Anxious Notes on College Life: The Gossipy Journals of Eleanor McDougall¹

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Abstract

The educated woman and the college girl were, for the great part of the 19th and 20th centuries in India, subjects of immense anxiety. In this paper, I examine the gossip narratives that a missionary educator in South India, Eleanor McDougall, wrote biannually for readers in America and Britain, whilst she was Principal of Women's Christian College (WCC) in erstwhile Madras, along with the book on her experience that she eventually published. In doing so, I locate the circulation of gossip in transnational circuits as a site where colonial anxieties about young Indian women as subjects of uplift came to be produced. For women like McDougall, the expression of urgent anxiety about young women's moral and social conditions served as a means to secure legitimacy for the work they did, and position themselves as important participants in a new discourse of philanthropically mediated development that emerged in the early twentieth century with the influx of American charitable capital into countries like India. At the same time, I show, in responding to her writing about them, the Indian staff and students at WCC mark a site of refusal: suggesting the anxious boundaries of colonial knowledge production at a time when the surety of discourses of racial difference was beginning to unravel. In its study of McDougall's gossip writing, this paper contributes to a complicated and non-linear understanding of emotions as a site of power and hierarchy.

Introduction

The hand that rocks the cradle does indeed rule the world but let us not also forget that it can also ruin the very same world.

- Mrs. N. Shanmugasundaram, Former Principal of Queen Mary's College²

If the numerous articles published and speeches given in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that ruminated on the question of women's education are any proof, the educated woman and her inchoate version, the college girl, were subjects of immense anxiety in South Asia. The quotation above comes from an article called 'What is wrong with Education today?' published in the Queen Mary's College Diamond Jubilee souvenir edition in erstwhile Madras³. Its author was a student of the college in the 1940s and in the 1970s its principal. Like many hundreds of others who wrote on this subject from the mid 19th to the mid 20th century, she worried that young women lacked moral courage and emotional stability. Empowered with education, and lacking 'culture', she wrote, women might put their learning to the wrong use, causing ruin and destruction. Metonymic of the deep unsettlement that urban modernity had engendered in colonial India, the educated young woman was, by the early twentieth century, at the heart of questions on sovereignty, national identity and civilisation. The life-and-death quality that Mrs Shanmugasundaram brings to this question in the quotation cited above is palpable through the history of women's education.

As Sanjay Seth notes, the frenetic quality of the debate about the education of women and the increasing consensus that it was necessary was not matched by numbers or a willingness to actually send girls to school⁴. Indeed, at the turn of the twentieth century, less than one per cent of girls in the country knew how to read and write in any language⁵. Much of this worrying was instead about emotional life: at its heart were questions of national character and progress, imagined to be embodied in women, and located in their roles as mothers and home-keepers. 'True happiness' was the object at stake⁶. If women were to be learned but not emotionally and culturally cultivated, it was feared that the home would cease to be harmonious. As such, it was widely argued that women ought not to be given the same education as men, but instead trained in the household arts as well as in cultural refinement: an education that they might put to good use in the upbringing of children, and the hygienic management of the home⁷.

Ideological battles over the educated woman also played a role in the negotiation of the terms of racial difference in India's early twentieth century colonial modernity. The plight of the Indian woman had served since the late nineteenth century as a yardstick of India's lack in civilizational maturity. From the 1860s onward, it was widely used by Western women missionaries and reformists to justify and legitimate their role in the imperial enterprise as expert informants on Indian women⁸. With the battle for suffrage nearly over early in the twentieth century, the 'status of women' in other parts of the world became a new rallying cry for feminists and women missionaries from America and Britain⁹. The substance of many of these anxieties suggests a scrambling succession of narratives full of anticipatory fears about what might happen

² N. Shanmugasundaram, 'What is Wrong with Education Today?' in The Queen Mary's College Madras Diamond Jubilee Magazine (Chennai 1974), no page numbers.

³ The city of Madras, like many other Indian cities underwent a name change and since 1996 has been called Chennai. Though Tamil sources have always referred to the city as Chennai, in this paper I use 'Madras' to refer to the city in the time period under discussion, as this is the word that missionaries, British government officials, and the upper caste upper middle class students who were educated in this time, largely used.

⁴ S. Seth, *Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India* (Durham, 2007), p.129

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 129

⁶ For example, in an issue of the Women's Indian Association's *Stri Dharma*, the editors announced the founding of a home for women of ill repute, where they might be educated and reintroduced into respectable society, writing: 'Ananda Vilas, where the girls now stay has a happy meaning and we are sure that its inmates will know the real 'Ananda' [happiness] that will come to them through lives that have been cleansed and healed of all perversity. Editors, 'The Home for Women', *Stri Dharma*, XVII, 6 (1934), p.280.

⁷ See for instance M. Hancock, 'Home science and the nationalization of domesticity in colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 35, 04 (2001), pp. 871-903.

⁸ M.C. Singh, 'Gender, Thrift and Indigenous Adaptations: money and missionary medicine in colonial India', *Women's History Review*, 15, 5 (2006): pp. 701-717.

⁹ See also M. Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham 2007).

if Indian women were left uneducated¹⁰. If the popular press compulsively published anxious reports about what college girls might or might not be up to¹¹, the reports that missionaries sent 'home' for the concerned publics of Western Europe and America to read were no less filled with what I show to be gossip about their wards, students and Indian colleagues.

In this paper, I examine the writing of a British missionary to South India, Eleanor McDougall, to examine the circulation of anxiety about the Indian college girl in a Christian public sphere of missionary literature between 1915 and 1940. This paper argues that McDougall's writing is gossipy as it draws on a combination of observed detail, anticipated fear, and repeated stereotype to make its point about the inherent difference and utter haplessness of the Indian woman¹². Historians of the British empire have located the language of emotions at the heart of the imperial social configuration through which racial boundaries were produced and negotiated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Located within this context, McDougall's journals are particularly interesting because they are located at the brink of a historical moment in which the non-Western woman was discursively transferred out of the isolated 'woman's question' of singular colonial settings into a larger web of imperial relations through which she was constituted as a subject of international philanthropy. At the same time, the temporal location of McDougall's writing between 1915 and 1940 positions it at a period when the common sense of racial hierarchy on which this convergence of imperialisms was premised was beginning to unravel.

The implications of this for a history of urban emotions lies in the role that missionaries like McDougall played in shaping the gendered terms of an early twentieth century urban modernity. Emotions, as I show in this paper, were certainly a site for the articulation of relationships of power and hierarchy: marking the missionary college an oasis of safety, both away from the traditional family, as well as protecting young women in a city imagined to be otherwise threatening to them. Emotional relationships were also the context in which the changing terms of race would be negotiated: shaping the ways in which Indian women refused colonial discourses that cast them as subjects of rescue.

In the sections that follow, I begin by setting the context for the gossip in Eleanor McDougall's writing about the young women in her charge. Following this, I examine the work of anxiety¹³ in this writing through an examination of two particular moments in the history of the college: first, the long crisis of housing that McDougall records, and secondly the furore that occurred when McDougall's students and Indian staff learned what she had been writing about them for the reading of hundreds of people in Britain and America.

Using the instance of the housing crisis, I demonstrate the role that anxiety played both in producing the figure of the Indian college girl as an intimately familiar, yet exotic subject of uplift and rescue. In evoking a sense of social concern among her readers, McDougall established the legitimacy of her own work, while also raising funds for her college from among the public in America and Britain. In this, we might read a microhistory of the emerging convergence in the 1910s and 1920s between British liberal imperialism and American philanthropic capitalism, mediated by Christian missionaries, in the field of women's uplift and education. McDougall's struggles to locate the college in an appropriate building in Madras also position this intervention at the heart of an emergent and tumultuous urban modernity in India.

In the second instance, I position McDougall's writing within a narrative of colonial anxiety. Examining the response to it in her college, I argue that the feeling of betrayal that many expressed when they read what

¹⁰ For example, see the article titled 'India' in the 48th Report of the Society for Promoting Female Education in the East (in Zenanas, Harems and Schools), 1883, pp. 15 – 17. Also H.B. Boswell, 'A Plea for Zenana Work and Zenana Missions', *India's Women: The Magazine of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society*, III (1883), pp. 3-5

¹¹ For instance, Anonymous, 'Ketta Penkal' [Bad Girls], *Manjari* 12, 8 (1959), p. 23 and a play called Anonymous, 'College Pen' [College Girl], *Kalaimagal*, 28, 154 (1944), pp. 141 – 146.

¹² L. White, 'Between Gluckman and Foucault: historicizing rumour and gossip.' *Social Dynamics* 20, 1 (1994), pp.75-92.

¹³ I refer here to the understanding within the field of history of emotions that emotions 'do' – i.e. they are aspects of a world of practice as much as they simply affect and induce physical sensations. For example, see M. Scheer, 'Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (And is that what makes them have a history?) A Bourdieuan Approach to understanding Emotion', 51 (May 2012), 193-220. Anxiety, as I will demonstrate, is a site where social boundaries are drawn and renegotiated.

she had written about them, marks the boundaries of transnational sisterhood and solidarity in the early twentieth century. McDougall's writing and the response to it, in this instance, serve as a lens through which to understand the increasingly insecure position that Western missionaries held in an India that was in the grips of a nationalist movement in the 1930s and 1940s. Marking the end of an imperial public sphere to which native subjects were external and remote, the response to McDougall's writing also suggests the limits of colonial practices of 'knowing' Indian subjects.

Gossip, Anxiety and the Principal's Journals

When Eleanor McDougall travelled to India to set up a Christian College for women, she had already had a distinguished career at Westfield College in London. Traveling in the first instance in 1912 with a Miss ME Roberts, McDougall visited a number of towns, assessing the extent to which Government Schools and Colleges fulfilled the need for a moral education in Christian ethics. When she returned in 1915 to set up the Christian College for Women in Madras, she did not come in the spirit of friendship that others like her successor Eleanor Rivett would invoke¹⁴. She was emphatically a reformer, who had come with the explicit purpose of spreading the benefits of Christian civilisation among what she saw as a much undeveloped people. Indeed, she believed that Christianity alone could give Indian women 'the great gift of girlhood': a time beyond childhood and before marriage when they could be educated¹⁵. Having first travelled to America to visit Mount Holyoke College, which was made a sister institution of WCC, McDougall positioned herself among a global network of educated women, through whom she hoped to attract the funds to expand the Christian College for Women in Madras. Her hierarchical approach, if somewhat old fashioned for her time, is very familiar in the accounts of Victorian travellers like Mary Carpenter¹⁶.

Soon after she started her role as Principal of WCC, McDougall began writing prolifically about her experience, sending detailed biannual 'Principal's Journals' to England as well as to America where the benefactors of her institution lived. Their purpose was evidently, from the beginning, both to attract funds and new recruits to the missionary movement, as well as to communicate with her far flung benefactors about the progress of a project founded through the cooperation of several missionary societies. Such reports were, from the late 1850s onward, central to demonstrating to Christian benefactors in the West that women missionaries and their organisations were actually achieving the goals of missionary work in places like India. In McDougall's Journals, the students of WCC are portrayed as being well-meaning but lacking in decisive power. Many are unable to resist early marriage, few have the nerve to continue their newly-acquired Christian faith after graduation, and others find themselves easily giving in to the temptation to cheat in examinations, to steal and to be seduced by unsuitable men. Of their intellectual capacities, McDougall is doubtful. Having had a student mix up Sir Isaac Newton with Plato: she writes that 'they do not shine in class'¹⁷.

Fundamentally, McDougall's writing shows her conviction that culture and knowledge in India are much inferior to those in the West, owing to the fact that they lack the moral grounding of Christianity. Even in matters such as music she writes that Indian music, however pleasing, lacks an understanding of harmony, and is hence less complex¹⁸. Further, she remains concerned throughout her writing that Indians are only interested in education as a means of securing government work, rather than as a means of improving the mind and cultivating refinement. As such, she complains that her students are too obsessed with examinations and are less interested in matters of moral development¹⁹.

McDougall's Journals might be located within an existing missionary public sphere, as well as a world of women's publications in the Anglo-Saxon West through which knowledge about the 'status' of women in

¹⁴ J. Haggis and M. Allen, 'Imperial emotions: Affective communities of mission in British protestant women's missionary publications c1880–1920' *Journal of Social History* 41,3 (2008), pp. 691-716.

¹⁵ E. McDougall, *Lamps in the Wind* (Edinburgh, 1940), p. 125.

¹⁶ See for instance, A. Burton, 'Fearful Bodies into Disciplined Subjects: Pleasure, Romance, and the Family Drama of Colonial Reform in Mary Carpenter's "Six Months in India"', *Signs*, 20, 3 (1995), pp. 545-574.

¹⁷ E. McDougall, *The Principal's Journal*, 2 (October 1915), p. 5

¹⁸ *ibid*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁹ For instance, E. McDougall, *The Principal's Journal*, 2 (October 1915), p. 6. Also see E. McDougall, *Women's Christian College, Madras 1915-1925* (Madras, 1925), pp.1-2.

countries like India came to be produced and circulated²⁰. Such outlets were sites through which missionary women found ways to resist the patriarchy of the mission world itself, carving out a space for themselves within the imperialist project, as experts on the lives of Indian women, to whom they – and not male missionaries – had access. Through the articles they wrote in the Journals of the Church of England Zenana Mission Society and the London Missionary Society, as well as in American outlets such as ‘Woman’s Work’, they established themselves as financial managers and administrators, moving beyond roles purely of care and mothering towards positions of management and authority in the institutions they founded and ran.

Importantly, as McDougall’s journals show, such publications were instrumental to painting an intimate picture of the everyday life of the Indian woman, making her a familiar albeit abject and deserving figure of sympathy and philanthropy to readers in America and Britain who might make contributions to the expansion of McDougall’s institution. As Antoinette Burton further points out, the direct address of the writing in such journals, that addresses the average female reader, was instrumental in schooling women in America and Britain into active citizenship, cultivating in them, a feeling of their own political importance and participation in a crucial endeavour of which the precondition was their own social and economic emancipation²¹. McDougall was certainly successful in this regard. While large corporations like the Rockefeller foundation responded to her appeals and made large grants to WCC, the substantial part of the funds raised for the institution to buy the land on which the college stands came from middle class women in America seeking to make a contribution to women’s uplift in Asia: a cause that McDougall, with the help of prominent friends, had expertly made both urgent and intimately familiar to them through her writing.

The anecdotal content of these journals makes them gossipy: the stories they tell follow the lives of individual students, making judgements and rendering particular stories exemplar of stereotypical narratives about the inherent nature of Indian womanhood. These stories serve to create fixed narratives as a sign of racial difference, through which the figure of the Indian College Girl is portrayed as being fundamentally different from, albeit only a few steps behind, the British and American university going woman. Gossip has largely tended to occupy oral historians and anthropologists, who study it as a means through which unofficial forms of cultural knowledge circulate and draw the boundaries of community and trust²². However, gossip also pervades written accounts of everyday life – produced by memsahibs, colonial officers, and missionaries like McDougall – in postcolonial contexts, giving the historian access to a stratum of emotional life otherwise difficult to access²³. As Stoler further points out, these accounts are often full of anticipatory fears and fantasies, some of which propelled disciplinary practices and acts of explicit violence against racial others²⁴.

In the South Asian context, gossip and rumour have largely been studied in the context of insurgency and political revolt and have been key to the development of subaltern historiography²⁵. In this case, I turn the attention away from explicit relations of racial antagonism to a site of ostensible sisterhood, alliance and uplift: a project which, for all the criticism it attracted, had partners in Indian feminists and progressive reformers, and was widely celebrated in the early twentieth century²⁶. The circulation of gossipy narratives about the Indian college girl in McDougall’s writing serves to fix her as a subject of anxiety: a figure who elicits social concern and the drive to participate in a project of uplift, while at the same time marking and reinscribing a racial boundary. This fixity materialised through the repetition of a stereotype itself is, as Homi Bhabha argues, a site simultaneously of anxiety and ambivalence²⁷. Seen through this lens, the anxious repetition of stories that prove a pre-existing common sense about the wretched degradation of Asian

²⁰ A. Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865 – 1915* (Chapel Hill, 1994).

²¹ Ibid.

²² See for instance L. White, *Speaking With Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley 2000).

²³ See L. White, ‘Between Gluckman and Foucault: historicizing rumour and gossip’ *Social Dynamics* 20,1 (1994), pp.75-92 for a discussion of an unpublished gossipy memoir written by a colonial official.

²⁴ A.L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, 2009), p. 183.

²⁵ Guha, Ranajit, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Oxford, 1983).

²⁶ The Women’s Indian Association’s *Stri Dharma*, for instance often attempted to foster such partnerships by featuring the writing of foreign women interested in political and social questions to do with India.

²⁷ H. Bhabha, ‘The other question: Difference, discrimination, and the discourse of colonialism’ in H. Baker, M. Diawara and R. Lindeborg (eds). *Black British cultural studies: A Reader* (Chicago, 1996), pp. 87-106.

women, the lack of moral strength among non-Christian populations, and the sexual licence of Indian life are central to the production of colonial knowledge about racial difference. At the same time, this fixity is a site of ambivalence and productive power: as this article will show, the occlusions and omissions of narratives such as McDougall's, create sites where subjects might refuse to be marked as wholly 'other'.

Housing College Girls in Madras

In 1913, at the end of her reconnaissance tour of India, Eleanor McDougall wrote that the best way to educate young women in India would be in a residential college, away from the influence of the traditional home²⁸. It was with this view that she founded the Women's Christian College in Madras in 1915: hoping to educate in an urban hostel, young women who she felt sure had been far too sheltered in what she assumed to be their secluded lives as respectable young women living in small towns and villages in South India. It is evident from the start that McDougall's narrative of her institution's adventurous history is a story of urban modernity: in the city, living in a community of women scholars and away from the compelling voices of their fathers and brothers, she hoped, young women would learn independence of thought and habit.

McDougall however did not initially enjoy living in Madras. She did not take to the city, finding it alien in its layout: more like a group of villages than a properly urban space. Madras, to McDougall's mind, was intruded upon rudely by the rural, in its landscape: it was still interspersed with paddy fields to her great shock, and every middle class home that she visited was surrounded by large, untamed gardens that were impossible to cross in the heat. She writes: 'The size of these compounds, with their great trees and solid white houses, gives Madras its peculiar charm, and also its peculiar annoyingness, for to visit the next house but two means a journey of perhaps half a mile, which, in this climate, is an impossible walk for a foreigner in the day-time.'²⁹ The house where the College was first established, an estate in the neighbourhood of Kilpauk named Hyde Park, also troubled McDougall for its lack of a hedge or wall, as well as the home owner's indifference to installing such a boundary.

The fact was particularly puzzling to her as McDougall had learned that in this region respectable young women were not to be seen out and about in the public spaces of the city. Indeed, one significant reason for venturing to found a Christian College particularly for women in Madras was the understanding that women could not comfortably attend men's colleges³⁰. While she certainly saw Indian cities as places of possible enlightenment and women's uplift in comparison with rural areas, Madras did not impress her as having fully become a city yet³¹. The problem, as she saw it, was of permeability: with large, uncontrolled gardens, and no boundary wall, creating order in the house she had rented for WCC was proving impossible. Most houses, she writes with some surprise, had large windows, in some cases the area of aperture exceeding that of wall space³². This permeability was worsened by humidity and heat: to her frustration, McDougall found that they could not sleep with all their windows and doors shut. The garden, with its poisonous snakes, harsh winds, sudden rain, and potentially also intruders, it appeared, could not really be kept out of the hostel³³. McDougall found this particularly dangerous, because of the lack of moral strength she perceived in her charges.

²⁸ E. McDougall, *The Education of Women and Girls* (Edinburgh, 1914), p. 12.

²⁹ E. McDougall, *Principal's Journal*, 1 (July 1915), p. 3.

³⁰ Special Correspondent, 'The Christian College for Women, Madras, and its Contribution to the Cause of India's Womanhood' *Looking East: The Journal of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society*, 10, 403 (1920), pp. 74-77. While this fact would have been true also of women in England and America, it is often mentioned in missionary literature as a particularly important thing. Of the founding of WCC, Rev Pittendrigh, who helped Eleanor McDougall find land for the college on several occasions writes: "Before a woman could get a degree it was necessary for her to attend a men's college and this, in the present social conditions of India, was felt to be open to serious disadvantages" (G. Pittendrigh, 'Historical Introduction' in *Women's Christian College, Madras 1915-1925* [Madras, 1925]).

³¹ E. McDougall, *Principal's Journal*, 1 (July 1915)

³² E. McDougall, *Principal's Journal* 2 (October 1915), p. 4.

³³ *ibid.* p.4

Coming to college, particularly to live in an urban hostel, McDougall tells her readers in 'Lamps in the Wind', exposes the Indian college student to potential threats and unsafety from the men around her³⁴. Whereas she would have been previously inaccessible in the seclusion of her home, in moving to the hostel, the college girl would be suddenly rendered visible and accessible in the city hostel. They might, McDougall writes, particularly send cruel letters threatening suicide, or harm to the young woman, or worse induce her to run away with them after all³⁵. Given the lack of boundary walls, McDougall also feared that these men might now be able to enter the hostel at night, as one young man did. While that particular incident ended with no casualties, McDougall evidently had little faith in her students' ability to resist the wiles of such men³⁶. In keeping unsurprisingly with the narrative of rescuing brown women from brown men that is inherent to the discourse of the 'white woman's burden', she tends largely to see the men in her students' lives as being untrustworthy. Indeed, McDougall spoke in America criticising the Government of India Act of 1919 for placing education in Indian control, emphasising by the same dint the importance of colleges like her own which – given that they were not Government Colleges – would be impervious to any deleterious moves that Indian men might make in the education of Indian women³⁷.

The young women, as McDougall presents them to her readership, are entirely hapless, given, in her understanding to 'crave a shelter against independence'³⁸. For example, she found out that one of her students, Kamala, eloped with and married a young man her family did not approve of. In McDougall's opinion, Kamala went with Govind was not because she might have loved him but rather because 'the word of command was too much for her; she had no more power of resistance to the voice of Govind than a filed scrap of iron to the pull of the magnet.'³⁹. Similarly, she wrote of another young woman, Rani Royappa, who slipped out of college one morning to marry her lover: a man who had been in her father's employ. Here again, McDougall writes, the young woman did not really want to marry this man but had simply never been trained to stand up for herself. In her dramatized rendering of this event, the story ends with a dialogue between Rani and her father at their home:

'But, but, Rani, what did you do? Why ever did you go with him? Why did you want to marry him?'

'I didn't want,' exclaimed Rani with some indignation, 'but he told me to do it.' She knelt down by her father and covered her face with her hands...

... 'but Rani, Rani, what have you done? Why in the world did you go with him?'

'Father, he told me to, he did tell me to and he said I must', with increasing agitation. 'I swear by Heaven that he did order me to go with him. Father he did tell me to. Indeed, I am telling the truth. Oh, Father, don't you believe me?' Rani broke down into helpless weeping.

'What difference does that make, you foolish child?' asked her father gruffly but not untenderly.

Rani looked up in amazement. 'But he did tell me. And you never told me I mustn't. If you had told me I must not marry him, I would not. I would have done as you said'⁴⁰.

For women quite so morally infirm, she argues, even the telephone is a dangerous instrument: likely to allow men of bad reputation to get in touch with them for immoral reasons⁴¹. The spoken words of men, she fears, are what women are unable to resist: 'It seems to be the actual voice of the man that is so

³⁴ E. McDougall, *Lamps in the Wind: South Indian College Women and their Problems*, (Edinburgh, 1940), p. 151.

³⁵ *ibid.* p. 151

³⁶ *ibid.* pp. 152 – 156.

³⁷ Anonymous, 'For the College Girls of the Far East', *Woman's Journal*, 5, 29 (1920), p. 801.

³⁸ E. McDougall, *Lamps in the Wind: South Indian College Women and their Problems*, (Edinburgh, 1940), p. 157

³⁹ *ibid.* p. 145.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 125

⁴¹ *ibid.* p. 141

dominating. A girl may ignore even her father's command if he is not there, or go flat against his orders if she is bidden do so by someone who masters her by his overbearing words⁴².'

McDougall's anxieties that the College's first home, 'Hyde Park' was too unprotected, and soon to be threatened by the arrival of unsavoury neighbours resulted in the award of \$25,000 from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller foundation⁴³. The grant far exceeded the sum she needed for the purchase of the College's new – and still current – location, Doveton House in the more central neighbourhood of Nungambakkam. The move to Doveton, while celebrated, was not entirely happy⁴⁴. Doveton House was bordered by a piece of garden land called Hanson's Gardens on which stood a house that the British government leased from a private owner⁴⁵. In the early years, McDougall was able to use this to house her ever-growing staff, and even senior students. However, she remained unsettled by the fact that there were no boundaries – save for some trees – between Doveton and Hanson's Gardens, such that if this property came to be occupied by undesirable neighbours, her students and she would be in trouble again⁴⁶. When the property came up for sale, she issued desperate calls to her benefactors in America, and eventually raised the majority of the funds she needed for the purchase, making up the rest with a bank loan⁴⁷.

It is evident also that McDougall's work was perceived extremely favourably within the circles of missionary life in the 1910s and 1920s. An article addressing this college in the *Journal of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society*, for instance praises McDougall for having resigned her prestigious lectureship at Westfield College in London to brave Madras and set up a Christian College there. Echoing a widely held view at the time, the author of this piece writes: 'There are few questions of greater importance to the welfare of humanity than that of the ideals which will shape the education of the awakening womanhood of Asia⁴⁸.' In America, well-known medical missionary Ida Scudder, who had founded the Christian Medical College at Vellore, only a few kilometres from Madras, supported McDougall's effort to raise money for the college through the Fund for the Union Christian Colleges for the Women in the Orient by speaking on a special radio broadcast⁴⁹.

McDougall's American connections are locate her in a convergence between British liberal imperialism and American philanthropic capitalism that had emerged from the late 19th century on, particularly in the field of public health, but gradually also extending to education⁵⁰. This convergence – and the uncomfortable ground it sat on – came to a head with the controversy on Katherine Mayo's controversial 1927 book *Mother India*⁵¹. However, even by the turn of the 20th century, this was evidently brewing, motivated significantly by the criticism of the British colonial regime that missionaries on both sides of the Atlantic shared: that the government had been extremely remiss in neglecting religious and moral education in India⁵². WCC itself was founded through the co-operation of several missionary societies in both Britain and America, and in its early years, always had an American representative on its staff. This connection was further also maintained and strengthened through exchange programmes that, until the mid-1960s, allowed students of Mount Holyoke College and Vassar College in the USA to attend WCC as visiting scholars. McDougall's

⁴² *ibid.* p. 126

⁴³ E. McDougall, *Women's Christian College, Madras 1915 – 1925* (Madras, 1925), p. 9

⁴⁴ E. McDougall, *Principal's Journal*, 5 (August 1917)

⁴⁵ E. McDougall, *Women's Christian College, Madras 1915 – 1925* (Madras, 1925), pp. 14-15.

⁴⁶ E. McDougall, *Principal's Journal*, 5 (August 1917), Editor's Note (Separate, unnumbered leaf).

⁴⁷ E. McDougall, *Women's Christian College, Madras 1915 – 1925* (Madras, 1925), pp. 14-15.

⁴⁸ Special Correspondent, 'The Christian College for Women, Madras, and its contribution to the cause of India's womanhood' *Looking East: the journal of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society*, 40, 403 (1920), pp. 75-76.

⁴⁹ H.W. Peabody, *Story of the College Campaign*, *Woman's Work*, 38, 4 (1923), p. 92.

⁵⁰ S.N. Kavadi, *The Rockefeller Foundation and Public Health in Colonial India, 1916 – 1945: A Narrative History* (Pune 1999). Also see D. Arnold, *Imperial Medicine and Indigenous Societies* (Manchester, 1988).

⁵¹ M. Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham, 2007)

⁵² See for instance E. McDougall and E.M. Roberts, *Statement by Miss Roberts and Miss McDougall Upon Investigations into Women's Education in India During their Tour 1912 – 1913*, no page numbers. As well as Special Correspondent, 'The Christian College for Women, Madras, and its contribution to the cause of India's womanhood' *Looking East: the journal of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society*, 40, 403 (1920), pp. 75-76. In the American context, Anonymous, 'Address by Mrs. Henry Peabody', *Report of the American Ramabai Association* (1915) pp. 31-38.

own close friendship with American philanthropists like Mrs Lucy Peabody of Boston, who had lived in India and was an acquaintance of Pandita Ramabai – as well as a prominent member of the Ramabai Association in America – cemented her position in this imperial convergence⁵³.

Historians typically mark the inter-war years as a time of British imperial decline. If this is so, this was also the period when an American philanthropic discourse of development and humanitarianism was on the ascendant, not unconnected to the closer diplomatic relations that developed between the US and Britain in the inter-war years⁵⁴. McDougall's depiction of Indian women as wretched and emotionally weak, as well as in need of the immediate attention of Britons and Americans, in this context, suggests the beginning of a discourse of rescue that goes well beyond the administratively colonial project of British imperialism, to the neo-imperialism of global development agendas. As a substantial feminist scholarship now points out, this figure of the well-meaning but ill-fated third world woman – although she would not have been called as such in McDougall's time – has been central to the post-1945 configuration of racialized discourses of rescue⁵⁵. We might then read in McDougall's writing, the discourses through which the 'woman question' was transferred from within isolated colonial contexts to a broader transnational site of development.

Betrayal at Women's Christian College

Successful as McDougall's accounts of college life in India were in winning the support of philanthropic organizations in the West, her portrayal of Indian women as being weak, and lacking agency and spiritual courage eventually came to the attention of her Indian staff and students. That McDougall's Journals were not meant for the reading of those who were their subject is amply evident. From May 1916 until the final issue in 1936⁵⁶, the journal carried a prefatory note that went from a mild admonishment that the contents were meant for private circulation only and not for publication, to the vigorous 'Readers of this Journal are again emphatically asked to remember that it is of the nature of a private letter, and that no quotation from it ought to be made in public or appear in public print.'⁵⁷ In July 1918, McDougall began her journal with an explanation to her readers of her reasons for asking that the contents of her biannual report be kept confidential. Blaming the 'continual and adroit flattery' that she feels the Indian people have received from their leaders, she argues that any criticism by a foreigner such as herself is now apt to be seen as insult. Suggesting that there had been negative reactions to her Journals from among Indians abroad, or even Westerners who disagreed with her, she writes in frustration: 'A sentence of praise is 'condescension'; a sentence implying a difference between Indian and British characteristics is 'contempt''⁵⁸.

The anxiety that creeps into McDougall's writing in defending her own imperialist positions is of particular importance here because it is positioned at the brink of a moment when the common sense of such thinking was beginning to unravel. Halfway through McDougall's tenure in the college, the Katherine Mayo controversy would force the vast majority of missionary organisations to clarify their position: most objecting to *Mother India* as an unfair account that did not fairly depict the subjects of their work. Narratives of 'betrayal' and criticisms of racist imperialism would come to inform critiques of American missionary and British colonial work in South Asia. McDougall's journals, while they are not explicitly political in content, show an awareness of this growing tide of opinion: marked even in her admonishment to those expressing objections to the tone of her writing⁵⁹.

As Antoinette Burton has noted, women's periodicals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were key to creating 'an important epistemological basis for British feminists' claims to imperial identity and

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ M. Sinha, *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* (Durham, 2007), pp. 68 – 84.

⁵⁵ See for instance C.T. Mohanty, 'Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses.' *Feminist Review* 30 (1988), pp. 61-88 and C. Kaplan, 'The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Practice', in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, eds. C. Kaplan and I. Grewal (Minneapolis 2006 [1994]).

⁵⁶ While future Principals wrote notes for the reading of 'friends of Women's Christian College', these were of a different character and were not prefaced with a similar warning note

⁵⁷ First seen in E. McDougall, *Principal's Journal*, 8 (February 1919), p. 3 (Emphasis original).

⁵⁸ E. McDougall, *Principal's Journal*, 7 (July 1918), p. 3.

⁵⁹ E. McDougall, *Principal's Journal*, 7 (July 1918), p. 3.

female moral authority in the public-imperial sphere⁶⁰. In this, they were central to the enterprise of knowledge production through which colonial power was consolidated in South Asia in this period⁶¹. Eleanor McDougall's 'Lamps in the Wind' was part of a series that included Mabel Shaw's 'God's Candlelights: An Educational Venture in Northern Rhodesia' and William Sewell's 'China Through a College Window'. All three books are memoirs of Christian missionary education that record, in the view of a reviewer of Mabel Shaw's book, a great deal about the thought and practices of 'primitive peoples'⁶². In this objective, 'Lamps in the Wind' is ethnographic in style: often pausing from singular narrative about college incidents to comment on matters of cultural habit and psychological tendency.

When 'Lamps in the Wind' was published, many took unsurprising exception to this portrayal of their lives at WCC. McDougall's successor Eleanor Rivett, who was left to deal with the aftermath, writes about the kerfuffle this caused: 'they (Indian staff) consider the very personal details of actual and still remembered happenings in College constitute a breach of the confidence they have always given their greatly beloved Principal.'⁶³ An Englishwoman, Margaret Hunt, who was teaching at WCC at this time also records in her journal the outrage that her Indian colleague, a Christian woman named Sara Abraham felt upon reading this book. Abraham, she writes, felt that McDougall had cherry-picked incidents to suit the argument she was making of Indian women's weakness and helplessness, drawing them out of context to make their subjects seem exceptionally irrational and silly. A nationalist in Margaret Hunt's description, Sara Abraham was 'in an explosion of distress' at the portrayal in this book of women like herself⁶⁴.

As the tone of the student magazine, *The Sunflower* indicates, for many, the College was a second home: a site of escape from familial expectation and obligation, as well as of close friendships both with other students and members of staff. Personal and professional life in College were, further, not particularly separate. For instance, teachers were married in College. Students attended these weddings, wrote reports of them, and were members of the wedding parties⁶⁵. The image of the college as 'home' – a place of trust and confidence, with expectations of personal mentorship and guidance from teachers is suggested throughout this writing. Placing the narratives in McDougall's 'Lamps in the Wind' in this context, the weight of its betrayal appears ever more severe. In her journal, Margaret Hunt writes that her Indian colleagues feel that McDougall "has written entirely of extraordinary incidents, not of the normal life of the College which really flows on very joyously⁶⁶". The irony is deepened by the fact that McDougall herself writes of her desire to induct the young women she is teaching into a community of women scholars ranging from America and Britain to various parts of Asia: a community of which, she hopes in her very first journal, her students have a sense⁶⁷. In keeping her Journals private from these young women nevertheless she renders them firmly pedagogical subjects, not yet mature enough to be fully initiated into this imagined community. It would seem that for all her fears about safety and permeability, McDougall's own writings engendered feelings of unsafety and intrusion in the lives of her Indian colleagues and students.

The furore at WCC over 'Lamps in the Wind' marks an end to a world of white women's writing to which the 'native' reader – particularly the native woman – was imagined to be remote. If we read McDougall's claim to 'know' the Indian College Girl as a site of colonial knowledge production in a proto-ethnographic mode, the sense of betrayal that McDougall's students and staff expressed in this context might be interpreted as a scene of ethnographic refusal in which "the moment of feminist innocence, where

⁶⁰ A. Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865 – 1915* (Chapel Hill, 1994), p. 98.

⁶¹ See B. S. Cohn 'Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British in India' (Princeton, 1996).

⁶² E. McDougall, *Lamps in the Wind: South Indian College Women and their Problems* (Edinburgh, 1940), Back Matter.

⁶³ Rivett Eleanor, letter to Paton, 19 August 1940, British Library, Asia Pacific & Africa Collections, Mss Eur F 220/117.

⁶⁴ Hunt, Margaret Journal 1940, British Library, Asia Pacific & Africa Collections, Mss Eur F 241/18. See also J. Haggis and M. Allen, 'Imperial emotions: Affective communities of mission in British protestant women's missionary publications c1880–1920' *Journal of Social History* 41,3 (2008), pp. 691-716.

⁶⁵ For instance, the emotionally laden description of the wedding of a Miss Hume, who became Mrs Philips described in the Editorial, *The Sunflower*, XXXVI (October 1937): pp. 4-6.

⁶⁶ Hunt, Margaret Journal 1940, British Library, Asia Pacific & Africa Collections, Mss Eur F 241/18, p. 43.

⁶⁷ E. McDougall, Principal's Journal, 1 (July 1915), p. 15. Also see

sisterhood or solidarity prevails automatically in spite of difference”⁶⁸ is shattered in the subject’s rejection of the narrative that the ethnographer binds her in. Rather than straightforward subaltern speech, or resistance, however, the language of ‘betrayal’ in this refusal suggests instead its location within the tangled web of emotion through which the imperial social configuration, common to the missionary and her Indian charges had come to be constructed by the early twentieth century. The emotional language of this response marks the non-linearity of the power relations engendered in this context: even in anger and betrayal, McDougall remains the “beloved Principal”. The limits of her gossip are not a site so much of outright, or undiluted racial antagonism as of disappointment and hurt⁶⁹.

Conclusion

Until lately the evening light of a South Indian household was given by oil lamps, kindled with a murmured word or two of prayer while the brief twilight darkened round the house. These lamps might be tiny bowls of rough red clay, pinched at one side into a handle and at the other end into an open spout along which an inch or two of wick led from a spoonful of oil to the point of light... When the desire is only to illuminate the village home within, such lamps are sufficient... But if it is required to dispel the darkness around the house, and is carried out into the open and assailed by gusty winds, the flame will cover low within the hollow of its shielding prison, or may even flicker and go out. Something different is needed if the flame is to be a guiding light that gleams and burns clear through the darkness and defies the hurricane; it must not be a little oil lamp but a torch of fire.

- Eleanor McDougall, *Lamps in the Wind*⁷⁰

Eleanor McDougall’s elaboration of the metaphor of ‘lamps in the wind’ that she uses throughout her book on college going women in South India is indicative of a number of discourses about urban spaces, women and the anxieties that marked colonial civilising missions. Here the village is a place of insufficient training for the young woman to become a ‘torch of fire’: she remains sheltered there, unable to shine brightly in the face of opposition. As McDougall goes on in that chapter to explain, the opposition she anticipates here is that of the woman’s orthodox Hindu family: as ‘daughters of a tradition of subordination’⁷¹. Away in the city college, she imagines, the young woman would learn to burn bright: to withstand the wind and no longer be fragile.

This paper has positioned Eleanor McDougall’s gossip writing at the brink of two historical conjectures: the location of the Indian woman subject within international discourses of aid and global development, rather than those of British liberal imperialism alone; as well as the challenge to a colonial common sense of inherent racial difference posed both by Indian nationalism as well as a growing criticism of imperialism within Western Europe and America. In doing so, it explores the role of racial anxiety, first in constructing the ‘other’ subject of women’s missionary work as well as of philanthropic intervention, and secondly, in the challenge to McDougall’s writing that came from within her own college in the language of betrayal. This anxiety, as I have shown, also shaped the place of the women’s college within an urban modernity: positioning it as an oasis of safety and rationality within a chaotic and unsafe city.

Historians have tended largely to focus on emotions as ‘readable’ language games or on the conditioning of emotions in particular historical contexts: i.e. how emotions are cultivated and learned⁷². Such practices, as these scholars have shown, are also fundamental to power relations and as such key to the imbrication of the life of the individual and the social⁷³. Lucien Febvre predicted in his 1941 essay that emotions such as

⁶⁸ K. Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis 1994).

⁶⁹ This is particularly poignant because Newington Murder.

⁷⁰ E. McDougall, *Lamps in the Wind: South Indian College Women and their Problems* (Edinburgh, 1940), p.162.

⁷¹ *ibid.* p.163

⁷² Anthropologists of emotion and affect such as A. Pandian, ‘Interior Horizons: an ethical space of selfhood in South India’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 16, 1 (2010), pp. 16-83 – as well as historians such as M. Sreenivas, *Wives, Widows, Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial India* (Bloomington, 2008) – take this approach to understanding emotion.

⁷³ J. Bourke, ‘Fear and anxiety: Writing about emotion in modern history’, *History Workshop Journal*, 55, 1 (2003), pp. 111 – 133.

hate, fear and cruelty 'will tomorrow have finally made our universe into a stinking pit of corpses.'⁷⁴ Their appropriate expression – and indeed the development of the capacity for appropriate emotion – has been shown to be central to colonial discourses that linked self-rule over one's own emotions, to the right to political sovereignty⁷⁵.

In examining anxieties through the circulation of gossip I have focused in this paper on this role of emotions, as sites of power, where boundaries are drawn, and hierarchies etched out. However, in locating the circulation of gossip in the complex context of a college – where pedagogical relationships, and explicitly stated bonds of care and kinship mark the possibilities of love, sisterhood and alliance, even as the betrayal of confidences causes a rupture in this bubble of alignment – I also suggest that these power relationships are far from linear. The anxieties that shape the making of respectable womanhood in colonial modernity also haunt the limits of such a pedagogical project, engendering the space for refusal.

Reading McDougall's writing is an odd business. Prefaced as much of it is with warnings that it is not for commercial circulation or to be quoted from, the Journals are private in their tone. McDougall frequently uses the language of emotion: speaking of happiness, sorrow, anxiety, fear and excitement: the life of the college is rich and lively in her descriptions, however unflattering to her students. Given the size of their readership however, as well as their aim of raising resources and recruiting missionary teachers, the Journals had implications well beyond those of a private letter or diary. The Principal's Journals and 'Lamps in the Wind' are also simultaneously travel memoirs: recording the adventures that McDougall undertook in founding and expanding Women's Christian College, as well as the institution's relationship with the expansive community of Christians in Britain and America who contributed to this venture. Fundamentally, however, both the Journals and 'Lamps in the Wind' are imperialist narratives of anxiety: the young Indian woman, as she is constructed through this writing, is a wretched, miserable person, marked by her cultural difference, and in need of immediate intervention. If not, as a 'lamp in the wind', McDougall appears to say, she is in danger of going out forever.

⁷⁴ L. Lefebvre, 'Sensibility and History: How to Reconstitute the Emotional Life of the Past' in *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre*, Peter Burke, ed., K. Folca, trans. (London, 1973).

⁷⁵ Ann Laura Stoler *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*, (Durham 1995).