



Home

Editorial

Authors' Responses

Guidelines For Reviewers

About Us

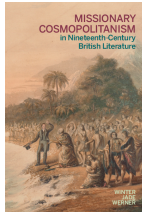
Masthead

Feedback

Search Every Field

Search

Missionary Cosmopolitanism in Nineteenth-Century British Literature



By **Winter Jade Werner**

(Ohio State, 2020) xi + 210 pp.

Reviewed by **Mary Ellis Gibson** on 2020-11-06.

[Click here for a PDF version.](#)

[Click here to buy the book on Amazon.](#)

By age twelve I was satiated with Baptist sermons. Yet every winter I still looked forward to the occasional moment when a woman occupied the pulpit or when at least the lectern was taken by a man from far away. I loved the vague idea that a whole mission organization had been inspired by a missionary to China named Lottie Moon, a woman I felicitously associated with Chinese mooncakes as they appeared in my book *Children Around the World*.

My understanding of cosmopolitanism was bookended by Lottie Moon, missionaries, and mooncakes on the one hand and, on the other, by a stream of returning Peace Corps volunteers who ate at our dining table and showed slides of the villages where they had built wells or taught English. My cosmopolitanism came to an abrupt end, though, when I tried to put these pieces together. One February morning I took the courage to ask my Sunday school teacher about our most recent guest, a volunteer English teacher who happened to be Jewish. Since this volunteer teacher seemed to me the moral equivalent of Lottie Moon, I wanted to know if she was going to hell. The answer: "We just have to be missionaries at home."

Winter Jade Werner's study of missionaries and nineteenth-century literature investigates precisely this dilemma: how can a cosmopolitan perspective emphasizing the value and dignity of all human beings square with the doctrine that Christians alone can be saved? Is "missionary cosmopolitanism"--Werner's key concept--an oxymoron? In 1837 John Williams, famous missionary to the South Sea Islands, claimed that because the Christian must understand the "condition, and changes, and prospects of every people," the Christian "is the only true cosmopolite" (qtd. 1). How should we understand this claim?

Werner tackles this question in two ways. After showing how missionaries understood their own work, she links missionary publications (and some responses to them) to key literary texts from the long nineteenth century that directly addressed the work of Christian missions. Her chosen texts include poems and prose by Robert Southey, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, and the two versions of Sydney Owenson's novel about seventeenth-century India, *The Missionary* (1811) and *Luxima, the Prophetess* (1859).

According to Werner, British missionaries often considered themselves cosmopolitan, especially before the Indian uprising of 1857. At the least, she writes, they argued for "the meaning and practicability of the 'universal family of mankind'" (3). Yet while capitalizing on the positive valence of the term "cosmopolitan" in the early nineteenth century, they were earnestly trying, at the same time, "to square an Enlightenment humanist ethos with evangelical Christianity" (3).

Werner traces the vicissitudes of cosmopolitanism from the missionizing and anti-slavery efforts of Shaftesbury and Wilberforce in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Unlike the radical cosmopolitanism of Byron or Voltaire, their kind of universalist humanitarianism could accommodate an evangelical emphasis on missions. While spreading the gospel, humanitarians of this era were often culturally curious about the conditions and prospects of every people.

For the most part, if not evenly, these global concerns comported with imperial commerce. Yet rather than treating religion as the handmaid of commerce, Werner helps us understand the contradictory position and the sometimes contradictory claims of missionaries themselves, who identified both as cosmopolitan and as Christian proponents of the one true religion. She also aims to show how novelists and poets teased out or reinforced these contradictions. As to missions themselves, Werner's concern is more with missionary claims--that is, with missionary writing for the metropolitan market--than with the practices or activities of missionaries in the field. Likewise, she is more concerned with the goals that united missionaries across Protestant denominations than with the doctrinal and institutional factors that divided them.

While most of this book examines texts from the first half of the nineteenth century, Werner's final chapter treats not only the first version of Sydney Owenson's *The Missionary* but also the second, *Luxima* (1859), published two years after the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Following Adrian Wisnicki's *Fieldwork of Empire*, [reviewed elsewhere on this site](#), Werner argues that cosmopolitanism was redefined after that year. For missionaries and their supporters, she writes, the idea of conversion gave way to the concept of trusteeism. Missionaries also--we are told-- began to espouse premillennial eschatology, which suggested that since conversion was unlikely, missions should merely prepare the way for the second coming. This shift to trusteeism was also prompted by racial ideology and by missions to Africa, as Wisnicki has explained with regard to David

Livingstone. It was precipitated as well by the marked failure of mass conversion in India coupled with the reaction to the uprising of 1857.

Nonetheless, citing Tanya Agathacole's *Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination* (2011), Werner finds among late nineteenth-century British missionaries a new recognition of cultural alterity. At its best, this new cosmopolitanism recognized human differences, cultural differences, by engaging global or at least international perspectives.

In her coda, Werner links this new cosmopolitanism to late twentieth-century shifts in missionary discourse as reflected in the Centenary of the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 2010. At that conference, missions were defined in terms of social justice, local Christianity--or Christianities--and the idea of *vulnerable* missionary activity. According to Werner, missionary cosmopolitanism provides a way of seeing religion as not inimical to but engaged with the twenty-first century cosmopolitanism espoused by philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and Kwame Anthony Appiah. This convergence may well strengthen the ethical or religious basis of global networks struggling for social justice.

In treating the late nineteenth-century shift in missionary attitudes, though, Werner elides crucial differences among missionaries. Missionary millenarianism strikes me as a far cry from the new cosmopolitanism that Werner finds emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The racism and millenarianism that Werner cites (141-42) were surely at odds with a cosmopolitanism that eschewed Eurocentric normativity. Denominational and theological differences also militated against cosmopolitan egalitarianism in the late nineteenth century, and they continue to do so today. To overlook these differences historically or in the present would be to minimize the anti-cosmopolitan animus of evangelical fundamentalism across Africa and much of Latin America, and among missionaries sent to those continents from the United States and elsewhere.

Despite the conflict between missionary cosmopolitanism and evangelical anti-cosmopolitanism, the main argument of Werner's study has much to offer. By means of her no doubt labor-intensive study of periodicals (missionary and otherwise), she sheds fresh light on missionary work in the early nineteenth century. In chapter 3, for example, she shows that while marriage between missionaries and their converts was first approved, it came to provoke strong disapproval. (A parallel shift occurred in the attitudes of the British East India Company toward marriage--or domestic relations--between EIC employees and Indians.)

Whether or not Charlotte Brontë was fully conversant with the controversy about missionaries marrying converts, Werner insightfully brings it to bear on the relation between Jane Eyre and St. John Rivers. According to Werner, Brontë's novel treats marriage as a hyper-kinship that turns two persons into one, a single permeable being. While physically abhorrent to Jane, this married hyper-kinship is said to be a "prophylactic measure" for St. John, a necessary bulwark against the temptation to go native by marrying an Indian woman. Since St. John will marry only a woman who is already his kin, Werner writes, he "in effect practices the most extreme form of what Ann Laura Stoler terms 'white endogamy.'" (134). For Werner, Brontë's novel marks a transitional moment between the missionary cosmopolitanism of universal kinship (which did initially accept marriages between missionaries and converts) and a sterile view of endogamous kinship. For St. John, marriage is both "antiseptic," as Werner brilliantly puts it, and entirely physical: "monstrous," as Jane puts it to herself. The proposed marriage of Jane and St. John thus exemplifies the contradiction in the missionary enterprise between spiritual affiliation to the missionized and feared contamination from them.

Just as Werner reads *Jane Eyre* in light of the controversy about missionary marriage, she links *Bleak House* (1852-53) to the Great Exhibition of 1851, which is said to have instantiated "the evangelical conviction that missionary Christianity, world peace, and a globally ascendant Britain were necessarily entwined" (59). This missionary benevolence (and the cultural self-congratulation attending it) nationalizes and evangelizes an earlier form of cosmopolitanism: that of Skimpole, who is commonly acknowledged to be modeled on Leigh Hunt. Though Jarndyce contrasts Skimpole with Mrs. Jellyby, Werner reads them both as cosmopolites--of differing kinds. They are early and mid-nineteenth century cosmopolites, to be exact. Skimpole is a citizen of the world who takes advantage of those at home, and Mrs. Jellyby evangelizes the world while ignoring those at home. Beneath their apparent difference, as Werner smartly puts it, "is a shared sensibility: Missionary cosmopolitanism, the novel suggests, is also motivated by aesthetic susceptibility rather than genuine moral conviction" (63). Thus Jo perishes on the steps of the Society for the Promotion of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. He dies sick and destitute while the supporters of missions contemplate the imaginative delights of saving children in exotic lands.

In a Burkean critique of cosmopolitanism, Werner concludes, Dickens implies that moral concern should be rooted in the domestic sphere, whether Esther Summerson's home or Britain itself. Yet the claims of the domestic sphere hardly explain Dickens's role in the controversy over the Governor Eyre affair and his rewriting of the global in *Little Dorrit*. From the perspective of the later novel, as well as within the terms of *Bleak House* itself, Esther's concentric circles of duty represent Dickens's tenuous and temporary response to Britain's claims to global economic power and moral authority. By contrast, the movement from nation to world in *Little Dorrit* has been read as a movement toward a productive yet problematized cosmopolitanism. (See Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance* [2001] and James Buzard, "The Country of the Plague," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 38 [2010]: 413-19). Even in *Bleak House*, then, I find Dickens espousing not so much Burkean nationalism as provisional domesticity.

As Werner argues in chapter 2, the conservative justification of missionary endeavor comes a generation closer to Burke than Dickens's novel. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, as Werner shows by once again mining periodicals from the missionary archive, missionaries moved from fringe "fanaticism" into the conservative mainstream; they "secularized their evangelical agenda, rendering their efforts more attractive and acceptable to polite society" (72). In repeatedly reviewing missionary publications, Werner demonstrates, Robert Southey "found in this writing a means of smoothing out an ideological conundrum that profoundly troubled missionary work." Even though "the spread of supposedly liberatory Christian humanism seemed very much to depend on manifestly oppressive" power, Southey defended colonization (72). Through his reviews of missionary publications as well as his *Sir Thomas More, or Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society* (1824) and his narrative poem, *A Tale of Paraguay* (1825), Werner tracks his path from a relatively secular Enlightenment ideal of the cosmopolitan to his embrace of colonial expansion.

Though previous studies have examined *Jane Eyre*, *Bleak House*, and Owen's *The Missionary* in light of missionaries and empire, Werner breaks new ground by deeply researching the missionary archive and by showing how

missionaries themselves claimed to be cosmopolitan. By identifying missionary cosmopolitanism as a key strand of cultural discourse in the long nineteenth century, Werner creates new contexts for reading both canonical novels such as *Jane Eyre* and lesser known texts such as Southey's *Thomas More* and Owenson's revision of *The Missionary*. In light of Werner's research, I can also better understand my own childhood consternation as I tried to tell a myself single ethical story about my friend the Peace Corps volunteer and Lottie Moon.

Mary Ellis Gibson is Arthur Jeremiah Roberts Professor of Literature at Colby College.

Leave a comment on Mary Ellis Gibson's review.

Name:

Email:

Comments:

I'm not a robot

reCAPTCHA
Privacy - Terms

Submit

[About Us](#)

Copyright © Dartmouth College, 2008-2020