made. They must have done a good deal to stimulate and sustain interest, however, and to encourage the society to expand its original bridgehead.

'The Presbyterian Church maintains almost as many industrial boarding schools as all the others put together - and undoubtedly spends more of her own money in the work of Indian education than is spent by any other church in the Northwest, Protestant or Catholic.'²⁶ This boast, which dates from 1891, could not have been made apart from the major contribution of the W.F.M.S. One cannot help wondering whether this society, looking about in 1883 for ways of putting a little extra money to the most effective use permitted by its constitution, realized the magnitude of the commitment that would eventually result. If not, it

never showed signs of regret but instead took a more and more active part in the work. In 1896 it appointed a separate secretary for the northwest, Mrs. Cecilia Jeffrey, and later it named an additional secretary for British Columbia. Even before that time its secretaries had instituted a practice of occasional visits to the missions,²⁷ and out of these ultimately came far-reaching recommendations to the Foreign Mission Committee. Begun as a mere auxiliary to a male committee that made all appointments and allocated all money, the W.F.M.S. became, in large part because of its involvement in Indian missions, a powerful body that initiated projects and had a good deal to say about their operation.

NOTES

1. Andrew B. Baird, The Indians of Western Canada (Toronto: Canada Presbyterian, 1895), p. 28.
2. 1st Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, Canada, 1881-82, p. 13.
3. It reported \$19,117.20, but from this one must subtract \$6,798.50 in government grants to the institutions it supported, 31st Annual Report of the W.M.S., Methodist Church, Canada, 1911-12, pp. xx, xxi. The Presbyterian figures for this year were \$14,300.79 for the northwest and \$6,335.92 for British Columbia, 36th Annual Report of the W.F.M.S., 1911-12, p. 89.
4. Roughly \$13,000 may be inferred from a list of items that cannot all be clearly identified, but this includes only money spent in dioceses other than those in which it was raised, 1st Year Book of the W.A. to the M.S.C.C., 1912, end page.
5. Acts and Proceedings of the 39th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1913, appendix, p. 6.
6. Minutes, Board of Management of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church in Canada (Western Section), United Church Archives. Reference will be made to these minutes, without footnotes, by date of meeting.

7. Andrew Thomson, The Life and Letters of Rev. R.P. MacKay, D.D. (Toronto: Ryerson, 1932), p. 63.
8. Minutes of the Foreign Mission Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Canada (Western Section), United Church Archives, 16 April 1878.
9. 1st Annual Report, W.F.M.S., 1877, p. 23; 2nd Annual Report, 1878, p. 11.
10. Priscilla Lee Reid, 'The Role of Presbyterian Women in Canadian Development', in Enkindled by the Word (Toronto: Presbyterian Publications, 1966), p. 116.
11. 3rd Annual Report, W.F.M.S., 1879, p. 20.
12. Emma Baylis' diary, 1872-85, is in the United Church Archives.
13. 8th Annual Report, W.F.M.S., 1884, p. 3.
14. 9th Annual Report, W.F.M.S., 1885, p. 22.
15. 10th Annual Report, W.F.M.S., 1886, p. 120.
16. The Story of Our Missions (Toronto: W.M.S. of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1915), p. 270.
17. A settled policy that the W.F.M.S. should be responsible along with the government for education, while the Foreign Mission Committee should look after evangelistic work on the reserves, is also noted in the 20th Annual Report, W.F.M.S., 1895-6, p. 37.
18. Acts and Proceedings of the 34th General Assembly, 1908, appendix, p. 182.
19. 1st Annual Report, W.F.M.S., 1877, p. 22; 11th Annual Report, 1887, p. 104.
20. By 1887, e.g., revenue was more than \$3,000 in excess of estimated expenditures, 11th Annual Report, W.F.M.S., 1887, p. 108.
21. Nicholas Flood Davin, 'Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half-Breeds, Ottawa, 14 March 1879, to the Right Honourable the Minister of the Interior', p. 13.
22. Minutes of the F.M.C., 23 May and 17 October 1882.
23. Ibid., 20 September 1883.
24. Ibid., 18 June 1885.
25. 18th Annual Report, W.F.M.S., 1893-4, pp. 16, 21; 25th Annual Report, 1900-1, p. 18; 26th Annual Report, 1901-2, p. 18f.

26. The Western Missionary, August 1891, p. 87.
27. 19th Annual Report, W.F.M.S., 1894-5, p. 21; Acts and Proceedings of the 24th General Assembly, 1898, appendix, p. 180.