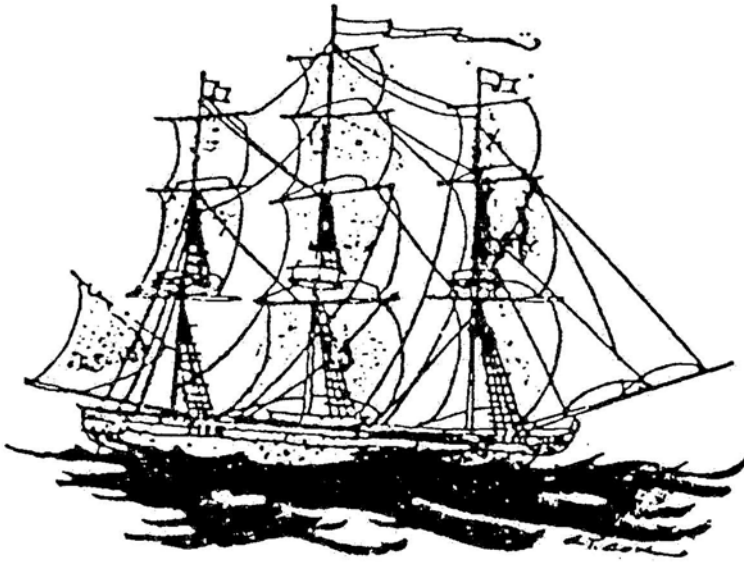


DISCOVERY

Edited by

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Ten Women Who Changed Their World

More than 130 years ago ten Methodist Episcopal Church women began a work in India which had far reaching consequences. Their commitment to missions not only changed the lives of millions of women, but also touched the lives of many families and reshaped the cultural practices of societies. Their work began in 1869 under the banner of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The story of that beginning is amazing.

There had been missionaries in India since 1856 when Dr. William Butler and his family had begun mission work sponsored by the Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Although the work of the men in establishing mission centers and churches was recognized and applauded, the work of the missionaries' wives remained unheralded. Male missionaries realized that the doors remained closed to them when they made attempts to reach Indian women. They soon realized that if Indian women were to be reached, missionary wives would have to do it.

This was the situation on Sunday, March 14, 1869 when Dr. William Butler preached his missionary sermon at the Tremont Street Methodist Episcopal Church in Boston, Massachusetts. After the service several of the women began talking and agonizing over the desperate needs of Indian women. Their response to the challenge of answering this need led to a plan for a mission to India. The plan was formulated and presented to the women. There was enthusiastic response. Mrs. Butler, the wife of the preacher, found a strong ally in Mrs. Edwin Parker, another missionary wife.

An organization was needed if their plan to reach the women of India was to be realized. A letter to Dr. John Durbin, secretary of the Methodist Mission Society, brought a cautious response. He answered, "By all means raise funds for support of some portion of mission work in India, in China too if you wish, but leave the selection of missionaries and the administration of the work to the Board of Managers here at home and the missionaries in India."

Mrs. Butler thought that Durbin's was a typical male response: 'You

women raise the money and we will spend it.' It had always been so. But Durbin was in trouble. As far as the three prime movers, Mrs. Butler, Mrs. Flanders, and Mrs. Parker, were concerned the limitation of women to mere fund raising was not going to happen.

The call of the leaders went out to the Methodist Episcopal women of the Boston area to meet at the Tremont Street Church on March 23, 1869. Dorothy Clarke Wilson, the author of *Palace of Healing*, described the scene: "It was a rainy day in Boston on the 23rd. At the church Mrs. Butler and Mrs. Parker huddled in the cold vestibule outside the locked door of the church their hopes draining with the water from their dripping umbrellas. But Mrs. Flanders, the third member of the triumvirate, arrived with the sexton and the key. Mrs. Flanders expressed the feelings of the others. 'Men! Thinking a little rain would keep us from holding our meeting! When the Methodist women of Boston make up their minds about something . . .'"

Mrs. Butler was encouraged and hoped the others invited would not have their spirits dampened by the rain. Only five others arrived. What they started changed not only their world, but also the lives of countless Indian women. The names of those five women deserve to be mentioned - Rich, Kingsbury, Merrill, Stoddard, and Taylor. All of them were wet, in addition to Butler, Parker, and Flanders, but they were determined.

In the meeting which followed, Flanders spelled out their goal — the funding of a Woman's Foreign Missionary Society bent upon meeting some of the desperate needs of Indian women. Wilson drew a word picture of that eventful afternoon meeting. "During the next few moments history hung precariously in the balance. The plea was, 'But there are only eight of us, don't you think we should wait?' The answer, 'But there were only twelve disciples. What if they had argued that they were too few to get anything started?' But what will our husbands say? Too much. And, as usual, do too little. But do we dare?" Not only did they dare, they acted. These eight women on that rainy afternoon at the Tremont Street Methodist Episcopal Church voted to organize the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society.

Rainy days seemed to promote their good fortune, for in the following week on a rainy Tuesday twenty-six women adopted a constitution and elected officers. They spelled out their purpose: "to engage and to unite efforts of the women of the Methodist Episcopal Church in sending out and supporting female missionaries, native and Christian teachers, and Bible readers, in foreign lands."

The male dominated Mission Board, while expressing approval of the women's efforts, still stood by their advice, "You raise the money, we will administrate." In the moments that followed this directive, one of the women, Mrs. Twombly, cut the umbilical cord. She moved that since the women could accomplish a work no other could do "we will administer our own funds." As Wilson observed, "Little did any of them realize that the little society started by eight women on that rainy day in Boston was to

become one of the largest and most efficient women's organizations in the world."

Other women would transform the faith of these eight into action. Two of them, Isabella Thoburn (1840-1901) and Dr. Clara Swain (1834-1910), would pioneer women's missionary work in India. On May 26 at Bromfield Church the women voted to appoint Isabella Thoburn as the Society's first missionary to India. Why not a physician also to be reaching the medical needs of Indian women? On September 6 the Society proposed to send Dr. Clara Swain, a newly graduated physician, as the second missionary.

There was, of course, an overwhelming cost involved. Mrs. Edward Porter addressed the assembly: "Sisters shall we lose Miss Thoburn and Dr. Swain just because we do not have the means to send them? No. Rather let the Methodist women of Boston walk the streets in calico gowns and save the expense of more costly apparel. But let us send these two missionaries to our sisters across the seas." When the vote was taken, there was no dissent.

Within the year Thoburn and Swain were on their way to India: the first missionaries of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society. While their stories have been told many times, to most United Methodists today they are strangers.

Isabella Thoburn, or Bella as her family called her, was the first missionary appointed by the Society. Born on the family farm in the hills of Ohio, Bella grew up knowing hard work and what it meant to live by the family rule: "Never take the easy way out. If it's right to do something, do it. If it's right to go somewhere, go." Her brother, James, had already followed the rule and was a missionary in India. He appealed to his sister to follow his example. Because of her teaching experience, he urged her to come and help establish a desperately needed school for girls. Indian women long bound by ancient cultural practices were mired in abysmal ignorance. In response to this need for better education Bella Thoburn quickly answered her brother's plea, "I'll come as soon as the way is open."

The eight Boston women, who had organized the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, heard about Bella's mission. Overcoming their own anxieties and objections, they supported her work with prayers and money. The way was opened for her. In 1870 Isabella Thoburn sailed for India. However, she did not go alone. Clara Swain, a teacher in western New York, had experienced a call to become a medical doctor. A graduate of the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, she was seriously interested in serving as a medical missionary in India. The fledgling Woman's Foreign Missionary Society was willing to appoint her as their second missionary and the first female doctor in India. It was a great leap of faith!

Isabella Thoburn, educator, and Clara Swain, physician, sailed for India together arriving in Bareilly, January 20, 1870. A whole new world of mission activity was opening in India. A Christian work in education and medical care especially for women in India began with these two women. There

is more to their stories.

Isabella Thoburn, after learning some Hindustani, made a two-fold decision. First, she would give her attention to the education of girls. Second, she would reach out to women who were secluded in their homes. On April 18, 1870 she opened her first school with six girls enrolled. Quickly, there were twenty-five, and by the close of 1872, acquiring land and more adequate facilities, the school had twenty boarding students and forty-five day students. The institution was named Lal Bagh Girls' School. It became the foundation of an educational venture which grew into two major institutions, one, the Isabella Thoburn College, and the other, the Lal Bagh Secondary School.

Thoburn's influence was far-reaching. She was a creative educator and a dynamic leader. Through her efforts the Wellesly's Girls School was founded in Naini Tal as well as the Cawnpore Girl's High School, known now as the co-educational Methodist High School of Kanpur.

Health problems caused Thoburn to return to the United States on a four year health leave. She remained active and during those years, despite poor health, and worked in Chicago and Cincinnati where she had a major impact on the development of the deaconess movement. Her work with the deaconesses led to the founding of a hospital in Cincinnati of which she became the first superintendent.

Isabella Thoburn returned to India and continued her educational work. Her health remained precarious, but in 1886 she began offering college classes. The work was slow and after ten years she had seventeen girls who passed the entrance examinations. Finally, the first candidate stood for the B.A. university examination. It was a milestone in education among Indian women. Isabella finally contracted cholera and on September 11, 1901 she died in Lucknow. Her educational and Christian work literally changed the lives of countless Indian women whose culture would have kept them in servitude.

Clara Swain was the tenth woman to help changer her world and the lives of those to whom she brought healing. She went with Thoburn to Bareilly, India, and was the first female physician ever to practice medicine in India. It is fair to say, however, that this singular venture had been prepared for by others. Missionaries had been offering elementary medical assistance where possible. In 1864 the Board of Missions had provided \$100 for medicines even though the Board made it clear they did not encourage the practice of medicine. The Board's fundamental purpose was to preach the Gospel to the heathen.

Dr. Swain reported in her book, *A Glimpse of India*, that "My medical work really began the day of my arrival. When I came out of my room in the morning I found a company of native Christian women and girls eagerly

awaiting the appearance of the "Doctor Miss Sahiba," and with the aid of a good missionary sister I was able to understand their words of welcome and find out what I could do to help them. As I had no medicines with me I procured a few simple remedies for their ailments from Mrs. Thomas who has quite a little dispensary for she has been obliged to care for the sick in the mission compounds and the Christian village as well as the girls in the orphanage. I had fourteen patients that first day."

One month after Swain's arrival, her supplies and equipment arrived, and she established a medical class among the women. She approached her task carefully and tactfully. She described her method in *A Glimpse of India*, "Native gentlemen do not allow their wives to come to see us for they live in seclusion, but when we go to their houses the woman sits on a mat in a corner while her husband is with us; she keeps her face covered and seems more like a shy kitten than a human being, but after a few visits she loses some of her shyness and when we are alone sits on a chair or a stool and uncovers her face and talks freely with us."

Dr. Swain's work brought immediate attention from the authorities. The Lieutenant Governor of the provinces, the Rajahas, and leaders from many strata of society were impressed by her work. They were especially impressed by a white American woman practicing medicine and desiring to help women and children. Within a year she had treated over 1,300 people. After six years her medical work was so firmly established that three additional women doctors joined the mission.

Dr. Swain remained in Bareilly until 1884 when a major change occurred in her medical ministry. That year she was called to Khetri State in Raiputana to minister to the Rani Saheba. After her successful efforts, she was invited to remain as physician to the Rani and the women of the court. This position enabled her to open a clinic for women as well as a girls' school. This work became the focus of her work until March 1896 when failing health forced her to return to the United States. Her work in India, however, was well established and was turned over to younger mission doctors and teachers.

In 1906 Swain returned to India to help celebrate the 50th anniversary of Methodist Episcopal Church missions in India. She remained amid much acclaim until January 1908. Returning to the United States, Swain lived for nearly two more years until her death on Christmas morning 1910.

Ten women who changed their world is a story without an ending, for what they did is still touching the lives of countless women and men not only in India, but across the world.