

A Heart at Leisure from Itself: Caroline Macdonald of Japan, by Margaret Prang. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995. xv, 346 pp. \$39.95 cloth.

Caroline Macdonald was a Canadian missionary in Japan from 1904 till 1931, bringing the Presbyterian Word to a Buddhist, Shintoist country where missionaries were discovering with dismay that a sense of sin was singularly lacking and the idea of redemption held little appeal. Yet they also knew that the Christianizing of Asia would best make progress from a strong base in Japan. As one American strategist put it, "the key to China is in Tokyo." Caroline Macdonald was part of this crusade, working through the YWCA to create a Christian milieu through which the individual could be brought to Christ. "It means," she said, "the gradual substitution of a new background, a new outlook, a deeper conception of . . . reality." She was a warm and friendly person; her heart went out to people and they responded.

Brought up in southern Ontario in the social gospel tradition, she herself soon acquired a deeper conception of social and economic realities. The Kingdom of God, she came to believe, could not be achieved in Japan or anywhere else unless society in general were transformed to deal with underlying social problems. She became a much-loved prison visitor and was influential in the reform of Japanese prisons. She supported the new labour movement, set up labour schools for women factory workers, made union organizing a plank in her Christian platform. After the great earthquake of 1924, she helped restore and rebuild. She identified with the Japanese people, learned their language, made their problems her own, and gave bold and imaginative leadership. The Japanese government in 1924 recognized her contribution in educational and social work when the emperor bestowed on her the Sixth Order of Merit of the Order of the Sacred Treasure. Caroline Macdonald was no ordinary missionary.

And no ordinary woman. She was "ambiguous," as Margaret Prang explains in her preface to this richly-textured biography. The reference is to a line of thought opened up by linguistic theorist Deborah Cameron and pursued by Carolyn Heilbrun in *Writing a Woman's Life*. The "unambiguous woman" complies with the social norm, making partnership with a man the preeminent goal, deferring to male authority and adopting the kinds of behaviour that authority prescribes: modesty, reticence, submissiveness — seemly decorums that Mary Wollstonecraft was rebelling against two centuries ago.

"Occasionally," writes Carolyn Heilbrun, "women have put God or Christ in the place of a man; the results are the same: one's own

desires and quests are always secondary." This was not true of Caroline Macdonald, even though for her God was the very source of being and His will the ultimate authority and guide. For from a secular point of view, she was simply an unusually confident and assertive woman, favoured by family and education to make her voice heard. To have that capacity, as Heilbrun explains, to be able to declare oneself and become one of the actors in the world of human endeavour is to have power, and Caroline Macdonald exercised power easily, something the "unambiguous woman," deferential and obedient, dares not aspire to.

When her settlement house in Tokyo was under police surveillance because it was a meeting place for striking brewery workers, she laid down the rules for the strikers and also reached an agreement with the police to avoid trouble. The strike lasted for fifty-three days, but she reported that she was confident there would be no violence, for she could "manage them" [the strikers]. She had them "in the hollow of [her] hand from the beginning" and, moreover, had given the detectives "instructive discourses." After the strike, she had tea with the police and chatted with them, surprised but gratified that they credited her with its peaceful outcome. Of her involvement with the labour movement she concluded that ". . . up to date I have all the lines in my hand. I labor under no delusions as to the seriousness of the tasks we are tackling, but I seem to have the confidence of people who might not themselves be willing to tackle the same things." She could tackle things because of her strong Christian faith which made no separation between religion and social duty. God was therefore no hindrance to an ambiguous woman with the zest and talent for a free and independent life. Although Caroline Macdonald was never a radical feminist, she educated Japanese women to reject their traditional role as obedient, passive servants to men and to become individuals in their own right.

Margaret Prang does not intercede between the reader and her subject: she presents as valid Caroline Macdonald's strongly held religious convictions. In these more secular times of heightened awareness about cultural imperialism, readers may be unwilling to credit the ardour of a faith that moved its adherents to embark on the grandiose task of Christianizing the whole world. In her preface Margaret Prang prepares the reader against this response, and by her respect for her subject and impressive scholarship soon engages our sympathy. Caroline Macdonald emerges not as a biographical curiosity but as an admirable and likeable person whose life deserves to be known and remembered.

At the end of her career, Caroline Macdonald acknowledged in all humility that missionaries had no "special responsibility" in a foreign land and that indeed their well-meant endeavour could be perceived as "a most preposterous act." But when is proselytizing of any kind not preposterous? Is it any more acceptable for one people to urge on another a "new outlook" on human rights, for example? This biography stirs such uneasy reflections, making the life of Caroline Macdonald of Japan extraordinarily relevant for a Canada increasingly preoccupied with questions of belief and moral imperatives.

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