



Book Review

Linda and Robert Banks, *They Shall See his Face: The Story of Amy Oxley Wilkinson and her Visionary Blind School in China* (Sydney: Acorn Press, 2017), pp. xii + 164, ISBN 978064751977.

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This is a missionary biography of Amy Oxley Wilkinson, an Australian Anglican woman who worked for the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in the Fujian province of China between 1896 and 1921. It is a companion piece to the authors' earlier account of another Australian CMS missionary: Sophie Newman, Amy's contemporary in Fujian (*View from the Faraway Pagoda*, 2013, also from Acorn Press, the imprint of the Australian Bible Society). The present book, like its predecessor, is based on extensive research in mission and state archives, mission and secular newspapers, family letters, as well as being informed by recent scholarly historical work on Australian religion and on Christianity in China.

Amy came from a distinguished New South Wales family. Her maternal great grandfather was the pioneer missionary Samuel Marsden. (He was born in Farsley, West Yorkshire, England where this reviewer grew up.) Amy trained as a nurse and volunteered for medical work at Foochow [Fuzhou], and arrived in the immediate aftermath of the 1895 murder of CMS missionaries and their children at the mission of Kucheng, in rural Fujian. This was one of a series of anti-foreign protests which culminated in the Boxer uprisings in northern China in 1900. Oxley became involved, almost by accident, in the care, rehabilitation and education of blind boys, many abandoned or mistreated by their families. Her School for Blind Boys – called in English 'the Soul-Lighted School' – flourished, and was widely recognized, not least by the new Republican government in China (after the 1911 revolution) as an important contribution to China's modern healthcare. In 1920, she was awarded the Order of the Golden Grain by the Chinese government.

In 1902 Amy had married an English CMS doctor, George Wilkinson. He developed the hospital work at Foochow and became particularly noted for his treatment of opium addiction. In 1921, largely because of the educational needs of their two children, they left China and settled in London, where they continued to have particular concern for the Chinese community in the Lime House area of East London. Amy died, aged 81, in 1949; her husband in 1951.

This book is primarily of interest for the light it sheds on the social origins of missionaries, and on the importance of, and lively interest in, foreign mission among Australian Anglicans. Amy's furloughs were widely reported in the press, and she had access to a range of prominent figures in Australian political and cultural life. Amy commented on the ironic parallel between the nativist attitude to foreigners

manifested by the Boxers, and the xenophobia of the White Australia policy of the newly created Commonwealth of Australia (p. 57). Both Amy and her husband were strongly influenced by the Keswick holiness movement, and were keen to inculcate a personal faith and strong devotional spirituality among their Chinese converts. But Amy had wider concerns for the economic livelihood of blind people as adults – her school aimed to provide a strong academic education, and to teach economically useful craft skills. The music training of the school and its band was particularly commended.

Amy was no puritan, mildly complaining that the family wedding trousseau contained too many old-fashioned clothes, and that necessities like quality underwear were notably absent (p. 68). Intriguingly, and reflective of her own high social status, she was careful to inform her family that her husband was *not* an ‘honorary missionary’ (i.e. not like those missionaries, from rich families, who from the 1880s began to offer their services at their own expense, to CMS or the China Inland Mission).

This book is a valuable contribution to missionary biography but this reviewer was rather disappointed at the comparative lack of insight it revealed on the missionary task in China, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. There is comparatively little on the nature of Fujian Anglicanism, its ideals, its problems. Moreover, I would have welcomed a more careful analysis on the development of Western educational theories about teaching the blind, how they were applied in China, and to what effect. The use of Braille, and the formidable difficulties of applying it to Chinese orthography is hinted at, but not explained in any detail. It is clear, from the moving stories of rescue, that blindness was an enormous problem, a catastrophe, for families in Fujian. Amy claimed that ‘Confucianists, Taoists, and Buddhists do nothing for the blind; they leave them to die or beg or earn their living by fortune-telling’ (p. 109). This statement needs to be explored and problematized, and put in a wider religious and social context. There is little on the subsequent lives of the blind boys – it would be useful to know the extent to which Amy’s hopes that her boys would lead productive lives in adulthood were realized. And what about blind girls? Why was a similar school for girls not possible or practical? Were social attitudes to blind girls significantly different from that of boys? Did Amy herself comment on this discrepancy, and, if not, what does one make of the silence?

Amy herself was a strong, independent woman, who regretted being demoted to ‘missionary wife’ on marriage, even though this did give her more freedom to develop her work among the blind. More on the place of women, married and single, in the mission culture of the time would have been welcome. What emerges from the story is that missionaries, male and female, at this period had a strong conviction about the superiority of the Christian message and Western civilization over what they saw as a failing Chinese culture. The Wilkinsons left China in 1921, at a time when these perceptions were only just beginning to be challenged.

This book is aimed at a Christian audience, who will certainly be enlightened about the strengths and problems of the missionary encounter with other cultures and civilizations. Understandably, it has its limitations as an account of the Chinese response to the Christianity brought by the missionaries. But the continued value of the blind school in contemporary China is indicated by the fact that Xi Jinping

himself, when party secretary in Fuzhou in the 1990s, supported the building of a new campus for the Blind School, a fitting memorial to the enduring work of Amy Oxley Wilkinson.

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