Reclaiming the women of Britain's first mission to West Africa. Three lives lost and found. By Fiona Leach. (Studies of Religion in Africa, 47.) Pp. xx + 448 incl. 21 colour and black-and-white ills. Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2019. €239. 978 90 04 38711 9; 0169 9814

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In the modern history of Christianity in Africa, Sierra Leone plays a significant role as the hub of missionary activity by freed Africans and their children across West Africa. From the 1840s a Christian culture developed in Freetown and was intentionally spread further afield through people of African heritage settling in Freetown from North America, the Caribbean and England from 1792 and, from 1808, being rescued from slaving ships by the British Navy. This book does not examine this story of Christian expansion. Rather it focuses on the missionaries of the Rio Pongas mission, often regarded as an unsuccessful footnote to Christian history, and the gruelling conditions of early Freetown from 1804 to 1826. It is a history of mission as misunderstandings, unwise decisions, compromise, hubris and flawed humanity. Particularly, it focuses on lives obscured by their gender: three women who were married to the early German missionaries of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), two of whom were white British and one a black woman who had been born in America.

From scant sources Leach painstakingly reconstructs the lives of Sarah Hartwig (1773–1815), Elizabeth Renner (d. 1826) and Suzannah Klein (1769–1825) to demonstrate their role in the educational aspects of missionary work and their attempts to support their husbands and, often, to hide the worst of their husbands' defects. The use of a biographical approach effectively keeps women and their concerns at its centre when the weight of evidence prioritises the actions and opinions of men. Leach's excellent pen-sketches and pithy turn of phrase make this large and complex book a pleasure to read. Leach deftly navigates the intricacies of the wider context of Sierra Leone and the London headquarters of the CMS to produce history with a strong and compelling narrative. The selection of women's letters in the appendices provides excellent primary source material for teaching. The list of *dramatis personae* at the beginning is also an accessible guide.

The Rio Pongas was an area about 100 miles from the British jurisdiction that held sway in Freetown. Abolitionist missionaries were increasingly dragged into the culture of slavery which surrounded them, entangling themselves with slave traders and their children, even as the abolitionist cause grew stronger at home. They were attempting to create societal change through Christian preaching and bible translation – about which we hear little in this book – and also education – about which we read much more, since the main female characters were involved in it. The missionaries were poorly equipped to respond to the situations they found themselves in and their work had little impact on local people. When British forces intervened to burn the slave factories after the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807, the mission stations became targets of attack. The governor Charles McCarthy persuaded missionaries to give up their dreams of influencing the Susoo people and return to Freetown. There McCarthy organised them to work in parishes to help resettle the large numbers of sick and disoriented re-captives that landed on the coast. Again, they were ill-equipped for the task. However, the support of missionary wives ensured the men were more effective than they might otherwise have been.

Missionary wives died in childbirth and from sickness. Sarah, Elizabeth and Suzannah[1] did not have children and lived longer than many. They navigated a hostile climate, violent attacks on mission stations, schools that were under-resourced and husbands who made poor decisions and succumbed to drink and, in Sarah's husband's case, a 'country wife'. Elizabeth had the most profound influence on an education system that provided different curricula depending on gender, and also on class. The schools became reliant on some pupils doing more manual labour than others. Some pupils were sent to school accompanied by an enslaved person to serve them. This, says Leach, was a case of gender and class ideologies being 'imported unmodified into colonial Africa' (p. 226) as a result of the European missionaries' commitment to the superiority of their 'civilisation'. Leach does not make clear why these ideologies were appealing to those whose children were sent to the schools. Nor is it clear how these aspirations could have remained 'unmodified' when the schools were under-resourced, fragile projects influenced by the expectations of those they were attempting to serve. One assumes that the class hierarchies brought from Britain were bolstered by the priorities of a slaving society that, for all its support by certain British individuals and institutions, was not the same society as in Britain. Further explanation of the societies in which the missionaries found themselves are crucial for the writing of cross-cultural history and would have illuminated the processes of amendment and adaptation.

Through the figure of Elizabeth Renner, Leach comes some way towards studying the resettled African population, yet the available sources do not fully explain the culture developing in Freetown and what the appeal of 'civilisation' may have been for Elizabeth. The challenges of the fragile settlement and its effect on Europeans are abundantly clear, but the roots of the more prosperous and stable African community that was emerging from the late 1820s are less so. Some short background descriptions of the slaving communities along the Rio Pongas would have been helpful to place in a wider context of slavery the immediate concerns of the book. Leach finds little sympathy with the life decisions that they took, even as she understands the way in which their ability to make those decisions was limited by the patriarchal society in which they lived. This critical stance obscures their motivations and aspirations. In the same way as Leach reconstructs the gender and education expectations within which they lived, some insight into the propulsion of Evangelical Christianity as a motivational force may have allowed empathy for awkward personalities who cannot always command our sympathy. These criticisms, however, are not substantial. Leach's book is a primarily a gender history. It uses limited sources with great sophistication and insight, and has a narrative flair that belies tenacious research.

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[1] First names are used throughout the book so husbands and wives are not confused.

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