

Isabel Fleming (1890 - 1983) and Jessie Service (1888 - 1958)

Isabel Fleming (1890 - 1983) and Jessie Service (1888 - 1958) were Scottish missionaries whose work was closely connected to the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), through which they supported the running of hostels and promoted access to education for women. They travelled widely, working in countries including Egypt, Japan, China and Malawi. A few of their memoirs describe their experiences in Manchuria (present day Northeast China) during the period following the 1931 Japanese invasion and the months surrounding the attack on Pearl Harbour.¹ Their accounts include experiences of surveillance, internment, and eventual evacuation in 1942.

In 1923, Isabel began working at Moukden Medical College, an institution run by Scottish missionaries, where she taught science and later served as a warden of the women's student hostels. Her close friend Jessie Service joined her in Moukden in 1931 working as a YWCA General Secretary. Their missionary work was part of a wider reform movement that sought to promote Christian values alongside education and medical care, in an attempt to associate their work with fostering 'modernity'.² Isabel and Jessie were also part of the broader expansion of Irish and Scottish missions there in the early twentieth century, by 1941 there were around 50,000 Protestants in Manchuria.³

Following Japan's seizure of Manchuria in 1931 and the creation of the puppet state of 'Manchukuo', authorities increasingly restricted missionary activities, including monitoring correspondence.⁴ Letters taken out of context were interpreted as evidence of espionage on behalf of the British government. This suspicion of foreign missionaries intensified, and the medical school began hiring substitute teachers to replace interned missionary staff. Jessie was arrested on the 12th of January 1942, due to

¹ Sandra Wilson, *The Manchurian Crisis and Japanese Society, 1931-1933* (New York: Routledge, 2002) pp.1,4.

² Bill Sewell, Missions to Manchuria, in *The Canadian Journal of History* Vol.54, No.1-2 (2019) p.91.

³ *Ibid.*, p.99.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.107

a 'deliberate desire to misunderstand.'⁵ She was held in the Shanghai Bank building until early June. During this time Isabel destroyed photographs, notes and addresses that 'might be suspicious in the eyes of an ignorant detective.'⁶ She remained a constant source of support, bringing Jessie bedding, clothing, food, books and visiting up to four times a week, although they were rarely allowed to speak.

In April 1942 Jessie was informed that 'Japan, Britain and America...' had agreed to an exchange of enemies and advised her to leave the country.⁷ Isabel organised both their belongings and arranged transport to Malawi. By the 6th of June 1942, the two women evacuated alongside many other Scottish and Irish missionaries. Their memoirs, provide a glimpse into the experiences of the large missionary population in Manchuria between 1931 and 1942.⁸ They also highlight the involvement of the YWCA overseas and the intense pressures faced during the escalation of the Second World War, including Japanese occupation, surveillance, internment and evacuation.

References

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⁵ Papers of Isabel Fleming (1890-1983) and Jessie Service (1888-1958), CSWC 7. University of Edinburgh Library Heritage Collections, p.4

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.48.

⁸ *Ibid.*,