The Martha Cartmell Story

The first Methodist woman missionary sent out was Martha Cartmell of Centenary Church, who departed for Japan in November of 1882, and who founded what is now known as the Toyo Eiwa School for Girls in Tokyo. Her efforts assisted in the revolutionizing of education for women in Japan, and she is revered to this day. Students from Japan often make pilgrimage to Centenary.

In the early days of Hamilton, prior to the building of Centenary Church, there were three Methodist churches in the centre of the city that formed a circuit, King Street, later to be known as First, Wesley, and MacNab Street Church. Members of MacNab Street Church would found the Wesleyan Female College in Hamilton, later to be known as the Hamilton Ladies' College.

In those days only girls from the Church of England could be educated beyond grade 8 (in Bishop Strachan School in Toronto).

This was because the Church of England was the only institution permitted to legally hold title to land. In protest against this discriminatory restriction, the MacNab members opened the Wesleyan Female College in 1860, making it open to accepting girls from all denominations.

The school became the first school for the 'higher' education of women in Upper Canada. Martha Cartmell attended classes there, graduated, and went on to study at the new Normal School for teachers in Toronto.

Centenary Church took the place of the MacNab Street Church. The building was officially opened in May of 1868. And four years later, in 1872, when Martha was 27 years of age, she was captivated by a powerful missionary address in the church, urging that Canadian Methodism have a foreign mission, preferably in Japan, which was just emerging from national seclusion.

Canadian Methodism was just emerging itself, undergoing a union of the various of actions, the British and the American wings, because of the confederation of Canada. And the need for missionaries was being raised, including women–Martha later saying that she felt 'called of God then', but kept it a secret in her heart for several years.

It was a year later, in 1873, that the first male Methodist missionaries made their way to Japan, from Canada, a Dr. MacDonald, and a Dr. Cochrane. The so-called 'Meiji' period was just six years old in the Japanese political experience. A small group of samurai and aristocrats had

overthrown the ruling shogunate and had restored the emperor to his previous position at the head of the government. These revolutionaries were actually acting without the support of the Japanese people.

Nevertheless, on Jan. 3, 1868, the emperor had officially announced the return of imperial rule. And the emperor, a teen-ager named Mutsuhito, adopted 'Meiji', meaning 'enlightened rule', as the name for the era of his reign. Mutsuhito reigned from 1868 to 1912.

In practice, during this period, it was the leaders of the revolution and their successors who ruled the country, not the emperor. And they did so utilizing the slogan "Enriching the Nation and Strengthening the Military" as their guiding policy.

By enriching Japan, the new leaders believed they would enable the nation to compete with the Western powers. And thus the environment was set for the changes to come, not the least of which being the education of women.

The previous norm had been expressed this way: "It is better for women that they should not be educated because their lot throughout life must be in perfect obedience to first a father, next a husband, and third, a son, what is the use of developing the mind of a woman, or training her powers of judgement, when her life is to be guided at every step by a male?"

That norm was about to change, thanks to Martha Cartmell. The male Canadian Methodist missionaries, arriving at the beginning of this new political era, soon discovered that there was evangelistic work among the women of Japan that only a woman could do.

The homes of the Japanese people were inaccessible to foreign men. And while these missionaries were attempting to have a Christian influence upon the men, the wives of the Japanese men at home were training their children according to the old precepts. For the first time, a role for women in ministry and in missionary work began to make sense within the church.

In November of 1880, thirty three women from across Hamilton gathered in Centenary Church to constitute the first organizational meeting of the Methodist Woman's Missionary Society. Their organizational efforts caused other auxiliaries to quickly form, embracing the whole of Canada, Newfoundland, and Bermuda.

Less than a year later, at a general meeting of the Wesleyan Ladies College, in Hamilton, a resolution to form a local branch of the Woman's Missionary Society was moved by Martha Cartmell, followed immediately by a resolution "to support a lady missionary in Japan."

At the first annual meeting of the W.M.S., a year later, in September of 1882, Martha Cartmell was appointed to be that first woman missionary. Later that same fall she sailed for Japan, from San Francisco, as the C.P.R. rail line through the Canadian Rockies had yet three years to go

before completion. She was assigned a tiny top bunk in a cabin of three high, and spent most of the voyage in her bunk, seasick.

Miss Cartmell had been teaching in the Central School in Hamilton for several years, and seemed particularly suited to the task of teaching children and training the Japanese women to work among their own people. However, at her farewell gathering, she was honoured, and all the while, not allowed to speak.

The report of the occasion states that 'a galaxy of reverends' were present as were the President and Secretary of the W.M.S. And a group of the women gave to Miss Cartmell "a well-filled purse", but it was presented, not by one of the women, but rather by a man, Mr. Dennis Moore. And subsequently another man, the Rev. D.G. Sutherland replied for Miss Cartmell, in what was termed "touching and appropriate terms." Only the men spoke, it seems, in those days, at Canadian Methodist Church meetings.

Martha's salary was set at $600 per year, with a furniture allowance of $250. And an invoice of purchases made in preparation for her journey, dated November 17, 1882, indicated a purchase of supplies, including of a box of mucilage, two dozen lead pencils, an accounts book, half a dozen note books, a pen holder, a set of Collins' Commentary and a copy of 'Bible Educator'.

A list of the parting gifts she received before departing showed the 'purse' from "Ladies of the W.M..S.," a pair of photo frames from her uncle William Robinson, a shell match box from her younger brother, George, a bracelet and pin set from her sister, Mary, gold bracelets from her school class, and a book of photos of Hamilton.

Upon arrival in Japan, Martha was met by Dr. MacDonald and two other missionaries. Dr. Cochrane and his family were back home in Canada on furlough. She was taken to Dr. MacDonald's home, where she remained for three months.

The homes of the missionaries were facing a river, with only the roadway between, while in the garden behind was the original dwelling of the missionaries, a small two-roomed house with mat floors and sliding paper panel walls. This original house was in the process of being prepared for Miss Cartmell's use by having a second story built upon it. At the beginning of March, Martha moved in, to live in the upstairs rooms, receiving visitors on the lower floor.

Martha Cartmell worked alone at first, in Japan, learning the language, and laying plans for her school. She found, of course, that no Japanese women were allowed or expected to have an education. But she persisted in advocating the importance of education for girls, believing women would play an important role in the society in the years to come.

After consultation with the General Board missionaries, she set to work to found her girls' school in Tokyo, petitioning the Imperial Court for permission to do so. Six months after her arrival, she was invited to attend a meeting of the General Board on the occasion of their decision to purchase a site for a boys' school. And when it was revealed that an adjacent site

could be purchased for $1,000, the question came up, ‘would it be wanted for a girls’ school?’ The young woman who had not been allowed to speak at her own farewell gathering immediately spoke up and pledged her infant Centenary W.M.S. group to that amount. She then wrote home to tell them about it.

A thousand dollars in 1883 was a substantial sum. But at the very moment that Miss Cartmell was writing home, Mrs. Gooderham, president of the society in Hamilton was writing to tell her to found a boarding school immediately, and to not waste time on a day school. And Mrs. Gooderham was sending moneyfrom her own personal bank account to help her do it. The two letters crossed in the mail.

The school opened with two pupils, in 1884, in a small house; but the numbers increased rapidly. Dr. MacDonald helped her, as did three Japanese pastors. It was called The Oriental Anglo-Japanese Girls’ School.New buildings were erected. And Miss Cartmell, as first principal, also undertook more work outside the school. In 1885 a second teacher arrived to help with the school–a Miss Spencer, followed by a third.

By 1887, there were 227 pupils enrolled, 127 boarders and 100 day pupils. Records show that a year after that, by 1888, 120 of the students had been baptized. Soon, a Normal Training course was started to provide for the students who wanted to become teachers themselves, and to train female leaders.

Meanwhile, a group of a dozen young Japanese men, eager to learn English, had approached Miss Cartmell to ask her to teach them for three hours a week. She had put it to her male colleagues. Two of the three had discouraged her from the idea; but Dr. MacDonald had not only approved, he had assisted her in making the arrangements. Consequently a class of young men had been formed, meeting one evening a week, participation conditional on their attendance at Christian service on Sundays, and at an additional evening of reading the Bible in English, and having the passages explained. Most of these Japanese men became Christian, and several were ordained into the ministry.

From the very first, the school had found favour with the upper classes. Two young daughters of Marquis Ito, Prime Minister of Japan, had enrolled, along with the daughters of counts, viscounts, and military officers, and girls from upper class homes.

Almost from the first, the fees paid for the students’ board, but there were some students for whom their fees were paid by Miss Cartmell herself, in exchange for their giving of two years of service as teachers, interpreters, or ‘Bible women’.

Once a group of aristocratic official came to her, offering to pay for any building she needed if she would agree to keep the school exclusively for their upper class daughters. For these men the object was the training in the English language and in the etiquette and good manners of ‘the gentle Canadian teachers’. Miss Cartmell refused to put such limits on her school. These officials nevertheless continued their support for the school.

Many graduates of the schooldid later become the wives of leading officials and members of the Court circles. The mother of Emperor Hirohito was a pupil in the school, as was the mother of Commander Midzumo, who accompanied Crown Prince Akihito and his wife on their visit to the United States in the late 60s, and who related that his mother and an aunt had been among the first student-teachers engaged at the school.

Martha waited many months before she received her first invitation to visit a non-Christian home. The woman in the home was suffering from a paralysis, and was desirous of seeing a woman who had travelled so far to teach her people. Martha spoke of the woman's surprise to find that she was willing to take her message to the 'second wife' in the home, even though she had come from a culture where there were no plural marriages. Weekly visits followed, with neighbours gathering in to hear the Bible stories. And the work among wives subsequently began to grow.

In 1887, five years after arriving, Miss Cartmell was forced to resign because of ill health. She returned to Canada, whereupon she recovered sufficiently to once again make her way back to Tokyo. Retiring again in 1896, at the age of 51, she returned to Canada, and worked for two years with the Japanese in Victoria, B.C. until ill health brought her permanent retirement.

She then came home to Hamilton, to live with her cousins, Elizabeth Strachan, and Mrs. W.E.Ross, on Markland Street. When her cousin Elizabeth died in 1931, Martha moved to Toronto to live with a niece, Mrs. W.E. Pescott, becoming a member of High Park United Church. In these later years, Miss Cartmell travelled the length and breadth of Canada stimulating interest in the Tokyo school, and drawing to Japan some of the most able and dedicated women of our church.

Her last address was given when she was 88, in Zion United Church, in Hamilton, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the W.M.S., and she was said to have spoken with"a clearly thought out message, easily heard to the back of the church."

Martha Cartmell lived into her 100th year, still of sound mind, although afflicted with deafness and poor eyesight. She died on March 20th, 1945.

In a letter to an Annual Meeting of the Woman's Missionary Society, Miss Cartmell wrote these challenging words, which would be published in The Christian Guardian:

To the Friends of Missions:As the Annual Meeting of the Woman's Missionary Society is drawing near, I feel prompted to lay before those who have this work on their hearts and daily pray for the extension of the Kingdom of Christ in the earth, a statement of the pressure upon the Society and the earnest appeals for financial help, that can only be partially and meagrely responded to unless the amount in the treasury is increased by special donations. Ill health has compelled me to come home, leaving no hope of return to the work to which I had consecrated, and in which I hoped to spend my life. This causes the Japan interests to be constantly before my mind, knowing so well the demands.

But lest I appear selfish, let me simply say–the seal the Lord has put upon the efforts made in the past, by giving so many souls who attest the genuineness of their conversion by fruits of holy living (those gathered in the school and also in the evangelistic or Bible woman's work) encourages me to affirm confidently the Lord of hosts himself invites his Church to appease the hunger for knowledge he has aroused in the hearts of the people. They ask they know not what, when they cry for Western civilization and Western teachers. They are willing to help themselves as far as they are able.

We know they need the "Bread of Life." Shall we allow a scorpion to be given by permitting godless, if not infidel, teachers to enter the field God has given the Methodist Church in Canada to cultivate?

I know much, feel deeply, and could write for hours to strengthen my appeal for Japan, but forbear. However the work must extend or we cannot be guiltless. . .

(She goes on at length in support of other mission work in China) To the Church I commend this work. Look into it; find out its need. I have done what I can. Don't lay this letter aside without prayer and action. James says, "Show me thy faith without thy works, and I will show thee my faith by my works."

Yours for the cause of Christ, M.J.Cartmell 120 Hughson Street North, Hamilton, Ontario, September 1887.

Consider the heritage that is ours. The heritage of Martha Cartmell. The heart for mission in the name of Christ. The passion for the labours of love. We are about that toil here in Hamilton. It is time for us to also look to the needs further afield. To renew our commitment to that to which God call us–the ministry of Christ across the world.

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