**Talking about Teaching Social Justice (online)**

**York St John University**

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Decolonising York St John University: An exploration of alumni colonial missionary work across three colonies from 1913 to 1928.

As a part of a Students as Researchers project, I have explored York St John University's archival material to explore the University's connections to colonialism. The aim of the project is to examine the potential value of the University’s archival holdings for promoting cross-disciplinary collaboration and furthering the aims of institutional decolonisation. During my time working on this project, I focused specifically on the Ripon College Association Magazines from 1898 to 1935.

Since York St John and Ripon colleges formed, York St John alumni have travelled the world to continue their teaching careers — whether that be independently or as a member of a missionary group. When cataloguing Ripon College Association Magazine’s entries, I documented and transcribed the entries from alumni working abroad. In this presentation, I will focus on three missionaries from Ripon College and their descriptions of Christian teaching practices in Canada, India, and Japan in the Ripon College Association Magazine. This presentation will focus specifically on Miss Ethel Marston in Ontario, Canada, Miss Mary Mander in Tokyo, Japan and Miss Mary Whitaker in Ranchi, India during the years 1913 to 1928. Although some writing I will reference will fall just outside of this time frame, the main body of research will be contained within these years.

To give a brief introduction to the missionaries discussed, the three women were previous members of staff at Ripon College. Within the scope of the magazine entries I catalogued, Mary Mander was the only missionary whose career I managed to document in the most detail. Ethel Marston was a missionary in Canada for one year in 1922 and wrote about her experience in the 1924 magazine issue. Mary Whitaker was a member of the S.P.G and, from 1913, worked in Ranchi for over a decade. Whitaker was noted to be ‘held in high esteem as an educationalist in India’ and was asked ‘to sit on the Commission’ which was to ‘enquire into the education of women in India’ (Editor, 1914, p.43). Whitaker’s entries offer the greatest amount of detail on English education abroad. Finally, Mary Mander offers over a decade’s worth of entries on her career in Yokohama and Tokyo, Japan since 1915. Her work provides insight into missionaries’ desire to spread Christianity and Christian teachings.

Although the entries written by the missionaries for the magazine do not always discuss teaching in great depth, they do give an insight into the indigenous communities and the English missionaries who taught local students. The magazine entries in this presentation are therefore best understood as pieces of travel writing rather than notes on teaching abroad. This method of documenting missions promoted alumni to apply and actively engage with their institution’s missionary work. Their entries also created imagined and often romanticised versions of the cities they worked in, which were influenced by imperial progress. The entries also paint a biased picture of colonial subjects which feed into an imperialist narrative. By reviewing such articles and analysing their contents, the magazines provide insight into York St John alumni’s role in the cultural and practical work of British colonialism.

In the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, ‘Christian evangelism […] shaped education and identity both at home in Britain and abroad’ (Procter, 2020, p.120). Christian teaching practices brought education to poor communities in Britain as well as to communities across the globe by missionaries. Missionaries ‘were neither for nor against the imposition of colonial rule’ however, ‘they had to maintain a belief in the potential of ‘lower’ heathen races to learn and ‘improve’ with Christian tuition’ (Johnston, 2003, p.54). Ultimately, missionary work in the late nineteenth and twentieth century ‘played a key role in the imperial process’ (Procter, 2020, p.120). Missionary societies connections to colonialism are not explicitly referenced in the Ripon College magazine entries in this study. However, ‘missionaries’ very presence in the colonies disrupted the cultural unity on which white supremacy depended’ (Thorne, 2006, p.145). Despite missionaries not inherently supporting colonialism, the act of British missionaries spreading Evangelical Christianity to other colonies inevitably contributed to empire building or the existence of the British Empire. Ripon College alumni emphasised ‘the necessity’ of ‘definite Church teaching’ to make a successful colonial citizen (Mander, 1906, p.28). This value was important and desired to be taught to British children but was also valued in the missionary work undertaken by alumni. The three missionaries, particularly Miss Mander and Miss Whitaker, emphasised the importance of a Christian education for communities abroad. Writing about their experiences in the alumni magazine aimed to encourage readers to do the same, and spread Christian values across the Empire.

The alumni discussed in this essay are only three examples of the missionary work conducted by past staff and students of York St John whilst it was a training college. In the Ripon alumni magazines, there is further evidence of alumni travelling to the same areas to provide Evangelical Christian teachings to both indigenous communities and American and European settlers. The alumni magazine acted as an advertisement for teaching and missionary opportunities abroad. When home on furlough, missionaries would give ‘talks about the mission work to raise funds and to gain recruits’ (Allen, 2010, p.87). The Ripon College Association Magazine likewise supported missionary work through its requests for donations and promotion of missionary work. The entries authored by alumni working abroad, presented a curated and edited account of these experiences for the readership. Writing about missionary work in the magazine was successful as later editions show other alumni working in the same areas. The magazines reveal that a couple of Ripon alumni followed Mander over the years to work in her schools, most notably Mrs Coward in 1917 and Miss Boyd shortly afterwards.[[1]](#footnote-1) The alumni magazine therefore acted as a brochure to encourage Ripon staff and students to teach Evangelism abroad. The writings from the magazine discussed little about teaching and work. Rather, these entries acted as travel writing and sell the idea of working abroad. Ripon College was a part of ‘the National Society for the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church’, which ‘brought education within the reach of the children of the poor’ (Badcock, 1892, p.11; Newby, 1922, p.25). To extend this teaching to the colonies would theoretically benefit children abroad as well as the poor children in Britain.

In *Place/Culture/Representation*, Duncan and Ley argue that ‘most of human geography until the 1950s, was ‘descriptive fieldwork’ based upon observation’ (Duncan & Ley, 1994, p.2). Of course, the alumni in this presentation are not ethnographers or geographers but their entries to the alumni magazine could be described as a descriptive fieldwork of the countries they worked in. York St John alumni became missionaries via different avenues but many became missionaries via teaching exchanges and specific Church groups. In 1922, Ethel Marston worked in Canada for a year after applying for ‘the League of Empire’s Scheme for the Interchange of Teachers with the Colonies’ (Marston, 1924, p.50). The scheme allowed ‘a British teacher [to spend] 12 months in a selected Dominion, taking the place of a colonial teacher who, in return, spent the year teaching in the place of the British teacher’ (Crutchley, 2015, p.730). Teaching is only mentioned in two sentences of this six page entry. Marston writes: ‘Professionally little is to be gained from an exchange with a Canadian teacher. Canadian methods seem to be much behind those of our country’ (Marston, 1924, p.53).

Marston’s entry on her year in Canada acts as a piece of travel writing rather than an analysis of her time as a teacher in the country. It would be easy to assume this text is not about teaching abroad. The final sentence of Marston’s entry reads: ‘Canada is essentially a land of sunshine, sunshine that is reflected in the warm hearted hospitality of its people and their happy lives’ (Marston, 1924, p.56). Marston was not the only alumni to travel to Canada in the alumni magazine. However, Marston’s entry is the most descriptive and is a prime example of writing in the magazine to encourage further teaching abroad. Anna Johnston argues that ‘British Protestant missionaries were prolific writers’ (Johnston, 2003, p.3). Diaries, fiction, histories and letters were penned by missionaries and consumed by church goers back at home. Of course, this writing creates a biased representation and imagined geography of other cultures and Britain’s Empire.

Marston was stationed ‘at one of the newest schools’ in Brantford, Ontario in 1922 (Marston, 1924, p.53). Although she does not name the school she worked at, many schools British missionaries travelled to in this area were a part of the Canadian Indian residential school system. By 1920, ‘the federal governments [made] residential school attendance compulsory for Indigenous children’ (anglician.ca, 2021). In the 1920s, many day and residential schools were built for indigenous children. Missionaries were brought to the day and residential schools ‘with a clear emphasis on “Christianizing” and “Canadianizing” both’ (Morrison, 2013, p.392). The Christianisation and Canadianisation of indigenous communities not only involved an erasure of indigenous culture, these schools have been reported for the abuse and trauma they have placed on their students. Further investigation into York St John’s alumni missionary work in Canada must be done and a conversation must be opened up concerning our potential links to day and residential schools for indigenous children. Other entries, such of those of alumni visiting Indian reservations can be found in the Ripon magazine, could be explored in greater detail. Marston concludes her entry with the following sentence, ‘I enjoyed my year immensely, so much so that I wish I could persuade those who are finding life difficult, narrow and cramping, to emigrate to that country of real opportunity’ (Marston, 1924, p.56). The joy and recommendation of Canada as a ‘country of real opportunity’ is unsettling to read knowing the oppression indigenous communities faced. The romantic image of Canada emphasises the privilege of the coloniser.

Like Marston, Mary Mander and Mary Whitaker offered descriptive observations of the areas they work in. In their first entries to the magazine, Mander and Whitaker both introduce their surroundings, describing architecture, climate, and people. Both alumni worked for over a decade in India and Japan, respectively, and, as time progressed, their writing moved from descriptions of their surroundings to commentaries on their careers as educationalists. Whereas, Marston’s entry reads like a travel brochure, Mander and Whitaker’s entries promoted an English education in Asia. Edward Said argues in his work *Orientalism* that ‘the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures’ (Said, 1979, p.31). English is certainly seen as a superior language in an educational setting in both of the missionaries’ entries. Mander in Tokyo and Whitaker in Ranchi are participating in an effort to ‘civilise’ and Westernise the East.

Whitaker’s first entry for the alumni magazine is an overview of life in Ranchi, in particular, the schooling system. Ranchi fell under the British Raj and was an active area for protests against the partition of Bengal during the Indian independence movement. The S.P.G. set up a site in Ranchi and their missionary work is still active in the area today. Whitaker establishes a hierarchy of languages in her entry:

The main language is Hindi. Then in schools, all high school education is in English (but there is not a girls’ high school), our school vernacular is Hindi, [23] there are schools lately started for Bengali speaking children here, and in the country there are Numdari schools. Also the poorer people speak Ganwari, a patois of Hindi, and that has to be used to a certain extent in the lower standards or the children would not understand. (Whitaker, 1914, pp.23-24)

As Whitaker’s entries continue over the years, English becomes the primary language in an educational setting. Although she acknowledges the use of English as ‘arbitrary’, she states ‘it has had advantages’. Whitaker quotes the ‘lack of books in the vernaculars suitable for study’ and that one language must be chosen to ‘be understood over the whole of India’ (Whitaker, 1935, p.11). In this entry, there is an emphasis on the fact that ‘no Indian vernacular is understood all over India’ (p.11). English as the primary language for education is rooted in Empire. Gauri Viswanathan argues that English supported ‘maintaining control of the natives under the guise of a liberal education (Viswanathan, 1987, p.17). Ultimately, this is not about ease of access to education, this is about an imperial education. It is argued in *The Empire Writes Back* that the ‘imperial education system installs a ‘standard’ version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all ‘variants’ as impurities’ (Ashcroft et al, 2002, p.7). Language holds power and to make English the language of business and education excludes large numbers of the population who cannot speak the language. English is permitted in the Indian Constitution and shows the lasting impact of British rule in India. To make English the primary language in education is to gatekeep knowledge.

Mander was passionate about Church teachings and wrote about the importance of Bible Studies in education for the alumni magazine when she was still a teacher at Ripon College. Out of the three missionaries in this study, Mander was the most vocal about Church teachings creating a morally good person who serves the Church. From the years 1918 to 1935, Mary Mander wrote the most entries for the alumni magazine about her missionary work in Japan. During her career, Mander taught in various schools in Tokyo and specialised in Bible Studies. Her classes discussed ‘all kinds of modern problems’ such as ‘the clash of modern ways and thought with the old-fashioned Japanese customs’ (Mander, 1928, p.6). Mander’s reference to modern ways refers to Christian teachings whereas the old-fashioned customs refer to Buddhism. The opposition of Buddhism and Christianity in Mander’s writing suggests that she believed Christianity to be modern and progressive. This argument positions non-Western societies as inferior and backwards which is a key trope of Orientalism. The textbooks Mander used in her classes also erased Japanese culture from her classrooms. Due to Christians making up a small portion of the Japanese population in the 1920s, few Christian texts were written in Japanese and Mander claims few people ‘were competent to act as translators’ (Mander, 1924, p.48). The absence of Japanese texts in Bible Studies is not rectified in Mander’s entries nor seems to be a priority as her students learn English. Mander also did not learn Japanese during her career. Again, English is the default language for education. Mander further emphasises that ‘[t]he students read English easily and are full of longings to copy the English and American women students about whom they read’ (Mander, 1928, p.7). The previous sentence indicates that the books written in English depict American and English people. This shows that the implementation of an English-speaking education does not incorporate the culture it was being taught in. Reading about European and North American women indicates that Westernisation is the ideal. Using English texts written for European audiences portrays European ideals and the textbooks were not edited to represent Japanese culture. The teaching described is Eurocentric and, to use Said’s argument, emphasises Europeanism as superior. Although Japan was not a British colony, British Evangelical missionary work still promoted Britishness and Western views of Christianity as the ideal.

The research I have conducted brings more questions than answers and further investigation should be done in the archives. Due to the time limit on this project, the work I have done has only scratched the surface and a collaborative effort from staff and students would uncover much more information. Further research into the alumni magazines could be done and staff profiles could be created to give us a further insight into alumni missionary work abroad. Outside of the alumni magazines, an investigation into the donations from the Diocese of York as well as donations to missionary expeditions and missionary gifts to York St John could be a possible avenue for further investigation. Finally, further research into the language of the magazine entries could continue as the missionaries construct imperial imaginaries of spaces in their work.

To acknowledge the University’s links to colonialism and to address this internally and on external platforms is vital. York St John aims to be inclusive and to encourage activism within its community. To do that, we must look at our past and interrogate the darker side of our history as teacher training colleges. The University archives are an important tool that can be used to engage constructively with the historic and enduring links between colonialism and the institution. The archive could host further student researchers, inspire dissertation topics and feed into discussion and reflection around teaching policy and practice within the institution. They also potentially allow insight into the broader question of the involvement of the Cathedral Group in practices and legacies of empire. As an ongoing area for interdisciplinary work, all Schools within the University might benefit from this work, not just the humanities.

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1. Please see News of Old Students, p.10, 1917 issue, FBA 26 – vol.7 Ripon College Association Magazine 1916-1919. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)