

A Passion for Evangelism and a Heart for the Women of Iran: A Victorian Missionary's Encounter with Qajar Iran

Abstract: By focusing on the life and work of one individual this paper seeks to outline some of the complexities underlying the relationship between Victorian Christian missionary women and the Islam and Muslims of Qajar Iran. Drawing on material from a British perspective, the life and efforts of Mary Bird (in Iran between 1891-1914) are described and analysed with particular reference to her role in the historical women's movement and her part in early Christian encounters with people of another faith. She is recognised as a woman of her age - one whose theology was shaped by a particular strand within Victorian Christianity and whose ideologies were restricted by social norms of imperial culture. Nevertheless an attempt is made to look beneath the surface, to distinguish between her writings which conform with orientalist and religious expectations of the day and her actions which display great commitment and understanding towards the Persian people amongst whom she worked.

The role of evangelism in the work of missionary women

Women's work within the British Church Missionary Society (CMS) in Persia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries may be described in terms of three primary categories: that of evangelism, education and medicine.

Though the three areas seem distinct and self-contained, there was considerable overlap between them. Ultimately, the primary aim of each missionary was evangelism and all strove to spread the gospel message of salvation as the basis of social improvement. Theoretically, therefore, the practical work of teachers, doctors and nurses was set within the context of the missionary task to evangelise and remained subordinate to it. However, the paucity of workers and the physical needs of people they encountered meant in practice, time was often unevenly divided between explicit evangelism on one hand and the exercise of professional skills on the other. Those set aside as evangelists frequently found themselves drawn into the realm of more practical activities. Meanwhile, educationalists and medical workers struggled to maintain the required balance between welfare work and spiritual responsibility.

The phrase "evangelisation of the world" had gained common usage in Britain by the end of the nineteenth century.¹ The term was used to mean the process of spreading the gospel through proclamation of salvation in Christ and the call to repentance, faith and new life in the Holy Spirit. This method relied upon belief in the power of God to act through missionaries as passive vessels or messengers of the gospel.

On the mission field, however, this ideal required tempering if it was to become a realistic vision. Missionaries soon found meeting the physical needs of the people amongst whom they worked was an essential component of their task. The CMS women in Iran were not exceptional in their early realisation that efforts to Christianise were more likely to succeed if they had something more tangible - such as medical treatment or educational opportunities - to offer Persian people. In addition, the CMS women were moved by the suffering they witnessed to progress beyond preaching into activities for advancing the physical condition of Iranian women and elevating their position in society.

The theory of pure evangelism remained at the heart of Christian mission ideology and continued infusing the evangelical language it relied upon. However, its application expanded to incorporate practical elements in an effort to improve social conditions.

This tension between the words and actions of missionaries, or their "sayings" and "doings", is an underlying element within the work of the CMS women in Iran, and nowhere is it more obvious than in the person of Mary Bird. Her language consistently conforms to the standards of that strand of nineteenth century Christianity - known as evangelicalism - at its starkest. Yet her conduct presents a notion of mission far greater than the narrow confines her words might present. Eager to win individuals for Christ in an effort to procure their salvation after death, she also represents an ardent desire to work for the redemption of whole *people*, not merely souls, in terms of all their relationships. Her concern was for salvation here and now, as well as in the life to come.

Throughout her career in Iran (1891-1904, 1911-1914), Mary Bird remained committed to the notion of evangelism as the essence of missionary activity. Despite her practical skills and the extraordinary manner in which she employed them, she always considered herself, first and foremost, an evangelist. For her enthusiasm and commitment were based wholly upon a desire to lead people to Christ. However, whilst her writings may suggest adherence to narrow evangelism in the worst sense, her life was an example of a more rounded approach. Bird, fully persuaded of the need to carry out Christ's commission to preach the gospel throughout the world, never lost sight of his teachings on issues of human dignity and justice.

Bird's significance within the Persia mission and her challenge to contemporary feminism

Mary Bird is undoubtedly the most famous CMS woman to have served in Iran. She enjoys that privilege partly because she was the first especially assigned to work amongst Muslim (as opposed to Armenian) women.

Bird was, in short, a colourful and potent personality, deeply committed to her vocation and much loved by a wide range of Persians and Britons alike. In the CMS archives alone, though her writings are not as prolific as some, she stands out as an extraordinary woman, determined and strong, yet with a gentle disposition. Compared to many, her time in Persia was short but her impact was keenly felt and her influence long lasting. She paved the way for later work amongst Muslim women, unconsciously leaving a trail in which others found it difficult to follow. Bird's love for the women of Iran, combined with intense commitment to evangelism, render her a fascinating and important figure in the overall evaluation of the CMS Persia mission and its female missionaries.

More than that, however, Bird's life issues a challenge to late twentieth century feminism. For it would be easy to dismiss her as a woman of restricted vision, enslaved by linguistic, religious and ideological expectations of her day. The challenge, however, is to look beyond the superficial, in a willingness to see positive elements without expecting to endorse all her ideas and the manner in which she expressed them. She herself would probably be appalled and confused at the possibility of being termed a feminist, and many today would regard her as having no place within the women's movement. In her achievements, however, and the way in

which she won the love and respect of those whom she met, Bird defies an entirely negative appraisal and demands an unconventional place in the history of the western women's movement.

Her methods would be unacceptable today, but considered within the context of her time, she is impossible to dismiss. Bird combined genuine humility with utter confidence, and an unfailing spirit of adventure led her into new possibilities that extended the boundaries of acceptable behaviour for British women. Moreover, her life was spent in an effort to improve the condition of other women, and for that alone she takes her place within the historical women's movement. Mary Bird represents a religious strand within Victorian feminism whose expression was somewhat contorted due to the language and influence of evangelical Christianity and orientalist ideologies. This strand did not motivate women towards active involvement in organised politics or the fight for equality. Nevertheless, it emanated from a similar source, for it grew from a concern for the well-being of woman-kind.

The beginnings of a missionary career

Exceptional in many respects, Bird was not an innovator ahead of her age but rooted deeply within the nineteenth century and its dominant ideologies. Essentially a product of the social and religious environment of her day, Bird regarded the influence of "the false prophet Mohammed" as responsible for turning Persia into "this seething mass of moral and social corruption".² However, to dismiss her on the basis of words like these would also be to misunderstand her. For Bird also had a vision of a better future in which women, free from suffering, would be fulfilled and whole. Her life was spent in an effort to bring about this future in the only way she knew how.

Perhaps more than any other CMS missionary her strong and earnest desire was for Christianity to be established in Persia. Christ alone, she believed, was the solution to the country's problems and it was her duty, therefore, to evangelise. She gave what she could, in order to secure a better life for the women of Iran, intending to improve their immediate conditions as well as their spiritual life after death. Her achievement was in the love and affection returned to her by them.

Changing strategies and conflicting ideologies in the CMS Persia mission

It was a small group that Mary joined in Julfa in 1891, yet her early years were an important and formative time in the mission's development. After fifteen years official presence in the country, since 1875, CMS, now more established, had begun shifting its emphasis to work more directly with Persians rather than through the Armenians of Julfa. Within this broad agenda, Mary was assigned to pioneer work amongst the women of Iran.

As soon as possible she began visiting Persian women wherever she found a welcome. She was convinced of the need to influence the female population if change was to be effected in the country as a whole. However, the transformation she envisaged and which motivated her efforts, was never straightforward or clear-cut. Her theology shaped her belief in the women as "a matter

of the greatest importance in the evangelization of Persia",³ suggesting she regarded them as the most likely means of ensuring the success of her religious ambitions. However, Mary was also driven by an acute awareness of the physical anguish she perceived, regarding the women as "the greatest sufferers"⁴. She noted that from birth, the lives of girls counted for little next to those of their brothers. Not considered worthy of education, they often married as young as ten and were later frequently required to endure the humiliation of polygamy or divorce.

The misfortunes she witnessed, combined with the Victorian ideologies and religious sentiments that had shaped her, encouraged Bird in her efforts to ameliorate Persian women's condition in this world *and* the next. Evangelical assumptions meant she associated the suffering she encountered with the religion of Islam whilst confidently presenting Christianity as the solution to all social problems. Meanwhile, appropriation of the imperialist agenda meant she regarded herself in a superior position, able to provide the necessary help. However, it was the woman-centred approach to her work, emanating from the same concern for female progress in Britain, that convinced Mary of the need to improve the condition of women in Iran. All these factors combined to ensure Bird willingly provided for the physical needs of Persian women, whilst never relinquishing the longing to accommodate their spiritual needs through the hope of salvation now and after death.

One sees in Mary Bird's life the conflicts arising for missionary women from prevalent ideologies in Victorian Britain. This tension runs through her career, reflecting both negative and positive impacts. A passion for religious conversion as the solution to Persia's problems and an inherent superiority in western capability is balanced by a genuine desire for the progress of womankind. Though these contradictions were not unusual in theory, Bird maintained their balance in such a way that her contribution stands out over that of many others.

Undeniably, the source of her motivation was always religious and, ultimately, she regarded inner peace as more important than physical comfort. Concerned that "... in the hour of anxiety, sorrow or death, the Moslem faith gives its followers no sure and certain hope nor divine consolation", Mary continually told the women that the gospel contained within it, "the secret of life, peace and joy".⁵ Yet the depth and sincerity of her religious convictions meant the outpouring of her faith in the shape of benevolent works was more than a belief in her own superiority and a very real desire to lessen suffering and pain where she could.

However, the physical problems of Persia were too immense even for the best and most motivated philanthropic will in the world. This left only the spiritual dimension, both as a reservoir to encourage the missionaries themselves and as a source of hope to offer the women they encountered. The hopelessness of the social reality made it difficult for the missionaries to maintain ceaselessly the impetus for continuing work. But assurance in eternal life, together with the inner peace which faith could give, provided an underlying framework for the CMS women's motivation. Mary believed that if she could guide Persian women towards personal faith, then she had helped them find something greater than the possibility of temporal alleviation in this life. For inner joy and comfort were realities that no-one could take away and, if sustained from within, would ultimately lead to the possibility of social change for women. Regarded in this way, Bird's life can be interpreted in a more rounded manner. The dualistic

separation of spirit and body, apparent in much of her writings, becomes less difficult from a twenty-first century perspective when considered within the context of her entire contribution. For ultimately, Mary was concerned for the well being of *whole* women, perceiving no need to dismiss either spiritual or physical needs.

It is difficult to imagine how daunting the future must have appeared to Mary in those early days with no role models or proven working techniques. She was neither medically trained nor a qualified teacher. Yet her delicate physique hid a strong and stubborn personality, fearless and optimistic. Thriving on sheer faith, Mary was certain she was doing God's will, and that confidence gave her courage to face the uncertainty and danger she encountered.

Certainly, her task was exciting as well as challenging, but it would be wrong to think of her career as romantic. The life of a single foreign woman in Qajar Persia was far from idyllic and Bird should not be remembered in the fanciful terms of Victorian orientalism's exotic East. She was, rather, setting out on a lonely path which would lead her into unknown dangers and an early death. Yet it was this woman who became the foremother of much that followed in the Persia mission. For Birdie, as she came to be known, was fully involved, alongside the early men, in establishing the whole ethos of the mission as it changed its focus from Julfa towards Isfahan, and eventually developed work amongst Muslims in other areas also.

Establishing work amongst Muslim women and laying the foundation for future efforts

Transformation of a class system within missionary women's imperialism

To ascertain a pattern for work among Muslim women, Bird began by familiarising herself with the language, scenes and customs of Persian life.

The women were the principal subjects of her study, as she sought to acquire a sympathetic understanding of both their outer and inner life.⁶

She was keen to make contact with as many Persian women as possible in order to gain their trust. Her efforts to form friendships with the rich were occasionally successful, but generally she found the poor more accessible. Bird's eagerness for contact with wealthier women reflects a more general attitude within the whole mission. For Mary and her colleagues believed that lasting social change for Persian women could most successfully be realised through the efforts of their own counterparts, in other words, the middle- and upper-class women of Iran. This confidence in the higher echelons of Persian society was based upon an appropriation of a similar class-based ideology underlying the western women's movement at the time. For in Britain, the upper-classes were regarded as responsible, and better able, to ensure lasting social change for their working-class sisters.

However, the transferral of this philosophy into an Iranian context relied on a subtle shift in emphasis. In British feminism, upper-class women were contrasted in a straightforward and diametrical manner against the lower- and working-classes. In Iran, ultimately *all* women were grouped together, and set up in antithesis to the missionaries themselves. A class-based ideology still existed, and is apparent from the missionary desire to influence wealthier women. However,

an added imperialistic dimension also entered the equation based on a notion of Muslim versus Christian, and/or eastern versus western. This justified the female missionary vocation to convince *all* Persian women of the need for conversion and change. Accordingly, whilst eager to reach the upper-class women of Iran, Bird was equally critical of them, finding them too interested in material things and little inclined to show interest in religious matters.

Whilst the missionary aim was to aid women, an invisible yet impenetrable barrier, constructed from the values of empire, differentiated between eastern and western women. The intrinsic ingredient of orientalism, which regarded East as essentially "other" and by implication inferior, entered the woman-centred agenda of the missionaries, distorting - though not negating - their role within the history of feminism.

Victorian evangelicalism and the liberation of British women

Realising that contact with all types of Persian women was more difficult than she had expected, Mary soon found they received her more readily if she had something to offer. Mary began by teaching a number of girls and women to read and knit in the few homes where she found a welcome. Returning from one such visit, she noticed a woman crying in the street and on enquiry discovered her boy was ill and she could not afford the doctor's fees. The woman eventually agreed to Mary's proposal that they should pray together, before willingly accepting quinine that Mary hoped would cure the boy of what she believed was malaria.

The boy's health was restored and "no sooner was he better, than the mother told all her neighbours [Mary] was a doctor".⁷ No amount of protestation availed and Bird soon found women and children visiting her daily in the hope she could cure their physical ailments. Despite her concerns, senior missionaries encouraged Mary, assuring her that the women were safer in her hands than many of their own superstitious doctors.⁸

Very quickly Bird's work, and reputation, began to grow. A room was rented in Julfa, acting as a dispensary for two or three days each week. Mary studied any medical books available and soon women began to trust her, coming to the dispensary in increasing numbers and begging her for home visits. She became affectionately known as *Khanum Maryam* (lady Mary) or *hakim Maryam* (Dr Mary) and the mission soon understood the significance of her accomplishments.

Despite the success of such unconventional medical work, evangelism remained at the centre of Bird's missionary agenda. Her practical skills provided the opportunity of reaching people and, whilst she willingly helped them physically, it was the desire to share her faith and preach the gospel which motivated her. She wrote,

From the first my greatest desire was to tell the sick ones of the Great Physician who still, though now invisible, goes about doing good to *soul* and body.⁹

Accordingly, the medical care she provided was never isolated from an opportunity to evangelise. Unlike Persian doctors, Bird accepted no money from patients but they soon understood that the Christian message was a component in the package she offered. Initially

many objected to prayers and Bible readings in Persian rather than Arabic yet soon their complaints subsided.

From a twenty-first century perspective it is easy to see limitations in Bird's attitude to life and work. The naivety of her faith in a quasi-medical approach and the priority of evangelism in her missionary method may now seem unsophisticated at best and crude or even dangerous at worst. Within their historical context, however, these elements are marks of the way in which British religious women participated in one strand of the developing women's movement. Despite the Victorian restrictions on the role of women within society, many - like Bird - used faith as a resource for expanding their opportunities. It was Mary's uncomplicated evangelical beliefs that convinced her of her vocation to help the sick and suffering women of Persia. Her ardent religious faith enabled her to take risks in the hope that new possibilities would arise for herself and the women of Britain, as well as those she met in Iran. Without this assurance, Bird was unlikely to pursue such an unorthodox and potentially reckless career, for the safety of convention and precedent had a strong hold over Victorian women.

Faith also gave to Mary Bird the confidence to express her calling and vocation in definite terms and act accordingly. Her perceptions were hampered by linguistic and ideological restrictions. Yet her vision for a better future for women drove her to work for change and improvement in their social and spiritual condition. Like many in her day, she remained uncritical of methods based on mistaken assumptions and limited understanding of eastern people. However, her efforts to ameliorate the position of Persian women, whilst expanding the possibilities for British women, characterise her enterprise as woman-centred, giving her a place in the history of feminism.

Christian imperialism or a mission of wholeness?

Despite all this it would still be easy to regard Mary Bird as excessively spiritual, caring little for the ills of the body as an end in themselves but using them merely as a means to conversion and religious change. Indeed, her writings did tend towards a more potent expression of this side of her personality though within herself Mary was naturally attracted to a more practical approach to life and the spiritual dimension was the one she struggled to improve. For her, the conflict was never resolved and after years of missionary work she still strove to withstand the temptation of preaching less and doing more.

This desire for emphasis upon the explicitly spiritual was typical of many Victorian missionaries. There appears, at times, to have been an almost intolerable tension between the philosophy of their methods, based upon the ideal of pure evangelism, and the need for social action. Nevertheless, both elements continued in a surprisingly comfortable coalition. Theoretically, social action submitted easily and was subsumed in the jargon of missionary philosophy. In practice, it retained a vital part within the missionary method.

This co-existence of spirit and body is an apparent feature in Mary Bird's life and is best expressed in terms of a dichotomy between words and actions. She remained entirely within bounds of the language expected of her, yet her efforts at improving social condition are no less significant because of this. Considered in its entirety, Bird's contribution was not based on a

dualistic advocacy of soul over body. However, she expressed these elements in different ways. Whilst her concern for the spiritual is most fully asserted in writings that adhere to expected norms, her actions speak volumes about the regard she had for temporal needs. Even amongst her contemporaries Birdie was known as one whose "doings [were] much greater than her sayings",¹⁰ and this is a significant factor in interpreting her life.

Bird represents a missionary approach of holistic care which was *expressed within the context of late nineteenth century Victorianism*. Close examination reveals a woman for whom body and soul were intimately linked, but whose theology ensured the emphasis of salvation through Christ over and above the need for participation in humanitarian acts. Her medical skills were used in an effort to reach people's souls, however, that need not imply that the corollary was an unloved or uncared for body. Rather, it suggests that her *raison d'être* was found in the combined healing of body *and* soul. Both elements were equally necessary for, as explained by Mary in answer to critics of the missionary movement, the extraction of one distorted the fullness of the vision. She displayed no partiality in treating those with an inclination towards conversion, compared to the majority without. But her single rule was that patients should *listen*, in the hope that their hearts might be touched. She was ultimately a missionary, not a social worker - motivated by the spiritual, not so much the physical. Yet her life in its fullness was an example of the complete care to which Kenneth Cragg refers as the essence of religious calling. For, he argues, "Christians are not called to organize philanthropy dissociated from the love of God in Christ. Nor are they called to a rescue of the soul that ignores society and sickness".¹¹ Mary Bird was an example of one whose life and work were a self-conscious effort to achieve the right balance between these two aspects of the missionary vocation.

Growing opposition and the threat of female initiative

Growing confidence from achievements in Julfa soon convinced Mary to venture into Isfahan, hitherto closed to missionary activity and foreign presence generally.¹² In a respectful attempt to show solidarity with Muslim women, Bird's first visit was made in local outdoor costume. However, on hearing that people thought she was ashamed or afraid to be known as a Christian and was attempting to gain admittance into their houses in disguise, she gladly changed the *chador* for an English cloak and veil.

It is significant that the Persian reaction to Mary's efforts for commonality proved it to be misguided. The ideological importance of the *chador* in representing the public/male and private/female division of roles in Iranian society was extremely powerful. In this instance, Mary's choice to wear the veil was perceived as a threat to the normality and security of social convention. An unknown foreigner did not fit into the recognised sphere of Iranian womanhood merely by virtue of her sex. In fact, her deliberate choices to part from the commonly accepted female role placed her more within the public realm of men. In other words, Persian women also recognised an "otherness" between themselves and the CMS missionaries. Whilst they sometimes respected and even envied the possibilities represented by these British women, they were, certainly in the early days, threatened and uncertain. For Mary Bird, as a single autonomous woman with a mission, presented them with a public dimension to the familiar private world of women.

Despite initial problems, Mary's open personality and persistent character, together with the medical advantages she offered, gradually broke down barriers. As the women began to trust her, relationships were formed and friendships created. The fame of the mission's small medical team spread far and wide and patients travelled great distances in the hope of receiving a cure. Concurrently, however, as she won the confidence of women, Bird also attracted growing hostility from the Muslim leadership in Isfahan. Soon *mullahs* were preaching openly against her and forbidding women from attending the dispensary. Many persevered, however, coming either at daybreak or in secrecy across the flat rooftops of neighbouring houses.

This whole scenario depicts the ambiguous feelings of Persians towards Mary Bird in particular, and the mission and Britain in general. On one hand, she was loved, or at least respected, by those who continued to visit the dispensary despite warnings and threats and even physical retribution. On the other hand, opposition grew both towards the mission and herself.¹³ For *Khanum Maryam*, as well as being a friend to many, came to be perceived as a threat to Islam and the Persian way of life.

In 1901 Mary Bird was transferred to work in Kerman where much of her time was spent alleviating the suffering caused from widespread opium addiction and long hours of enforced carpet weaving amongst children in particular. Her time in Kerman was brief, however, for in 1903 she somewhat reluctantly returned to England to care for her ageing mother. Upon her departure a testimonial of gratitude was written by the leading inhabitants of Kerman (including the chief *mullah*), which spoke of "Her Highness the English Mariam Khanum",¹⁴ and her care for the sick of Kerman.

A life spent in the service of God: Phase three of Bird's work, 1911-14

Eight years later in 1911, at the age of fifty-two, and twenty years after she first arrived in Iran, Birdie was welcomed back to Persia once more. Work had expanded considerably. The mission now included thirty-two women, of whom nineteen were single. The medical team included several nurses as well as four male and four female doctors. Mary clearly had a lower profile, but both colleagues and Persians were glad to have her back. For the first two years she was posted to Yezd where her time was spent visiting in the town and surrounding villages. Still remembered by many as *hakim*, she continued caring for the sick when she could, though the emphasis of her work shifted more towards teaching and evangelism. At the end of 1913 Bird transferred her work to the surrounding villages and city of Kerman.

Contact with ordinary folk remained her first love, for it gave her the opportunity of preaching the gospel. And it was not only women whom she impressed. Persian men, who seldom had contact with European women, often treated *Khanum Maryam* in a different way. Many took her seriously, willing to listen, and argue with her.¹⁵ On one particular occasion, some of the village women had assembled while Mary spoke. "Suddenly", Bird wrote, "I heard a man's voice behind me and saw that the village men had gathered behind a mulberry tree and said they were glad to listen."¹⁶

Her death, when it came, was sudden and unexpected. By mid July 1914 all missionaries had left Kerman for their customary summer break except Bird who intended joining them at the

end of the month. In the wake of a typhoid epidemic, she was determined to keep open the dispensary for two convalescing patients. Eventually she left Kerman on 3 August. The following day Bird had a fever and it soon became apparent she herself had contracted typhoid. She died peacefully on Sunday 16th August 1914.

The memory of Mary Bird and her influence, however, did not die with her. A grave on the outskirts of Kerman still stands witness to her life and work. As a forerunner of work amongst women, she remained an inspiration to those who followed. For Persians there may have been "but one Khanum Maryam",¹⁷ however, other missionaries continued to receive a warm welcome in many remote villages in her name and for her sake.

Concluding remarks by way of an evaluation of Bird's life and work

In his study of women's role in the modern missionary movement Sean Gill makes a passing reference to Mary Bird as just another example of how Islam was viewed in "stock Victorian terms as a religion of the sword whose precepts had little practical effect".¹⁸ On one level this cannot be denied, for Bird was extremely critical of Islam and its social manifestations.¹⁹ In light of later developments in the theology of religions, Bird and her attitude towards Islam and Muslims can hardly be regarded as innovative or forward-looking.

However, as I have tried to stress throughout this paper, Bird's life must be evaluated contextually and she should not be judged merely on the strength of her written words or our contemporary values. In a sense, Mary Bird represents her age *fully*, for her life is an example of the best *and* the worst of late-Victorianism. Certainly, she had little positive to say about Islam, yet as a deeply religious woman she fearlessly followed her calling and paved the way for others to follow. Moreover, Mary was not a negative person. Everything she did emanated from a strong and earnest belief in the positive power of Christianity. She sincerely believed that Christ was the only solution for the problems of Persia and it was that belief which gave meaning to her life and inspired her to help others find meaning for theirs.

Recognising the constraints which limited her, three things in particular may be said of Mary Bird. First, in her day, she was not looked upon as narrow minded or prejudiced.²⁰ Notwithstanding her evident zeal for spreading Christianity, she was considered open-minded and tolerant, always willing to acknowledge nobility and truth wherever she saw it.

Secondly, it must be noted that her writings, which often adhered to the strongly anti-Islamic tone typical of the time, were aimed at a *Christian* audience. She wrote not even for the general British public but for a specific group of CMS supporters, expecting to be regaled by details of missionary success. Evidence suggests that in conversation with Muslims her use of theological expressions was much more abstract and inclusive.²¹

Thirdly, despite what now seems unpalatable in much of her writings, Bird's life in action does not bear witness to the negativity portrayed in the evangelical and orientalist language she utilised. Unable to express herself in terms of any other framework, it was for her deeds she came to be known, and for those, Mary was motivated by much more positive factors. Letters and articles may suggest a missionary motivation based on anti-Islamic fervour. In fact, it was

deep faith in the Christian message which provided the stimulus for her work. Bird's life, considered in its entirety, reveals actions that sprung, not in negative response to Islam, but from an earnest and positive desire to share the most valuable gift she believed could be offered. Clara Rice, a contemporary of hers, describes her thus:

She reproved sin and its consequences, and deplored the darkness of the hearts of men [sic], but more by holding forth the true Light than by seeking to make darkness visible. There was more in her teaching that was positive than negative. It was for building up, not casting down.²²

Bird was certainly unafraid of criticising social norms where she believed it necessary. But for that she should not be condemned. All cultures have elements worthy of rebuke and Persia at the turn of the century was no exception. Whilst speaking against social ills where possible, Bird - energised by her Christian faith - tried to ease suffering whenever possible.

The difficulty from a twenty-first century perspective is that whilst she was alive to the wrongs of Islamic Persia, she remained blind to the evils of her own culture in Christian Britain. Unable to identify her experience of relative freedom as the result of living abroad, she rendered invisible the problems of women in England. Discovering her own potential *away from Britain* she displayed a kind of irrational loyalty to a homeland recreated through distant memories and wishful beliefs. Certainly, the freedom she enjoyed to work, travel and pursue a life outside the home, could be compared favourably with much that she witnessed in Iran. However, it hardly justified her glorified portrayal of England and how marvellously God had prospered it since it became a Christian nation.²³

Exceptional in many respects, Mary was unable to dispute the nationalist agenda within the ethos of the British empire. Willing to challenge sexual stereotypes in Persia, she seemed unaware (or uncritical) of those operating at the heart of English society. Her achievements were in spite of such restricting ideologies and should not be denied because of them. Nevertheless, Mary and many of her colleagues fell prey to the temptation of wholesale comparison, by associating the social ills of Persia with Islam, whilst losing sight of the evils in Victorian Britain, in particular regarding its attitude towards women.

Today many will not understand Mary Bird, just as countless Persians could not fathom her then. Some, of course, will believe she was misguided and wrong, and with the benefit of historical hindsight, there is indeed much to criticise. Nevertheless, amongst her contemporaries Mary Bird was an outstanding example of courage, determination, commitment and love. Entirely a product of Victorian attitudes, she overcame many restrictions without disturbing the accepted boundaries of female behaviour. In a secular book on women travellers Jane Robinson writes of Bird and how Persian women's "curiosity soon turned to trust, and trust to love", for,

Mary was not one of the betrousering and civilizing brand of missionary: at home in her Jolfa dispensary and on her extensive travels ... into the outlying areas, she grew to respect (if not condone) the Muslim traditions of the Persians, and was able to explain the Christian faith with a potent mixture of deference and authority.²⁴

She grew to understand Persians perhaps better than any of her colleagues. Experiencing the extremes of their temperament, from great warmth to violent opposition, she was always eager to make friends and was moved by expressions of friendship shown towards her.

Above all, Bird passionately believed that Christ could offer the women of Persia comfort in the suffering that no-one else could alleviate. In a mysterious way this touches on something significant. Countless came and went without ever becoming Christians, yet clearly Mary made a strong impact on the lives of many such Persians. Her success is ultimately incalculable for no-one will ever know how many found solace through her vision of a loving saviour, caring for them as friend and brother in their often unhappy and lonely lives.²⁵ But "results ... are more than those that are measurable",²⁶ and once more Mary evades being judged by definable criteria.

Eager to speak of her faith whenever possible and rejoicing at individual baptisms, Bird remained aware of the complexities in converting an entire country. She understood that "foreigners can never evangelize a nation", but trusted they had a part to play in "train[ing] the first generation of workers".²⁷ She may have disapproved of prolonged missionary presence in Persia, for perhaps she had greater faith in the power of God and the wisdom of local Christians. Such notions are mere conjecture, but Mary's part in laying the foundations for the growth of an indigenous church community remains indisputable. Whilst weeping for the plight of many Iranian Christians today, Mary would also rejoice at their perseverance and commitment. She would not doubt for one moment that her life's work had been worthwhile, even in the face of such small and apparently insignificant results. For Mary Bird believed in the value of each individual, body and soul, and her passion remained undiminished by the numerically small number of respondents.

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(NB All End Note references are not complete;
for confirmation of correct references see

Guli Francis-Dehqani, *Religious Feminism in an Age of Empire: CMS Women Missionaries in Iran, 1876-1934.* CCSRG, University of Bristol, 2000)

Chp 5 - Mary Bird: A Passion for Evangelism and a Heart for the Women of Iran

- 1 See, for example, F.W. Dillistone (1980), *Into All the World: A Biography of Max Warren*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, p 71.
- 2 In Mary Bird (1899), op. cit., p 2; and Rice (1916), op. cit., p 174.
- 3 *ibid.*, pp 65-6.
- 4 *ibid.*, p 66.
- 5 Bird (1899), op. cit., pp 63 & 31.
- 6 Chappell, op. cit., p 124.
- 7 Bird (1899), op. cit., p 39.
- 8 For details of some treatments offered by locals see, for example, Bird (1899), op. cit., pp 43-4; and Powell, op. cit., pp 45-52.
- 9 Bird (1899), op. cit., p 39.
- 10 *ibid.*, p 7.
- 11 Kenneth Cragg (1985 rev.), *The Call of the Minaret*. London: Collins, p 198.
- 12 In 1891 Isabella Bishop wrote about her brief journey through Isfahan and the anti-foreign sentiment of the people, describing the experience as a "bad half-hour". See Isabella Bishop (1891), *Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan*, i. London: John Murray, p 244.
- 13 There was, for example, an attempt to poison her by the wife of a local *mullah*. For details, see Powell, op. cit., pp 62-3.
- 14 G2/PE/O 1904: 60.
- 15 Rice (1916), op. cit., p 103.
- 16 Bird, *Mercy and Truth* (1914), op. cit., p 141.
- 17 Chappell, op. cit., p 160.
- 18 Gill, op. cit., p 195.
- 19 She, for example, devotes a chapter in her book to disproving and undermining the five pillars of Islam. For details see Bird (1899), op. cit., pp 5-15.
- 20 Rice (1916), op. cit., p 6.
- 21 On one occasion she recalled debating Christianity for three hours with a village governor near Kerman. At its conclusion she was eager for them to arrive at a point of mutuality and "proposed that we should pray that He who is the Truth should guide us into all truth". Put this way, "he at once agreed, and told all the servants present to bow for prayer". See Mary Bird *Annual Letters* (1903), p 141.
- 22 Rice (1916), op. cit., p 136.
- 23 Quoted in Rice (1916), op. cit., p 142.
- 24 Jane Robinson (1990), *Wayward Women: A Guide to Women Travellers*. Oxford: University Press; p 154.
- 25 On rare occasions Mary Bird would hear of the effects of her work. After the death of one particular female patient, a message was brought to Bird, asking her to visit the deceased woman's daughter and read to her from the Bible. Apparently hearing the Christian gospel had comforted the patient, and her dying wish was that her daughter also should hear the message of hope. Bird (1899), op. cit., pp 78-9.
- 26 Kenneth Cragg, op. cit., p 324.

27 In Rice (1916), *op. cit.*, p 193.