Sex and Salvation: Modelling Gender on an Indian Mission Station.

Andrew Brown-May

The Welsh mission to the Khasi Hills commenced with the arrival of Thomas and Ann Jones in the British hill station of Cherrapunji in 1841, and ended with the expulsion of all foreign missionaries from northeast India in 1967. The history of the mission provides numerous pathways to interrogate the relationship between missions and colonialism. Set against the daily work of the mission in Christianising and educating its Khasi flock, this chapter observes the apparently anomalous failure of workers in the mission’s formative years to model moral conformity to the ideal Christian family. By examining representations of the role and status of missionary wives, indigenous gender roles, and sexual improprieties on the mission station, the chapter sets the stereotypes of Christian propriety and sexual savagery against the lived experiences of the Welsh missionaries, leading to more complex understanding of the inheritance and meaning of the mission for indigenous peoples.

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After his expulsion from the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS) in 1847, founding missionary Thomas Jones had supposedly ‘gone native’ in the Khasi Hills of north-east India, defending local interests in the face of British commercial exploitation. Speculation surrounds the identity of a child named Camilla, surname unknown, whose death in 1843 is commemorated on an isolated mountainside gravestone. The headstone inscription includes a quotation from John Milton’s ‘On the death of an infant dying of a cough’ (1626), but the main memorial stone is also set on either side with two smaller unhewn stones in the style of Khasi ancestral megaliths known as mawhynna (memory stones). Because of the syncretism of the funerary ornaments, many in the hills believe Camilla to have been the illegitimate child of the missionary. For some Khasis, Jones retains a reputation as both a religious and secular hero, a status reflected in a widespread local belief that after the death in 1845 of his wife Ann, he had married a local woman.

The Welsh mission to the Khasi Hills commenced with the arrival of Thomas and Ann Jones in the British hill station of Cherrapunji in 1841, and ended with the expulsion of all foreign missionaries from northeast India in 1967. The history of the mission provides numerous pathways to interrogate the relationship between missions and colonialism. The figure of U Larsing (1838-1863), for example, offers scope for examining the figure of the non-European evangelist as Christianity’s double-agent; as Peggy Brock has noted, such figures have ambiguous insider/outsider relationships to their own communities as well as to their mission brethren.\(^1\) The link between mission and imperialism in the story of the WFMS is no doubt ‘established and incontrovertible’, and as scholars of the mission such as Aled Jones have argued, the role of missionaries as cultural propagandists impacted not only on Indian society, but on the society back in Wales to which they reported and which they visited on furlough. Welsh school children learned Bengali folk songs, while missionary literature provided ‘a route into the culture for a discussion about race, difference, and power’, as well as a belief in the improvement of the condition of women.\(^2\)

The intention of this chapter is to unpick the oversimplified view, which diametrically opposes the image of the sexualised savage with that of the pious and strait-laced Christian. Such dogma, informed both by nineteenth-century racial theories as well as by Evangelical Christian doctrine, was a fundamental moral justification of missionary intervention into Indigenous cultures. By examining representations of the role and status of missionary wives, Indigenous gender roles, and sexual improprieties on the mission station, the chapter sets the stereotype of Christian propriety against the lived experiences of the Welsh missionaries. While the work of the mission in Christianising and educating the Khasi people proceeded

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steadily through the 1840s, it is perhaps anomalous that a number of the men and women associated with this daily task failed demonstrably in the mission's formative years to model moral conformity to the ideal Christian family. If sexual mores were the boundary between European righteousness and native depravity (or as Ann Stoler puts it, if sexuality was an important feature in discerning the 'the moral parameters of European nations'), what happened when these boundaries were breached? We learn more about the dynamics of empire if we consider the missionary body less as a generic colonialist elite and more as a dynamic and transforming system, comprising at times conflicting and even contradictory attitudes to empire and religion.

Recent scholarship on women and missions has explored both the gendered nature of missionary enterprise itself, as well as the emergence of a professionalised cohort of female workers in foreign fields. Patricia Grimshaw and Peter Sherlock have succinctly characterised the historiography on women in missions, noting key works and insights of the last two or three decades that have been inspired by the advance of feminist critiques of historical inclusiveness, as well as post-colonial critiques of the role of women in the exercise of power over Indigenous peoples. Most mission histories have ignored women's experiences, but Grimshaw and Sherlock can still be far from complimentary about the ways in which such insights have been incorporated into mainstream understandings of imperial history. The depiction of female missionaries, they suggest, has barely transcended populist and anecdotal representations that prevailed in Charles F. Hayward's volume on missionary heroines, *Women in the Mission Field*, as long ago as 1907. There has certainly been remarkable hesitancy in incorporating the significant work of women into overarching historical narratives, and over a decade ago Fiona Bowie went so far as to suggest that 'women have been systematically written out of historical and anthropological records'. Bowie cited the 'lone voice' of James Hudson Taylor of the China Inland Mission: 'Unless you intend your wife to be a true missionary, not merely a wife, homemaker and friend, do not join us'. In an era before women were formally accepted as missionary candidates in their own right, it often seems that the missionary wife is characterised either as exceptional missionary heroine or simple domestic helpmeet.

Such stereotyping could lead us to misread the interplay between mission and home society expectations on the one hand, and women's agency on the other. While Bowie asserts that 'missionary' was effectively a male noun, subsequent historians such as Jeffrey Cox have inflected the master narratives of religion and empire, suggesting that while both European and Indian women are often absent from missionary histories, in reality 'missionary' usually meant a married couple. Narratives of the heroic individual male missionary occlude the significance of women, who were not necessarily subordinate to men either by action (performing key roles in mission enterprises) or numerically (for example, by the end of the nineteenth century, 60 per cent of the missionaries in the Punjab were female). As Cox has shown, 'a solid majority of all missionaries in the late nineteenth century were female', and in the gap between literary and historical portrayals and what missionaries were actually doing, might be found a variety of ways in which gender roles were being improvised according to the local settings within which they operated.
The early years of the Welsh mission provide ample evidence of the importance of women to the missionary project, and an acknowledgement of such in private and published literature and correspondence. Thomas Jones had addressed an emotional valedictory meeting in Rose Place Chapel in Liverpool on 4 November 1840: ‘Many (especially amongst the women) were weeping copiously’, recorded John Roberts, ‘and my emotions were so agitated, that in vain I tried to write down what my friend said with any consistency’. The Rev. John Hughes, Pontrobert, publicly addressed first the missionary, and then his wife: ‘And as for his wife, - if she receives assistance to learn the language, she can accomplish a great deal. She can support him mentally; she can be up when he is down, etc.’. The Revd. John Parry, Chester, was then called upon to address the audience:

Then the speaker turned his gaze upon the gallery, where the Missionary’s wife was sitting, and said, I can almost hear his wife saying, I am not a missionary, what is there for me to do? Go ye also, and teach - teach the women and children of Kassiah as much as you can; teach by your example; teach by being of every assistance to your husband. I truly think that you have a bit of the Missionary Spirit in you, otherwise you would not have married such a man who had decided to leave his country and friends.

While Ann Jones’ subordinate position is reflected in the seating arrangements (she in the gallery, he on stage), she is publicly accorded status as both companion and co-labourer. Indeed there is an expectation that she will indeed be more than just a helpmeet, and an acknowledgement that she is perhaps animated by a similar religious spirit, the zeal of the true missionary.

When the time for departure came, hundreds were at the Pier Head to see the ship setting off, ‘and many were the tears shed by men and women, as they bade farewell to our brother and sister, whose faces will very probably never be seen again by many of us, if not all’. A specially composed Welsh awdl—a heroic or epic poem in strict alliterative metre—was dedicated to the ’Revd. T. Jones and His Wife’, in which Ann Jones’ multiple positions as evangelist, missionary wife and feminine exemplar were explicit:

Mild weather and righteousness,
A fair wind to sail two people,
May the Lord harness his raging deeps,
two talented ones;
Go brave ones, O go for the sake of the good,
For one man, go to India....
May Christ be your rock, with your pure wife,
May the heavenly table be your courageous element
The radiance will make you joyful - for you
your need will truly drink the presence of the gospel,
Dear missionaries, flying - may you be
of a swift mind;
And may your catechism give the taste of the sweet salvation.
A special hymn was also composed, referencing the anticipated intervention of the missionaries in the native practices of child sacrifice and sati (though these were Hindu practices rather than rituals associated with Khali animist belief systems).

The Joneses set sail on 25 November 1840, arriving in Calcutta on 23 April 1841, a voyage of nearly five months. While the missionaries were at sea, mission secretary Roberts was still contemplating the role of the missionary wife. On 2 December he wrote to Church of Scotland missionary Dr John Wilson:

I gave a copy of the memoir to Mrs Jones some months ago, and have reason to believe that the perusal of it had been productive of much benefit to her. She told me that it would be in vain to expect ever to become so useful to her husband as Mrs Wilson had been to you, but that she would always endeavour to bear her example in mind, and to follow her steps as far as lay in her power.9

Wilson had been ordained in June 1828, had married a minister’s daughter Margaret Bayne in August, and within a month the newlyweds were en route to the missionary field in Bombay. Margaret Wilson was dead within five years, but far from disappearing from view, her missionary labour was celebrated by her husband in A Memoir of Mrs Margaret Wilson, of the Scottish Mission, Bombay; including extracts from her letters and journals, published in Edinburgh in 1840. This eulogy to her sacrifice, self-denial, and industry, though selectively edited and framed by a grieving husband, stands as an exemplar of the missionary wife not simply as adjunct ‘homemaker and friend’, but as a co-labourer of independent thought, spirituality, responsibility and action. Wilson’s Memoir was arranged as a textbook of the genre conventions of a pious life: the call to mission, the moments of self-doubt, spiritual challenge, isolation, disappointment, physical hardship. Like many other missionary women, Margaret Wilson ran schools for female education, establishing and supervising three in Bombay. The civilising and Christianising of women was for Wilson at the root of renewal.

She looked upon the females of this country, not only in the light of Christianity, as alienated from God, and devoted to the love and practice of sin, but, considered in regard even to ordinary civilization, as most unlikely, from their ignorance, the restraint and almost entire suppression of affections and tendernesses natural to them, their want of domestic and social virtues, to perform their part in informing the minds and moulding the characters of their children, or in soothing, comforting, counselling, and humanizing their husbands. The general state of native society, she clearly perceived, therefore, could never be improved while their education was neglected or only partially prosecuted; and, having traced the stream of corruption to its right source, she resolved, as far as her instrumentality was concerned, that an attempt should be made to stem it.10

If Margaret Wilson subscribed to ideals of British femininity and womanhood as the standard for her Indian sisters, she was disappointed in the conduct of her fel-
low countrywomen in India. Where she had mastered Maráthí, Hindustání, and was studying Portuguese, female society in general ‘is far from being so pure, or so influential, as it ought to be. Ladies are in general so early married, that they are almost *children* after they have had families; and most of them lead a life of complete idleness and dissipation’.11

While in India, Margaret Wilson lost a child, two of her two sisters drowned in an accident back in Scotland, and other colleagues in India succumbed around her to privation and disease. After (and perhaps because of) her death, she was constructed as a heroic missionary wife.12 Margaret Wilson died on 19 April 1835 (the Sabbath day), after enduring a long illness:

> When it was mentioned to her at one time, that the symptoms of her disease were thought to be not so formidable as they had been believed to be, she said, ‘I am sorry to hear it. I thought that I had been done with this evil world. My heart is now in heaven … the last words I heard from her lips were “THE KINGDOM OF THE SAVIOUR”.’13

William Carey’s Serampore mission had sent the young Scottish-born missionary James Rae to Assam in 1829. In 1835 Rae’s wife died in distressing circumstances, probably from tetanus, the symptoms of which included fever, spasms and lockjaw:

> In a helpless state, not able to call for anything or explain her wants. Just before her death he read to her John 14 & prayed. Afterwards asked her Hannah do you know what book this is? She stared wildly, took the book in her trembling hands, put it to her mouth and kissed it & embracing it in her bosom, she gave two heavy sighs and died.14

Ann Jones, on reading Wilson’s *Memoir*, may well have aspired to follow in the late Margaret Wilson’s footsteps, but must also have feared sharing her fate and the fate of other missionary women. The Joneses had arrived in Calcutta on 23 April 1841, and Ann had been unwell for most of the voyage. On 5 May she went into labor, and ‘continued in a deplorable state’ for three days:15

> when nature had made her last effort, she was delivered by instruments, (as the only chance of preserving her life) of a fine boy, which however by being dragged into the world with irons, was strangled on its way into this world of sorrows, and its spirit returned to God who gave it, before it knew any thing of the toils & troubles of time. On Sabbath morning its little body was laid in the Scotch burial ground, a hostage, I presume, that the grave in India must have many members, even of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist mission.16

By the time the couple reached their ultimate destination of Cherrapunji in June, Ann had only marginally recovered, and updates on the state of health were regularly published in the missionary newsletter *Y Drysorfa*.17 In October, Thomas Jones reported:
Mrs Jones is what one might call in fair health; the constant labours she has endured have caused her to remain weak, but I anticipate every day that she will be able to take more rest, and that consequently, her strength may be restored. For the sake of others, in case her illness discourages those who are thinking of following her, I think that it is quite proper for me to mention, that her illness cannot be entirely attributed to her coming to India, although it is true that this has made it worse; but I have no doubt that she would have suffered wherever she was.18

Ann Jones gave birth to a daughter on 10 February 1843, a child who this time was to outlive her. She gave birth to a son on 12 August 1845 (who died soon after), and herself died of wasting and fever on 22 August after terrible suffering. She had in fact scarcely been well since she had first arrived in Calcutta.

The possibilities for the domestic success of the Joneses as models for the natives of the Christian family were clearly frustrated by these circumstances. A later history of the mission simply records ‘the removal of one of the workers from her labours ... [who] did much quiet and effective work among the females, in spite of constant weakness and suffering’.19 The death of Ann Jones, however, was reported at length in Y Drysorfa, with commentaries on her sickness and last hours from Thomas Jones and his co-missionary William Lewis. The latter constructed her death in terms of her role to the end as dedicated mother and model Christian:

she asked to see her little boy; and when he was brought in she made a great effort to look at him; but the hand of the ‘King of Terrors’ was upon her, and her eyes had become too dim to be able to make out the lines of his face, ‘Well, well, well, (she said) it seems that I will not be able to recognise him here’...A few moments before she died I asked her if she was contented? and she replied ‘Yes’ and her spirit departed without a struggle...

For Jones the death of his wife elicited a more ambiguous commentary, and one constructed very much for public consumption, knowing as he did that his letters would be published back in Wales:

you may well imagine that I found it very interesting, and yet terrifying, to listen to her conversations and her words of advice from the brink of eternity! I am not so foolish as to think that my wife had no faults or blemishes; but I can venture to say that there has never been a woman so honest, simple, unostentatious, faithful and devoted to her husband and her Saviour. She so detested all forms of ostentation, pomp and affectation, and she saw so much of it around her, that she was never eager to mix much with other people.

In the light of later animosities between Thomas Jones and the Lewises, it is tempting to read his eulogy as being less about his wife and more as an avowal of his own views concerning his co-missionaries.

William and Mary Lewis had joined the Joneses in the Khasi Hills in 1843, accompanied by the Rev. Dr Owen Richards and his six-year old son Owen Charles.
Richards’ wife Maria Charles (granddaughter of the Rev. Thomas Jones, Bala, one of the leading figures in the establishment of Welsh Calvinistic Methodism) had died in 1836. Lewis and Richards had been ordained together at the Theological College at Bala, as had Thomas Jones, one of its first graduates, while Ann Jones was also a distant relation of William Lewis.

Where Ann Jones had been hampered by the frailties of the body in living up to the invocations of the mission board and the model furnished by Margaret Wilson, Mary Lewis quickly picked up the mantle. She was also unusual as a missionary wife in that she herself had no children. Grimshaw and Sherlock note that ‘Women’s daily work was relegated to the margins and divorced from the broader narrative of the establishment of missions, which centred on conversion and the nurturing of new churches’. This in part is, of course, a function, as they note, of the under-representation of women’s letters in mission archives. But in the figure of Mary Lewis, we have a missionary wife who comes to play a key role in the core business of the mission, and whose diaries and letters were published or preserved to the extent that we can place her everyday work in close connection to the establishment narratives.

In anticipating her own role in the Bombay mission, Margaret Wilson had been ‘appalled at the magnitude of the work’ and ‘my utter disqualifications for entering upon it’, though her self-perceived deficiencies as a woman were countermanded by her faith: ‘Though weak in myself, I go forth under the banners of Him who is mighty as the king of his Church’. On the voyage out to India in July 1842, Mary Lewis similarly articulated the multiple tropes of a paternalistic god, the missionary as his instrument and, self-deprecatingly, the missionary wife as helpmeet:

He will guide us over the vast expanse of waters and bring us safe to that haven to which we look forward as our place of destiny where I trust my dear William may be made an instrument in the hand of the Lord to call many sinners to Christ[,] now on leaving home it is my sincere wish to do all things to promote the happiness and comforts of one whom I trust will be a shining light in the dark regions of India[,] I often fear lest I should be a stumbling block in the way or a preventer to the widening of the Gospel in those parts where my Dear William intends becoming useful. I sometimes fear, I shall bring a reproach upon the missionary cause, as I know there is nothing in one suitable for this great office[,] neither am I in possession of those accomplishments necessary for this great field of labour, Yet I will cry to God he will help me.

Mary Lewis’s correspondence on the subject of her female school, and in particular the first female conversion of Ka Nabon, was also published in Y Drysorfa. Six of the first thirteen converts were female, and the Lewises maintained the importance of female conversion to the broader success of their mission:

When we remember what Khasian society is like, it is essential that a few women should turn to the Lord, and to his dear son Jesus, the Saviour of sinners. Where men and women live in close proximity, in a cottage not more than six to eight feet square, one could not expect decency; and we
cannot expect to improve the people’s morals to any extent if we do not succeed in teaching the women this virtue.23

There is an argument that Mary herself maintained the spirit of the mission through the years when her husband became despondent about its progress. She played a key role in the publication of the Khasi New Testament, and translated Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress into Khasi.24 Women’s letters may have been sent mainly to relatives, but here in the Welsh mission they also kept up a visible correspondence with the mission secretary. Their accounts of mission work, even if not published, were circulated amongst friends and read aloud at local chapel meetings as a critical means of raising home support for the mission.

When John Roberts, the secretary of the WFMS, sat in his parlour in Liverpool, he could therefore lift his eyes above the Bible on his lap and see mounted on the wall opposite a picture not only of Thomas Jones but also a likeness of his wife Ann. Like Mary Lewis after her, Ann was publicly respected as an integral part of the mission endeavour. ‘I need not tell you therefore’, he wrote to Thomas Jones in the Khasi Hills, ‘that not a single day passes without our thinking of you’.25 But if the missionary couple and family was a central axis of missionisation, then the Welsh mission is a textbook study of disequilibrium. The problems flowing from the death of Ann Jones and the fact that the Lewises had no children were compounded by a series of controversies that challenged ongoing negotiations about immorality and the meanings of masculine and feminine gender roles.

The Enlightenment theories of ‘barbarism’ and ‘civilisation’ that motivated the moral imperatives of the missionary society often depicted Indigenous women as semi-slaved, unwomanly or sexually precocious. A lithograph of two semi-naked Juang women, from a photograph of a supposedly naturalistic scene by Tosco Peppé, was reproduced in Edward Tuite Dalton’s 1872 Descriptive Ethnography of Bengal. There he characterised the population of Bengal under nine groups, including the hill tribes of the north-east frontier, of which the Khasis were one. In infantilised and sexualised representation of tribal women, their nakedness signifies primitiveness and indecency, and they and the other specimens in Dalton’s anthology are supposed the last remnants of their race within a ‘salvage paradigm’ of photography.26 Zahid Chaudhury has given an acute reading of this figure as a ‘fantasy of primitive innocence’, where the ‘positioning of a “primitive” woman’s hands on the breast and genital area of another native is not meant to detract, but adds to the cold scientific racial truth invested in the anthropological photograph’.27 Just as Jane Lydon has drawn out the dynamic relationship between the photographer and the Indigenous subject whereby the latter contested the objectification of the camera’s eye,28 so too Chaudhury reads resistance in the Juang girls’ demeanour. There are no images of Khasi women in Dalton’s work, though his descriptions hark back to those of the first Europeans to describe the Khasis. Of the natives during his 1837 visit, botanist William Griffith had ‘little to say’:

They are a stout-built, squat, big-legged hill tribe: the women in regard to shape being exactly like their mates; and as these are decidedly ugly—somewhat tartarish-looking people, very dirty, and chew pawn to profu-
The presence of missionary wives was therefore regarded as being critical to the education of Indigenous peoples and in particular the demonstration of gendered ideals. But while the presence of Ann Jones or Mary Lewis was calculated for their profit to the mission as evangelical role models exhibiting the virtues of domesticity, it could be little guarantee of moral stability on the mission station. The actual or imputed sexual improprieties that rocked the early years of the Welsh mission involved charges of sexual misconduct between missionaries and other European women on the station. The Rev. Dr Owen Richards was recalled to Wales in 1844 after allegations of improprieties with Lucy Marsh, the niece of local resident Lieutenant William Lewin, a case that brought to the surface palpable tensions between the Joneses and the Lewises. According to Richards:

Mr Jones would never mention Mr Lewis without endeavouring to lead me to speak ill of him. Mr Lewis would never mention Mr Jones without indulging in the same propensity. As I joined with neither, each supposed me a greater friend of the other than of himself, & thus became obnoxious to the designs of both.

Thomas Jones had initially welcomed the arrival of Owen Richards on account of the new missionary’s medical skills. While Richards vehemently defended the allegations made against him of any immoral conduct, the prospect of a relationship with Lucy Marsh may have been enticing, particularly as she was due to inherit 2000 pounds after the death of her father in 1843.

Ann Jones died in 1845, and the arrival in 1846 of a new missionary couple—Daniel and Anne Jones—was swiftly followed by his death from malaria, the death of their baby, and the return of Anne to Wales. Thomas Jones himself was expelled by the mission board in 1847 followed his remarriage to a fifteen-year-old Englishwoman, a liaison made much against the wishes of his co-religionists. Visual and textual representations, such as Dalton’s ethnographic images, may reveal what Europeans imagined about the savagery of Indian sexualities, but less notice has been taken of the fact that the moralities and sexual behaviours of missionaries cannot themselves be assumed to embody their religious or social protocols. Male missionaries may have sought to take advantage of social, sexual and pecuniary opportunities in the face of frustrations of the body, pocket and soul.

Attempting to monitor the far-off missionaries from his base in Liverpool, mission secretary John Roberts vainly mediated the internecine strife of his operatives, via mails that often took many months to arrive. To Mary Lewis, he again invoked the example of Margaret Wilson:

remember that if you give way to the temptation I have just alluded to, & fret and cry as you say you have been doing ever since your arrival in Cassea!, you not only run the risk of doing injury to your own health, but also weaken the hands of your husband,— to whom you should endeavour the rather, by cheerfulness & activity, to be a helper in the arduous work
wherein he is engaged. One would almost think from the strain of your letter that you regretted having left your native country, & wished to return; but I trust you will have thought better of it, and made up your mind to devote yourself with all energy to the fulfilment of the duties which have devolved upon you as a Missionary’s wife. I would recommend you to read Mrs Wilson’s memoirs, & strive to imitate that excellent lady so far as your abilities & opportunities allow.33

The mission field was an intense emotional landscape, the site of desire, separation and loss, for men as well as women. It is also a fruitful place to observe ideas and practices of masculinity and fatherhood, so crucial to the evangelical theology of the period where ‘the idea of God’s fatherhood provided a language and imagery with which to delineate relationships of accountability and responsibility both within the system of divine governance and within earthly familial networks’.34 The advice of the Rev. John Hughes, Pontrobert, to Thomas Jones on his departure was embedded with this paternal idea of God:

There is a great necessity for a missionary to show much affection to those amongst whom he labours; to be friendly and cheerful and yet to keep his distance. Not all missionaries are sufficiently humble in this regard; but hopefully our brother will be very praiseworthy in this regard; - he will show great love to the people, although there will be nothing in them which will call for anything but pity for their souls.35

Children were born and children died with regular monotony through the early decades of the British military station and the Welsh mission at Cherrapunji. Such mortality affected men’s identities as fathers, as breadwinners and as moral leaders who saw their roles as being to educate, protect and discipline.36 Many of them were young men embarking on married life at the same time as a new career, and had been set loose from an intensely hierarchical world in Wales where the old lions of their religion still very much held sway. Both Thomas Jones and William Lewis had married within months of sailing for India. After losing their respective wives, Owen Richards and Thomas Jones were also forced to renegotiate their domestic circumstances in a milieu that restricted their social circle, but also freed them to some extent from the social pressures and expectations of home. As Strange notes, ‘the death of a wife and mother was thought to precipitate the disintegration of domestic economy and the splintering of the nuclear unit’.37 Ideas of masculinity, femininity and fatherhood, were reworked as the conditions of family life were subjected in the Khasi Hills to isolation as well as a sense of freedom, and confirmed or tested by native contact.38

The isolation of a far-flung mountainous hill district like the Khasi Hills is displayed in the correspondence between Emma Shadwell and four of her children, who in 1862 had been sent to England in the care of an aunt to be educated. Emma was the wife of John Bird Shadwell, the Assistant Commissioner in the Political Agent’s Office at Cherrapunji. Her letters give an indication of the ebbs and flows of social life on the station, and of the particular isolation of personnel on the farthest Indian frontier. In November 1865 she reported that a Lieutenant Gregory had
passed through Cherrapunji on his way back to North Cachar: ‘He & another Lt are the only English persons in that place & when he came in on his way to Cherra he said I was the first lady he had seen since last March so he is more lonely out there than we are here’. Her separation from her children extended from months to years. No sooner did she receive photographs of her children in the mail, than the wet climate reduced them to moulded scraps. Where other mothers could take their children on the usual social rounds, a few days after Christmas in 1864 Emma Brockway tucked the paper substitutes of her Emma, St Clair and Howard under her arm as she went visiting:

you all look so sweet in the Album. I am going in a day or two to take you all over to visit Mrs Cattell, the old lady will be so pleased to see you on Saturday evening at Miss Buists’s she was looking very well I told her I had your likenesses she was pleased to hear that you are well.

Despite the earnest expectations of Emma and John Shadwell that their family would soon be together in England, the children were never reunited with their mother, who died at Jowai in the Khasi Hills in 1870.

The controversies and divisions of the first decade of the Welsh mission, far from compromising the success of the missionary enterprise, may well have enabled the flourishing of oppositional and syncretic forms of Christianity, which strengthened rather than weakened the process of proselytisation. Despite his perceived transgressions, which had him effectively expunged from mission history, Jones’s reputation has been rehabilitated by Khasi Christians and more latterly by the Welsh Presbyterian Church itself. Jones’s behaviour was clearly antagonistic to the understandings of respectability, sexual propriety and Christian brotherhood that were professed by his co-workers and by the mission board in Wales. Such a reading is reflected most acutely in the view of Daniel Jones’s wife Ann, who in 1847 wrote disparagingly to Mary Lewis of Thomas Jones’s marriage to the youthful Emma Cattell:

He said that providence had so highly favoured him in providing him such a partner. He said also that she would be the glory of our mission, and a great many more glaring untruths beside which are not worth naming. I do not know how the man can be so presumptuous towards his faithful brethren ... He told them that he never was so happy before, and that he felt himself many years younger ... I pity the poor natives who are under their pretended instructions.

An alternative version demonstrates a variant rendering of Jones’s character and influence. Deviations from the norms of missionary precepts and Victorian morality have in more recent times been mobilised in the service of the Khasi cultural and political revival that followed the inauguration in 1969 of Meghalaya as an autonomous region, and its subsequent achievement of full statehood in 1972. In this narrative, according for example to Rymbai in 1978, the death of Thomas Jones’s wife and his subsequent ‘unmissionary activities’ and alienation from the church which had sent him, were less a failure of mission and more a profound revelation
about the true nature of Indigenous Khasi social structure and spirituality—monothestic, matrilineal, communal:

The acquisition of this new knowledge convinced Thomas Jones that the Khasi-Phars excepting their primitive economy ... and barring their want of written literature, were not savages at all as missionaries back home were told before they ventured out east, but very cultured and highly civilised people. From then on he devoted his time more to the improvement of their economy than to the so-called betterment of their souls by way of proselytisation.[43]

The inflection in this reading is less on the missionary who has become immoral and thus more savage, than on the so-called savage who has become more civilised. The Welsh mission provides a rich field in which to explore the complex relationship between missionaries and colonial regimes, particularly if we are alert to the well-established axiom that ‘colonial and missionary activities must not be treated as though one were merely a branch of the other’. But within this dynamic, ‘missionary’ cannot always be reckoned as expressing unanimity of belief or concordance of action. While Evangelical missionaries were disturbed by the gender arrangements of non-Christian populations, and while they prescribed particular expressions of masculinity and femininity when it came to sexuality, marriage, labour and childcare, the core Protestant evangelical worldview of gender and family was put under immense strain by the forces of isolation and the lived needs of men and women who struggled to prosper in exceptional social and cultural circumstances. The actuality of the life of the mission station leads to other possible readings of the experiences and outcomes of the mission both for the individuals concerned, and for the complex inheritance and meaning of the mission for Indigenous peoples.

Endnotes

1 See brief discussion in Andrew Brown-May, ‘Collision and reintegration in a missionary landscape: the view from the Khasi Hills, India’ in Collisions of Cultures and Identities: Settlers and Indigenous Peoples, eds Patricia Grimshaw and Russell McGregor (Melbourne: History Department, University of Melbourne, 2006), 141-161. See also Peggy Brock, ‘New Christians as Evangelists’ in Missions and Empire, ed. Norman Etherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
4 Patricia Grimshaw and Peter Sherlock, ‘Women and Cultural Exchanges’ in Missions and Empire, 173-193.
6 Ibid.
7 Jeffrey Cox, Imperial Fault Lines: Christianity and Colonial Power in India, 1818-1940 (Stanford University Press, 2002), 5.
8 Y Drysorfa, Supplement, 15 December 1840, 385-92. Welsh original tr. Sylvia Prys Jones (as are all subsequent extracts).
9 John Roberts to Dr Wilson, 2 December 1840, National Library of Wales (NLW), Calvinistic Methodist Archive (CMA) 28720 Letter Book of General Secretary, Vol. 4, 1840-43.
10 John Wilson, A memoir of Mrs Margaret Wilson, of the Scottish Mission, Bombay; including extracts from her letters and journals (Edinburgh, 1840), 235.
11 Margaret Wilson to her sister, Bombay, 29 November 1834 in Wilson, A memoir of Mrs Margaret Wilson, 513.
12 The literary rendition of deathbed scenes provides a frame with which to examine not only Christian models of the good death and the ways missionary heroism is employed as propaganda for a home audience, but also a liminal moment where gender roles as well as notions of public/private are reformulated. For a reading of Euro-American missionary descriptions of Christian Indian deathbed scenes for their historical and cultural specificity, and as evidence of syncretic spiritualities, see Erik R. Seeman, ‘Reading Indians’ Deathbed Scenes: Ethnohistorical and Representational Approaches’, The Journal of American History 88, no. 1 (June 2001), and Richard Bell, ‘“Our people die well”: Deathbed scenes in John Wesley’s Arminian magazine’, Mortality 10, no. 3 (August 2005), 210-23.
13 Wilson, A memoir of Mrs Margaret Wilson, 600-01, 604.
14 Notes from Periodical Accounts of the Serampore Mission, NLW, CMA 27,159 Correspondence (1903-24) and material relating to The Story of our foreign mission by John Hughes Morris.
15 John Roberts to Jacob Tomlin, 5 July 1841, NLW CMA 28720 Letter Book of General Secretary, Vol. 4, 1840-43.
16 Thomas Jones, Calcutta to John Roberts, 11 May 1841, NLW CMA 5898 (copy).
17 Thomas Jones to John Roberts, Cherrapoonjee, 28 July 1841, Y Drysorfa, Rhif CXXXI, Llyfr XI Tachwedd (November) 1841, 345-49.
18 Thomas Jones to John Roberts, Cherrapoonjee, 8 October 1841, Y Drysorfa, Rhif CXXXIII, Llyfr XII, Ionawr (January) 1842, 28-30.
21 Wilson, A memoir of Mrs Margaret Wilson, 94.
23 Y Drysorfa, Rhif CLXIX, Llyfr XV, Tachwedd (November) 1845, 347-8. GOOD NEWS FROM KHASIA! Excerpts from a letter sent by the Revd W. Lewis, Khasia, to the Secretary of the Overseas Missionary Society, dated July 31, 1845.
25 John Roberts to Thomas Jones, 29 September 1841, NLW CMA 28720 Letter Book of General Secretary, Vol. 4 1840-43.

30 Examples from other mission fields involved sexual misconduct between European or native Christians and Indigenous peoples. See for example Erlank, ‘Sexual Misconduct and Church Power’.

31 Owen Richards, Cherrapunji to the Rev. Lewis Edwards, Bala, 2 April 1844, NLW CMA 4713.


33 John Roberts, Liverpool, to Mrs Lewis, 28 February 1844, NLW CMA 27222.


37 Julie-Marie Strange, “‘Speechless with Grief’: Bereavement and the Working-Class Father, c1880-1914’ in *Gender and Fatherhood*, 146.

38 The seclusion of the mission station, with its compound mirroring a rural model where the spheres intermixed, might have been more familiar to Thomas Jones the miller’s son from rural Montgomery, than to William Lewis, a tailor’s son from urban Manchester.

39 Emma Shadwell, Jowai to her daughter Emma Shadwell, 3 November 1865, letter in private possession of V. Loesch, London.

40 Emma Shadwell, Cherra Poonjee, to her daughter Emma Shadwell, 26 December 1864, letter in private possession of V. Loesch, London.

41 In a predominantly Hindu country (80.5 per cent at the 2001 census), where Christians are a small minority of the population (2.3 per cent), Meghalaya has the third highest percentage of Christians (70.3 per cent), behind Nagaland (90 per cent) and Mizoram (87 per cent).

42 Ann Jones to Mary Lewis 21 July 1847, 4 August 1847, NLW CMA 27221.
