

# **Lilith: A Feminist History Journal**

**Nos. 17 & 18, 2012**



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***Lilith: A Feminist History Journal*** is the journal of the Australian Women's History Network.

First published in Melbourne in 1984, *Lilith* is a peer-reviewed journal which publishes articles in all areas of women's, feminist and gender history. It is a valuable forum for both new and established scholars.

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ISSN: 0813-8990

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## **Editorial**

This issue sees the re-launching of *Lilith* after a hiatus of five years—reinvigorated and reconfigured but continuing the journal's tradition of pushing new directions in historical research. It is in fact nearly 20 years since the first issue of *Lilith* appeared and over this time it has been a unique forum for promoting scholarship in women's, gender and feminist history. It has been particularly valuable as an outlet for postgraduate and early career researchers to publish their first work (alongside established academics). Many who are now leading scholars in this field had their earliest publications in *Lilith*.

This is not the first time that *Lilith* has been revived. Its history as a postgraduate-run journal has been its strength, but has also meant that periodically the Editorial Collective has not been able to maintain continuity. *Lilith* has now, however, been adopted as the official journal of the Australian Women's History Network. We hope that this affiliation will provide a supportive infrastructure and ensure its stability. But, as in the past, *Lilith* will be produced by a collective of postgraduate students and early career researchers. This current issue, we hope and expect, will be the only exception.

The contents of this issue were drawn together from a range of sources. The five (peer-reviewed) articles in the first thematic section emerged from papers presented at the 2011 Symposium of Australian Women's History Network on 'Utopian Visions'. It also includes a set of discussion essays originally presented at the 2008 US Social Science History Association conference, on Judith Bennett's book *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism*. The final section republishes (invited) papers from a forum that originally appeared during *Lilith's* brief existence as an online journal (and this is why the current issue has dual numbering). The website for the never completed *Lilith* no. 17 expired, and so too these articles disappeared. It is wonderful that Margaret Henderson's important article, 'Wonders Taken for Signs', and the valuable responses from Ann Genovese and Zora Simic, are now available again.

Finally, on a personal note, I'd like to take the opportunity to thank everyone who has been involved with *Lilith* over the years. And in stepping down, I would like to wish the new Collective every success as they forge ahead with the journal. I'm sure they will produce outstanding results!

Jane Carey

# **'I had more children than most people': Single Women's Missionary Maternalism in Arnhem Land, 1908-1945**

Laura Rademaker, The Australian National University

## **Abstract**

*This article will consider how single missionary women of the Church Missionary Society in Arnhem Land in the early twentieth century established themselves as mothers of Aboriginal people. It opens with a discussion of how fears of imperial decline shaped expectations of motherhood. British women were to ensure the future of 'the race' through motherhood. It then discusses the evangelical belief in children's need for special attention with regards to the widespread understanding of Australian Aborigines as a 'child race'. Finally, the article looks at contemporary discourses of adoption. The article concludes that missionary work presented single women with an opportunity to express maternal care according to white, evangelical values. In their attempts to fulfil the role of the caring, Christian mother, however, the single women delegitimised Aboriginal motherhood. Despite good intentions, missionaries established their alternative family at the expense of Aboriginal families.*

7<sup>th</sup> May 1914. Went across to the camp tonight with Mr Warren. There are quite a crowd of natives there again. Daly Rivers baby is back & is nearly dead, starved. We told Nora to bring him over for food & I will try & see what I can do for it.

8<sup>th</sup> May. The new baby came over today—poor little thing. It has been starved ... Have let him go back to the camp tonight—but I think I will keep him altogether.

10<sup>th</sup> May. My baby is getting on very nicely. I never saw such an improvement in one week in a child before.

11<sup>th</sup> June. This evening there was a lot of talking in the camp & Bob wanted to take his baby. Poor little thing I am afraid it would not last long in the camp. Mr Joynt brought Bob over here to see it asleep in my room & he went off satisfied. It is very doubtful if it will get better but it certainly would have no chance in the camp.

16<sup>th</sup> June. Have not looked at my diary for a few days. The poor little baby died this morning. I would have liked to have seen him get better but God knows best.

24<sup>th</sup> June. Another week gone. Have not felt very well & have missed the baby.

## *Rademaker: Materialism in Arnhem Land*

27<sup>th</sup> June. For the first time since I came I feel I would like to get away for a few days & yet I don't think any time that things have been smoother than now nor have I been happier in my work. It is so strange to feel so depressed. I have missed the baby.<sup>1</sup>

These extracts are from the diary of a single missionary woman named Mary Crome, who was stationed at Roper River mission with the Church Missionary Society (CMS). The CMS is an evangelical Anglican society which established three such missions to Aborigines in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory in the early twentieth century.

Crome's writing about a nameless Aboriginal baby suggests that maternalism was integral to being a female missionary. Crome constructed herself as a mother, calling the child 'my baby'. Crome saw no need to investigate why the baby was starving. Perhaps this level of material deprivation was common, given the number of Aboriginal people near the mission who had fled settler violence in their own traditional country.<sup>2</sup> From Crome's perspective as the missionary, she had come to save the lives of such poor children and, it seems, she simply presumed that any Aboriginal child would be better off under her care. The sense of Crome's grief on the baby's death is overwhelming. As a nurse, she was familiar with suffering, yet the baby's death made her consider leaving the mission altogether; it threw her entire missionary project into question. Was it not God's will for her to rescue and nurture the child? 'Rescuing' children by becoming their mother, it seems, was fundamental to her conception of a missionary woman.

This article is concerned, therefore, with women missionaries and their self-identification as mothers. Mission historian Nancy Lutkehaus coined the term 'missionary maternalism' in her study of Papua New Guinean missions. She argues that missions were predominantly 'maternal' in nature due to their focus on the socialisation of children and the development of 'inner' moral qualities as opposed to the 'paternal' colonial state.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Barbara Ramusak, in her study of British women's humanitarian work in India, argues that these women were not so much 'cultural imperialists' as 'maternal imperialists'. They saw themselves as Indians' mothers.<sup>4</sup>

Yet most missionary women were not mothers. In the first decades of the twentieth century, hundreds of single white women were flocking to missionary work. In Australia at this time most United Aborigines Missionaries (UAM) were single women.<sup>5</sup> Unmarried women also made up over two thirds of Aborigines Inland Mission missionaries from 1905 to the 1930s.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the CMS in Australia was overwhelmed with single women; between 1892 and 1931, around fifty per cent of its missionaries were single women.<sup>7</sup> Despite the predominance

of single women in the mission field, the study of their role has hitherto been neglected in mainstream mission histories.

Since the 1970s there has been a gradually increasing interest in the history of gender and missions, including single women.<sup>8</sup> Firstly, Jane Hunter argued that mission work presented single American women with an opportunity for autonomy outside marriage.<sup>9</sup> Looking at early nineteenth-century Women's Missions, Ulrike Sill argued that women's presumed motherly and domestic qualities (believed to transcend biological motherhood and thus attributable even to childless women) provided an ideological rationale for their work.<sup>10</sup> Connie Shemo and Beth Baron, who are also concerned with missionary maternalism, have written on single American women and adoption, and Wendy Urban-Mead has discussed the mother/son relationship between a single missionary woman and African converts.<sup>11</sup> They agree that the missionary experience was quite different for single women and that their work has been a major component in the global mission project. In the Australian context, Alison Longworth has revealed that single women missionaries to Aborigines have been largely forgotten by historians but are still remembered by Aboriginal communities.<sup>12</sup>

Yet single women missionaries' lives present historians with a wealth of ambiguities and complexities about gender and empire to explore. Unlike their married counterparts, single women chose missionary work of their own initiative, associating with the 'heathen' without a husband's leadership or protection. Single women implicitly challenged conservative feminine norms through their independence and childlessness to such an extent that Elizabeth Prevost suggests calling this movement 'missionary feminism'.<sup>13</sup> In light of these implicit challenges, it seems unlikely that so many otherwise conservative single women would feel called to missions. Margaret Jacobs was astounded that so many white Australian women who 'upheld motherhood as a sacred institution' supported the removal of Aboriginal children from their families.<sup>14</sup> I am interested, firstly, in what it was about missionary work to Aborigines which produced this bias towards unmarried women and secondly, how missionaries could revere motherhood but endorse the destruction of Aboriginal families. This article will argue that through the classification of all Aboriginal people as 'children' and through the construction of missionaries as adoptive parents, missionary work presented single white women with an opportunity they otherwise lacked: to model white Christian motherhood.

In particular, this article looks at Mary Crome and May Dove, CMS missionaries in 1913—1935 and 1923—1946 respectively. Crome was a hard worker and a qualified nurse, born in Northcote, Victoria in 1874. She began at Roper River mission, aged 39.<sup>15</sup> Her diary reveals how she sank into depression during her first two years on the station. Missionary work was often lonely and monotonous for single women. Slowly she learned to find satisfaction in her

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work. She married fellow missionary Alfred Dyer in 1917. May Dove came to missionary work at Groote Eylandt, aged 34. From 1923 until 1933, the Groote Eylandt mission was almost exclusively focused on the upbringing of children of mixed racial descent. The 'stolen children' on Groote Eylandt had been brought to the mission from all over the Territory.<sup>16</sup> Dove had a reputation for being difficult and strict, but her close friends called her affectionate and compassionate.<sup>17</sup> She was born in Heathcote, Victoria, and also previously worked as a nurse. She spent most of her missionary years on Groote Eylandt and never married.

At the CMS missions in Arnhem Land, those who spent the most time in 'maternal' roles, teaching and caring for the mission children were childless women. Crome wrote in her diary how busy she was 'getting my children's things all along' for a picnic day.<sup>18</sup> According to her, domestic chores were 'family washing & mending'.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, Dove called the mission children 'our' children.<sup>20</sup> She and the children 'were a big family, seventy seven in all'.<sup>21</sup> The single women organised 'family' activities for the children. Crome adored their picnics and described them in detail: who came; what they ate; what games they played.<sup>22</sup> The missionaries would even invent birthdays for the children just to hold a party.<sup>23</sup> Crome seemed so delighted on Christmas Day because, by preparing the presents, she had made the children happy and, under her motherly care, they were all well behaved.<sup>24</sup>

The single women missionaries genuinely seemed to love the Aboriginal children. Crome loved going 'walkabout' and playing with the girls, describing them as 'very loveable and so funny at times'.<sup>25</sup> Dove also described the children fondly. She knew them by name, their favourite colours, their interests, and kept in touch years after retirement.<sup>26</sup> She later explained that Connie, a mission girl, was 'the most beautiful child she had ever known'.<sup>27</sup> The other missionaries also spoke highly of how the unmarried missionary women looked after the children with firmness and affection. One reported that 'although [Crome] was strict with the girls ... you could just feel the love that she had for them'.<sup>28</sup> Another described the attention which Dove and another single missionary woman gave to the children on Groote Eylandt, constructing their work in terms of motherhood. The single women:

spent all their time with the Aboriginal children from the time they were infants right through till they were say 20, and they gave them personalised attention and they taught them to play the organ and two or three of them became teachers. They taught them all the necessary hygiene and how to care for themselves.<sup>29</sup>

The single women's motherly identity was informed by contemporary discourses of motherhood and Empire. According to postcolonial historian Nira Yuval-Davis, social understandings of women's reproductive roles have been linked to

nationalist discourses: to understand constructions of motherhood, historians should consider national or colonial identities.<sup>30</sup> In this case, fear of imperial decline meant suspicion that British 'stock' was not as healthy or virile as in days past.<sup>31</sup> The future of the Empire would depend on mothers.

Eugenicists hoped that the 'better classes' would take up the vocation of motherhood for the sake of the 'imperial race'.<sup>32</sup> In the early twentieth century, the declining birth rate across the Empire provoked widespread concern about 'race suicide'.<sup>33</sup> The 1903 NSW Birth Rate Commission concluded that the decline was primarily due to increasing selfishness among middle- and upper-class women (Australia's best 'stock') who rejected motherhood.<sup>34</sup> In 1904, therefore, the *Medical Gazette* recommended an Australian propaganda campaign advocating motherhood as a social responsibility for upstanding women. Women who marry seeking 'the gratification of the sexual passion without the responsibility of motherhood' were 'no better than a mistress or prostitute'.<sup>35</sup> The Australian Government introduced a 'universal' maternity allowance in 1912 to encourage motherhood. The allowance excluded Aboriginal and Asian women; only a particular type of motherhood (white) was desirable.<sup>36</sup>

Environmentalists, on the other hand, argued that 'nurture' could also prevent imperial decline.<sup>37</sup> In Australia, feminist writer Maybank Anderson argued that gaols 'might be scrapped ... if only mothers would understand their duty and learn how to do it'.<sup>38</sup> Proper motherhood would solve national social problems and produce upstanding citizens because, in her view, mothers were responsible for character development.

Motherhood, therefore, became both a high social calling and a role that required training in ethics and science. As Catherine Arnup explains, in the early twentieth century, 'maternal instincts alone would no longer be sufficient'.<sup>39</sup> Christian women rallied to equip each other in motherhood through the Australian Mothers' Union of the Church of England, whose membership reached 10,000 in 1930.<sup>40</sup> Scientists, feminists and government officials alike advocated the training of women in mothercraft so that they could produce the best possible outcome for their children.<sup>41</sup> The National Council of Women of Australia in 1914 passed a resolution for compulsory domestic training for girls.<sup>42</sup> Even Anderson, who defended women's right to choose to remain childless, advocated compulsory mothercraft training for all women.<sup>43</sup>

If motherhood required certain training and aptitude, it could be dangerous for women lacking in moral fibre or education to become mothers: this would put the advancement of both the Empire and the human race at risk. This ideology had profound implications when applied to Indigenous peoples. Given Aborigines' supposed 'poverty' and 'heathenism', Aboriginal women were presumably ill-equipped for motherhood. Aboriginal gender relations, polygyny and child-marriage were depraved in European eyes, rendering Aboriginal

marriage invalid and the position of Aboriginal mothers questionable.<sup>44</sup> Historian Susan Thorne puts it succinctly: 'such degraded women, it was presumed, could not contribute to their family's moral development'.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, the social Darwinist idea that Aborigines were an inferior race, destined soon to die out, necessitated the belief that Aboriginal women must be inferior mothers. Since the future of the British race supposedly depended on mothers, then logically, the 'demise' of Indigenous people must be the fault of Aboriginal mothers.<sup>46</sup>

The CMS missionaries adopted these assumptions. Dyer observed that 'the Aboriginal child bosses his parents' and that 'boys spit on and kick their mothers'.<sup>47</sup> He had observed traditional Aboriginal parenting in Arnhem Land, which involves a high indulgence of children's wishes until puberty.<sup>48</sup> Yet to the missionaries, this was evidence of parental incompetence. Dove copied entire paragraphs from *Christianity and the Race Problem* (1925) in her notebook. Aboriginal women's questionable moral character would, in her mind, stunt the children's proper development:

The domestic environment of a half-caste population is, as a rule, adverse to healthy growth. Such a population is in many cases the offspring of illicit union and the children grow up without any home. The social environment is often equally injurious both physically and morally.<sup>49</sup>

Not all single women missionaries denied that Aboriginal motherhood could make a positive contribution to children's development. In the 1930s, UAM missionary Mary Bennett advocated fostering Aboriginal family life, but she was a notable exception.<sup>50</sup>

In light of the perceived discrepancies between Aboriginal and British motherhood, it took only a short logical leap for missionaries to describe Aboriginal children (especially children of mixed descent, born out of 'illicit relationships') as orphans, even when their parents were still living. Crome described 'poor little Tommy' as 'worse than motherless and fatherless'.<sup>51</sup> Another CMS missionary explained that 'the half-caste children weren't altogether part of the Aboriginal family'.<sup>52</sup> According to Dyer, children of mixed descent were 'orphans' because the 'much sinned against' mother would certainly be unable to provide adequate maternal care.<sup>53</sup> Dove also wrote that children who grew up on Groote Eylandt had 'no parents. On the mission they received all we can give them to make up for the loss of parents'.<sup>54</sup>

Dove was aware that many of the children's mothers lived at Roper River mission. According to Majorie Hamilton, a 'stolen child', the missionaries occasionally brought her mother to the island to visit her.<sup>55</sup> According to the CMS, mothers were allowed to visit the children on Groote Eylandt, and some children spent school holidays with their mothers at Roper River.<sup>56</sup> Yet, to Dove, they effectively had no parents and some caring woman such as herself had to

remedy that lack. By claiming the role of surrogate mother thus, she also claimed that the white Christian home was the only wholesome environment.<sup>57</sup>

With these paradigms of Aboriginal and British motherhood in mind, contemporary notions of Aboriginal 'childishness' also underpinned the missionaries' maternal focus. Much of white Australia called Australian Aboriginal people a 'child race'.<sup>58</sup> In the Northern Territory, it was common to refer to grown Aboriginal men as 'boys'.<sup>59</sup> The CMS missionaries also ascribed to this way of thinking, explaining that adult Aborigines were 'like children'.<sup>60</sup> The Women's Non-Party Association even congratulated the missionaries in 1934 for treating adults as 'only children'.<sup>61</sup>

Anglicans blended these evolutionary notions of an underdeveloped people with the Christian belief in children's need for special attention and value. For example, in 1906 the Anglican Bishop of North Queensland, Bishop Frodsham, quoted a Biblical text ('despise not one of these little ones') to advocate humanitarian action in North Australia.<sup>62</sup> CMS missionaries were convinced that Aborigines' 'childlikeness' would make them more receptive to the Christian gospel, giving further impetus for their evangelistic efforts. Missionary Stanley Port explained, for example, that:

These primitive people ... are accepting in faith the Life eternal, which our Heavenly Father holds out to all His created beings, regardless of class or colour, by a simple faith.<sup>63</sup>

In holding this conviction, the missionaries disregarded popular social Darwinist presumptions that Aborigines were unable to comprehend religion. The CMS missionaries did not refute this by insisting that Aborigines were of equal intelligence to themselves. Rather, they believed that a 'simple' faith was sufficient for conversion. Despite the intended emphasis on racial equality, Port's statement does not deny notions of cultural and racial hierarchy. To him, Aborigines remained 'primitive people', saved only by God's grace.

Furthermore, Anglicans felt that Aborigines' supposed childlikeness engendered a special closeness to God. They expected ministry to Australian Aboriginal people to be more fruitful than to non-Indigenous people. In fact, they sought to imitate Aborigines' 'simple faith'. As Frodsham explained:

The promise of Christ to all His little ones has been realised with great power in this race of children—for, compared with us, the blacks are in the infancy of human civilisation, and that many are nearer to Christ than I am myself.<sup>64</sup>

Although a spiritual blessing, Aboriginal 'childlikeness' also prevented cultural advancement and made them prone to error. What the Aborigines lacked, in missionaries' minds, was a Christian parent to channel their childlike innocence into Christian maturity. In 1938 a CMS newsletter explained:

The crying need of the Aborigine is a consecrated Christian parent ... because the Aborigine is still a child. This is the reason why the task of the CMS does not finish with the presentation of the Gospel to this primitive race. We must teach them, not how to earn a living but how to live.<sup>65</sup>

Historian Fiona Paisley writes that at the turn of the century the development of the individual from childhood to adulthood was understood as an 'evolutionary trajectory' reflecting the development of the human race from primitivism to civilisation.<sup>66</sup> For instance, Anderson described children's personal development in terms of human evolution, saying that children are dominated by the 'primal instinct' until mothers bring them into maturity.<sup>67</sup> This intersection of the discourses of mothers as the key formative influence in the child's life and notions that all Aboriginal people were effectively 'children' provided a space for missionary women. Missionary mother figures were responsible for the evolution of a 'child race' into adulthood.

Moreover, in a society that saw mothers as the moral backbone of the family, single missionary women were most qualified to mother Indigenous people. They were well versed in Christian ethics. They were seen to excel in 'feminine' virtues: compassion, piety and selflessness. Their singleness was evidence that they were more virtuous than a biological mother; where the *Medical Gazette* criticised wives who enjoyed 'sexual passion without the responsibility of motherhood', the CMS women willingly sought motherly responsibilities and apparently denied themselves any sexual gratification.<sup>68</sup> Such women were presumably qualified to provide moral guidance to a 'child' race.

In a culture that exalted motherhood as a norm and duty for women, it is understandable that these single missionary women were eager to take on a motherly role. It was an avenue to personal fulfilment. Motherhood was expected to be women's chief source of happiness. Anderson, for example, spoke of 'the void which can only be filled by the fresh love of children'.<sup>69</sup> In her history of adoption in the USA, Julie Berebitsky explains that at this time adoption was an avenue for childless women to fulfil their full potential and satisfy their natural maternal longings.<sup>70</sup> Adoption was becoming increasingly popular in the early twentieth century. In the USA the 'Child-Rescue' adoption campaign was an overwhelming success, placing 2,000 children in families between 1907 and 1911. Adoption was positive for the 'rescued' child, the mother who gained an opportunity to love, and the nation, which was spared a potential delinquent.<sup>71</sup>

Perhaps the unmarried CMS women sought to fill the 'void' that they were presumed to feel by constructing the relationship between themselves and mission children in terms of an adoptive relationship. One CMS official wrote that 'the members of [Dove's] adopted family loved and respected her'.<sup>72</sup>

Margaret Somerville, a single missionary at Croker Island Mission, emphasised the personal fulfilment she gained from her 'adopted' mission children. She also felt compelled to defend the validity of adoptive motherhood; it was important to her that people saw her as a real mother:

I had more children than most people had. I worked out really at one time that I had about thirty children go through my cottage ... and really it was a wonderful time in my life.<sup>73</sup>

Missionary adoption was also informed by Christian theology. Evangelicals believed that the Christian, with 'childlike faith', is transformed from a slave to an heir as he/she is spiritually 'adopted' by the 'Heavenly Father'. The spiritual family was thus more profound than transient biological families. In light of this, the unmarried CMS women 'adopted' Aboriginal people into their 'spiritual' family. Crome saw a direct link between her divine adoption as a 'daughter of God' and her maternal relationship with mission children. Recounting a sermon, she believed that God's graciousness to her obligated her to treat Aboriginal children likewise:

I loved how we are the sons of God—our privileges as children, sons & daughters of God, our responsibilities as such. The children are so loveable I just feel many a time like picking them up & kissing them.<sup>74</sup>

On another occasion, she recorded a private spiritual experience: 'a voice sounded "take these children & nurse & I will give thee thy wage"'.<sup>75</sup> The voice quoted the Biblical Egyptian princess' request referring to baby Moses in the Passover story. As the story unfolds, it is evident that Moses' royal adoption was God's preparation for Moses' leadership in the Exodus. Crome found a parallel between baby Moses and Aboriginal children like the Daly Rivers baby. She hoped likewise that by her adoption the 'little chap would be a blessing to his own people' and, perhaps, like Moses, redeem them from oppression.<sup>76</sup> She expected that as in Biblical times, God would save through adoption and maternal care. In this way, their maternal relationship had the ultimate objective of Aboriginal people converting to Christianity. Adoption and motherhood was her vehicle for evangelism.

This 'adoption', however, served also to acculturate the Aboriginal children to missionary norms and so could be justified quite apart from evangelistic objectives. Gerry Blitner, for instance, was taken to Groote Eylandt when he was only four. In his oral history he explained that he was 'brought up in the Word of God, in the right manner'. Yet he insisted, 'the missionaries didn't convert me, "so-and-so" didn't convert me, MY MOTHER converted me'.<sup>77</sup> Blitner's mother was a Christian, presumably as were the mothers of a number of mission children. Evidently, Christian conversion was not the only concern driving single women's adoption. Rather, the acculturation of the children to white norms (understood to be achievable through providing

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maternal care and discipline) also provided impetus for such 'adoptions'. Thus, 'adoption' was an avenue for unmarried white women to fulfil their ideal of Christian femininity and, despite their childlessness, to epitomise white motherhood.

Adoption was not a foreign concept to Aborigines at the missions. In many Aboriginal societies, children's 'other mothers' (aunts and grandparents etc.) contribute to parenting.<sup>78</sup> For example, in the Andbara in community in Arnhem Land, female siblings participated in girls' upbringing and betrothal.<sup>79</sup> Anthropologist Gillian Cowlishaw is sceptical about 'the myth of multiple mothers', explaining that the relationship between biological mother and child is unique.<sup>80</sup> In many Aboriginal societies, however, it is normal for children to call multiple women 'mother'.<sup>81</sup> The mission children were also 'adopted' by the Warnindilyakwa people on Groote Eylandt and incorporated into their kinship system.<sup>82</sup> The missionaries' approach to adoption, however, was fundamentally different to Aboriginal tradition. Perhaps Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land saw the missionary women's relationship with 'stolen' children in terms of 'adopted kin'. The single missionary women, however, did not assume the position of simply 'another mother'. As discussed earlier, they denied the validity of Aboriginal parents, calling their children 'orphans'.

From our twenty-first century perspective, we see the CMS women's zeal to adopt Aboriginal people as tragically misplaced. Ironically, while valuing the parent-child relationship as a heavenly gift, missionaries facilitated the destruction of Aboriginal family relationships. Bill Harney, who visited the mission at Groote Eylandt, was one of the few white people to write about mothers' experiences:

[A] child would be taken away and great would be the wails which came from the camp. Blood would flow from the head of the mother, as she gashed it with stick or stone in anguish for her lost child ... That mother still yearns for her lost one and carries little bits of its clothes around in memory for her child.<sup>83</sup>

The discrepancy between Harney's account of Aboriginal mothers and missionaries' accounts is particularly interesting. Although the CMS missionaries were rarely directly involved in the removal of children from their parents, they were certainly aware that families were separated.<sup>84</sup> Despite this, they rarely acknowledge the mothers' experiences. When asked if there was any resistance from mothers, one CMS missionary answered, 'not that I know of ... one of the mothers wanted her children back again. That was all'.<sup>85</sup> He later admitted it was 'rather cruel in a way' to take children away because although they 'weren't altogether part of the Aboriginal family ... the mothers seemed to like them'.<sup>86</sup> To him, the mothers displayed a fondness for their children, but could not be considered real family. To acknowledge the mothers' loss would challenge the

children's constructed identity as 'orphans', undermining the legitimacy of missionary 'adoption'. Crediting some degree of agency to Aboriginal mothers could indicate that perhaps their mothering was valid. For the viability of the mission agenda, therefore, missionaries ignored Aboriginal motherhood.

## **Conclusion**

Missionary women's childlessness and singleness did not constitute a rejection of traditional white Christian motherhood. Through engaging in missionary motherhood, a single white woman could perform the work of what she envisaged as a 'true' Christian woman. It allowed childless women to direct their supposed natural maternal instinct to 'uplifting' the 'heathen'. The single woman's mission experience thus promised the prospect of transforming her into an idealised (white) woman. While, at least on paper, CMS's sole mission was 'the evangelisation of the world in this generation',<sup>87</sup> the unmarried missionary women pursued an additional mission: to confirm their self-conception as a 'real' motherly Christian white woman.

Furthermore, to women who had little chance of marriage or children, missionary work promised a taste of the warmth and affection of motherhood. Through 'adopting' Aboriginal children at missions, women like Crome and Dove could love children as if they were their own and hope to be loved in return. Single white women, therefore, were ideal for missionary work. Whereas missionary societies required mother figures to care for and ultimately evangelise Aboriginal people, unmarried evangelical women looked for a tangible way to express their faith and to realise Christian womanhood without the domestic sphere. The process of the 'stolen generation', therefore, can be better understood in light of single white women's search to fulfil their personal longings, femininity and spirituality.

But these women turned to missionary duty to fulfil their maternal desires, to the extent that they over-identified as mothers of other women's children. Thus, it was not motherhood that the women rejected but Aboriginal motherhood.<sup>88</sup> In missionaries' minds Aboriginal women were too childlike to rear children. Hence, by establishing themselves as mothers of Aboriginal children, missionary women also established themselves in maternal position over all Aboriginal people, both young and old. Although Aborigines could come to Christ by a 'childlike' faith, the single women's assumption of the maternal role ensured that there was no such equality between black and white at the missions.

It is easy to criticise the missionary women's maternalism, but historians should also remember that, although caught up in imperial ideology, some missionaries truly cared for Aboriginal children at great personal cost. Part of the tragedy of the 'stolen generation' is that the mission mothers seemed genuinely

to seek what they perceived to be the children's best interests. A number of Aboriginal people who grew up on the missions described the single white women fondly, even as mother figures.<sup>89</sup>

Yet the single CMS women's mission to confirm their conception of white femininity obscured their ability to fully appreciate the priorities, feelings, values and experiences of Aboriginal mothers and children. Despite their compassionate concern, by pursuing that mission, the single CMS women judged Aboriginal mothering and families to be less valid. Alongside the other missionaries, the ramifications of the judgement of these single white women continue to be felt in Aboriginal communities and families today.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Crome Diary in Rev Alfred Dyer Records relating to mission life in Northern Australia (hereafter Dyer papers), NTRS 693, Item 11, Northern Territory Archive Service (hereafter NTAS), Darwin.

<sup>2</sup> John Harris, 'Creoles—New Languages and an Old Debate', *Journal of Christian Education*, no. 85 (1986), 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy C. Lutkehaus, 'Missionary Maternalism: Gendered Images of the Holy Spirit Sisters in Colonial New Guinea', in *Gendered Missions: Women and Men in Missionary Discourse and Practice*, ed. Mary Taylor Huber (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1999), 208.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Ramusack, 'Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India. 1865—1945', in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, ed. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 120, 133.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 12; Catherine Bishop, '“A Woman Missionary Living Amongst Naked Blacks” Annie Lock, 1876—1943' (Australian National University, 1991), 22; Susan Thorne, 'Missionary Imperial Feminism', in *Gendered Missions: Women and Men in Missionary Discourse and Practice*, ed. Mary Taylor Huber (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1999), 39-66.

<sup>6</sup> Bishop, '“A Woman Missionary”', 23; O'Brien, *God's Willing Workers: Women and Religion in Australia*, 142.

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Piggin, *Evangelical Christianity in Australia: Spirit, Word and World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 72-73.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Grimshaw & Peter Sherlock, 'Women and Cultural Exchanges', in *Missions and Empire*, ed. Norman Etherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 173.

<sup>9</sup> Jane Hunter, *The Gospel of Gentility: American Women Missionaries in Turn-of-the-Century China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), xvi, 79.

<sup>10</sup> Ulrike Sill, *Encounters in Quest of Christian Womanhood: The Basel Mission* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 53.

<sup>11</sup> Connie A. Shemo, '“So Thoroughly American”: Gertrude Howe, Kang Cheng and Cultural Imperialism in the Women's Foreign Missionary Society, 1872—1931'; Beth Baron 'Nile Mother: Lillian Trasher and the Orphans of Egypt' and Wendy Urban-Mead 'Faith, Empire and Gender in Colonial Rhodesia, 1899—1906' in *Competing Kingdoms: Women, Mission, Nation, and the American Protestant Empire, 1812—1960*, ed. Barbara Reeves-Ellington, Kathryn Kish Sklar, and Connie Anne Shemo (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Alison Longworth, 'In Loving Memory of Mary Belshaw, May McRidge, and the Nyungar People of the Badjaling Mission, 1930—1954', *Journal of Religious History* 31, no. 1 (2007), 117, 128.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Prevost, *The Communion of Women: Missions and Gender in Colonial Africa and The British Metropole* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2-5. See also Judith Godden, 'Containment and

Control: Presbyterian Women and the Missionary Impulse in New South Wales, 1891—1914', *Women's History Review* 6, no. 1 (1997), 75 and Deborah Kirkwood, 'Protestant Missionary Women: Wives and Spinsters', in *Women and Missions: Past and Present. Anthropological and Historical Perceptions*, ed. Fiona Bowie, Deborah Kirkwood, and Shirley Ardener (Oxford: Berg, 1993), 41.

<sup>14</sup> Margaret D. Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia 1880-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), xxix-xxx.

<sup>15</sup> 19/9/1913 Crome Diary.

<sup>16</sup> For this reason, I have not been able to use more specific clan or language-group names to refer to Aboriginal people.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Harris and Joy Harris, *The Field Has Its Flowers: Nell Harris* (Darwin: Historical Society of the Northern Territory, 1998), 42.

<sup>18</sup> 13/4/1914, Crome Diary.

<sup>19</sup> 8/12/1913, *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Handwritten notebook, E.I.M (May) Dove Personal records collected whilst a mission in Northern Australia and in Victoria (hereafter Dove papers), NTRS 685, Item e, NTAS.

<sup>21</sup> Keith Cole, *Groote Eylandt Stories: Changing Patterns of Life among the Aborigines on Groote Eylandt* (Melbourne: Church Missionary Society Historical Publications, 1972), 53.

<sup>22</sup> 12/11/1913, Crome Diary.

<sup>23</sup> John W. Harris, *We Wish We'd Done More: Ninety Years of C.M.S. and Aboriginal Issues in North Australia* (Adelaide: Openbook, 1998), 339.

<sup>24</sup> 25/12/1913, Crome Diary.

<sup>25</sup> 22/11/1913 & 2/1/1914, *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Notes on children taken from Roper River to Groote Eylandt, Dove papers, Item g.

<sup>27</sup> Margarey Harris, May 1987, in Harris, *We Wish We'd Done More*, 374.

<sup>28</sup> Harris & Harris, *The Field Has Its Flowers*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Len Harris, NTAS NTRS 226 TS 64.

<sup>30</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Nationalism, Feminism and Gender Relations', in *Understanding Nationalism*, ed. Monserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 123.

<sup>31</sup> Marie C. Stopes, *Mother England: A Contemporary History* (London: John Bale, Sons & Danielsson, 1929), 178, M. A. Budd, *The Sculpture Machine: The Physical Culture and Body Politics in Age of Empire* (New York: New York University, 1997), 101.

<sup>32</sup> Katherine Arnup, *Education for Motherhood: Advice for Mothers in Twentieth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 38.

<sup>33</sup> Marie de Lepervanche, 'Women, Nation and the State in Australia', in *Women Nation State*, ed. Nira Yuval-Davis (London: Macmillan, 1989), 46.

<sup>34</sup> Carol Bacchi, 'Evolution, Eugenics and Women: The Impact of Scientific Theories on Attitudes Towards Women 1870—1920', in *Women, Class and History: Feminist Perspectives on Australia 1788—1978*, ed. Elizabeth Windschuttle (Melbourne: Fontana Books, 1980), 147.

<sup>35</sup> Editorial, 'The Declining Birth Rate' *Australasian Medical Gazette* 21/3/1904 cited in *ibid.*, 148.

<sup>36</sup> de Lepervanche, 45.

<sup>37</sup> Julie Berebitsky, *Like Our Very Own: Adoption and the Changing Culture of Motherhood, 1851—1950* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2000), 28-29.

<sup>38</sup> Maybanke Anderson, *Mother Lore* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1919), 11.

<sup>39</sup> Arnup, 36.

<sup>40</sup> Piggin, 81.

<sup>41</sup> C.W. Saleeby, *Woman and Womanhood: A Search for Principles* (New York: Mitchell Kennerly, 1911) pp.171-173, cited in Arnup, 37.

<sup>42</sup> Bacchi, 143-144.

<sup>43</sup> Anderson, 12.

<sup>44</sup> See Ronald Berndt and Catherine Berndt, 'Body and Soul: More Than an Episode!' in *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions: Ethnographic and Historical Studies*, ed. Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose (Bedford Park: The Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1988), 53.

<sup>45</sup> Thorne, 54 & Jacobs, 87-88.

<sup>46</sup> Jessie Mitchell, 'Flesh, Dreams and Spirit: Life on Aboriginal Mission Stations, 1825—1850 a History of Cross-Cultural Connections' (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2005), 200-201.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Alf Dyer to 'Co-Workers/CMS', 29/10/1933, CMS Unarmed Expedition A452 1953/106, National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA), Canberra; Diary—Book 3 Peace Trip, Dyer papers, MSS 2545, Mitchell Library (hereafter ML), Sydney.

<sup>48</sup> Gillian Cowlshaw, 'Socialisation and Subordination among Australian Aborigines', *Man* 17, no. 3, 495 & Annette Hamilton, *Nature and Nurture: Aboriginal Child-Rearing in North-Central Arnhem Land* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1981), 100.

<sup>49</sup> Handwritten notebook, Dove papers. See J.H. Oldham, *Christianity and the Race Problem* (London: Student Christian Movement, 1925), 147.

<sup>50</sup> Fiona Paisley, "'Unnecessary Crimes and Tragedies': Race, Gender and Sexuality in Australian Policies of Aboriginal Child Removal", in *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernity*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Routledge: New York, 1999), 136.

<sup>51</sup> 3/2/1915, Crome Diary.

<sup>52</sup> Harry Leslie Perriman and Barbara Blackman, Interview with 103 year-old H.L. Perriman, mechanical engineer, about his experiences as a missionary on Groote Eylandt, largest island in the Gulf of Carpentaria [sound recording] 2006.

<sup>53</sup> 'Native Characters', Various Typed Manuscripts relating to Groote Eylandt & Roper River 1933—1959, Dyer papers, item 13.

<sup>54</sup> Handwritten notebook, Dove papers.

<sup>55</sup> Cole, *Groote Eylandt Stories*, 57.

<sup>56</sup> Church Missionary Society Submission 453 quoted in *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Enquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Canberra: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

<sup>57</sup> Jacobs, 88.

<sup>58</sup> *The Argus*, 19/10/1933, A452 1953/106, NAA.

<sup>59</sup> Alan Powell, *Far Country: A Short History of the Northern Territory* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press: 2000), 133.

<sup>60</sup> Perriman and Blackman.

<sup>61</sup> Letter from Blanche Stephens of the Women's Non-Party Association to the Hon J.A. Perkins, Minister for the interior 2/4/1934, A452 1953/106, NAA.

<sup>62</sup> Frodsham, Bishop of North Queensland quoted in 'Report of the Church Congress Held at Melbourne, 19<sup>th</sup>—24<sup>th</sup> November, 1906' (Melbourne: The Church Congress, 1906), 122.

<sup>63</sup> Stanley E. Port, 'Report of the Roper River Mission for the Year ended 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1934', Roper River Mission NT A659 1941/1/1118, NAA.

<sup>64</sup> Frodsham, quoted in 'Report of the Church Congress Held at Melbourne, 19<sup>th</sup>—24<sup>th</sup> November, 1906' (Melbourne: The Church Congress, 1906), 120.

<sup>65</sup> 'The Open Door' Church Missionary Society of Australia and Tasmania 1/2/38 in Harris, *We Wish We'd Done More*, 100.

<sup>66</sup> Fiona Paisley, 'Childhood and Race: Growing up in the Empire', in *Gender and Empire*, ed. Philippa Levine, *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 240.

<sup>67</sup> Anderson, 16, 57.

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<sup>68</sup> Bacchi, 148.

<sup>69</sup> Anderson, 12-13.

<sup>70</sup> Berebitsky, 52, 56.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>72</sup> Miss Emily I. May Dove, MSS 6040 CMS Australia Administration Federal Office, Series 3, Box 25, ML.

<sup>73</sup> Oral history interview Margaret Somerville, NTRS 226, TS 713, NTAS.

<sup>74</sup> 16/11/1913, Mary Crome Diary.

<sup>75</sup> 3/2/1915, *ibid.* Crome quoted Exodus 2:9-10. A crucial difference between the Biblical story and Crome's actions is that the Princess entrusted Moses to his biological family until adolescence when he went to Pharaoh's household for education. NTAS NTRS 693 Item 11 3/2/1915; Item 18.

<sup>76</sup> 8/5/1914, *ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Gerald Blitner, interviewed by Martin Thomas [sound recording] 2007, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>78</sup> Ronald Berndt and Catherine Berndt, *The First Australians* (Dee Why: IPC Books, 1974; 3rd Edition), 49.

<sup>79</sup> Annette Hamilton, 'The Role of Women in Aboriginal Marriage Arrangements', in *Women's Role in Aboriginal Society*, ed. Fay Gale (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1978), 31-32.

<sup>80</sup> Cowlshaw, 498.

<sup>81</sup> Hamilton, *Nature and Nurture*, 92.

<sup>82</sup> Blitner.

<sup>83</sup> W. E. Harney, *North of 23 Degrees: Ramblings in Northern Australia* (Sydney: Australasian Publishing Company, 1946), 153-154.

<sup>84</sup> Most children were delivered to the missions by the police or pastoralists. Harris maintains that 'there is no evidence that any missionaries ever forcibly removed any child from its family'. The missionaries did, however, separate children from their mothers at Roper River and take them to Groote Eylandt. Whether the mothers consented is debatable. See Harris, *We Wish We'd Done More*, 359.

<sup>85</sup> Oral history interview H. L. (Les) Perriman, NTRS 226, TS 102/4, NTAS.

<sup>86</sup> Paisley, "Unnecessary Crimes", 141.

<sup>87</sup> Oral history interview with Bobby Randal, NTRS 226, TS 779, NTAS & Ruth Hegarty, *Bittersweet Journey* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2003), 2.

<sup>88</sup> 6/11/1913, Crome Diary.

<sup>89</sup> Keith Cole, *Groote Eylandt Pioneer* (Melbourne: Church Missionary Historical Publications, 1971), 2.