Eleanor Rivett (1883–1972): Educationalist, Missionary and Internationalist

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Abstract: The chapter explores the leadership of Eleanor Rivett (1883–1972) as an educator and missionary in India from 1907–47 and her progressive internationalist stance also during the last decades of her life in Australia. Her cross-cultural relationships were ahead of many in India at the time. Her work to educate and lead the Australian public to a greater appreciation of Australia’s position and potential in the Asia-Pacific region began while she was in India but continued until her demise. While the Student Christian Movement and the friends and colleagues she made within it are important to understanding her achievements, the chapter argues the crucial importance of her family background.

Keywords: missionaries, women’s education, India, Australia–India relations

Introduction

Eleanor Rivett (1883–1972) had a remarkable career as an educationalist and missionary in India in the first half of the twentieth century. She worked to advance women’s position, leading two important educational institutions, one in Kolkata and the other in Chennai, as well as working in a number of women’s organisations.¹ She was also in the forefront of progressive missionary philosophy, which sought to develop an Indian and indigenised church. These were the years during which the Indian nationalist movement grew, leading, just as Rivett returned home to Australia, to Indian independence from British rule in 1947. Throughout her career, Rivett developed her skills and knowledge in cross-cultural work. She grew to appreciate her position as a white woman associated with the colonisers and learned to stand back and to support Indian leadership, rather than assuming a dominating position. The emergence of India and other new nations in the Asia–Pacific region had great import for Australia and Australians, who had hitherto enjoyed a comfortable position within a white-dominated world in the British Empire and later the British Commonwealth. Most importantly in this context, Rivett worked to educate Australians about developing more
egalitarian and respectful relationships with formerly colonised peoples, particularly in India.

As a member of the Australian and World Student Christian Movements (SCM), Eleanor Rivett was part of a cohort of young Australians that, from the first decades of the twentieth century, engaged closely with Asian societies. She took positions and engaged in cross-cultural work with an approach that was unusual for a white Australian woman of her time, though similar to the activities of her friends Anna Christiansen in China, Jessie (Reeve) McLaren and Charles McLaren in Korea, Nina Brentnall and the Stillwell sisters in India and her own sister, Olive, in Fiji. Her involvement in the SCM was key to this work but, in many ways, it echoed and affirmed a number of principles and values with which she had grown up. Indeed, her family of origin was a remarkable one, and its influence upon her is explored as part of the conditions of possibility for her leadership. The following examination of her leadership examines relevant aspects of her family background before proceeding to discuss the educational, missionary and internationalist/cross-cultural elements of her work.

Her Family Background

Eleanor Rivett came from a remarkable family, and the values and attitudes she learnt from her parents were highly influential in her adult life. Her father the Reverend Albert Rivett, was a Congregational minister. Trained in Britain, he spent some years at Esperance (now Dover) in Tasmania, where Eleanor was born. Later, the family moved to Yarrawonga and Beechworth in Victoria, where Eleanor grew up. He was subsequently at Albury and then in Sydney, where, during the First World War, he parted company with his congregation around disagreements about war and conscription, which he vehemently opposed. He espoused many progressive causes over his long life. Indeed, he died dramatically in 1934 just as he finished a spirited address to a demonstration in the Sydney Domain in support of Egon Kisch, the anti-fascist, who was barred from entering Australia for political reasons. Boris Schedvin has described him as:

a warm-hearted humanist, champion of the underprivileged and critic of authority in all its forms, especially of those institutions which produced social division and conflict. He was one of the few to speak out strongly against the South African War and was a trenchant critic of conscription in 1916–17 … his central moral concerns: the bestiality of war and the damage caused by the existence of national boundaries, the futility of
maintaining separate religious denominations, support for the weak and oppressed, and sympathy for socialist views and the policies of Henry George.\textsuperscript{5}

From 1891, he produced a monthly newspaper, under various titles, including the \textit{Murray Independent} and later the \textit{Federal Independent}, for his congregation and supporters, in order to demonstrate the causes and beliefs with which he was associated. He was a critic of the Boer War and the Australian policy of military training for young boys introduced in 1911. He was deeply interested in missionary work; the family supported the London Missionary Society and this publication carried many letters and reports from missionaries in the field and from their converts. He ran articles on Christian Socialism and, later in life, he wrote for the \textit{Worker}.\textsuperscript{6}

Albert Rivett was also a critic of the White Australia Policy, publishing a verse linking restrictive immigration with a critique of imperialism:

\begin{center}
If black man may not set his foot
Upon the white man’s strand
Who gave the white man leave to come
And seize the black man’s land.\textsuperscript{7}
\end{center}

It seems natural that growing up in such an atmosphere, Eleanor would also be critical of the White Australia Policy. In 1905, her father critiqued Deakin’s notion of ‘Australia for the Australians’. This battle-cry, he wrote,

was too contemptibly small for anything, besides being fatal to any true national aspiration or destiny ... Australia has a great future before it, but it will not be secured along the provincial rut in which our engineers propose to run the Commonwealth. Australia’s need is men who can think imperially, and act continentally, though not in the Jingo sense. With neighbouring nations of the East waking up, Australia will need to rub her eyes, take her bearings, and forge ahead in order to realise her distinctive destiny, as the nation of the Southern Seas.\textsuperscript{8}

In such an environment, Eleanor learned to be critical of racialised hierarchies. In December 1908, the famous Burns–Johnson prize-fight was held at Rushcutters’ Bay in Sydney. This was the first time that a black man was allowed to compete against a white man for the World Heavyweight Championship. Jack Jackson, the black man, comprehensively defeated Burns and the event reverberated around the world. In January 1909, scarcely three
weeks later, Albert Rivett, the pacifist, published and perhaps even penned a poem which ended with the stanza:

   And yet, for all we know and feel,
   For Christ and Shakespeare, knowledge, love,
   We watch a white man bleeding reel,
   We cheer a black with bloodied glove.9

Eleanor described her parents as having ‘a wide knowledge of the peoples of Asia, Africa and the Pacific’.10 Missionaries as well as their indigenous converts were often welcomed to the Rivett home. Indeed, at her parents’ final home, ‘Esperance’, in the Sydney suburb of Gordon, they built Talofa, a Pacific-style dwelling in the garden, where visitors from the Pacific could feel at home.11

They were not well-off in material terms. They had to be self-sufficient in a number of ways and always had an extensive vegetable garden, beehives and fruit trees to supply their kitchen. They were dependent upon the congregation and local community. Eleanor recalled, ‘One farmer’s wife made a practice of bringing in on the same day a joint of fresh meat for her Roman Catholic priest and one for father Rivett as well’.12 Much of the furniture was bush furniture made by Albert and his sons, and the children would have learnt a lot about making do and fashioning what was needed from the resources available. This was a hospitable home; a visitor described it as ‘often full of visitors, and yet never so full but it has room for one more’.13

Rivett has been described as following ‘the Galilean to the end of the last mile’, and his children all ‘absorbed a strong sense of social responsibility’.14 Certainly Eleanor’s childhood home must have been full of discussion about her father’s views and undertakings. He was certainly prepared to stand up to the powerful on behalf of the powerless, sometimes making enemies among the local powerful. As Eleanor recalled:

One of our earliest experiences of our father’s concern for people, insistence upon justice rather than municipal red tape, led to what was characterized as the Bark Hut Controversy. Typhoid had broken out in a family living in a shanty outside the town. Instead of enabling them to use all measures then known and usually prescribed for disinfecting the dwelling, the authorities ordered the hut to be burnt down together with all clothing. This aroused our father’s anger and his exposure of the cruel and discriminating measures taken probably prevented the
Rivett wrote at length about this Bark Hut Controversy in his newspaper in August 1895, and it seems likely that the ill-will caused led to the family having to move onto a new congregation in Beechworth. Rivett had a large personality and very decided views, and it is interesting to note that while Eleanor grew up to share many of these views and to have strongly held views of her own, unlike her father, she did not relish head-on confrontations; rather, she worked to find common ground with others.

Here we might look to her mother’s influence. It was said she had a ‘forceful but very gentle personality’. As a minister’s wife, Elizabeth (Lil) Rivett took leadership positions in a number of different organisations, such as the Band of Hope, in the small communities in which they lived. Eleanor was virtually born into a web of associations, the internationalism of the missionary movement and its network of ‘diverse and highly international, and multiple connections’, which made up her parents’ world. Her mother actively supported the London Missionary Society, the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and worked in the Sunday School, as well as raising a large family of seven children.

She encouraged her children to become very well educated, being the ‘mother of a family of distinguished sons and daughters who among them won scholarships worth thousands of pounds’. Gwynneth Long notes that she encourage her children from an early age to enter competitions, writing ‘essays, letters stories in girls’ and boys’ magazines as well as contests at Agricultural Shows’. They took every such opportunity to earn money and to improve their knowledge. Thus, through the pages of the *Murray Independent*, we read of Lil herself winning £3 in February 1891 in the twelfth division of the WCTU Temperance Physiology examinations. At the Sunday School Union Examinations in 1895, for which seven hundred candidates sat, Nellie (Eleanor) Rivett gained first credit at the junior level. Eleanor was to earn herself a secondary education by competitive means. In 1897, she was one of only two students to gain the Merit certificate from Beechworth primary school, and she won a ‘scholarship tenurable for three years’ at the Presbyterian Ladies’ College (PLC) in Melbourne, ‘heading the list of competitors in the colony for this honour’.

When Eleanor began at PLC, she left her mother with six children to care for, one of whom was a new baby. But Eleanor was strongly supported by her parents and there was no suggestion that she should stay at home as her
mother’s help. She excelled at PLC and won a scholarship to the University of Melbourne, where she took honours in English, French, German literature and philosophy, graduating BA, 1904, MA, 1906. During her secondary school and university days in Melbourne, Eleanor stayed with her maternal grandparents in a home interested in ideas and education. Her grandmother was German born and her grandfather, the Reverend C.M. Cherbury, who was said to have had part of his education at the Universities of Leyden and Utrecht, knew a number of languages and had travelled widely in his youth to South America, Java and Sumatra. He became an Anglican minister but, ‘no slave to orthodoxy’, he gravitated later to a more independent stance at his own Collingwood Tabernacle. His name was often before the Victorian public as he appealed for funds for the institutions he established—the well-known Homes of Hope for Destitute Children, as well as the Pilgrim’s Rest for Aged Destitute Gentlewomen. He was said to be interested in comparative religions.

In this remarkable family, Eleanor’s brother, David, won scholarships to Wesley College and the University of Melbourne. As a Rhodes Scholar, he then studied at Oxford and become professor of chemistry at Melbourne. Later, he was knighted in recognition of his work as the chair of the CSIR. Among their siblings, three were medical doctors: Olive was in India briefly but made a real contribution on the provision of appropriate medical services for Indian women sugar plantation workers in Fiji. Her brother, Ted, a Macquarie Street specialist, was one of the first in Australia to bring chiropracty into medical practice and ran a hospital at Castle Crag in Sydney, while Christine, a disciple of Marie Stopes, specialised in gynaecology in Brisbane and advocated birth control. Mary studied psychology at Cambridge and, with Elsie, the sister who stayed at home to care for their parents, she established the Children’s Library and Craft Movement, beginning with a club for poor children in Surry Hills, Sydney.

Eleanor grew up in a religious, internationalist and anti-racist environment. Her father was prepared to take and maintain unpopular positions in opposition to powerful forces. Determination and the will to succeed against great odds saw Eleanor and her siblings become highly educated. The skills of making-do, of fashioning something needed from the resources to hand, stood her in good stead when running a poorly resourced girls’ school in India.
Educationalist

After completing her studies at the University of Melbourne, Eleanor taught briefly at her old school, but she had long nurtured the desire to be a missionary. In 1907, she went to Kolkata with the London Missionary Society (LMS) to become the principal of their small girls’ school. Within a few years, the school was amalgamated with the senior classes of the Baptist and Methodist Missionary schools and she was charged with establishing and maintaining a girls’ school for both day and boarding students, which took some girls through to university entrance. The school, known as United Missionary Girls’ High School (UMGHS), gained affiliation to the University of Calcutta, and soon girls were matriculating and entering the university. In 1921, eleven girls matriculated from UMGHS and, of these, two won scholarships to the university. Increasingly Hindu girls, some of whom were married, were staying on at school.

Rivett was resourceful in getting funds for the school and for particular projects. She had a network of supporters in India and through the Congregational Church in Australia. In the early years, girls from Hindu families in the neighbourhood were not allowed to walk to the school and, with help from her staff and ‘the generosity of friends in India’, she got a horse-drawn purdah bus. A bus for school girls ‘was a novelty’, but as the number of day-girls grew they got a motor bus, allowing more girls to attend school. Particularly after the passing of the Sarda Act in 1930, which raised the minimum age of marriage to fourteen years, the school needed to cope with the issue of girls who did not take the academic route but stayed on at school and married while still there or shortly afterwards.

Rivett was a keen promoter of arts in education, and a strategy she adopted to engage these students was ‘to recapture some of the ancient arts and crafts of India’s past cultural greatness’. She interested the students in the Bengali folk art of Alpona, long practised in the home by women and girls … We encouraged our middle-school girls to familiarise themselves with the art as it had been practised in their own families. With the aid of their grandmothers they transmitted to paper the patterns discovered and gave them more permanent form in some school craft. Here was in time a real treasury of design.

Abindranath Tagore and others artists of the Bengali Renaissance in Arts and Crafts were interested in Alpona, and Rivett, too, was most interested in this movement. Such support by Europeans in India has been seen as a safe way of
'supporting’ Indian nationalism, as Partha Mitter notes: ‘The Raj welcomed *Swadeshi* art, the unthreatening face of nationalism, as an antidote to armed revolution’. While this was true in the case of Eleanor Rivett, she coupled this with curriculum that located her young students as citizens of a future independent India and encouraged discussion of nationalism. Rivett promoted the idea of social service to her students, and some students went on Saturdays to help village schoolteachers in small isolated schools. In the 1920s, students and teachers at UMGHS took up spinning, a practice that, as she wrote, Gandhiji had made ‘obligatory upon members of the Indian National Congress’. At times, her practical turn of mind challenged the romance of revolution. She noted that her Indian teachers had difficulty in spinning enough yarn for only one sari, and concluded that their opposition to imported cloth and ‘agitation in favour of Khaddar (hand spun) had of necessity to be modified as far as it concerned busy school teachers’. Rivett was concerned to ‘indigenise’ the girls’ education, to make hers a ‘truly national school’. H.A. Popley, the LMS missionary and renowned musicologist of Indian music, commented upon the musical and artistic side of UMGHS:

Miss Rivett was one of the first to develop this aesthetic side in the schools in Calcutta and the first to do so in any missionary institution. Her girls had teachers of Indian music and Indian art and she had the advice and help of first class Indian artists and musicians.

He noted her friendliness with Bengalis in the time around the First World War, although: ‘These were days when most of the European population of Calcutta did not mix freely with Indian people’. As well as providing an academic education for those aspiring to university study and a course of study suitable for future wives, mothers and citizens, Rivett participated in new developments in education, such as the use of the cinema and audio-visual aids and the Dalton plan. She encouraged healthy physical activities for her students, promoting girls’ sport and the attendant notion of team spirit in her school and also in other schools in the district. She reported in 1923: ‘Badminton continues to be the game in the High School’. In 1936, she was on the committee that organised a display of girls’ sport for the city’s Education Week. Rivett’s leadership in women’s education was recognised by the British authorities in Bengal and, in 1927, she was asked to take a position as ‘Chief Adviser on Girls’ Education’ in Bengal. She decided however to remain in her mission school and to develop it as a model for girls’ education.
Eleanor enjoyed sharing ideas with Indian women who ran their own schools and were active in the nationalist and feminist movements. She referred to her ‘Brahmo friend, Mrs. P.K. Roy’, the principal of the Gokhale School. Rivett wrote: ‘She is a great character. Her school is a bold experiment’.

Sarala Roy was also president of the All-Indian Women’s Congress in 1932. Another, Mrs Hossein, was Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein, founder of Sakhawat Memorial School, a school for Muslim girls, and active in the women’s suffrage movement in the early 1920s. She is well known as the author of *The Sultana’s Dream*, a work of feminist science fiction, which involved gender role reversal. Her writing was ‘innovative, daring feminist and anti-imperialist … she argued that women’s education form[ed] the cornerstone for India’s political emancipation as well as social emancipation’.

Rivett did not seek leading roles but was secretary or joint secretary of the BWEL from its inception until she left Bengal in 1937, carrying out the hard, behind-the-scenes work and mentoring her joint secretaries and other younger BWEL members. Sunita Bala Gupta, a young teacher from a school in provincial Bengal, recalled her efficient and modest leadership style from the 1934 BWEL conference:

I was one of the hundreds of women who gathered together to discuss problems relating to girls’ and women’s education in Bengal. But I was very much attracted by the League’s quiet and dignified Secretary, who
spoke very little but very ably managed a gathering of women whose mother-tongue was either Bengali, or Urdu or English and half of whom did not understand English.\(^5^3\)

Rivett lived in the UMGHS compound at 110/12 Asutosh Mukherjee Road, along with some of her staff and students. She made this household a node for many activities, for ‘considerable coming and going & representing so many societies & interests’.\(^5^4\) Like her parents’ home, this was an elastic household, always with room for one more. Indeed, when some school graduates had no hostel accommodation in Kolkata to enable their further studies, she made do, fashioning a temporary hostel in part of the school boarding house, drawing together funds and staff from the school and the YWCA.\(^5^5\)

Rivett was a model of an engaged professional woman, participating across many diverse issues and interests. She enriched the lives of her colleagues, her staff and students. Her leadership style was deceiving. Agnes Martin, who, as a Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) worker, was attached to the student hostel in the UMGHS grounds, recalled:

I was too inexperienced in those days fully to appreciate someone who was so unassuming, or to recognize the extent of an ability which was so far reaching and restrained as hers, but certain pictures stand out in my mind … Miss Rivett at the head of the dining table, bringing the breath of new thought and the stimulus of wider outside contacts into the daily “shop” of the mission house. Miss Rivett setting out after a day’s work in the school … to a committee meeting, or to visit one of her many friends of all communities who were occupied with experiments in women’s education, or the homes of her pupils and old girls, and then coming back from these additional activities refreshed and enlivened by variety of interest.\(^5^6\)

The sharing involved in the BWEL saw Rivett visiting other schools in the city, such as in 1927, when she visited the ‘Muslim Anglo-Oriental Girls’ School’ and the ‘Hindu Widows’ Training School’.\(^5^7\)

Rivett’s own accounts of her informal visits to her schoolgirls’ homes after school in Kolkata convey the ease she felt meeting with Indians. She would take the tram and call in to chat to the mothers and other female relatives of her students. She described such an afternoon visit to the family of Kamala, a seven-year-old pupil. She entered the joint family home:
On the lower verandah a couple of feet above the paved court, under a tiled roof, were seated the aunts and older cousins, already preparing the evening meal—husking and washing the rice to be cooked in open, handleless metal pots, or cutting the vegetables and fish for frying in large curved pans.

Kamala introduced me to her mother and the others and we sat on low wooden stools, and chatted, I learned with what entertaining gossip about school, her teachers and companions this little lass had been wont to regale them. Meanwhile she had disappeared and soon brought out a dish of sweetmeats, typical of Bengali hospitality, sandesh and rosa gola, sticky and juicy. Conversation never flagged and since good manners permitted endless questions, a visit of this kind helped to establish the easy relationship between home and school one had come to value highly.\(^{58}\)

During the four decades she spent in India from 1907–1947, Rivett not only established and led the UMGHS in Kolkata, but, in 1938, she became principal of the prestigious Women’s Christian College (WCC) in Chennai. She was there for the last decade of her working life, during the years of the Second World War, the Quit India campaign and the moves to Indian Independence. From at least the early 1920s, she had recognised the need for the Britishers to leave India and had seen her responsibilities as equipping young Indian women to become citizens of their own country. Graduates of UMGHS and WCC went on to ‘hold responsible posts in many parts of India’.\(^{59}\) Over these Indian years, Rivett was a leader in girls’ and women’s education. She also took leadership roles in the Young Women’s Christian Association of India, Burma and Ceylon, in which she sought to advance women’s position, working at times with the All-India Women’s Congress.

The position as principal of WCC was an influential one, and Rivett worked with the local government to promote Madras women’s education, being the chair of the Central Advisory Committee for Women’s Education in Madras from 1941 and the only woman member of the Madras University Inspection Commission in 1946–47. India offered her such great opportunities, opportunities at a level she might never have had in Australia. As ever, she worked for Indianisation and, when she left India in 1947, she described her old school in Calcutta as being run by an Indian former student, Mrs Kanaklata Das.\(^{60}\) At WCC, she was succeeded by Elizabeth George, the first Indian principal.\(^{61}\) A building at WCC was named in her honour. In 1946, the British authorities awarded her the Kaiser-i-Hind medal for her services to India.\(^{62}\)
Missionary

In relation to missionary work, Eleanor Rivett worked very much in the spirit of the Edinburgh Conference of 1910, which aspired to a more liberal and less Eurocentric Christianity. Margaret Sinclair saw these new directions as stimulating ‘a much wider appreciation of the study of non-Christian faiths’ and leading to the fostering of an Indian church with Indian leaders.

Throughout her time in India, Rivett joined congregations where Indian Christians presided. Thus, in Kolkata, she attended the Indian church at Bhowanipore, near the school, where the Reverend T.K. Chatterji was the minister. She was very supportive of the establishment in 1922 and ongoing work of the National Christian Council, which was governed by committees on which Indian Christians held 50 per cent of the positions. Conservative Europeans were outraged by such developments. Rivett was a strong supporter of the development of the Church of South India, which brought together some of the Protestant denominations in the south and was very proud to be able to offer the WCC premises for meetings relating to the creation of this Indian church in 1947.

From her earliest days in India, Rivett was open to learning about India’s other religions and showed some ability to appreciate their positions. In August 1907, she was invited to a meeting of the Indian Research Society [sic] in Darjeeling, where many Indian and Tibetan men from different religious traditions met to hold discussions across philosophy, archaeology, natural science and social issues. Although, as a young European woman, Eleanor was invited to sit on the platform ‘among the celebrities’, she was able to appreciate her limitations in this gathering.

It was an inspiring sight indeed to see this number of intelligent and highly-educated Indians speaking and listening to learned harangues. It made one feel pretty small to think what a long way one is from being so much at home in a foreign tongue, and that in such technical language too.

These men were well versed in the teachings of a number of different religions, and the Bengali speaker was an expert on Tibetan Buddhism. The discussion turned to women’s social position, and Rivett thought: ‘It was strange to hear … tribute upon tribute to the improvement of social and all other ideals’ resulting from ‘the education of women, and the acknowledgement of her intellectual equality, and all of this coming from Indian gentlemen’.
Sometimes her rhetoric was pervaded by orientalising discourses. In 1908, having witnessed the Muslim festival to commemorate the death of the prophet’s martyred grandson, Hossain, she described the behaviour of ‘the raving crowd’ as ‘demoniacal’ and felt it gave insight ‘into the Mahommedan character’. However, with her description of the end of the Ramadan fast, she could also draw her readers, here Australian children, into sympathy with the position of Muslims:

The housetops … were a picture, dotted with yet more, straining to see the longed-for silver thread, which would tell them their fast was over … You can imagine the joy those up-turned faces showed as they caught a glimpse of the moon.

Rivett grew to appreciate more fully the richness of Indian cultural and religious traditions. By 1917, she was more knowledgeable about Bengali and Bengali literature and was able to engage with a grandmother of a school pupil, in ‘quite an animated discussion’ of a drama by Kalidas, ‘the great Sanscrit poet’ and to explore the relative merits of Kalidas and Shakespeare to their country’s literatures.

Certainly, in the early days of her stay in India, Rivett was eager to hear of new converts. But over the years, perhaps like other Christians, she came to understand that ‘Christianizing India was to remain a missionary fantasy’. Later, she was not in favour of active Christian proselytising in her school, being respectful of students and their families. At WCC, the scripture classes Rivett taught were not compulsory. Non-Christian students were encouraged to attend; they were invited to share ‘the highest we knew as Christians’. Ultimately, these missionaries could hope to see what they thought of as Christian-like qualities develop in their students and to accept that most of them would not convert.

In a valedictory booklet for Rivett, a student wrote, quoting a Hindu student at WCC:

If we are to achieve our dream of one world we must first realize that we are all one people and Miss Rivett is certainly one of the messengers of this mission … In her scripture classes she would frequently refer to corresponding passages in the sacred writings of other religions with a view to finding common bonds … it is through persons like Miss Rivett that the vital link of human fellowship between peoples is kept up.
Rivett was also deeply involved in inter-faith discussions in the 1920s through the International Fellowship of Kolkata. It appears that the initial meeting of this organisation in Kolkata was held at the UMGHS in 1924, where they decided to discuss a paper entitled, ‘Inter-Religionism, Its Possibilities and Limits’. In the BWEL as well, Eleanor worked in the spirit of Edinburgh. She was on a sub-committee of women from different religions, which published booklets in Bengali for inter-faith religious services in schools. Rivett wrote: ‘Those who worked together over this compilation have found it a liberal education, to discover and to be mindful of the religious heritage of each member of the group in regard to thought and phrasing.’

Certainly Rivett’s inter-faith work was important to her missionary work, but she was always a dedicated Christian. Towards the end of her tenure in Madras, she devoted much energy and resources to the establishment of a missionary training centre for Indian Christian women, known as Christa Seva Vidhyalaya. While Indian Christian women went into teaching and medicine, it was felt that there were not enough Indian women trained ‘for pastoral and evangelistic work’. The late colonial period during the Second World War was a very difficult time to establish such a new venture, but the centre opened in 1945 and, by 1947, seven students had been trained. Rivett managed to raise money to build a residence for six students. She cajoled colleagues in Madras to lecture the students and herself presented weekly lectures on ‘Worship and Meditation’, gave many of her own books to the centre’s library and supplied graduates with ‘a good set of books’ to assist their work. On a return visit to India in 1955, Rivett was thrilled to find the centre flourishing, having graduated sixty women.

Internationalist

Eleanor Rivett conducted important work in conceptualising Australia’s place within the world, in particular within the Asia–Pacific region. She realised that the imperial world was waning and that the future would belong to the emerging nations of Asia, Pacific and Africa. Within this world, Australia’s White Australia Policy, inherently unjust, had no place. As Howe points out, women like Rivett were important intermediaries to their own home countries. Such leadership of Australian public opinion was particularly needed at the time. In 1923, the Indian Christian and YMCA worker, Dr S.K. Datta, made a tour of Australia. While he was lionised by the SCM in Australia, he made a very revealing comment about Australia in his private notebook,
It is a nice country, friendly hospitable people but so ignorant … This country depresses me—such good folks, Methodists etc but Christianity has so little spirit—such dullards too-quiet contentment not realising the world of Asia so near their shores is in tumult.

Rivett sought to convey her message to the Australian public in speeches, interviews and radio talks when she was on furlough. Thus, in 1921, she discussed the topical issue of Gandhi and Indian social unrest, and, in 1926, she described Gandhi as ‘the greatest man in Indian today.’ Her 1932 talk on Indian women was reported in the Argus, a Melbourne daily. In 1938, she spoke about the enthusiasm of Indian girls ‘to further their education’ and how they were taking up positions in teaching and welfare work. She further noted that women were also members of legislative councils. To members of the Lyceum club in Brisbane in 1938, she said that ‘Australians should help people realize that India was a self-governing dominion’ and could manage its own affairs, and that Indian women were playing an active part in this. She spoke too of the All-Indian Women’s Conference, where Indian women and those from abroad ‘worked together without any question of creed or caste’, before going on to talk about individual women, such as the first woman cabinet minister in Bengal and her work in public health.

After the war, she was telling Australian audiences that Australia ‘associated historically with one and geographically with the other, could play and important role as interpreter between West and East’. Writing to her former students, she also positioned herself in the role of ‘interpreter of your country to mine’ and was reported as ‘working for closer India–Australia relations’. She went out of her way to be friendly to visiting Indians and to those who came to study or settle in Australia. Her rhetoric was often cleverly crafted to position India and Australia as equal partners in the world, as ‘sister dominions’ facing similar problems. On leaving Women’s Christian College in 1947 she said:

I hope I may some day welcome students of this College among the doctors and nurses and scientists whom the Australian Universities are inviting for study and research, since we have so many problems in common in our sister Dominions.

In her talks, she did not dwell on the negative stereotypes of India and Indian women, such as those perpetuated by Katharine Mayo’s infamous work, Mother India. Rather, she countered these by speaking about Indian achievements, and perhaps set out to challenge her listeners by focusing upon Indian women, presenting them as like Australian women and even in
advance of them. Thus she wrote, ‘With a woman Governor, a woman Ambassador, and a woman Minister of Health in the first year of Independence, India is ahead of us in this Dominion of the Sunny South’.  

Conclusion

Much of Eleanor Rivett’s success as a leader in educational and missionary work came from her sensitivity to the positions of others from different cultural and religious positions. Her relative openness to India and Indians, and to their values, beliefs and hopes and aspirations, was coupled with an awareness of her own position as what she termed a ‘Britisher’. These qualities, and her sense of history and keen interest in what was unfolding around her in India in particular and in Asia in general, had been sharpened by her involvement in the Student Christian Movement, but drew to a great extent upon her childhood environment and experiences.

1 Rivett worked in Calcutta and Madras, but the current names of Kolkata and Chennai are used in this chapter, except when proper names or in direct quotations.
3 Ibid., passim.
5 Ibid.
11 Federal Independent, 1 November 1928, 15.
14 Schedvin, 398.
16 Murray Independent 15 August 1895, 1–4.
17 ‘Death of Mrs Rivett’, Argus, 19 August 1936, 15.
19 ‘Death of Mrs Rivett’.
21 See Murray Independent, 15 February 1891, 15–16.
22 Ibid., 15 August 1895, 87.
23 Ibid., 15 January 1897, 4.
25 Ibid., 6.
26 Ibid., 6–7.
31 Eleanor Rivett, Memory Plays a Tune, Being Recollections of India 1907–47, (Sydney: Eleanor Rivett, 1965), 16.
33 Rivett, Memory Plays a Tune, 15.
34 Ibid., 23.
35 Ibid.
37 Rivett, Memory Plays a Tune, 25.
38 Ibid., 30.
39 Ibid.
42 WCC, Eleanor Rivett, 23.
44 Rivett on UMGHS 1923, CWM/LMS/North India /Reports, Box 1921/1923, SOAS.
46 Rivett 24 May 1927, CWM/LMS Incoming Correspondence, Box 30, SOAS.
48 Rivett, Memory Plays a Tune, 29.
49 Ibid.
53 WCC, Eleanor Rivett, 27.
54 Rivett 24 May 1927, CWM/LMS Incoming, Box 30, SOAS.
55 Rivett 23 May 1917, CWM/LMS Incoming, Box 25, SOAS.
56 WCC, Eleanor Rivett, 25.
57 Federal Independent, 1 October 1927, 13–14.
58 Rivett, Memory Plays a Tune, 31–2.
59 WCC, Eleanor Rivett, 19.
60 Either Rivett mis-remembered or this was a temporary appointment during a furlough absence, as Olive Stillwell, also from Melbourne, was principal at UMGHS from 1938–1952. Kanaklata Das was the first Indian principal from 1952–1970. See http://nomoskar.tripod.com/unitedmissionarygirlshighschool/id1.html accessed 5 March 2011.
61 Rivett, Memory Plays a Tune, 81.
65 Rivett, Memory Plays a Tune, 18.
66 Ibid., 52–4.
67 Murray Independent, 15 August 1907, 9.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 15 April 1908, 8.
70 Ibid., 15 December 1907, 9.
72 Murray Independent, January 15 1908, 7–8.
73 Singh, 344.
74 Alice B. Van Doren, Christian High Schools in India (Calcutta: YMCA Publishing House, 1936), 87.
75 Rivett, Memory Plays a Tune, 43.
76 WCC, Eleanor Rivett, 34.
77 7 August 1924, Lawrence and Caroline Hogg collection, Box 53.1, Special Collections New Library, University of Edinburgh.
78 Federal Independent, 1 October 1929, 15.
79 Ibid., 35.
80 Ibid., 36.
81 Ibid., 37.
82 Ibid., 37.
84 Renate Howe, ‘The Australian Student Christian Movement and Women’s Activism in the Asia–Pacific Region, 1890–1920s’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 16, no. 36 (2001): 317–18. See also Ellen Warne’s comments on Constance Duncan in this volume.
85 Diary of visit to Australia, New Zealand and Fiji, 1923, Papers of S.K. Datta, Mss Eur F178/57, Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library.
89 ‘Indian Women at Home and in Public Life’, *Argus*, 22 October 1932, 23. See also ‘Girls of India: Miss E. H Rivett’s Impressions’, *Courier-Mail*, 1 July 1932, 16.
91 ‘Women’s Work in India’, *Courier-Mail*, 17 March 1938, 35.
92 ‘Australians: Are they East or West?’, *Barrier Miner*, 7 April 1949, 4.
93 *Sunflower*, August 1949, 10.
94 *Smith’s Weekly*, 29 Jan 1949, 1.
96 WCC, *Eleanor Rivett*, 43.