Introduction

In 1906, Edwin Brown, the Moravian missionary at the Presbyterian mission at Weipa, far north Queensland, wrote to his bishop, Benjamin La Trobe, reporting a conversation he had with a representative of the Presbyterian Foreign Missions Committee:

When he was here last year Mr Robertson gave us to distinctly understand that no single women would again be appointed to the position, & we agreed with him. His words, as near as I can remember were “We can’t make any change at Mapoon. There’s one name so associated with the place, that of Mrs Ward, that we could not think of making any change there, but at the other stations there should be a superior sort of man as assistant whose wife should be the teacher”.¹

Although this exchange reveals missionary and mission board anxieties over the place of single women on the Australian mission field, Mrs Ward’s name ‘was so associated with’ the nearby mission of Mapoon that her status was assured. And, at Edwin Brown’s mission, Weipa, a young single woman
named Laura Schick worked for seven years. Both women were employed as missionaries in their own right.

The presence of Ward and Schick at the north Queensland missions was an early indication of the rapid transformation of the balance of the sexes among missionaries on Aboriginal missions, which occurred in the first decade of the 20th century. Missionary women had always played a crucial role on Aboriginal missions—marriage was considered an essential condition for the earliest missionaries to the Aborigines. Married European women on missions took active roles in education, domestic labour, pastoral and evangelistic work and even, in the absence of their husbands, oversight of the missions. Single women were occasionally employed as schoolteachers on missions, though they were usually employed by the state rather than by mission societies. Until the end of the 19th century, however, it was primarily men who were officially employed as missionaries, men who wrote official reports to mission societies and churches, and men who thus became the public face of Aboriginal missions.

In the space of little more than a decade, this situation changed dramatically. This had much to do with the establishment and rapid growth of the interdenominational ‘faith’ missions, which emphasised spiritual fervour over education or class. Of the two largest faith missions, the Aborigines Inland Mission and the United Aborigines Mission, the AIM was founded and for nearly 50 years directed by a woman, and both missions employed women (married and single) as missionaries in their own right. Between 1905 and 1930, the AIM employed about 60 women, of whom 50 were single and 10 married. During the same period, 30 male missionaries were employed. Both the AIM and UAM struggled to find male candidates for mission.

The obvious impact of the faith missions in bringing women to the forefront of Aboriginal missions can obscure a more gradual change that had been occurring in the mainstream Australian mission societies. This chapter focuses on Matilda Ward, the first single women employed on an Aboriginal mission in Australia, as well as her colleague, Laura Schick, who was employed for a much shorter time on a nearby mission. How and why did these single women gain a place on these missions, in spite of obvious anxieties about the appropriateness of their presence? And what do their lives and experience tell us about opportunities for women’s leadership on Aboriginal missions, both for non-Indigenous and Indigenous women?

In examining the roles of these women, it is important to recognise the highly negative consequences that mission life could have for Indigenous people, as
family and community life was profoundly disrupted and many aspects of Aboriginal culture were denigrated and forbidden. Missions provided Aboriginal people with safety from settler violence, basic provisions and the opportunity for a (sometimes very basic) European education that could be used in negotiating with settler society, but, in exchange, Aboriginal people often lost control over many aspects of their lives. While some missionaries treated Indigenous people with respect, almost all were authoritarian and some were violent and abusive. The complexity of the mission experience is reflected in the diverse and often ambivalent ways that missions and missionaries are remembered in Aboriginal communities today. In writing about the experiences of both women missionaries and mission residents, I aim to acknowledge these complexities. While mission life provided unusual opportunities for Matilda Ward and Laura Schick, the same cannot be said for many of the mission residents at Mapoon and Weipa.

The Emergence of Single Women Missionaries

The experience of Matilda Ward—and, to a lesser degree, of Laura Schick—suggests a number of reasons these single women were able to gain a role in the missionary work in north Queensland, in spite of male resistance. In the first place, these women took their places within the family structure of the missionary enterprise. Aboriginal missions were often a family business, involving members of the immediate and extended family of the man employed as the ‘missionary’. For example, on the large north Queensland mission of Yarrabah, which was run by the Anglican missionary Ernest Gribble, both Gribble’s brother and sister assisted with the mission. Matilda Ward was the sister of Mrs Hey, whose husband, Nicholas, was the senior missionary at Mapoon. Laura Schick was the sister of Thekla Brown, Edwin’s wife. As members of the missionaries’ family, these women could be seen as acceptable, protected by family ties from being a sexual threat or being sexually threatened. Shortly after Brown wrote these comments, however, Yarrabah mission was rocked by scandal when Gribble’s sister, Ethel, eloped with an Indigenous man from the mission, Fred Wondunna. Rumours of the relationship between Ethel and Wondunna, which had first developed in 1903, may possibly have contributed to the anxieties of Brown and the Presbyterian mission authorities.

As Brown’s comment suggests, however, Ward was not just acceptable but central to the identity of Mapoon mission. This development was related to both the history of the north Queensland missions and Ward’s personal history. Mapoon mission was established in 1891, after the Presbyterian
Church of Victoria decided to support the establishment of missions in Queensland. As with the Presbyterian mission in Victoria, the Queensland counterparts were to be run by missionaries sent from Europe by the Moravian church, famous for its international missionary efforts. The first of these missionaries to arrive in north Queensland was an Irish Moravian named James Ward, who came with his wife Matilda. They were accompanied by a German Moravian named Nicholas Hey, who was soon joined by his wife, Matilda’s sister Minnie. In 1894, however, three years after arriving at Mapoon, James Ward suddenly became seriously ill and died. Matilda left Mapoon briefly but, in 1896, she returned to her work as a teacher in the mission school. She remained at Mapoon until 1917. Ward’s status as wife of a missionary ‘martyr’ and her return to the work after her husband’s death clearly gave her great significance, as Mr Robertson’s comment suggests.

We know little about Matilda Ward’s background but, as a Moravian apparently brought up in a Moravian family, she would have been steeped in the pietist culture of the movement, which combined evangelical convictions about the need for salvation through faith in Jesus with an emphasis on humility, hard work and zealous missionary activity. By the end of the 19th century, one in 60 Moravian members were missionaries and they focused particularly on those regions and people groups that were considered particularly challenging for Christian mission. Though Moravian culture was broadly patriarchal, Moravians emphasised that both men and women played an important role in the missionary task, taught that marriage and sex (within marriage) were of great spiritual value, and often lived in close communities in which children might be raised in sex-segregated dormitories. Older single women without independent means could live communally in a ‘Single Sisters’ House’. This heritage may help explain Matilda Ward’s determination to remain on the mission field and her belief that she could do so without a husband.

However, the experience of both Ward and Schick also points to a broader shift in worldwide missionary practice. Both women were employees of the Presbyterian Women’s Missionary Union, which came into being in 1890. When Matilda Ward returned to Mapoon after her husband’s death, she went as an agent of the PWMU, making her the first woman employed as a missionary in her own right on an Aboriginal mission. The establishment of the PWMU and its willingness to employ a single woman relates to the wider development and influence of women’s missionary societies around the world in the late 19th century.
Over the past four decades, feminist scholars and others have traced the shifting ideology of missions regarding women’s involvement in the missionary task. Early sexual transgressions among single male missionaries moved mission societies to employ married couples rather than single men. Evangelical mission societies initially mobilised women ‘in keeping with the Victorian gender convention of confining women to a separate domestic sphere, appearing in public, if at all, solely in a voluntary capacity and as helpmates to their husbands’. Such conventions were, as many historians have noted, often tied to the idea of women’s particular capacity for spirituality, as in the oft-mentioned image of women as the ‘angel in the home’. On the mission field, as Patricia Grimshaw has written:

The adult married woman was increasingly prized as the good helpmeet to her husband, by no means subservient, but the conscience, the stabilizer, for the man. Chaste in youth, faithful in marriage, she was also an alert and active mother, close to her children, watchful and prudent.

As Grimshaw notes, this was not a ‘decorative model’ of femininity; such wives were expected to be hard workers.

The first 50 years of the 19th century saw a growing conviction that the conversion and education of ‘native’ women was crucial to the establishment of indigenous churches, which in turn meant that women became seen as more necessary to the missionary effort. This translated into a willingness of mainstream mission societies to employ single women. In Britain, societies began to establish ‘Ladies’ Committees’ to oversee the selection of these women during the 1860s and 70s. But this trend came more slowly to Australia, as women’s missionary societies and unions did not form until the 1880s and 90s. As Anne O’Brien has noted, these missionary societies were the ‘first centralised statewide organisations of church women in the Protestant churches’ and they multiplied quickly. In 1884, the Ladies Auxiliary to the London Missionary Society was established, followed in 1885 by the Baptist Zenana Missionary Society and shortly afterwards by Presbyterian, Methodist and Anglican societies.

The early history of the Presbyterian Women’s Missionary Unions demonstrates the way such groups emerged. The Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria for 1890 contained a small paragraph that announced the aims of a newly formed organisation in Victoria: ‘The Presbyterian Women’s Missionary Union is an organisation for “Mission Work among Women by Women”, which originated through the
offer of £50 toward salary of a Lady Missionary in any Presbyterian Women’s Society which would undertake her support. 22 Although the PWMU (known in NSW as the PWMA) had not been mentioned in previous editions of the Assembly proceedings, there were apparently eleven societies already in existence at this time. Within two years, the Victorian PWMU had expanded to 52 branches and was maintaining ‘four lady missionaries’ in Korea. 23 It was also employing a Miss Newcombe to work among the Chinese women and children living in Little Bourke Street, Melbourne. 24 In New South Wales, a Presbyterian Women’s Association was formed the following year.

In 1892, 30 women and several Presbyterian ministers met in Brisbane to form a PWMU for Queensland. Unlike the majority of women’s missionary auxiliaries formed during this period, which had overseas missions as their primary focus, the Queensland PWMU understood their priorities as being: ‘To aid (1) Aborigines Mission at Batavia River, (2) The Kanaka Mission, (3) The Home Mission, and (4) Any other Mission which the strength of the Union may be able to undertake’. 25 This unusual focus on Aboriginal mission appears to have resulted, as the above quote suggests, from the contemporary interest in Presbyterian circles in a specific missionary effort towards the Aborigines of the ‘Batavia River’ region where Mapoon was established.

The Presbyterian Church in Victoria had also played a central role in the establishment of the Mapoon mission, so it is perhaps not surprising that when the young widow Matilda Ward arrived in Victoria in 1896, fresh from the shock of her husband’s death, the PWMU there determined to support her as their agent. Soon afterwards, they paid for Laura Schick to join the Weipa mission.

Organisations such as the PWMU represented a significant shift in women’s role within the missionary enterprise, both as supporters and as workers. The women’s missionary societies gave women experience in fundraising, public speaking, producing publicity material and reports and all the organisational processes of selecting and supporting missionaries. This was actively acknowledged and celebrated within the PWMU, with the annual report of the PWMU in 1899 triumphantly stating:

The women of our Church have learned the power of organisation, and by concerted action in this Missionary enterprise, they desire, in fellowship with Jesus Christ, to have the standard of service raised to His high ideal. Fifty years ago the limits of women’s work in heathen lands were drawn almost as closely as a system of caste. Now every open door bids her enter with her message of love and hope. 26
More pointedly, the president of the Queensland PWMU commented in 1900: ‘Even if we are Presbyterian women who have been handicapped in our younger days, and not allowed to speak, it just shows today what the women of the Presbyterian Church can do’. Matilda Ward seems to have agreed with this enthusiastic assessment. She wrote to Benjamin La Trobe in 1897: ‘I think the ladies of the Presbyterian Church have more “go” in them than the gentlemen—Mr Hey is not burdened with letters from the Convener of his Committee! Whereas I hear every month from mine’.

The fundraising capacity of the women’s missionary societies gave them the opportunity to support single women missionaries to do ‘women’s work for women’, in turn creating extensive new opportunities for single women on the mission field. While such women were still answerable to the mainstream mission societies to which they were attached, which were all run by men, as agents of the women’s societies they had alternative sources of finance and personal support, as well as networks for publicity and publication.

Judith Godden has shown that the very success of the women’s missionary societies meant that their independence could be short-lived. The Presbyterian Church in New South Wales pressured the PWMA to direct its fundraising into the general coffers and required the group to raise funds for mission in general, not just for women missionaries. By the end of 1912, the PWMA executive was amalgamated with the general Foreign Missions Committee, meaning that all women missionaries were now under the control of a male-dominated committee. Nonetheless, single women such as Matilda Ward continued to be employed as missionaries in both Australia and beyond. Ward’s experiences show that, as in the case of single women missionaries whom historians have studied in other contexts in this period, this employment offered opportunities for a degree of status and responsibility unlikely to be achieved ‘at home’.

The Role of Women Missionaries

If the presence of Matilda Ward and Laura Schick on the north Queensland missions can be explained by their family connections and the growing influence of the PWMU, what can we say about their role on the missions? What opportunities did they have to exercise leadership and what impact did they have? These questions are easier to deal with in the case of Ward and Schick than that of many missionary wives. As single women, both corresponded regularly with the Moravian missionary leadership in Germany,
as well as with the PWMU committees. After Ward returned to Mapoon, she began keeping a regular journal and her letters were frequently published in the PWMU magazine. No similar sources are available for the married women missionaries, whose husbands appear to have done most of the letter-writing. These sources allow us to examine the role of the women on the mission, their relationships with both the male missionaries and the married women missionaries, as well as their relationships with Indigenous women.

Like many other women missionaries, Matilda Ward acted as schoolteacher on the mission. With her sister, she also cared for the children who boarded at the mission, in early years primarily local children whose parents had placed them temporarily at the school. In his annual report on the mission in 1916, Nicholas Hey commented on the demanding nature of this work for the missionary women:

The constant strain of the work may be realized when it is understood that no holidays during the year are possible for the ladies of the staff because most of the boarders being orphans have to remain at the school.31

From Ward’s diaries and letters, we gain information about the size of the school, the subjects studied, the progress of the children according to her standards, and the health or sickness of the children.32 In her letters, she described her work with the children as one in which she had a significant degree of autonomy. For example, she wrote with regards to a young girl named Dolly:

I brought her back with me from Thursday Isl. during my last visit there. She was in the hospital & had been there for some years under treatment—but hers is an incurable disease & as the doctor assured me the infectious stage was past & that nothing more could be done for her—I brought her here so that she might hear something of that Friend who loves her. She is only about ten—and was as a child mal-treated by shameful white men.33

Ward’s description of her actions—‘I brought her back with me’—and her interactions with officials—‘the doctor assured me’—suggests that she had the power independently to make decisions with huge significance for children like Dolly.

Ward clearly found her work satisfying and saw it as a central part of the mission work. While she was sparing in the details she provided of her
teaching practice, she carefully copied down comments from the mission visitors’ book that highlighted the work done at the school. On 16 November 1906, she noted that a Mr and Mrs Galloway had visited and examined the school. Mr Galloway’s remark in the visitors’ book was: ‘I wish to place on record my appreciation of the Excellent results obtained by the teacher of the school Mrs Ward. The children have a really sound & useful knowledge which cannot fail to be of use to them in after life.’ On 30 May 1907, Ward recorded the comments of a Mr Park who had visited the mission:

Mrs Park & myself have been surprised & delighted with all we have seen & heard. The school work is quite abreast of our Public Schools in NS Wales in every department. The politeness of the children struck us from the first & their happiness is also very manifest.

Ward also recorded ongoing news about the later lives of the women who had boarded at the mission or worked in the mission house: their marriages, baptisms, bereavements and scandals. In later years, when the mission established an ‘outstation’, a European-style village of Aboriginal couples, Ward took regular visits to her old pupils. On 4 February 1912, she wrote in her diary:

Rode to out-station with Mrs Hall & girls & visited the various cottages. Had helpful talks with the married girls. In the little service in the Church all prayed so beautifully, only 8 of us, but we felt Christ was in our midst.

As this incident suggests, Ward took on a pastoral role among the adult Aboriginal women, whom she had known as children. This pastoral role extended on occasion from the ‘helpful talks’ with individuals or small groups of women to addressing the mission residents as a whole. At the opening of a new church at the Aurukun mission, on 22 September 1910, Ward wrote: ‘The little girl boarders next sang “Jesus bids us shine” accompanied on the organ by Mrs Wilson. I was then asked to say a few words after which two more verses of “All Hail” were sung.’ On 11 May 1913, she noted: ‘Sunday. Had a sing with the girls & spoke at evening service.’ Ward’s casual reference to addressing mixed congregations in church points to the unusual opportunities available to her.

The extent of Matilda Ward’s ministry is also obvious in comparison with Laura Schick’s more limited role. Schick was also employed as schoolteacher, at the Weipa mission. Unlike Ward, however, she rarely mentioned any pastoral or administrative responsibilities towards Aboriginal men and women.
but seemed almost entirely focused on the children. Her role in the mission is suggested by a comment she made on the division of labour during an influenza epidemic: ‘Mr Brown generally attends to the men, Mrs Brown to the women, while I look after the children’. And she wrote of the ‘Spiritual side of our work’ that ‘Mr Brown has classes for the men and Mrs Brown for the women’.

Schick believed strongly that the Aboriginal children were better off in the boarding school. She shared the missionaries’ typical hostility towards Aboriginal culture, writing in 1903:

> We have eight little ones under six years old, we are glad to get them so young before all the native superstitions and vices are instilled into them. All have been brought to us by their parents or friends, and we are very thankful that the people have so much confidence in us to trust their little ones to our care.

And, in the early days of the mission, she wrote:

> At first we were afraid that we should not get the little girls easily, but our fears were needless, we have not had to ask for any of the children, the parents and friends have, in each case, asked us to take them. We have two tiny mites, about three and four years old, they were almost too small to leave their mother, but when they were brought to us, we gladly took them, knowing that they will be better here than in the bush.

While the missionaries do not appear to have forcibly removed children from their parents, they went on ‘recruiting’ drives to encourage parents to leave their children at the mission. If parents came to remove their children from the mission, the missionaries do not appear to have prevented them from doing so. In 1897, however, the Queensland government passed the *Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act*, which gave the colony far greater powers over Indigenous people, including greater powers to remove children from Aboriginal communities. From 1901, Mapoon mission was appointed an ‘Industrial School and Reformatory’ for the reception of these children. The reports of the northern protector of Aborigines make it clear that some of the children sent to Mapoon were removed from their parents and many appear to have been selected primarily because they were ‘half-caste’. Certainly, the Aboriginal people who lived at Mapoon in the 1960s and 70s spoke of forcible removal of their parents as ‘half-caste’ children.
Schick left the mission with great reluctance, for health reasons, in 1907. She wrote to Benjamin La Trobe:

> It is indeed a great trouble to leave my picanninies, and my work, which are dearer than ever now, I cannot bear the thought of going. Mr & Mrs Brown have long urged me to take this step, but I could not make up my mind to it, and it was only after long consideration and much prayer that I decided to send in my resignation.  

Even though Laura Schick’s responsibilities at the mission may have been conventional, her role as an agent of the PWMU pushed her beyond conventionality. Describing her time on furlough, Schick wrote:

> I did no speaking when I went South for some time, as I was so sick, but when I returned from Gippsland, I could no longer plead sickness, and so I was put to work … I thought, if I were there with Mr Hey, I could hide behind him, but he would not hear of any such thing, and I had to do my share. At first, I was a bit nervous, but when once I started, I did not mind much.

As this brief overview demonstrates, work on an Aboriginal mission could provide white women with opportunities for authority and influence. In the broader church community, being a woman missionary offered unusual status and public profile. Both within the mission and without, however, this authority and status was shaped by the power structure on the mission and the broader constructions of gender relations that this reflected.

**Missionary Maternalism**

The Presbyterian missions in north Queensland, like most missions of the period, were structured in terms of a patriarchal family, in which the male missionary was ‘Father’ and his wife was ‘Mother’. Mrs Ward was ‘Auntie’ to the Aboriginal girls and the women she had taught as children. On the Weipa mission, Laura Schick described the Aboriginal girls at her school relating to Mr and Mrs Brown as ‘Master’ and ‘Mother’. While this familial structure may have had some resonance with Aboriginal kin relationships, it also reflected the tendency of missionaries to infantilise mission residents, seeing them as ‘childlike’ regardless of age. In the case of Mapoon, a mission council was established, made up of elected male mission residents, who had the power to judge and punish other residents who had broken mission rules.
This council was, however, chaired by the senior male missionary, and the missionaries imposed their own punishments on the children in the dormitories.50

The experiences of Ward and Schick, and their descriptions of life on the missions, make it clear that the relationship between the missionary women and the mission residents was one of maternalism—the women wrote of the Aboriginal girls and women with strong affection, but always in a context of monitoring and sometimes penalising their behaviour. In return, the mission residents of all ages were encouraged to see the missionary women as older female relations.

The maternal nature of these relationships emerges very strongly in the letters that Aboriginal women wrote to Matilda Ward on her final departure from Mapoon in late 1917. A young woman named Rhyda, who had grown up in the Mapoon dormitory, wrote to Ward:

> It hurts me to write this letter dear Auntie, as it makes me think that you’ll be leaving us; You who had been our dear Mother, teacher, adviser and Missionary for so many years … Thank you very very much for leaving your beautiful home & friends and come & live & teach us about the love of our Heavenly Father. We had often hurt you and given you a lot of trouble, but you had often helped us and we know that “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy and they that beareth precious seed shall doubtless come home rejoicing …”

Such a letter tells us as much about standard missionary discourse as it does about Rhyda’s own experience. Nonetheless, the letter clearly shows the terms in which Matilda Ward was identified: as both maternal figure and as a missionary. The maternal nature of Ward’s relationships on the mission is also seen in the letter of a young woman named Maudie, who wrote:

> I thank you dearest Auntie for the many corrections you have lovingly given me, which when I was a good bit younger I thought to be bad treatment. But now that I can understand better, I cannot tell how much I thank you for it made me a better girl … The motherly love you showed us will always bring me a step nearer to Calvary.52

And again, a woman named Annette wrote to thank Ward that:

> for many years you have been preaching the Gospel here and have brought many souls to Christ. I also do thank you dear Auntie for
Cruickshank • Matilda Ward

bring me up when I was a girl & telling me about the love of Christ.53

The twin roles of motherly care and evangelist or missionary emerge clearly in all these letters, suggesting that Ward had strongly communicated her own sense of her role to the girls under her care.

Devin Bowles has argued that the letters these young women wrote to Ward demonstrate a strong sense of individual guilt about sin. Bowles contends that an emphasis on personal guilt was a central element of Moravian theology and that the missionaries’ successful inculcation of such guilt explained the large number of conversions that occurred at Mapoon. In this reading, these letters communicate an understanding of Ward as an almost Jesus-like figure, with the capacity to intercede with God for the souls of Aboriginal people and so lessen their guilt. Such a relationship was, she notes, entirely unknown in Aboriginal culture.54 This is a thoughtful reading of the letters and it is clear that they are infused with a sense of guilt, or at least indebtedness. However, the repeated references to Ward as mother (or aunt) are, to my mind, evidence of the ways in which Ward was conceptualised in familial terms that had meanings, however different, in both Aboriginal and Moravian culture. The construction of Ward as a maternal figure who was both sacrificial and had a spiritual mission drew on familiar tropes in evangelical culture but presumably differed from Indigenous understandings of motherhood at this time and in this place, though it is difficult to know how radically.

Each of these young women had fulfilled missionary expectations by marrying and settling on the mission outstation. A number of the letters showed that the young women had internalised an understanding of motherhood that linked it to spiritual mission. ‘Pray for me’, Clara Bond wrote, ‘that God will give me the needed wisdom to train this little jewel for God and point him to the Saviour’.55 Rhyda wrote that she and her husband would ‘try and meet you if not on earth in Heaven above and we also will bring our little boy’.56 Nicholas Hey wrote in 1909:

We want homes and our young women must be able to make them … The only solution to the problem “what shall become of the half caste Aboriginals” seems to us to be found in the settling of young couples upon the land removed from outside influences & placed under Christian supervision.57

For the missionaries, this was the safest and most appropriate future for the girls under their care, though a few were permitted to leave the mission to
work as domestic servants on Thursday Island. While the missionaries at Mapoon lobbied (unsuccessfully) to have land granted permanently to individual mission residents, this was to further the aims of establishing Aboriginal people in communities of European-style agriculture and domesticity. The emphasis on ‘Christian supervision’—which at times was provided by Christians from the Solomon Islands and elsewhere in the Pacific—demonstrated that these couples were not yet considered capable of self-determination. For the women who grew up under Matilda Ward’s care, opportunities were highly limited and life itself remained highly regulated.

Conclusion

As the first paid woman missionary to work on an Aboriginal mission, Matilda Ward gained a higher status and profile than the majority of the many women who had worked on Aboriginal missions before her. As has been shown, this partly reflected her own personal history and reputation as the widow of a missionary ‘martyr’. It also reflected broader shifts in missionary practice, as women’s missionary societies began to select, fund and promote their own single female candidates to do ‘women’s work for women’. It was the combination of these two factors that gave Ward considerable authority on and off the mission, as is seen by the less prominent role played by her colleague Laura Schick, who did not have Ward’s reputation for self-sacrifice and heroism.

Ward’s and Schick’s experiences draw attention to the influence of the women’s missionary societies, which have received little attention from Australian historians. The capacity of these societies to engage Protestant women across Australia in organising, fundraising, writing and publishing on a very large scale, with an international focus, deserves further attention. Emerging during the same period as temperance and suffrage societies, these societies provide another example of self-consciously new forms of women’s activism at the turn of the century.

These single women’s experiences also provide evidence of the importance of missionary maternalism, as both married and single women attempted to take on maternal roles in relation to Aboriginal girls and women. Girls who lived in the dormitories were to be trained up to be Christian wives and mothers, a crucial element of missionary plans to socialise Aboriginal people into European-style communities under ‘Christian supervision’. While the limited opportunities available to mission residents were a consequence of the violent and racist context of colonial society as well as missionary ambitions, it is
clear that missionary attitudes to Aboriginal people remained maternalist and paternalist rather than egalitarian. The mission context allowed some white women to take on unusually prominent leadership roles, reflecting in part the new opportunities opening to women in broader society, but the roles available to Indigenous women remained highly circumscribed.

1 Edwin Brown to Benjamin La Trobe, 9 July 1906, MF 187, Moravian Mission Papers, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), Canberra.


4 This could lead to interesting conflicts between single women state schoolteachers and male mission managers. See the diaries of Ellie Hagenauer at Ramahyuck, 7–14 March 1892, 4370A/633, Le Souef Collection, Battye Library, Perth.


7 AAM Council to AIM Directors, 16 December 1918, MSS 7244/1/30, AIM Records.


9 For example, Friedrich Hagenauer, the Moravian missionary at Ramahyuck mission in Victoria, wrote of a period when he was absent from the mission: ‘The work at Ramahyuck, during my absence, was carried on as usual. Mr Beilby kindly took the services; my eldest son, the farming and station work; my eldest daughter, the Government part; of course, all under the direction of Mrs Hagenauer, so, that on my return, I found all in best working order’. Ramahyuck Mission report, 1885, ‘Reports of Mission to the Heathen’ *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria and Tasmania* (1885), xx.


18 Thorne, 43.


20 O’Brien, 74.

21 Ibid.

22 *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria* (1890), xxxiii.

23 *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria* (1892), xliii.

24 Ibid.

25 Quote from early PWMU circular, in McDermant and McIlwraith, 7.


28 Matilda Ward to Benjamin La Trobe, 11 February 1897, MF 187, Moravian Mission Papers.


30 For further discussion of the experiences of single women missionaries elsewhere, see Grimshaw, ‘Faith, Missionary Life and the Family’, 269–70; Kirkwood, 23–42;


32 For examples in letters, see Matilda Ward to Benjamin La Trobe, 9 November 1900; Matilda Ward to Benjamin La Trobe, 29 November 1906; Matilda Ward to Benjamin La Trobe, 13 July 1908, MF 187, Moravian Mission Papers. For examples in diary, see 1 October 1896; 7–8 January 1912, MSS 1893/11, BOEMAR Collection.

33 Matilda Ward to Benjamin La Trobe, 9 November 1900, MF 187, Moravian Mission Papers.

34 16 November 1906, MSS 1893/11, BOEMAR Collection.

35 Matilda Ward to Benjamin La Trobe, 30 May 1907, MF 187, Moravian Mission Papers.

36 4 February 1912, MS 1893/11, BOEMAR Collection.

37 22 September 1910, MSS 1893/11, BOEMAR Collection.

38 11 May 1913, MSS 1893/11, BOEMAR Collection.

39 Laura Schick to Benjamin La Trobe, 9 April 1902, MF 187, Moravian Mission Papers.

40 Laura Schick to Benjamin La Trobe, 21 October 1901, MF 187, Moravian Mission Papers.

41 21 March 1903, MF 187, Moravian Mission Papers.

42 Laura Schick to Benjamin La Trobe, 21 October 1901, MF 187, Moravian Mission Papers.

43 See Laura Schick to Benjamin La Trobe, 24 September 1902, in which she describes a father coming to remove his child. MF 187, Moravian Mission Papers.


46 Laura Schick to Benjamin La Trobe, August 1906, MF 187, Moravian Mission Papers.

47 Laura Schick to La Trobe, 18 June 1904, MF 187, Moravian Mission Papers.

48 See the letters from the residents of Mapoon Mission to Mrs Ward and later the Heys when they left Mapoon, in MSS 1893/11, BOEMAR Collection.

49 Laura Schick to La Trobe, 1 February 1906, MF 187, Moravian Mission Papers.

50 See Matilda Ward’s diary entries for 25 February to 7 April 1912, in MSS 1893/11, BOEMAR Collection.

51 Rhyda to Matilda Ward, 23 October 1917, MSS 1893/11, BOEMAR Collection.

52 Maudie to Matilda Ward, nd [October 1917], MSS 1893/11, BOEMAR Collection.


Ingereth Macfarlane and Mark Hannah, Aboriginal History Monograph 16 (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2007), 216–19.

55 Clara Bond to Matilda Ward, 21 October 1917, MSS 1893/11 BOEMAR Collection.

56 Rhyda to Ward, 23 October 1917.

57 Mapoon annual report, 1909, MSS 1893/11, BOEMAR Collection.

58 For an excellent account of conflict between the missionaries and the local authorities over whether Aboriginal people should be allowed to work in the local community, see John Harrison, ‘Missions, Fisheries and Government in Far North Queensland, 1891–1919’ (Hons thesis, University of Queensland, 1974). The missionaries were generally opposed to mission residents being employed off the mission.