

**“Was it worthwhile?”**

**An historical analysis of five women missionaries and their encounters with the Nyungar people of south-west Australia.**

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**This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of  
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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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## **Abstract**

Was it worthwhile? The thesis asks this question of the life and work of female faith missionaries who served in Western Australia with the Australian Aborigines' Mission and/or the United Aborigines' Mission, during the twentieth century.

In 1902, the New South Wales Aborigines' Mission adopted faith mission principles based on those of the China Inland Mission founded in 1865. The mission expanded into Western Australia in 1908 and changed its name to the Australian Aborigines' Mission. From 1929, it was known as the United Aborigines' Mission. The research began with a historiography of the China Inland Mission and the United Aborigines' Mission and its antecedents. The analysis of the principles of these two missions identified that some characteristics of a faith mission were present in the New South Wales Aborigines' Mission from the beginning and others were never adopted. It established that from 1902, the New South Wales Aborigines' Mission upheld the faith principles of trusting God to provide physical needs, not soliciting for funds and not entering into debt. Because most faith missionaries were female, the historiography proceeded to examine texts on women missionaries, including recent work by Australian writers. This recognised that issues of gender, race and class were present within both mission cultures.

Five case studies were chosen to cover a period from 1912 when Bertha Telfer arrived in Western Australia until the retirement of Mary Jones in 1971. Using written and oral source material from Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives, the research studied the work of five female faith missionaries in south-west Australia: Bertha Telfer/Alcorn, Ethel Hamer/Fryer, Hope Malcolm/Wright, Mary Jones and Melvina Langley/Rowley, with a focus on issues of Evangelicalism, race, gender and class. Preliminary investigation of the

women recognized that while only one had professional training and two received missionary training, membership of the interdenominational Christian Endeavour youth movement was a formative influence on all these female missionaries. An investigation into the principles of that organisation, founded in North America in 1881, established it was influenced by the 1858-59 Revival within Evangelicalism in England and North America and it placed a strong emphasis on personal conversion and a commitment to mission. Christian Endeavour spread to Australia by 1883 and was found to have provided limited leadership opportunities to women.

The research tracked the experience of the female faith missionaries over six decades of living by faith among the Nyungar people and discovered a lack of identification with Indigenous culture that had its roots in a widely held belief in the superiority of western culture. Associated with this was the Evangelical belief in personal conversion that did not address cross-cultural issues. The UAM identification with the rise of fundamentalism from the 1920s coincided with diminished leadership opportunities for women at a time when women were gaining more choices in the wider Australian community.

The thesis concludes that the role of faith missionary was costly to women in terms of their health and wellbeing. In the context of oppressive government policies towards Indigenous Australians, the poverty and marginalisation experienced by the women, when combined with compassion, created solidarity with Nyungar people. In some cases, this reduced the barriers of race and gender and resulted in the conversion of some Nyungar people, contributing to the formation of an Indigenous and Evangelical church. These findings are significant because they point to new understanding of mission, conversion and Aboriginal-missionary relations and cultures and of the role played by female faith

missionaries in the shared mission history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Western Australians.

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## Abbreviations

AAM	Australian Aborigines' Mission
AEF	Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship
AIM	Aborigines' Inland Mission
AIM	Australian Inland Mission
APA	Aborigines Protection Association
APB	Aborigines Protection Board
CE	Christian Endeavour
CIM	China Inland Mission
DGO	Dulhi Gunyah Orphanage
GMAA	Gospel Mission to the Australian Aborigines
KJV	King James Version
LMS	London Missionary Society
MBI	Melbourne Bible Institute
NSWAM	New South Wales Aborigines' Mission
RBMU	Regions Beyond Missionary Union
PBI	Perth Bible Institute
SROWA	State Records Office of Western Australia
UAM	United Aborigines' Mission
WCTU	Woman's Christian Temperance Union
WACEU	Western Australian Christian Endeavour Union



## Measurements

Decimal currency was introduced into Australia on 14 February 1966.<sup>1</sup>

### Currency

1 pence = 1 cent (approximate measurement)

12 pence/1 shilling = 10 cents

10 shillings = 1 dollar (\$1.00)

1 pound (£1) = 2 dollars (\$2.00)

Australia's "Imperial" system of weights and measures was part of its British heritage. The Metric Conversion Act 1970 enabled the progressive introduction of the metric system of measurement.<sup>2</sup>

### Distance

1 mile = 1.61 kilometres

### Area

1 acre = 0.405 hectares

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<sup>1</sup> K.M. Archer, *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia* (Canberra: Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, No. 52, 1966), 671.

<sup>2</sup> J. P. O'Neill, *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia* (Canberra: Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, No. 58, 1972), 1024-1029.

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