



**Hannah Adcock**  
**Miss Plumb**

"Ultimately worthy female missionaries have largely failed to capture the interest of historians. Their modesty has been mistaken for insignificance, their evangelizing for an embarrassing footnote in the story of empire." Isabella Plumb, a missionary in India between 1882 and 1925, campaigned tirelessly for the provision of schools, hospitals, and basic human rights for women. And, as author Hannah Adcock discovers from Miss Plumb's archive, recently donated to the National Library of Scotland, her life was really quite fascinating.

Isabella Plumb stares out of the photograph, square jaw set, blue–grey eyes locked in a steely gaze on posterity. A set–piece hairstyle is swept up from her wide forehead and her rather thin mouth is tightly compressed. She is almost just an indomitable Victorian matron, except her large ears are pointed at the top, given a slightly fey cast to her otherwise solid features. Miss Plumb (or increasingly Granny Plumb as she became known) never married. She devoted her life to missionary work in India, and in the process travelled nearly twice around the world.

Her archive consists of five boxes of material, predominantly from her adult years. Items include: the diary of her walking tour in the Himalaya Mountains as well as one for her round the world trip; reports of mission life; drafts of thirty talks, diaries, and correspondence. Mission reports from Sialkot and newspaper articles provide contextual information, whilst material in other hands, such as notes on Eastern architecture and religion, indicate her interest in all aspects of India. Photographs and postcards total 700. The postcards are from all over the world, mementoes of Miss Plumb's adventures on three continents. Miss Plumb is easy to spot in the photos and so are her close relatives who have similar jawlines and ears. Most are unlabelled and captions seldom provide names. Overall, it is an extensive and compelling archive, covering a large proportion of Miss Plumb's long life. I have only scratched the surface but my research continues.

However unusual, ultimately worthy female missionaries have largely failed to capture the interest of historians. Their modesty has been mistaken for insignificance, their evangelizing for an embarrassing footnote in the story of empire. Miss Plumb was of her time: as a British woman she believed in a Christian God, as a citizen she believed in Empire. Where she differs from the majority of her female contemporaries is that she endured the vicissitudes of a demanding career without the prop of a husband. Today, it can be appreciated that her spiritual mission co–existed with a grass–roots campaign for basic women's rights, but she would not have made such a distinction. By the end of her forty–two–year career, she had overseen the establishment of schools and hospitals, and the arrival of trained female medical staff. "Miss Plumb

forever", wrote a young admirer, just before she was retired by her Scottish employers at the age of 64.

Miss Plumb was born in Mundford in Norfolk in 1861, the youngest daughter of a family of seven children. Her father, James Edward Plumb, died when she was only four months old leaving her mother, Sarah Plumb, sole responsibility for raising the family. Miss Plumb was "not brought up in the lap of luxury", as she politely writes to a friend. She attended the local school, leaving at the age of fourteen to earn her living: she writes this in a letter, but I have not had time to discover exactly where she went and what she did. Her education clearly did not stop at school. Her speeches about missionary work, mostly delivered when she was home on leave, show a firm grasp of composition; her reading material includes works on Eastern economics. She learnt three languages and her only real linguistic flaw is a tendency to overuse the word "nice" in her diaries. However, I suspect the word possessed many different shades of meaning for the Victorians.

By her late teens, she was in London attending colonial college, as preparation for work in foreign fields. An index for the archive, compiled by a descendant, suggests she began to write essays, including "The Pilgrim", "To My Mother", and "The Working Women's Appeal". These essays do not appear in the archive. She borrowed £100 to buy books and cover her fees, although she later paid this back "with pride", as she informed her little grand-niece Elsie Plumb, in a letter dated 1926. From an early age Miss Plumb had wanted to be a missionary, but unlike those whose grand ambitions dwindled with the onset of adulthood, she never wavered from her "calling". She writes to Elsie:

God only knows how hard I had to fight in my young days  
before I was fitted for a worker in the foreign field. Now I have  
the honour of being the senior lady missionary in the Church of  
Scotland in India, Africa, and China. I did not climb to the top  
of the tree all at once. It took forty years.

Immured in the belief that God helps those who help themselves, Miss Plumb worked her way up the missionary "tree" by a combination of hard work, faith, and ability. Her determination is underlined by the fact that she resisted pressure to take a different course: when she left for India her mother, aged sixty-two, appears to have been almost inconsolable. No letters to or from her mother survive in the archive, but Miss Plumb writes with great feeling, suggestive of personal experience:

If there is anything more potent than all others to make us  
hesitate — to make right appear wrong and a clear duty seem  
doubtful — it is the grief of all those whose eyes are dimmed  
with age [...] words, unless well chosen, are not in place at all.

She was twenty-one when she left in 1882. There is no real indication in the archive as to why she chose India or indeed why she worked for the Church of Scotland Women's Association for Foreign Missionaries (Aberdeen Auxiliary). All correspondence places her family firmly in Norfolk. However, she had distant relatives in Scotland and may have spent time with them before attending colonial college. She sometimes uses Scottish words in her correspondence, suggesting at least some immersion in the culture. It is also possible that she was drawn to the Church of Scotland because of its interest in India. Her family knew Maharajah Duleep Singh, heir to the throne of Punjab, which the British annexed from his father in 1849. The Maharajah lived close

to the Plumb family home; he owned the Elveden estate, purchased by his trustees in 1863. It can only be imagined what the effect of such a neighbour had on the young Miss Plumb, particularly one who had been converted to Christianity.

Miss Plumb spent her first seven years as a missionary in the city of Poona (Pune), in western India. She was initially assigned to an orphanage, where she could become accustomed to the children, their languages, and their culture. She writes with youthful imagination that India "seemed almost like fairyland", bursting with colour and vitality, before adding, prosaically, "if it were not for the noise and dirt". The rules and regulations she was expected to abide by, as a representative of the Church of Scotland, demanded humble behaviour and unstinting hard work. Paradoxically, at a time when single, educated, and independent women were viewed with at least some suspicion; unmarried female missionaries were both accepted and respected. To serve effectively they needed to possess both knowledge and experience: they could study, travel, or own property with impunity, provided modesty was preserved. Miss Plumb owned at least two houses in England, possibly inherited after the death of her mother in 1903, and it is faintly amusing to see how her property agent, Henry Boville, had to change the printed "Mr" on his official letters for a hand written (M)iss. The decisive Married Women's Property Act had been passed as recently as 1882. Before that their legal personality had been subsumed into their husbands.

A short rhyming poem, called "The Mission Miss Sahibs", captures something of the austerity — and also perhaps the humour — of mission life. This is an extract:

The Mission Miss Sahibs must never complain  
Must never be fanciful, foolish, and vain  
Mission Miss Sahibs must furnish their brain  
Of two or three languages knowledge obtain

Apart from the odd fairy fantasy, Miss Plumb seems to have been a model "Miss Sahib". After becoming reasonably proficient in Marathi, she began to teach in the outside school and visit zenanas, apartments in high-caste Hindu or Muslim houses where women were kept in seclusion. According to Miss Plumb, these women were rarely allowed to go outside. She quotes the local saying that "women could not be trusted unless they were dead" as being more than just a misogynistic maxim. This was a severe culture shock for a woman who had just travelled more than 7000 miles by sea to an unfamiliar country, unescorted. Her response was thoughtful. She wrote that she hoped female missionary work would, in time, "withdraw from seclusion the wives and mothers of India, making them the companions of husbands and fathers". In speeches to the general public, given whilst she was on leave in Scotland, she often spoke about the zenanas: "You know what the life of a Scottish woman is in this country: perfect freedom to go in and out as she chooses; she may speak to whom she likes; she may leave home and go out into the world and choose her own employment and perhaps most importantly for the future happiness and well being of our nation she may choose her own husband." Miss Plumb begins with the issue of women's freedom and moves swiftly on to how this impacts on the future happiness and well-being of a nation. In many ways, her sentiments prefigure later feminist assertions that the personal is political. It was her conviction that by improving the lot of women in India who were kept in seclusion — she estimated 20 million — the country itself would be incalculably strengthened.

Miss Plumb was assigned to Sialkot in 1889 as the first Aberdeen Auxiliary female representative. This was a resonant area for Church of Scotland missionaries. Their first missionaries to the area had been murdered, along with their baby, during the Indian mutiny of 1857. I imagine Sialkot was a challenging — and alluring — destination for the determined Miss Plumb. Sialkot, with a population of 50 000, had "a go and swing that makes it most interesting". The city had the spectacular backdrop of the Himalayas, the "grandest natural scenery on the globe". Mr and Mrs Youngson, both experienced missionaries, gave her a warm welcome. She lived with them until 1891 whilst a Women's Mission House was being built. Dr Hutchison and Miss Scorgie were also lodgers and Miss Plumb writes in her diary of long walks, rides, and pleasant evenings spent in their company.

Whilst at Sialkot, Miss Plumb continued to take a special interest in zenana visiting, often keeping in contact with "old girls" from mission schools, who typically left at the age of twelve to marry (although not necessarily to cohabit with their husbands). She writes:

If it is Christ-like to go to the sorrowful with sympathy, to bring comfort to the bereaved, to make life a little brighter for a time to some of these secluded prisoners, to help in times of sickness, to whisper hope in the hour of nature's decay, and to point to the Heavenly land and the Friends of Friends; then this is Christ-like work.

Miss Plumb waited to be invited to a house to conduct bible readings, often assisted by a local Christian. One diary entry records how she would first be asked a plethora of secular questions: Why are you not married? Are you going to get married? How long are you going to stay in India? I can only imagine how Miss Plumb would have replied. I assume she brought God into her answer, but I do not know whether the lack of spouse prompted a sigh or a smile. "Miss Sahibs" did marry, but suitable male missionaries were not in plentiful supply. In times of illness or death in the zenanas, Miss Plumb was resolutely practical, combating an almost visceral dread of the funeral keening of Indian women relatives, and instead offered quiet sympathy and practical tips on nursing. She campaigned tirelessly for qualified women doctors to be sent over to the Sialkot mission. The case, she asserted, was desperate: "There is a great need for lady doctors. The women have to be satisfied with an untrained native nurse who is both ignorant and stupid." This is a strong indictment, but Miss Plumb grew up in a society increasingly concerned with public health and its "correct" management: the 1875 Public Health Act set down in detail what local authorities could do in terms of public health. Conventional Victorian medicine was the yardstick by which Miss Plumb measured attitudes towards health and she would have had little understanding of holistic Indian medical systems such as Ayurveda, already more than 2000 years old. However, she also based her opinions on specific case studies; on women she had encountered in pain or close to death. She saw firsthand how male doctors were denied access to these women, who relied on fathers or husbands to relay their condition to a doctor. The Aberdeen Auxiliary sent out their first female medical missionary to Sialkot in the early 1890s.

Miss Plumb and the medical missionaries gained very few converts, a fact Miss Plumb defended by suggesting what a sacrifice this would entail for an Indian woman — to be cut off from her family, husband, and community — and she made a leap of empathy to understand this:

I often think that if the condition of things were reversed, and strange teachers from a distant land were to come among us, we and our children would not be so willing to give ourselves up to them, as they are to us.

Whether for her strange dress, stories, intelligence, or kindness, Miss Plumb became a welcome guest at many Indian houses. She was asked to take care of two Indian princesses whilst their father was away on business. Miss Plumb, in her role as guardian, shared zenana with them, which was "a new experience", as she writes diplomatically. In 1910, more than fifteen years later, she visited the two princesses in another of their homes, deep in the jungle of Oudh. Although only able to stay for the day, she endured twenty-eight miles on an elephant with a bed attached to its back, to reach their home. She writes, "It was no easy matter to hold up an umbrella with one hand, while I grasped the bedstead with the other to keep myself from falling off." It is rather hard not to laugh, particularly given that on her return journey a dozen men with sticks and scowling faces accompanied her for about a mile. They had presumably never before seen a well-built white woman perched perilously on an elephant. Humour aside, however, Miss Plumb was sincerely attached to the two ladies and their father and perhaps it was this, her great capacity for kindness, that caused her to be held in affection by Indian men and women — despite her strange religion and perplexing, unmarried state.

Miss Plumb seems to have become, if anything, even more adventurous with age. She made a 400-mile walking tour in the Himalaya Mountains in 1908, aged 47. The tour began in Chamba, the capital of a native principality where the respected medical missionary, Dr Hutchison, was head of the mission. He was to accompany Miss Plumb and her companion, Miss Browne, on their "holiday", which began with a three-day walk over the Sach Pass, 14 328 feet above sea level. Miss Plumb describes some of the difficulties:

The descent was much more difficult than the ascent. There was no visible path — nothing but a wide expanse of snow. A postman who overtook us helped me for a few yards; then his foot slipped, and he slid down the mountainside — fortunately, he was able to stop himself before reaching the rocks below. Five men had tried to cross this pass in the Spring: two perished; the other three, after struggling on for five days without food, required to have parts of their frost-bitten limbs cut off — an operation performed by the village blacksmith.

Miss Plumb's expedition escaped unscathed and continued onwards to Kilar, Sanch, "Sensation Summit", Kyelang, Tindi, and the Drati Pass. Miss Plumb retained Victorian dress throughout, although Dr Hutchison thoughtfully provided her with Indian shoes called *chaplis*. Small feasts were instrumental in maintaining her physical (and psychological) strength: "The Doctor and I had scones and cheese before we got to the top which refreshed us." They often camped wild at night, with Miss Plumb showing typical fortitude. She writes at one point that she slept well "despite bears". In subsequent years, Miss Plumb visited Japan, China, Canada, and America, before travelling home to Britain, where she suffered a nasty bout of flu, brought on by over exertion. She had chosen to give more than 100 lectures on her return, rather than recuperating from her exertions. Her last grand journey was in 1928, aged 67, a pilgrimage to the Holy Land that took her to Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, Jerusalem, and Egypt. By this time Miss Plumb was retired. A notice to this effect appeared in the *News of Women's Missions* in 1925, accompanied by a

photograph of Miss Plumb looking more than usually implacable. The article reads:

At the time of her [Miss Plumb's] entrance in office there was no Mission House, only two native female missionaries, and hardly any organization; whereas now the Mission has a commodious official residence, a staff of five lady missionaries from Scotland, and about a score of native women teachers and other workers; two well-attended schools; a Missionary Boarding House to provide Christian teachers for the schools of the Punjab, visitations of the zenanas within, and the villages around the city; a woman's hospital; a Christian "Memorial Townlet"; and a rest home where missionaries on holiday receive needful temporary rest and a comfortable home.

Miss Plumb seems to have been ambivalent about retirement, writing to Elsie in the early 1920s that she longed to see her in England, but she remained in India for five years after her retirement, superintending the Wyligh rest home in Dalhousie, for which she had campaigned tirelessly. This was a job that she undertook voluntarily and without much obvious recognition from the Aberdeen Auxiliary. However, her services were greatly appreciated by visitors of all ages. Her youthful vigour captured their playful spirits and on her "21st birthday" (when she was 66) she was presented with a photo album complete with captions. One photograph shows her seated in an inelegant, sedan-style chair; the caption reads "she who rules at Wyligh". A poem composed for her 61st birthday also writes of her face "supremely bright" and her ability "in climbing, hiking, traipsing, to make the rest all run". However, it also says (I think):

And when the man of eighty comes may both be in the mood.  
Three cheers for our Miss Plumb

This may well have been an in-joke, and a later hand suggests her friend Professor Scorgie as a candidate for the "man of eighty". However, I did unearth marriage Banns dated 1929 and the gentleman in question was Dr Hutchison whom she had known since the early 1890s. In 1929 he was 84, and died soon after. It is easy to spin a romantic narrative about a love affair thwarted by duty, but I really haven't found any evidence. The most resonant part of the document, in my opinion, was a description of Miss Plumb. She had become a "spinster", a word that didn't seem to apply to her when she was active as a missionary. In contrast, Dr Hutchison, despite his advanced years, was described as a "missionary".

Miss Plumb returned to Britain in 1930 to live at "The Retreat", the Plumb family home, and she met her great-nephew Edward for the first time. He remembers her as a "great person" who taught him "about manners and how to treat people". After her death from cancer in 1944, he received many calls from people who had been her friend, keen to discuss her kindness or her influence on the political and social life of the Punjab. With his donation of her archive to the National Library of Scotland, a window has opened onto her legacy: her role as an intrepid traveller; her campaign for the provision of schools, female doctors, hospitals, and basic human rights for women. She was certainly modest, but far from insignificant: "Miss Plumb forever", I say.

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