

THE MISSIONARY WOMEN IN THE INLAND OF AUSTRALIA AND THE AUSTRALIAN INLAND MISSION AS REPRESENTED IN BETH BECKETT'S LIFE MEMOIR

Evi Eliyanah

(evielianah_rozi@yahoo.com)

Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia

Abstract: This article looks at the gender dimension of religious missions administered by the Presbyterian Church in the inland Australia as represented in Beth Beckett's life memoir written in 1947-1955. It is aimed at obtaining general ideas on the involvement of women, as the wives of missionaries, Focusing on the experience of Beth Beckett, it argues that her position as a wife of a missionary is problematic: on the one hand she did transgress the traditional idea of staying-home wife by choosing to travel along with her husband, but at the same time, she was still bound by the domestic side of the job.

Key words: Australian Inland Mission, Beth Beckett, Memoir, Gender

This article critically examines the gender dimension of the missions administered by the Presbyterian Church in the inland of Australia, known as the Australian Inland Mission (AIM). Looking at the role of women, especially the missionary wives in the missionary process: the roles they took up and their agency in being involved in the mission, the essay focuses on the experience of Beth Beckett, an ex-AIM-nurse married to a patrol padre. Critically analyzing her memoirs, written in 1947-1955, the article offers general ideas on the involvement of women, as the wives of missionaries, in the mission field during the mid twentieth century. Bringing together the thoughts and ideas poured in the writings on women and the mission enterprise in the British colonies, the

memoirs will be scrutinized in terms of women agency and women's specific roles on the mission.

Maynard (2005) links (European) colonization projects closely to the evangelization or Christian conversion of the heathen subjects. It has been believed that besides the attempt to control the resources or land, the colonizers also assumed the holy mission to spread the Gospel among the colonized that were considered heathens and requiring salvation. Australia as one of the British colonies has also been the terrain of evangelization by many Christian Missions. Many mission societies, such as the London Mission Societies (LMS), Wesleyan Methodist and the Presbyterian Church established missions in the areas. John Maynard argues that the settler colonizers considered that evangelizing the indigenous would civilize and save them from being the doomed race. Despite the initial good intention, the ideas of European superiority deeply undermined the works of the missions.¹

However, since the establishment of Australian Inland Mission (AIM), pioneered by John Flynn, missions were not only conducted for the sake of the natives, but missions were also considered important to be conducted to address the spiritual needs of the white settlers, especially those living in the out-back. Beth Beckett summarizes that there are three essential and complementary services provided by the AIM: education, health and patrol of ministers (Beckett 1998). Targeting the lonely and scattered people, consisting of government officials, police, station managers, drovers and stockmen adds up to the already immense workloads of the AIM personnels (Anonymous 1934).

The AIM established the position called patrol padre to serve the religious needs of the settlers. According to Beckett, basically this patrol of ministers was responsible for the spiritual welfare of settlers living in their parish (Beckett 1998). Yet, a patrol padre is different from other ministers of religion; he had to travel along his parish to serve his community, instead of staying in the church and waited people to come to him. The first patrol padre for the AIM, Rev. Bruce Plowman (1992), also indicated in his stories that he had to spend most of his time on the track to preach the gospel as well as to meet the need of

¹ John Maynard, "'Light in the Darkness' Elizabeth McKenzie Hatton," in *Uncommon Ground: White Women in Aboriginal History*, ed. Anna Cole, Victoria Haskins, and Fiona Paisey (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2005). p.3

the community, even such as hair cut.² Besides dealing with the spiritual needs of the white settlers in the outback, the missions also initiated the efforts of building health centers in the inland of Australia and established the first flying doctor service. Sidney Kidman, in the foreword written for one of Ion Idriess' books (1932), states implies that the life in the outback had been made more possible with the availability of health centers as well as the flying doctor services established by the AIM. The health centers built by the AIM had broken the isolation and loneliness of the outback.³ Thus, due to its unique nature, studying the AIM missions is considered worth doing.

Throughout the article, I argue that as a missionary's wife, Beth Beckett was not officially commissioned to the mission by the mission societies. However, she possessed the agency to be actively involved in her husband's public works. From that point, she has never been hesitant to address the mission work as belonging to both her husband and herself, instead of only her husband's. Yet, her position is problematic: on one hand, she transgressed the general idea of stay-home wife of missionary by traveling along with her husband and calling the one-ton truck her home, but at the same time she was still bound with the domestic side of the mission – the division of labor between her and her husband was still based on the stereotypical idea of sex roles. She no longer addresses work of domestic nature as theirs but she assumes full responsibility by indicating that it is her job to deal with such category of works. In conclusion, despite her agency to willingly assist her husband's public roles as a patrol padre, it does not mean that she also took up the public roles. She was still relegated to the domestic sphere of the mission. She had never been involved in the public decision making process.

METHODS

The analysis of Beth Beckett's memoir presented on this article is a result of content analysis. Placing the text in its context, Australian colonization by the European, the analysis attempted to deconstruct the idea of women involvement in Christian mission as liberation. Applying the qualitative approach

² Bruce Plowman, *The Man from Oodnadatta: Stories by the First Patrol Padre to the Australian Inland Mission, 1912-1917* (Wangaratta: Shoestring Press, 1992), p.3

³ Ion L. Idriess, *Flynn of the Inland* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1932).

to the analysis, as suggested by Krippendorff (2004), the analysis method is as follows.

First, the text, the memoir, was closely read. During the close reading, the analyst posed questions as to who says what, to whom, why, to what extent and with what effect. Secondly, the analysts rearticulate the meaning deconstructively by delineating the context, relating the context to the text and finally making inferences.

Gender and the Mission Enterprise in the British Colonies: A Context part 1

Since the establishment of Christian missions in the colonies, the efforts to convert the colonized subjects had been dominated by men missionaries. Ministers of religion, in this case Christian, were sent to the colonies, such as Africa, Asia and certainly Australia. Despite the fact that historians have not been able to delineate the exact correlation between the evangelization process and the colonization process, Norman Etherington (2005) believes that the two are indeed linked. They might not be closely linked, but they are related in the larger drama, such as “the spread of modernization, globalization, and Western cultural hegemony”. Much stronger than Etherington, Anna Johnston (2003) argues that in the case of the European colonization, missionary activities took a central role, especially in providing the colonizers with the sense of justice and moral authority.⁴ In other words, the evangelization activities in a sense granted them the license to intervene in the internal affairs of other countries. With the evangelization activities undergone in the colonies, they seemed to confirm the colonizers’ belief that the colonized deserved intervention in order to be civilized. The colonizers set up the example of civilization, which in this case was measured through theological practice. The practice of non-Christian religion was considered heathenism and required salvation. Therefore, as argued by Bronwen Douglas (2001), intervention was considered required to save the heathen subjects from degradation.

Rhonda Anne Semple (2003) argues that the notion of gender is closely linked with missionary practices. In a sense the gender notions operating in re-

⁴ Anna Johnston, *Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). p.13

ligion not only shaped the recruitment process of female missionaries, but also shaped the rhetoric of the mission, “women’s work for women”.⁵ In other words, the colonizers’ view on the treatment of women in the indigenous communities, which had been considered inappropriate in the Christian teachings, had given them license to intervene. Furthermore, since it was considered that only women could understand and address other women’s needs, recruiting women missionaries to deal with the problems of indigenous women was believed to be the best way to take. Therefore, women missionaries were considered important to civilize the heathens.

However, the advancement of women in the missionary enterprises cannot be separated from the efforts which had been contributed by the missionary wives who inspired the mission society to recruit women missionary. Jane Haggis (2003) argues that the missionary wives had initiated, developed and promoted the women’s work in mission enterprises.⁶ Despite the fact that they were not officially commissioned as missionaries, Patricia Grimshaw and Peter Sherlock (2005) argue that these missionaries’ wives were expected to contribute efforts in advancing the mission. Through their works, these women had made the mission societies realize the need of employing women in the evangelical mission to convert the heathen subjects as well as to spread the ideas of ideal femininity in the colonies.

Despite the significant contribution of these missionaries’ wives for the mission, Grimshaw and Sherlock (2005: 174) argue that efforts exercised by these women were often represented as anomalous. They have been under-represented in the historical archives. First of all it is because they were not officially commissioned by the mission societies. They were to help their husbands’ in the works. Secondly, it is because their correspondences were generally dedicated to their relatives, instead of the mission headquarters. Their disappearance into the household had, moreover, made their efforts hardly accounted or often credited to their husbands (Haggis 2003: 167).

Furthermore, while the recruited women missionaries enjoyed the same publications in the mission societies’ journals such as the AIM journal as their

⁵ Rhonda Anne Semple, *Missionary Women: Gender, Professionalism and the Victorian Idea of Christian Mission* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2003). p.2

⁶ Jane Haggis, "White Women and Colonialism: Towards a Non-Recuperative History," in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003). p.167

male counterparts, the missionaries' wives did not enjoy publication of their activities as they were not considered as working. Their unpaid nature of work has led to the invisibility of their contribution. I argue that this is the legacy of the Victorian era. During the nineteenth century, as argued by Leslie Parker Hume and Karen M. Offen (1981: 272), women's works centered at home was hardly recognized due to their unpaid nature. They further argue that the prescriptive literature on women at that time often celebrated the domesticity of women. This led to the formation of general idea of appropriating women's working activities as home based.

FINDINGS

Beth Beckett was married to a patrol padre, Ken Beckett, in 1947. In the introduction to her memoirs, she clearly suggests that despite the fact that she did not volunteer to work for the AIM, upon the marriage she chose to become her husband's willing partner to travel wherever his duties took him. The parish, which was under Ken Beckett's responsibility during his eight-year service, extended from the rugged frontier of Australia, the Kimberley region of Western Australia to the Top End of the Northern Territory.

The following is an elaboration of the represented gender roles in the mission administered by the AIM. The gender roles are represented in Beckett's accounts on her husband duties as a patrol padre and her duties as a patrol padre's wife.

Patrol Padre's Duties

Beth Beckett clearly describes the duties performed by her husband as a patrol padre to the AIM. First and foremost, he was responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of the white settlers in his parish. Although he was an ordained minister of religion, licensed by the Presbyterian Church of Australia to preach the Gospel, he did not preach as much as his counterparts of other missions. He delivered the Christian teaching more through giving instruction and setting examples. Moreover, the formal services he led, such as wedding and baptizing, were quite few and far between.

Besides taking care of the spiritual wellbeing of the settlers, he also acted as counselor. Due to the isolation and rare chance of communication, the set-

tlers in the outback were considered experiencing higher level of difficulties compared to their counterparts living in more closely settled areas. As a patrol padre, he was obliged to assist his parishioners in solving the problems. In this case, Beth Beckett's help might be sought, but she confides that there were many occasions when she had to be completely absent from any consultation Ken conducted.

Furthermore, due to the scattered nature of settlement, communication among them was quite minimal. This condition resulted in the feeling of isolation among the settlers. As a patrol padre, Ken Beckett had the mission to communicate with them. As he had good general knowledge, he was often involved in lively discussion and even debates with his parishioners. Beth Beckett thought that she might not as good as mastering discussion topics as her husband did, but she could be a good listener.

In addition to those above, a patrol padre, according to an article from *The Outlook* cited by Beth Beckett in her memoirs, should have good capability in mechanics as he should travel a long journey during his service; he must also have good health and pioneering courage as well as the ability of predicting weather as he was to lead an uncertain life on the road. Besides, he must also possess the strength of personality to convince his parishioners, and after all, he should be ready to give his best sympathy and fellowship at any times.

Patrol Padre's Wife's Duties

Beth Beckett accompanied her husband almost wherever duties took him during the time of his service as a patrol padre, from 1947-1955. Despite at the beginning she doubted her capacity of being a minister's wife, upon her marriage she embarked on the uncertainty of living the life of a patrol padre's wife. It was not she was forced to do so, but she says that it was her choice. Even when she knew she was pregnant with her first child, she thought that she would not bear being away from her husband. Thus, she insisted on leaving with him. However, there are occasions in which she was forced to follow her husband patrolling a certain area for the sake of the parishioners. Throughout the years of her husband's service, Beth Beckett's roles basically to accompany her husband and take care of the domestic side of the mission, such as being a cook for her own family and sometimes for the parishioners, substituting an ill parish mother in taking care of children and help her husband get the vehicle

out of the bog. Once she was also administering a nearly-closed hospital at Fitzroy Crossing. In short, despite the public nature of her husband's work – serving the religious needs of the parishioners scattered around in the vast areas, her own roles as a missionary's wife remained domestic – caring and nurturing. It is problematic as despite her not being at home, she was still bound by the cult of domesticity. The following will be deeper analysis on her role and agency as a missionary wife in the mid twentieth century of Australia.

DISCUSSION

As the legacy of colonialism, the Australian Inland Mission (AIM) was established to serve the needs of the white settlers. Clearly seen from its aim, this particular mission had been started as an exclusive mission to support the settlement of the Australian land by the white. In the earlier time, living in the outback of Australia might have been unimaginable for the settlers, but the three provisions provided by the AIM had made it possible for settlers to cope with the remoteness of the area. The provisions of education, especially for children got rid of the fear of lack of education and fear of not being able to raise children in the white western culture. Furthermore, the provision of health, including the establishment of many hospitals and flying doctor services, could get rid of the fear of maternity, illness and accident. This provision was hoped to save more lives of the settlers, especially they believed in the brute savages of the indigenous people. Eventually, the provision of patrolling ministers had provided the spiritual welfare for the settlers to save them from heathenism practiced by the indigenous.

This discussion will critically scrutinize the experience of Beth Beckett as a wife of a patrol padre, on duty during 1947-1955. In this article I argue that she possesses agency of choosing to travel with her husband. She chose to travel continually travel with her husband. Unlike the other patrol padres, this couple had no base to return to as the AIM could not grant their request of providing a base for them at Halls Creek. In short, basically their base was the utility they drove to travel the parish. Beth Beckett clear statement that she possessed the agency in leading such uncertain life gives the impression that she does not want to be misunderstood as being forced to follow her husband; what was more important for her at that time was the togetherness of her family.

However, in her memoirs, she does not deny that there were times when she did not want to go, but her husband expected her to. For example, when Ken would travel some remote stations at 'Over the Range', she decided to stay in a station. Yet, Ken encouraged her to go by saying, "Think about Rita Blythe at 'Mt House' who never sees another white woman for nine months at a time." (Beckett 1998: 129) Unable to resist, she finally went with her husband. This implies that Ken projected that the hostess of the station surely expected the companionship from a missionary wife once in a while as the hostess had never met even a single white woman to communicate with. Further, it implies despite her agency to choose either to follow or not to follow her husband's journey, the society had expected her to work along with her husband in serving the parishioners. She was expected to assist her husband in anyway she could. This confirms the notion that despite the missionary wives were not directly commissioned by the mission societies, they were expected to work in order to advance the mission activities. To recall, one of the roles of a patrol padre was to offer companionship to the parishioners. His wife, in this case, was expected to share this responsibility. However, the credit generally went to the husband for bringing his wife along and provided company not only to the host, but also the hostess.

Furthermore, as indicated in the beginning of the article, I argue that her position is problematic. On one hand she transgressed the general idea that a patrol padre's wife used to stay in the base while her husband traveled the outback parish. Beth Beckett says that she traveled along with her husband, even during pregnancy. She spent more time outside the house unlike her fellow women at that time. This implies her involvement in the public role of her husband as a minister of religion. This case is evident in the way she addresses the mission works as belonging to both her husband and herself. Take for example her description on the role of a patrol padre in providing fellowship to the outback parishioners who generally hardly had anybody to discuss with. She says, "It was our mission to communicate with these isolated people and we found it rewarding and enjoyable." (Beckett 1998: 63)

However, at the same time there is a sense of conformity to the imperial idea of ideal woman as her major share in the mission was dealing with the domestic side of it. This is evident in her efforts to realize John Flynn's insights on the women of the outback. Beth Beckett always thought of the isolation these women had to endure. Therefore, she always followed Flynn suggestion

to always put some sewing requisites, which she considered very close to the heart of every woman (Beckett 1998: 81). In this case, she indicates her-only mission for her fellow women. This does not belong to her husband as indicated by the pronoun I to imply her subjectivity. On another occasion, she describes that during the journey, she volunteered to cook for and care for the children of the parishioners (Beckett 1998: 23, 81). This indicates despite her not being bound by the physical form of a house, she was still bound by the domesticity. She dealt with the works categorized as feminine work load.

In conclusion, despite the fact that Beth Beckett assumes the agency to assist her husband at work wherever possible. Despite the mobile nature of the husband's work, Beth Beckett still assumes the domestic side of the job. Therefore, it is concluded that her position is problematic: on the one hand she was transgressing the idea of staying-home wife by choosing to travel along with her husband, but at the same time, she was still bound by the domestic side of the job.

REFERENCES

- Anonymous. 1934. "AIM Service Dedication of Nursing Sisters", *The Frontier News* p.4.
- Beckett, B. 1998. *Lipstick, Swag and Sweatrag: Memoirs of a Patrol Padre's Wife the Australian Inland Mission 1947-1955*. Rockhampton: Central Queensland University.
- Douglas, B. 2001. "Encounters with Enemy? Academic Readings of Missionary Narratives on Melanesians", *Comparative Studies in Societies and History*, 43, pp. 37-64.
- Grimshaw, P. & Sherlock, P. 2005. "Women and Cultural Exchanges", In *Missions and Empire*, Etherington, N. (ed.), pp. 173-193. London: Oxford University Press.
- Haggis, J. "White Women and Colonialism: Towards a Non-Recuperative History." In *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, Lewis, R. & Mills, S. (eds), pp. 161-189. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

- Hellerstein, E.O., Hume, L.P., & Karen, K.M. (eds) 1981. *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth-Century England, France, and the United States*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Idriess, I.L. 1932. *Flynn of the Inland*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.
- Johnston, A. 2003. *Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800-1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Krippendorff, K. 2004. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. 2nd Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Maynard, J. 2005. "Light in the Darkness: Elizabeth McKenzie Hatton" In *Uncommon Ground: White Women in Aboriginal History*, Cole, A., Haskins, V., Pisey, V. (eds), pp. 3-27. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.
- Norman, E. 2005. "Introduction", In *Missions and Empire*. In Etherington, N. (Ed.) (pp. 1-18). London: Oxford University Press.
- Plowman, B. 1992. *The Man from Oodnadatta: Stories by the First Patrol Padre to the Australian Inland Mission, 1912-1917*. Wangaratta: Shoestring Press.
- Semple, R.A. 2003. *Missionary Women: Gender, Professionalism and the Victorian Idea of Christian Mission*. Suffolk: The Boydell Press.