



ELISABETH BOWEN THOMPSON AND THE TEACHER TRAINING COLLEGE

ARCHAEOLOGY & HISTORY IN THE
LEBANON ISSUE TWENTY TWO:
AUTUMN 2005, PP. 84-89.

JEAN SAID MAKDISI

I: Introduction: Raising Questions

I first came across the name of Elizabeth Bowen Thompson, founder of the British Syrian Schools, and specifically of one of its most important units, the British Syrian Training College, as I was researching my maternal grandmother's life. My interest in writing about my grandmother, which culminated in the publication of a triple biography of her, my mother and myself,¹ had come about as I agonized over my situation as a modern Arab woman. In this context it was inevitable that I compare my life with my mother's and with her mother's in order to deal with a question that had occupied me for some years: were we in a state of progress as Arab women, as everyone claimed we were, or were we in a decline? Or, as I suspected, were we at a standstill, repeating with every day of our lives, the limiting domestic exercises which had preoccupied earlier generations? These questions had brought me to take a critical look, among other things, at the respective education, both domestic and academic, of the three generations, to see precisely what characterized and differentiated each from the other.

I had first to place my grandmother in her historical context, which required a major effort of demythologizing my own mission-seeped cultural background. My older relations from Palestine and Lebanon, all of them students of mission schools, harboured bitter personal memories of the Ottoman Empire as it lashed out in the cruel outbursts of its dying throes. The great famine of the First World War, the brutal repression of the early Arab nationalists, the vicious person of Jamal Pasha, all these loomed large over my childhood and early adulthood. In addition, the British schools in Cairo which I attended taught the Ottoman Empire in history lessons as "the sick man of Europe" and the villain of the piece known as "The Eastern Question", in which it was always presented as the opponent, the enemy, which had had nothing to offer but violence, cruelty and general negativity. It took me years of hard work and probing to overcome this prejudice.

The demythologizing began as I investigated the historical background to my grandmother's life in the complex civilization of the Ottomans, and discovered their contributions to art, architecture, public administration, law, literature, music, all those elements that had been left out of the narrative with which I had grown up. Next I searched out the little that was known about my grandmother's father's mission-connected life: that he had joined the first class in the new theological seminary which the



Mrs Bowen Thompson, 1924, *The Daughters of Syria*, London.

85

American Presbyterian missionaries had founded in Abeih, a small town in Mount Lebanon, in 1869, and that he was eventually to be ordained and become the first Arab pastor of the new Protestant community in Syria. In Abeih, he met his future wife, my great-grandmother, whose father owned the property in which the seminary was housed. I became aware that my great-grandparents were a part of the cultural fabric woven with the American mission in Syria, and must have played a role in its creation — but what role? That question intrigued me more and more, but I found that the histories of the area, and especially the cultural histories, lay much emphasis on these foreign missionaries and their schools, but that the commoners, the ordinary people among the locals, or “natives” as they were always called, were scarcely mentioned as individuals, and almost never researched. It was on the missionaries, who were so well documented by scholars, foreign and Arab, and indeed who documented themselves so prolifically, that the limelight was always shed. The locals were thus represented, if they were represented at all, as either, like the Ottomans, enemies of the missionary project, or as its fruit, but scarcely ever as prime movers in their own right. My interest, however, lay in them, precisely as ends in themselves, moving their own lives, for their own reasons, with their own imperatives, and in their own way. Finding them represented as incidental, as insignificant, as scarcely worth a nod or a footnote in the vast morass of mission documents, was for me an emotional as well as an intellectual jolt, for I had thought of my great-grandfather, whom I had hitherto seen only through his adoring daughter’s eyes, as an important man in the mission.

It was around this time in the progress of my work that I was invited to be the speaker at the celebration of Founder’s Day at the Brumanna High School in the hills to the east of Beirut. As I worked on my speech, I could not help but become aware that celebrating the Swiss Theophilus Waldemeir inevitably carried with it the suggestion that he had entered a cultural vacuum, or at least an empty space, that he had, like some ancient prophet, struck a stone in the cultural wilderness and out of it produced a school, which had emanated from his person as light from a fire. Surely, I could not help but think, surely that was a false picture? I had discovered, as I searched for something to say about this most interesting man, that there were many other people involved in the school’s founding: some people from Brumanna had given land; others had paid for, or oth-



86

Missions stations, Ain Zehalteh-church and school. Deir el Komr (entrance to Seraia of the Massacre, 1860). Suk el Gharb Church, H. H. Jessup, 1910, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, London & Edinburgh.

erwise contributed to, buildings. There were teachers and there were students: surely I thought, all these should be considered at least co-founders with Waldmeier? The more I worked on the missionary schools and colleges, the more I saw that the local collaborators in the educational effort, including some of my own relations, had been left out of the foundational narrative, and that it had thus become exclusively the story of the foreign missionaries and their creative genius. According to this inherited view, modern history and identity were the creation of others, and we, the locals, were all consumers of modernity, rather than participatory actors in its creation. I am today convinced that is where so many of our current cultural problems and quarrels come from, especially those surrounding the woman question.

I came eventually to see my great-grand parents as part of a kind of transitional, pivotal generation: from having been integrated subjects of the Ottoman Empire they had become harbingers of the modern age of globalization to which I belong, with all that meant in transitions of culture, clothes, languages, attitudes, and above all, notions of womanhood, my subject. I credited them with reaching out towards a new world, in whose creation, I insist, they actively participated, not as menial servants, mechanically obedient to a call from abroad, but people who had their own motives, their own ideas, their own agendas, which have yet to be fully identified.

In 1893 my great-grandfather was appointed pastor of the Beirut Protestant church, and that was when my grandmother, then twelve or thirteen years old, came to the normal training school of the British Syrian school system, which was itself around twenty-five years old. Later, having had a formal training as a teacher, she became one herself, and gradually as her life progressed, as she married and settled into the life of a pastor’s wife in Nazareth, as a mother of a large family, she established a reputation for herself as an educated “modern” woman, a pioneer of sorts, a model not only for her daughter and then her daughter’s daughters, but to the community at large, a teacher in the widest sense of that word. She had been formed at least in part, no doubt in large part, by the school which she had attended, and I set myself the task of tracing her development through her training in it.

Among the questions I had to ask myself were: Who was the woman who, coming from half a world away, had helped form my grandmother’s

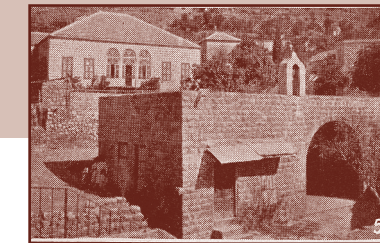
life? What sorts of thoughts and ideas had she brought with her? Who was Elizabeth Bowen Thompson? ²

II: Elizabeth Bowen Thompson and the BibleWomen: The Missing Link

Elizabeth Lloyd was born in 1812 to a Welsh country gentleman and his German wife. She and her siblings had the cloistered intellectual and religious upbringing normal for that class and that time. Her intellect was formed in the English classics that she read with her father and her siblings. Her mother saw to her children's moral upbringing: rather than allow her daughters an idle hour or two in their childhood, she made them cut holes in their pinafores only to make them mend them again. The family motto was "Dare and Persevere," which Elizabeth later adopted in Beirut as the motto of the schools, and was also taken as the title of an official history of the school.

In 1850, when Elizabeth was in her late thirties, she married Dr. James Bowen Thompson, a Scottish missionary who had founded the British Syria Hospital in Damascus, and had run it from 1843 till 48. After a few years married life in London, they moved to Sueidiah, near Antioch, where he had earlier bought some property, and where he wished to oversee the execution of a project he had conceived to build a railroad through the Euphrates Valley to India. When the Crimean War began, however, he felt it his patriotic duty as a physician to offer his services to his country's troops, and so the couple made an ill fated move to Balacava, where, no sooner had they arrived than he contracted a fever and died shortly after. Broken-hearted, Elizabeth returned home, alone and childless.

Now, back in London she began to engage full time in the missionary activity for which she seemed from the beginning of her life to have been destined. As a child she had been deeply religious and even, her sister and biographer writes, "saintly," much given to prayers of intercession. Already then she had been moved by a desire to improve the lot of the negro slaves in British colonial West Indies. It was during her married days in Souidiah that her missionary inclinations had begun to blossom. She taught the Bible, as well as rudimentary lessons in reading and writing, to local women and children in her house. In her letters, she records that women also came to her to learn sewing and needlework, and she went to their houses for this purpose as well. At this point it is important to



Missions stations, Suk el Gharb Boys' school. Deir el Komr (Protestant Boys' School and Chapel). Abeih Church, showing memorial arch to Messrs. Calhoun and Bird, 1905, H. H. Jessup, 1910, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, London & Edinburgh.

point out that for Elizabeth Bowen Thompson missionary work — that is evangelizing and proselytizing — and what we would today call social work were closely connected, and sometimes in her letters it seems that her true calling was more to social work than to missionary work proper. Her sympathetic descriptions of the hardships brought on by poverty is striking, and what is even more striking is its universality. Her description of the London poor, and the poor in the Syrian countryside and Beirut — and specially the women among them — are strikingly similar, and lacking in the imperial nuances that differentiate the natives from the metropolitan culture.

On her return to England following her husband's death she became involved with social work, recognized and patronized by Queen Victoria, with the widows and orphans of British soldiers killed in the Indian revolution of 1857. In the meantime, together with a group of women from the fringes of the upper classes, she founded a missionary society known as The BibleWomen, linked to the British and Foreign Bible Society. The BibleWomen's particular mission was to enter the slums of London and sell bibles to the poor, the idea being that in actually spending badly needed cash on the Scripture, their souls would be suitably edified, their consciousness purified, and their social improvement would inevitably follow. If that sounds rather a heartless agenda today, one would have to read their literature to see that their attitude was rather based on the deepest sympathy for the poor that they attended. The intermediary women, that is the women who actually went into the slums on their behalf, were themselves from the slums, and had therefore been elevated to do this work, though of course under careful supervision from the upper ranks of society.

The group, whose chairman was Mrs. Ellen Ranyard, guarded their independence, raised their own funds, and even published their own financial records. Many of the members it seems were wives and sisters of clergymen, but it is clear that clergymen themselves were emphatically not welcome in the circle. I have elsewhere described the group as proto-feminist, and I think that is as good a description as any. They were a mission from women, for women, to women, and they valued their independence as women as much as they believed in their work for women.

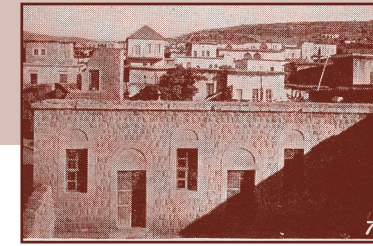
An example of the sort of work they did, and the kind of independence they sought from the patriarchal clutches of the church is made clear in the pages of their publication, **The Missing Link**, previously **The Book**

and its Missions. “Now while the Bible is the grand ‘Missing Link’ between Heaven and Earth, “they write, “ the term ‘Missing Link’ has come into general acceptance in connection with these lowly messengers, who have offered the Book for the purchase of the poor, and who, persuading those of their own class that it was worth their purchase by small installments, have awakened their independence and convinced them that they could also help themselves to the decencies and comforts of life, of which they had long been careless³. In the first year, the London BibleWomen had sold to the poor “upwards of nine hundred pounds’ worth of Bibles and Testaments⁴.”

This success seems not to have met with the unmixed blessings of the church, which in response created a similar women’s mission, apparently in an effort to have a more controllable and less independent organization than that of BibleWomen. In October, 1863, a paper read at the Church congress in Manchester by Vice-Chancellor Sir William Page Wood, on the Influence of the Missing Link, announced that in the year 1860, “after the perusal of the above little work” [The Missing Link] four ladies, taking counsel with the incumbent of a London district resolved to institute a society of Mission Women, of which they became the Managers.”

But this new society, in clear contrast with the BibleWomen, included the following principals: 1) “That the Mission be part of, and be subordinate to, the parochial system of the Church of England,” 2) That the Mission-woman (being of course a member of that church “selected by the incumbent of the parish, and superintended not only by him, but by a lady of education, but to be also named by him.” It was also made absolutely clear that the Mission-woman “is not a Scripture Reader, nor a teacher of religious doctrines, but through her agency, and that of the lady Superintendent, the pastor is to be informed of the spiritual necessities of all who are brought within the sphere of their influence; they are instructed to refer to him alone all in all such cases⁵. ”

In reporting this development in the pages of **The Missing Link**, Mrs. Ranyard points out that this new church mission “need not clash with that of the BibleWomen —previously instituted, and now spreading over all the districts of London.” In other words, she is refusing that “our poor imperfect seven years’ work” be seized and taken under the wing of the patriarchal establishment! Refusing especially the injunction of having to work under the authority of a pastor, she writes, “that the Bible is fitted by



Missions stations, Baalbek Chapel. Deir el Komr (Girls' Schools). Deir el Komr (Court of the Seraia, Scene of the Massacre), H. H. Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, London & Edinburgh, 1910.

Him whose Word it is to reach our population in *its lowest depths*. ”

“We think,” she continues, carefully dissociating her organization from the Church’s, “the new society most fitly call their agents “Mission-women,” and that ours are as fitly still named “Bible-WOMEN”. We carefully seek the co-operation of the earnest pastors in every neighbourhood wherever this is possible, and they are frequently as well to nominate the workers, and accordingly do so, but we do not merely send a message from the rich to the poor, nor from any particular church or community to those whom they may desire to bring within their fold; we have proved that if the poor woman goes among the people setting forth herself in any way as a specimen or example, her errand will result in failure...⁶”

Several important points need to be drawn from this passage. First, the BibleWomen (as opposed to the Church’s Mission Women) mission was not, as they saw it, a condescending, patronizing mission from the rich to the poor, as the conventional church missions were. The BibleWomen saw themselves as elevating a woman from the slums, arming her with a Bible, and then sending her back to her own people to elevate and uplift them in her turn. But, even more significantly, in “seeking the cooperation” but **not** the permission of pastors in every community, “wherever this is possible,” (clearly indicating that this is not always so), the pastor may “nominate” the mission-woman, the implication being that this nomination may not necessarily be accepted, the Bible-Women declare their continuing independence from the Church. This independence is underlined by the continued and open transparency as to funding: the funds raised and spent are constantly cited in the pages of **The Missing Link**. We read, for example, that “[t]he sum of no less than £1440 meets our monthly expenditure for January, and goes towards making up the deficit of November and December receipts, which were not equal to expenditure.” And then we read, “The receipt of last February were £1362”⁷.

But the independence is not merely financial, and threatens to raise more important and even dangerous questions. An article entitled “A Revived Female Ministry” written by “a clerical friend in Ireland” appears in **The Missing Link** the following month and raises an even greater challenge to the patriarchal authority of the church: “We say revived because in apostolic and primitive times it is certain that women were earnestly and actively employed in the ministry of the Church.”⁸ It seems that the quarrel with the church, however lady-like and implicit in all these discussions, continued. In the next issue, an article entitled “Is the money wasted?”

argues defensively *against* the statement: “It is wastage of money and waste to time to send Bible-women into districts where other Christian agents are at work”⁹.

That Mrs. Bowen Thompson saw her work in Syria as part of the work of the Bible-Women group to which she belonged is clear from the fact that many of her letters are published in **The Missing Link**, and that reports on “Bible Work in Syria,” “Mrs. Thompson’s Schools,” and many other reports on the subject from the area fill its pages.

If my reading of the relationship between the BibleWomen and the more official church missions is correct, including the rivalry, and the jealously guarded independence of the women’s group, then just as Mrs. Ranyard and her colleagues pushed the independent female space into the slums of Britain, so did Mrs. Thompson push it into Syria. Several subtle changes occurred in the nature of the mission in Syria however, first of all in the nature of the mission itself, and second of all in its tone and quality. From being a purely evangelical, Bible spreading mission, Mrs. Bowen Thompson’s became an educational one, and from being inspired with what I have called that proto-feminist spirit as indicated above, the educational mission preached an extremely conservative vision of the vocation of women.

The question I wish to raise now is how did these changes come about, and what is their significance?

III: Making the Connections

It is clear from the beginning that Mrs. Bowen Thompson’s mission was a purely evangelizing one and had nothing to do with education except in a marginal, incidental sort of way. This is borne out by all the biographical material, by the letters, and even by the inscription that still stands over the gate of the building of the school that was once the British Syrian Training College, that later became the British Lebanese Training College, and today is Hariri High School II:

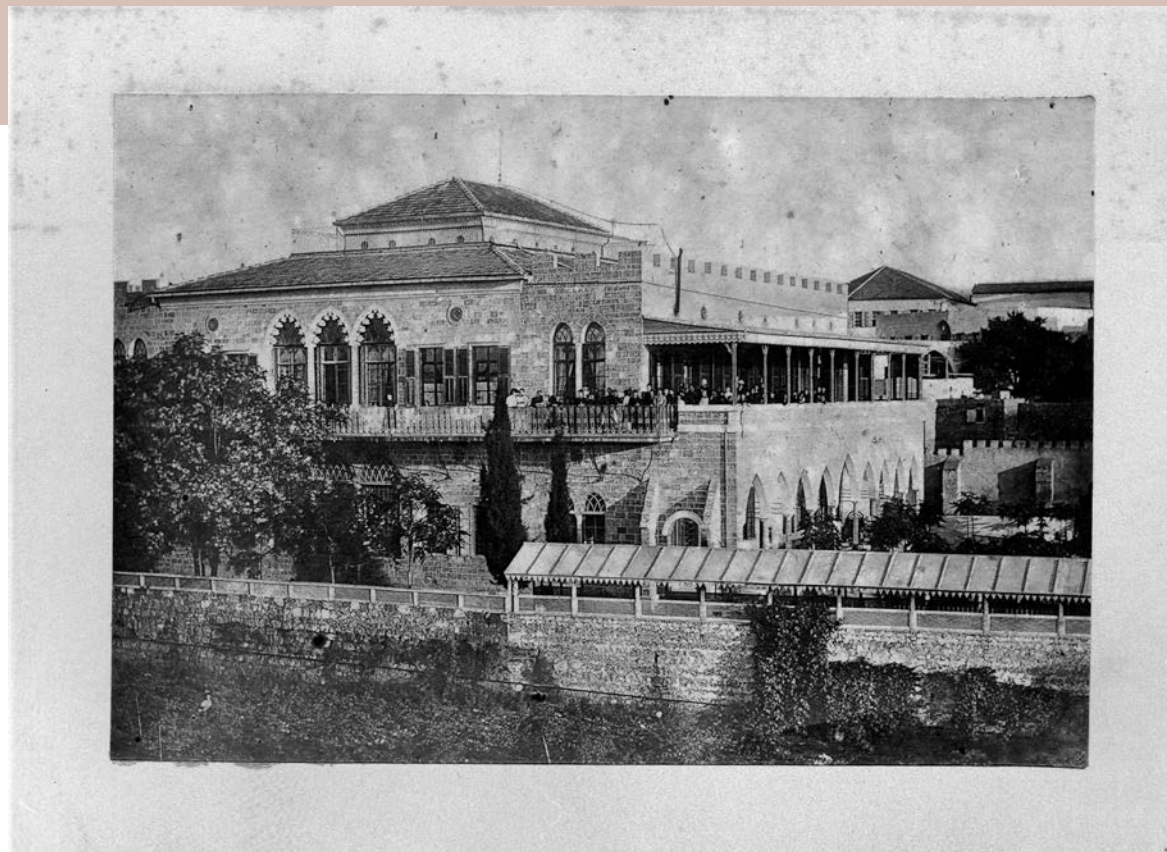
In Memory of
Mrs. E. Bowen-Thompson
Foundress of the British Syrian School
at Beyrout, Damascus and the Lebanon,
Who came in 1860 in the hour of their deepest affliction
to Bring the Consolation of the Gospel
to the Widows and Orphans of Syria,

and, in the midst of her noble mission
entered her Heavenly rest,
November 14, 1869

“The hour of their deepest affliction” was of course the sectarian war of 1860, which had been widely reported in Europe. The heavily publicized plight of the Christian refugees from the mountain areas had led to the creation of relief agencies specially concerned with Syria. Mrs. Bowen Thompson had joined in these efforts, and as her sister and biographer wrote: “God had work for her in Syria, and she cried out in obedience... ‘Here I am; send me!’”¹⁰. She arrived in Beirut in October of 1860.

Her support group in London named itself “The Ladies’ Association for the Moral and Religious Improvement of Syrian Females.” Precisely what the relationship this group had with the BibleWomen association, whether in fact they were the same group, or merely overlap, or affiliates of one another, or incidentally related, or whether the relationship is merely in the person of Mrs. Bowen Thompson herself, is not entirely clear to me, and needs to be further researched. All the officers and members of the group, with the exception of the Honorary Treasurer, were women, and many of them were titled¹¹. What is clear, however, is that when she came she had not the slightest idea of an educational mission but rather a traditionally evangelizing one, and that its practice was closely related to that of the London BibleWomen. There are many references in **The Missing Link** to “Bible Work in Syria”, and several Syrian BibleWomen are mentioned by name. In the May 1865 issue, for instance, we read about “Nakle, our earliest missing link with the daughters of Syria”. In May 1867, Mart Mosa, Em Yusef and Nigme of Musseitbe, are named in **The Missing Link** as BibleWomen (p. 152). The BibleWomen Association is also mentioned in the official history of the school.

When she first arrived in Beirut, Mrs. Bowen Thompson was not well received, but rather, her sister writes, “she was seriously advised to return to Europe by the next steamer”¹². Placing herself under the protection of Lord Dufferin, however, she took a house, and began a small mission station. The refugee widows, mostly from Hasbaya, who came to her house were given paying work, especially needlework. Later, she opened a laundry in which only women were employed, which became especially successful when the British navy began to send their linens whenever they were in port. The only hint of educational work in this missionary project comes when, according to her sister and biographer, Mrs. Bowen



93

British Syrian School at Beirut, Mrs Bowen Thomson, 1924, *The Daughters of Syria*, London.

Thompson gave the children of these women, and even eventually the women themselves, some lessons in reading and writing.

Soon after her arrival in Beirut, she met a young Damascene, Selim Kassab, whose work and place in the expansion of Mrs. Bowen Thompson's project is, as usual, as neglected in the scholarship as that of all the many others among the local "helpers" "associates" and "friends" of the foreigner missionaries. His name is not even mentioned in her sister's biographical sketch. Still, the school historian, however, is quite clear as to the importance of his work with Mrs. Bowen Thompson: "Without his support and knowledge, much less must have been accomplished"¹³. Whether the idea of formal schools was his or not, I do not know, but it is certain that he taught Arabic for decades and was still teaching when my grandmother was a student in the school. He was in charge of the Arabic church services in the schools. But perhaps most important, he was Mrs. Bowen Thompson's link to the community, translator and interpreter: The local people were constantly and consistently demanding schools for the education of their daughters¹⁴.

In 1866, a major change took place in Mrs. Bowen Thompson's mission: from being part social work, part evangelizing, part rudimentary education, it became a full time and serious educational project with the founding of the Normal Training School for girls. That this year happens to be the one in which the Syrian Protestant College was founded is not mentioned either by her or by the historians. What she does mention is that upper-class families, wishing their daughters, "the highest ladies in the

94

land," to learn English began to approach her, and thus the schools, from being purely charitable institutions, became self-supporting. If at first the language of instruction at the SPC was Arabic, it became English a few years later. Was it not thus necessary for more teachers to be trained for the increasing number of Protestant mission schools and the larger number of students required to feed into this institution? The Training College was to remain the main source of female teachers for the Protestant mission schools until the middle of the twentieth century¹⁵.

That there was a close connection made between Mrs. Bowen Thompson and members of the American mission in Beirut is clear from the correspondence. In a letter to Mrs. Ranyard from a member of the Persian mission published in **The Missing Link** in August 1865, he refers to Dr. and Mrs. Bliss, and then he writes: "I am glad you see so many of our good American Missionaries, on their way to and from the East"¹⁶. Mrs. Bowen Thompson herself often mentions her friendship with The Rev. Henry Harris Jessup in her correspondence, and I believe that her attitudes were, to some degree at least, shaped by his influence on her, and his was certainly the authoritative, patriarchal, conservative voice which she and her friends had so strenuously rejected in London. Perhaps her need for friends in this new and strange foreign environment to which she had come led her to suppress her feminist tendency in favour of the deeper and longer lived instincts of the class to which she, like Jessup, belonged.

It is important to note the contrast between the fiercely independent work of Mrs. Bowen Thompson and her colleagues in the institution of the Bible Women, and the spirit of independence which sent her to Syria, on the one hand, and the conservative attitudes regarding the female vocation preached in the school on the other. In book after book, history after history, I have read that the missionaries – especially those that addressed women – were a modernizing, liberating movement. After my work on the subject I have come to doubt that this is true, at least as it has been represented, a one way gift of freedom from the liberating missionaries to the oppressed women of the area.

In a passage typical of the missionary discourse on the female vocation, Mrs. Bowen Thompson writes in the September 1865 issue of **The Missing Link**, that "God made our first mother ... a helpmeet for man". (p 246) In another passage, she writes:

While at Zachleh, we paid a visit to the ladies of the family of an Effendi. They were all reclining on the divan, smoking or idling,

except one, a fine young woman, who was seated on the ground with a quantity of white calico beside her, and several paper patterns, fitting and cutting out some garments. She looked up with a sweet smile, exclaiming, 'Ah dear lady, I learnt to work when I was in your schools, and now I am come from Damascus for a few days, and am helping my friends to make some apparel.' I assure you I watched her pretty little fingers adjusting the patterns, and then cutting out so neatly, with perfect admiration and respect. Her little nieces are now in our schools. A respectable young woman, in a plain lilac dress, fastened up to the throat, sat down on the divan beside the ladies. She too had been in the school at Beirut ¹⁷.

While the education offered in the Training College certainly included modern and secular subjects, it also placed a heavy emphasis not only on Scripture, but, as the above passage clearly shows, on "proper" behaviour — a propriety strictly bound up with sexual puritanism, submission, deference, acquiescence — and on such skills as housework, embroidery, handwork and so on, all of which provided a framework which was hardly liberating, but on the contrary, binding. It is my firm belief that the domestication of women was one of the results of the missionary education for women. ¹⁸

It is clear that to emphasize the accomplishments of the new schools, a blanket condemnation of the existing status of women was necessary. That Jessup clearly played a major role in Mrs. Bowen Thompson's perception of the place of women in Syrian culture is clear from her letters. "The long neglected and despised Syrian woman," she writes, in **The Missing Link**, at the beginning of the passage quoted above, "is beginning to rise from her abject ignorance and degradation, and is manifesting in her life and conversation that she is what God made our first mother, a helpmeet for man". Then, she continues,

We no longer hear the taunt of 'You might as well teach a cat as a woman.' Nor do you now often here (except in remote mountain districts) their plea for ignorance: "We are women, how should we know; we are like the cows, we know no more than the oranges over our heads; all we know is that we die like sheep." (pp. 246-247).

In one issue of **The Missing Link**, 1867, we read that "Our dear friends,

Mrs. Thompson and Mrs. Mott" have come from Beirut and have held "sympathetic meetings with our Bible Women in London", during which they told them about the eastern nations "where women, once called 'sheep and donkeys' are daily transforming into noble wives and mothers ... ¹⁹".

The tone of this discourse closely echoes Jessup's writing on Arab women. On the completion in 1869 of the building housing the Beirut Female Seminary, later to become the American School for Girls, founded by the Americans in 1864, he wrote a ferocious attack on Islam in its influence on women and on the Eastern Christian sects:

... Any school for girls would have been an impossibility when the American missionaries first landed in Syria. The people thought and said that there was more hope of teaching a cat than a girl. The Moslems said that girls could not be trusted with a knowledge of reading and writing, girls were to be servants, slaves, beaten, despised, degraded, dishonoured. They could not be trusted. No Moslem would allow his wife's face to be seen by his own father or brother. No Moslem would mention the word woman in the presence of other men without saying, "Ajellak Allah," which means, May God exalt you above the contamination of such a vile subject! The Mohameddan religion has destroyed the family, degraded women, heaped ignominy and reproach upon the girls. Secluded at home, veiled when abroad, without training, veracity, virtue or self-respect, men despised them and they despised themselves. If a European doctor insists on seeing the face of a sick Moslem woman, the husband has often been known to say, "Never, let her die first — but no man shall ever see her face."

But Jessup is not only referring to Moslem women in this damning account:

The Oriental Christian women were driven into partial seclusion by the intense fanaticism of their Moslem neighbours. ²⁰

This attitude of Jessup's seems to have been largely swallowed, not only by Mrs. Bowen Thompson and her fellow missionaries, but also by popular local opinion on the subject, which survives to this day. The fact that there is no mention in the above attack of class differentiation or of rural versus urban settings makes one wonder if Jessup had ever thought about making a similar comment on women in the USA or Britain at the time.

A more nuanced, and therefore more historically acceptable version of the situation of Syrian women at the time is still lacking today. Though present scholarship on the modern history of Arab women is at its beginning, it is already clear that local women, particularly Muslims, (on whom more research has been done than on Christians), were far more accomplished than the above quotations suggest. Such 19th century individuals as Zeinab Fawwaz, who was born and bred in what is today South Lebanon, and who was an accomplished writer, was surely not alone in her accomplishments, nor could she have existed in a cultural vacuum. Jessup's influential writings, however, combined with the lingering hostility preserved in the popular memory towards the Ottoman Empire have done incalculable harm to the truth in this regard, and to this day many believe that were it not for the missionaries, women would still be in the dark ages.

By the time my grandmother entered the Training College in the early 1890s, the curriculum was by any standard quite sophisticated. Although the study of the Bible was still the central concern, and heavy emphasis was placed on behaviour and the domestic arts, the students were taught English as well as Arabic language and Literature, science, physiology, geography, history, mathematics, and other secular subjects. There is no question that my grandmother was indeed a highly educated woman, as she always proudly claimed to be. Her husband, her children, her community looked up to her as a modern woman, who played the piano and kept the accounts at church and at home, who worked with her husband as an equal. But in the end the ultimate aim of that high education was to make a domestic goddess of her, to turn her eyes inwards to her home, her husband, her children, her embroideries, her needlework, her hygienic kitchen, rather than the large world to which I have aspired to belong, and from which I, and those of my generation, feel ourselves to have been so separated.

I have no desire to suggest here that my grandmother's missionary education was a bad thing, or that she, and all those like her, would have been better off without it. Quite the contrary, I am proud of her, and have come to revere her proudly cultivated reputation as a modern woman. Yet, I cannot help but feel that many of the ambivalences and doubts of my generation come from her day, and especially from her encounters in that schoolroom that she attended. The gospel of respectable domesticity has

been shown, by the work of such scholars as Mary Poovey, to have been an integral part of the English Victorian economic system, providing proof of familial stability and therefore of credit-worthiness.²¹ Preaching such a system in school therefore, was sensible preparation for a girl in Victorian England. How it prepared a girl for life in the Ottoman Empire, no matter how close to collapse that Empire might be, however, is far less clear. It will be the work of future scholars of the history of women in this part of the world to sort out these various strands of influence, and to evaluate them more accurately than has hitherto been the case. It seems clear to me that the inheritance of modern Arab women is vastly more complex and more interesting than most historians have so far been willing to admit.

NOTES

- 1 Teta, Mother and Me: An Arab Woman's Memoir (London: Saqi Books, 2005).
- 2 Most of the biographical material below is based on a biographical sketch by Mrs. Bowen Thompson's sister included in Daughters of Syria: A Narrative of Efforts by the late Mrs. Bowen Thompson for the Evangelization of the Syrian Females, ed. Rev. H.B.Tristram, M.A. LL.D., FRS, Master of Greatham Hospital and Hon. Canon of Durham. London: Seeley, Jackson, and Halliday, 1872. The book also includes letters and other pieces written by its subject.
- 3 *The Missing Link Magazine or Bible Work at Home and Abroad*. Dedicated to the British and Foreign Bible Society and to the Friends of Bible Circulation of Female Missions through the world. Edited by L.N. R. Volume I no. 1, January 1865. p.1- 2
- 4 Ibid., p. 3
- 5 ibid., p. 4
- 6 Ibid., p.4-5
- 7 *The Missing Link*, Vol. I, no.2, February, 1865. p. 34.
- 8 *The Missing Link*, Vol. I, no.3, March, 1865, p 66.
- 9 *The Missing Link*, Vol. I, no. 4, April 1, 1865.
- 10 Cited in Makdisi, p. 178.
- 11 Frances E. Scott, *Dare and Persevere*. (London: Lebanon Evangelical Mission, 1960), p.29
- 12 Cited in Makdisi, p. 178.
- 13 Scott, p.15
- 14 In Hasbeiya, "Many of the

women urged Mrs. Bowen Thompson to transfer the women's school to Hasbiya and open a girl's school." Ibid., p. 20. ". . . in response to the earnest entreaties of the inhabitants, a school was begun in Mokhtara . . . "p. 21, ". . . several leading Greek Orthodox gentlemen visited [Mr. Kessab] to beg his mediation with Mrs. Bowen Thompson for a girls' school [in Damascus]." p. 22. The catalogue of requests for schools is peppered throughout the mission accounts.

15 See Daniel Roberts' unpublished *The Beirut College for Women: A Short History*, cited in Makdisi, pp. 281 ff.

16 The Missing Link, August, 1865, pp 202-204.

17 Cited in Makdisi, p. 193.

18 For a longer discussion of this idea, please see Makdisi, especially Chapters 11 and 12.

19 Vol. III, 1867, Preface p. iv. Yet these same "sheep and donkeys," it seems, under the watchful eyes and imaginative narratives of Mrs. Ranyard could produce the following no doubt apocryphal story of a Syrian Bible Woman's encounter with a Maronite monk, in which she cheerfully challenges not only the absolute patriarchy of the Eastern Church (which survives to this very day) but reproduces the arguments of "our clerical friend in Ireland" as to the validity of a female ministry. "I said,"Will you sit down a little. As you are a monk, perhaps you will like to hear the Word of God? " I read to him, and spoke a great deal about false doctrine. He answered, 'Our priests do not tell us so; and you are a woman, how can you read the Testament?' I said, 'Is the Testament for men, and not for women? Jesus died for all, not only for men; and we ought to teach the truth that God teaches us, and to beware of false doctrine.' He said, 'It is true,' and he left. " ("Report of Em Yousef, Our BibleWoman in Syria." The Missing Link, October, 1, 1867, p.317)

20 *Fifty-Three Years in Syria* (New York:Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910), Vol. I., p. 224,

21
See for example her important book *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*.