

# *Nellie, Topsy and Annie*

Australian Anglican Martyrs,  
Fujian Province, China, 1 August 1895

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## Prefatory Note

This is work in progress. It is part of a monograph on the Huasang Massacre that examines the circumstances under which Nellie and Topsy Saunders and Annie Gordon went to China and the work they did while there that is inseparable from the story of single women missionaries in China in the 1880s and 1890s. It will examine the events leading to their deaths and the reaction of the British, American and Chinese Governments to the Huasang Massacre.

The National Library of Australia showed generosity in purchasing the archival microfilms of the Church Missionary Society for the East Asia Mission. I have drawn extensively on the Library's collection of British Foreign Office and US State Department microfilmed archives for late 19<sup>th</sup> century China. The sources are cited in the footnotes.

### **THE HUASANG MARTYRS**

Rev. ROBERT WARREN STEWART, C.M.S. (Ireland)  
Mrs. LOUISA K. STEWART, C.M.S. (Ireland)  
HERBERT STEWART, (England – five years old)  
HILDA SYLVIA STEWART. (England – baby)  
HELENA YELLOP (Ireland) nurse of Stewart children.  
MARY ANN CHRISTINA GORDON, C.E.Z.M.S. (Australia)  
ELSIE MARSHALL, C.E.Z.M.S. (England)  
HESSIE NEWCOMBE, C.E.Z.M.S. (Ireland)  
HARRIETTE ELINOR SAUNDERS, C.M.S. (Australia)  
ELIZABETH MAUD SAUNDERS, C.M.S. (Australia)  
FLORA LUCY STEWART, C.E.Z.M.S. (England)

## Nellie, Topsy and Annie

Few people today, outside supporters of the Church Missionary Society in Australia, have heard of Harriet Eleanor (Nellie) or Elizabeth Maude (Topsy) Saunders of Kew, Victoria. Fewer still know of Mary Anne Christina (Annie) Gordon, of Ipswich, Queensland<sup>1</sup> or of the Australians and New Zealanders who served as missionaries in China and elsewhere from the 1890s onwards.<sup>2</sup> In the case of China, missionary work of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century ended in the early 1950s with the expulsion of all foreign missionaries following the Communist Revolution.<sup>3</sup>

More than a century has gone by since Nellie, Topsy and Annie left Melbourne to complete their journey to China at Foochow (Fuzhou), a ‘Treaty Port’ in Fukien (Fujian) Province. Annie had arrived in China a year earlier, to work with the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society, a society organised by women to serve women abroad.<sup>4</sup> The three were to die in a massacre at Huasang on 1 August 1895. Annie Gordon, like the Saunders sisters, was a protégé of the Rev. H B Macartney of Melbourne.<sup>5</sup> There were other Australians with the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society (CEZMS) — Ada Nesbitt and Emilie Stevens, both from Tasmania, are mentioned by the Saunders Sisters. The wife of the senior CMS missionary in Fujian Province, Archdeacon John Wolfe of Fuzhou, was a Miss Mary Maclehose of Sydney.

The passing of the colonial era in Australia brought with it a new sense of national identity and culture.<sup>6</sup> Australia’s identity was inseparable from the Australian federation movement that reached its peak in the years during which these and other idealistic young Australian women decided to go as missionaries in China.<sup>7</sup> Australian ‘settler’ identity has always centred on the good life, secured by the protective cover of the British Empire.<sup>8</sup> The idealism that sent young Australians abroad as Christian missionaries continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. A Melbourne newspaper wrote of the Saunders Sisters:

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Gordon was born 13 September 1864 and was baptised at St Paul’s Anglican Church, Ipswich, 30 October 1864. Her parents were Charles John Gordon (veterinarian) and Mary Anne Devine. (Personal communication from Mrs Sandra Yould, a family member).

<sup>2</sup> About 10% of China Inland Mission workers were Australians, the largest grouping of Australians in China. There are two doctoral theses dealing specifically with Australian missionaries in China. Dixon, Lesley, (1978), *The Australian Missionary Endeavour in China, 1888-1953*, PhD thesis, University of Melbourne (unpublished), and Brotchie, Phillip Edgar, (2000), *The Importance of the Contribution of Australians to the Penetration of China by the China Inland Mission in the Period 1888-1953, with Particular Reference to the Work of Australian Women Missionaries*, PhD (unpublished) Deakin University.

<sup>3</sup> Under the liberalization policies of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries China has allowed foreign Christians to return but not as missionaries per se. Most foreign Christians work as English-language instructors or in other forms of higher education.

<sup>4</sup> It was not the first. It was preceded by the Society for the Promotion of Female Education in the East (1843) and other societies who saw the importance of female evangelisation.

<sup>5</sup> *The Weekly Times*, Melbourne, 10 August 1895, Editorial. Macartney was the first Chairman of the Victorian Council of the China Inland Mission (1890).

<sup>6</sup> Prior to 1901 ‘Australasia’ comprised seven self-governing and independent (of each other) British colonies — New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia. Although it had very close links to the Australian colonies, New Zealand remained outside the Australian Federation of 1901.

<sup>7</sup> A press report at the time of the murders referred to Nellie and Topsy Saunders as ‘Australian citizens’ a statement of identity that did not exist for another seventy years. It may be among the earliest uses of the term and reflects the emerging Australian national identity. *The Sydney Morning Herald* 7 August 1895

<sup>8</sup> A note from Topsy Saunders described a health insurance arrangement for foreigners. ‘They do such a queer way here with doctors; every house pays them a certain amount a year, and they come and see everybody all round once a week whether they are sick or not.’ Topsy Saunders, c 19 December 1893, Berry (London Edition), p 33.

They left this colony two years ago for China, as we are graphically told, “burning with Christian zeal” and strong in the hope of years of useful life amongst the Chinese . . . They went forth, these brave-hearted, pure-souled, high-minded, and heroic girls—the elder but 22 and the younger only 20, when they left for China . . . Their noble work—healing the bodies and caring for the souls of the Chinese.<sup>9</sup>

Linked to their deep spiritual commitment and their idealism was another strength, the hope of adventure:

Missionary candidates were not moved to their choice of a vocation wholly by religious motives. The young men and women who volunteered were seldom religious aesthetes, although the spiritual drive was central in their lives. They reflected the normal excitement over an unusual career in an unusual corner of the world, free from the more prosaic patterns . . . at home.<sup>10</sup>

Anyone who reads the letters of Topsy and Nellie Saunders will be struck by the exuberance with which they approached their work in China and the sense of excitement and adventure that is found on almost every page.

The Saunders Sisters were teenagers when they first decided to be missionaries.<sup>11</sup> Harriette Elinor (Nellie) Saunders was born in Brighton, Melbourne, on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1871. Her sister, Elizabeth Maud (Topsy) was born on July 30<sup>th</sup> 1873, also in Brighton.<sup>12</sup> Their father was John Alexander Saunders, a merchant, who died in 1876. Their mother was Eliza Arabin Saunders, his second wife.<sup>13</sup> There is nothing known of the children from John Saunders’ first marriage. After her husband’s death Mrs. Saunders moved the family to ‘The Willows,’ Normanby Road, Kew, in the then outer northeastern edge of Melbourne’s metropolitan area.<sup>14</sup>

Topsy Saunders may have been the youngest missionary ever sent by the Australian Anglicans to China, or anywhere else for that matter.<sup>15</sup> Nellie, unusually for an Australian missionary, had matriculated.<sup>16</sup> They had no work experience.<sup>17</sup> Topsy’s assessment was that being a missionary was more

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<sup>9</sup> *The Weekly Times*, Melbourne, 10 August 1895.

<sup>10</sup> Varg, Paul A, (1958), *Missionaries, Chinese, and Diplomats: The American Protestant Missionary Movement in China, 1890-1952*, Princeton University Press, pp vii-viii.

<sup>11</sup> An editorial referred to the objectives of ‘foreign missionaries’ as ‘the most abstract and altruistic of motives’ and stated that ‘their fate presents a noble and pulse-stirring example’ and further, that ‘they are the least selfish and most single-minded of which human nature is capable.’ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 August 1895.

<sup>12</sup> Rev. H Stanley Mercer, *Church Missionary Intelligencer*, London, September 1895, p 140.

<sup>13</sup> John Saunders had three sons and two daughters by his first marriage. They are not mentioned in Berry’s book or in the frequent press reports that followed the massacre. Attempts to locate member of the Saunders family in Victoria have been unsuccessful. Berry (London Edition), p 1. Eliza Arabin Saunders was one of 9 children of Charles and Elizabeth Arabin of Ireland, who emigrated to Australia when their parents died (and some prior). Of the nine, two were sons and only one had issue. Of the seven sisters four did not marry at all so that leaves just Letitia who married a Jephson, and Charlotte who married a Mayne. Personal communication from Mrs Shirley Arabin of Mount Maunganui, New Zealand, 28 May 2004.

<sup>14</sup> It reflects Mrs. Saunders missionary focus that the name of the house was the same as that of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society’s Training Home in London. Eugene, (1899), *The History of the Church Missionary Society*, London, Church Missionary Society, Vol III, p 371. A brief account of the work of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society in China is found in Macgillivray, Donald, (1907), *A Century of Protestant Missions in China, (1807-1907)*, Shanghai, American Presbyterian Mission Press.

<sup>15</sup> The average age of women sent by the China Inland Mission from Australia was 25.7 years. Brotchie, Phillip, (2003), *The Importance of the contribution of Australians to the penetration of China by the China Inland Mission in the period 1888-1953, with particular reference tot he work of Australian Women Missionaries*, PhD unpublished, Deakin University, p 87.

<sup>16</sup> The overall education of Australian missionaries to China, judged by the largest Australian missionary body, the China Inland Mission, was low by today’s credentialing frameworks. Few had completed 12 years schooling. Only 17 men were ordained ministers with non-university level theological training. See Brotchie, op cit, pp 111-112 and Appendix IV. D E Hoste, General Director of the CI said that: ‘CIM missionaries as a

about hard work than being ‘wonderfully gifted.’<sup>18</sup> Most Australian missionaries of the 1890s and early 20<sup>th</sup> century had limited secondary schooling made up, it was hoped, by work experience and spiritual strength as well as ‘enthusiasm’.<sup>19</sup> During his visit to Victoria in 1890 Hudson Taylor had noted that Australians had little to offer beyond enthusiasm.<sup>20</sup> When Hudson Taylor went on to China from his Australia and New Zealand tour of 1890, a missionary party of enthusiastic Australians, if largely uneducated and with limited skills, accompanied him to China.<sup>21</sup> More than a hundred went over the next decade.

The 1890s also experienced a major expansion of evangelical Christian interest in overseas missions stimulated by visits to Australia in 1890 by James Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, accompanied by the Rev. Montague Beauchamp. In 1892 the English Church Missionary Society sent Mr. Eugene Stock, the lay Secretary, accompanied by the Rev. Robert Stewart. An Australian religious historian, Darrell Paproth<sup>22</sup>, cites E C Millard’s letter of 24 September 1891:

Before leaving England in April last I called upon Mr. Eugene Stock of the Church Missionary Society. He urged me to prayerfully urge the Australian friends of the Society to form a separate committee for the Colony . . . Rev E J Barnett has kindly consented to act as secretary protem.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the two missionary deputations, an English Anglican evangelist the Rev. George Grubb, conducted two evangelistic missions in Australia during the 1890s at which many people, among them the Saunders sisters, made a special commitment to Christ for missionary service.<sup>24</sup> Paproth notes that Grubb

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- whole “did not possess all the scholastic qualifications required by the great denominational missions” but were chosen rather on the basis of their “genuine faith and piety, sound sense and good health.”
- 17 An American writer has observed: ‘Assessment of women’s suitability for mission work was initially based less on academic achievements and more on the possession of some broadly defined general education. It was heavily reliant on social and familial networks. The selection of female workers was . . . an assessment of whether or not the candidate could be considered ‘ladylike’.’ Semple, Rhonda Anne, (2003), *Missionary Women: Gender, Professionalism, and the Victorian Idea of Christian Missions*, Rochester, NY, Boydell Press, p 192. In the case of the Saunders Sisters the social network centred on Eugene Stock who personally endorsed their candidature.
- 18 Topsy Saunders, Berry (London Edition, p 27. See Letters of Frank Burden 1891-1899, Australian Missionary of the China Inland Mission, in the ownership of Mr Frank Burden, grandson.
- 19 Brotchie, Phillip, (2003), The Importance of the contribution of Australians to the penetration of China by the China Inland Mission in the period 1888-1953, with particular reference to the work of Australian Women Missionaries, PhD unpublished, Deakin University.
- 20 Australian (and perhaps New Zealand) missionaries were perhaps the most poorly educated group of the English-speaking missionaries. Americans were far better educated, and left their mark in China in the establishment of many colleges and hospitals that continue to the present day. The British made a mark in schooling and in hospitals but only limited contributions to institutions of higher learning. As far as the author is aware, there were no colleges or major medical institutions founded by or resourced by Australians. Few Australian missionaries, despite their language skills, found their way into university teaching or research after their return to Australia. Enthusiasm and commitment are the hallmarks of Australian missionary endeavour.
- 21 His grandson has collected the papers and photographs of Frank Burden, one of the 1890 Australian CIM party, and a CD-Rom has been deposited with the Missionary Archives Project at the Australian National University.
- 22 Dr Darrell Paproth teaches at the Bible College of Victoria, Croydon, Victoria. He is an authority on the 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelicals of Victoria. The Bible College of Victoria, (Melbourne Bible Institute) was originally formed to train missionaries for the China Inland Mission. 140 out of 3000 CIM missionaries from Australia were trained at the Institute.
- 23 Paproth, Darrell, (working paper in progress) An Irishman who did it his way, Hussey Burgh Macartney and Missions, cites Millard, Edward C, (1893), *The same Lord: an account of the mission tour of the Rev. G.C. Grubb in Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand from April 3rd, 1891 to July 7th, 1892, being a continuation of the story of "What God wrought", compiled from diaries kept by members of the mission party*, London, p 167
- 24 The Rev H A Wittenbach suggested in a 1948 pamphlet that the Saunders were converted at the Grubb Mission. This is not supported by their minister at the time or by Berry. Wittenbach, H A, (1948),

was ‘the first missionary appointed by the Keswick Convention to spread the Keswick message.’<sup>25</sup> The Bishops of Melbourne and Ballarat<sup>26</sup> were sponsors of the 1890 mission.<sup>27</sup> During his 1890 visit, Grubb stayed with the Rev. H B Macartney (Jr) in the vicarage at St Mary’s Anglican Church, Glen Eira Road, Caulfield.<sup>28</sup>

The first Australian ‘Keswick’ took place at Geelong in late September 1891, with the participation of Grubb and Macartney. Hudson Taylor’s visit of 1890 exerted a strong residual impact. Pollock writes:

One incident at the first Geelong Convention even reached the staid columns of The Times of London. At the close of the missionary meeting . . . a woman quietly sent up a slip of paper enclosing £2 for the China Inland Mission. Gifts began to pour. ‘The people responded,’ reported the Times, ‘by giving their purses unopened, their watches and rings, while women stripped off their jewellery and personal adornments. Others gave hastily executed conveyances of land and other property. In a few minutes money and property valued at £1500 had been subscribed.’<sup>29</sup>

The Saunders family was among the many who responded.<sup>30</sup> Keswick’s emphasis was to refocus people on an active expression of their dedication to God and humanity through missionary service.<sup>31</sup> Macartney, a central figure in Victorian evangelicalism, was very highly regarded in England and appears to have been the only 19<sup>th</sup> century Australian resident to speak at an English Keswick convention.<sup>32</sup>

Keswick values were important in the lives of the Rev. Robert Stewart and his wife Louisa (Smyly) and formed part of the spiritual regime of the Gutian CMS Mission, especially during the regular holiday

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“Forward”, *The motto and the challenge of the Stewart Family for Hwa-sang, Fukien*, London, Church Missionary Society,

<sup>25</sup> Paproth, Darrell, (working paper in progress) ‘An Irishman who did it his way, Hussey Burgh Macartney and Missions,’ cites Pollock, John, (1964), *The Keswick Story: The Authorised History of the Keswick Convention*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, pp 91 ff. Grubbs missions were in 1890 and May-September 1891.

<sup>26</sup> Rt. Rev. F F Goe (Melbourne) and Rt Rev S Thornton (Ballarat).

<sup>27</sup> St Paul’s Cathedral can seat between two and three thousand people. Dr Robert Withycombe of Canberra recently referred me to reports of the Grubb Mission published in the *Church News*, the diocesan paper of the Anglican Diocese of Tasmania and presumably in Sydney and the other diocesan papers.

<sup>28</sup> This is the first reference to Macartney, but far from the last. A biography of this remarkable man has yet to be written. Attempts to locate his personal papers in Australia and the United Kingdom have so far been fruitless.

<sup>29</sup> Pollock, John, (1964), *The Keswick Story: The Authorised History of the Keswick Convention*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, p 92.

<sup>30</sup> The holiness movement remained a strong influence in Victorian evangelical circles well into the twentieth century. It tended to move away from personal and inward reflection upon God, expressed in daily Bible readings and prayer (the Quiet Time), towards expression in socially and legislatively repressive impositions on the rights of non-evangelicals, including such things as no trains to popular beach destinations on Sunday, closure of public museums and libraries on Sundays, restrictive liquor laws, and for individuals: no dancing, no smoking, no drinking, no makeup (for women), etc. The negativity resulted in a uniquely dismissive Australian term for supporters of pietism. They were given the tag ‘wowers’.

<sup>31</sup> It is impossible to comprehend the evangelicals of the 10<sup>th</sup> century without some reference to the concept of ‘disinterested benevolence’ and its grounding in Reformation theology. The need for a personal experience of God through conversion and the demonstration of the efficacy of the conversion experience in service to God was a key factor in the expansion of home and foreign missions in North America, Great Britain and the British colonies of settlement in Australasia. See Welch, Ian, (2003), *Alien Son: The Life and Times of Cheok Hong CHEONG, 1851-1928*, PhD, Australian National University. See also Semple, Rhonda Anne, (2003), *Missionary Women: Gender, Professionalism, and the Victorian Idea of Christian Missions*, Rochester, NY, Boydell Press, p 193.

<sup>32</sup> Pollock, John, (1964), *The Keswick Story: The Authorised History of the Keswick Convention*, London, Hodder and Stoughton.

breaks at Huasang.<sup>33</sup> Robert and Louisa shared the Keswick values of deep personal spirituality coupled with social activism through a large network of primary schools and a less structured but important system of basic medical assistance.<sup>34</sup> The following table gives some idea of the educational emphasis of the CMS in Fujian Province:

**Table 1**  
**CMS Mission Statistics for Fujian Province, 1871-1925**

YEAR	ORDAINED PREACHERS	TOTAL CHINESE EMPLOYED	COMMUNICANT MEMBERS	TOTAL ADHERENTS	NUMBER OF SCHOOLS	TOTAL STUDENTS
1871			271	633		65
1875			400	1200		
1880		100	1251	3556		
1885		108	2011	5704	32	
1890	8	224	2267	8489	92	1271
1895		157	3062	13111	169	2399
1900		460	4327	21478	212	3354
1905		483	4806	12824	224	3356
1910		535	4841	11379	175	4038
1915	20	714	5167	12910	194	4896
1920	29	808	7054	20153	207	5799

Topsy Saunders was converted through the confirmation preparation classes of the Rev. Stanley Mercer, then Vicar of St Hilary's Anglican Church, Kew. Through Topsy's influence, Nellie also underwent a conversion experience, some nine months later.

At the time of their confirmation they were drawn to the Lord, and from then began to seek for a field to work for him. Mr. Beauchamp and Mr. Hudson Taylor fired their hearts with the stories of the woes and wants of the heathen, and they both decided to dedicate their lives to converting the heathen. Some time passed before an opportunity presented itself. In 1892 they got the chance they had been waiting for. They were accepted as workers if they would first qualify themselves by some additional study.<sup>35</sup>

The conversion experience was a key element in the lives of evangelical missionaries and is mentioned in almost every study of missionary motivations and lives during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>36</sup> Conversion brought about not only a satisfying, some would add life transforming, sense of the individual's relationship to God but encouraged personal discipline enriched through active participation in evangelical organisations.<sup>37</sup> Evangelical conversion relies on acceptance of the Bible as the 'living Word of God' containing all that is necessary for salvation. A confidence in the Bible is shown in almost every page of the Saunders Sisters letters to their mother as it is in Elsie Marshall's letters to her father.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> The CMS outstation at Gutian has several names in different dialects of Chinese and at different times. Ku T'ien, Kutien, Ku-Cheng, Kucheng. The name Kutien was widely used. The modern pinyin form Gutian is used in this essay.

<sup>34</sup> Semple, Rhonda Anne, (2003), *Missionary Women: Gender, Professionalism, and the Victorian Idea of Christian Missions*, Rochester, NY, Boydell Press, p 193.

<sup>35</sup> *The Weekly Times*, Melbourne, 10 August 1895.

<sup>36</sup> See Flynt, Wayne and Gerald W Berkley, (1997), *Taking Christianity to China: Alabama Missionaries in the Middle Kingdom*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press and Hunter, Jane, (1984), *The Gospel of Gentility: American Women Missionaries in turn-of-the-century China*, New Haven, Yale University Press.

<sup>37</sup> See discussions in Flynt, Wayne and Gerald W Berkley, (1997), *Taking Christianity to China: Alabama Missionaries in the Middle Kingdom*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press. See also Hunter, Jane, (1984), *The Gospel of Gentility: American Women Missionaries in turn-of-the-century China*, New Haven, Yale University Press.

<sup>38</sup> Marshall, Elsie, (c 1896), *'For His Sake', A Record of a Life consecrated to God and devoted to China*, London, The Religious Tract Society.

The institutional church played an important but secondary part in the Christian lives of the Saunders Sisters — obedience to the Bible was always first. In evangelical fashion they nurtured their personal relationship with God by daily Bible study and private prayer — the ordinances of the church being in second place.<sup>39</sup> Nellie told her mother she was reluctant to stand, a common mark of respect for an authority figure, when the bishop (Rt Rev J Burdon of Hong Kong) entered the Gutian Church to conduct a confirmation service, an event that occurred on rare occasions, usually five or six years apart:

On Sunday morning there was, first, Sunday school, and then came church at 10.30. The chapel was crammed, and when Mr. Stewart and the Bishop came in, one stood up. It is against my principles, but Sie Mi, in our hearing, asked the men to do it, so we didn't like to refuse.<sup>40</sup>

The offer by the Saunders Sisters to work with the Church Missionary Society in Fukien (Fujian) Province, China, came from hearing the Rev. Robert Stewart, a long-serving missionary in Fujian Province, who accompanied Eugene Stock to Australia. Stewart had been on extended sick leave in England when Stock, with just a few days notice, invited him to go to Australia on deputation.

Stock's aim, following Hudson Taylor's success, was to form local auxiliaries of the CMS and the three Saunders women apparently decided on the spot that they would apply to the CMS to serve in China.<sup>41</sup> The original family plan, before the Stock visit, had been for the three women to go as self-supporting missionaries with the CEZMS and this may have influenced Eliza to move to the parish of Caulfield where Macartney was the Australian agent, for the CEZMS.<sup>42</sup>

The Zenana Missionary Society, with its special work by women and for women first attracted the attention of the Misses Saunders and Mrs. Saunders proposed to devote her private means to the life-work of her daughters, and sharing their Christian zeal, she proposed to accompany them in their journeying to India or China, whichever land was selected as the field for their missionary work. . . She [Mrs. Saunders] was above the age at which missionaries were sent out by any of the societies, and at last, with much pain, she had to consent to a separation from her daughters, for whom the newly organised local branch of the Church Missionary Association had found openings in the Chinese Mission.<sup>43</sup>

The Secretary of the Church Missionary Association of New South Wales, Mr. C R Walsh, said at the time of the sisters' murder:

Mrs Saunders was to have gone out with her daughters, to keep house for them and the other missionaries. She was a woman of means, but the crisis in Victoria prevented her from disposing of her property in Melbourne, and consequently she had to remain behind.<sup>44</sup>

The family's key remaining asset was the house in Normanby Road, Kew.<sup>45</sup> This could not be sold at a fair price for several years as housing values in Melbourne collapsed following the bank crash.<sup>46</sup> It was

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<sup>39</sup> A characteristic of evangelical behaviour was the 'Quiet Time' each morning and evening, when the Bible was read, often with the aid of a prayer list as a guide to their prayers for others.

<sup>40</sup> Nellie Stewart in Berry (London Edition), p 154.

<sup>41</sup> Before hearing Stewart, the three Saunders women intended to go to China with the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society. *The Weekly Times*, Melbourne, 10 August 1895. See also Rev Hugh Stowell Phillips, In Memoriam, *The Chinese Recorder*, November 1895, p 527. Eugene Stock says that the address was given in St Mary's Church, Caulfield, on the same day that Stock and Stewart arrived in Melbourne. Stock, Eugene, (1899), *The History of the Church Missionary Society*, London, Church Missionary Society (4 vols), Vol III, p 568.

<sup>42</sup> There is a specific reference to correspondence from Macartney concerning the CEZMS in Barnes, Irene H, (c1896), *Behind the Great Wall: The Story of the C E Z M S Work and Workers in China*, London, Marshall Bros, p 174.

<sup>43</sup> *The Weekly Times*, Melbourne, 10 August 1895.

<sup>44</sup> *The Age*, Melbourne, 6 August 1895.



decided that Mrs. Saunders would remain until such time as the house could be sold when she would join her daughters in China.<sup>47</sup> Eliza remarked that: 'I'd go tomorrow if I could dispose of my property.'<sup>48</sup> Eventually the house was sold and she went to Fuzhou and remained there until her death a few short years later, in 1898.<sup>49</sup> She seems to have leased Normanby Road and used the rent as a source of income.

Mrs Eliza Saunders . . . lived at 110 Normanby Rd, Kew until 1890. In 1891 she moved to Doona Ave, Kew, and in 1892 she lived in Inkerman Rd, Caulfield. Her 1893 address was 609 Rathdown St, Nth Carlton, and in 1894 she moved back to Normanby Rd, Kew. That was still her address in 1897.<sup>50</sup>

There is little information about the lives of Nellie and Topsy Saunders prior to their decision to become missionaries other than that their mother took a very active role in their education.<sup>51</sup>

In their youth they were seized with a desire to devote themselves to missionary work, and as their aspirations were encouraged and shared by their mother their education was specially directed to the essentials of missionary enterprise.<sup>52</sup>

Their letters display good literary skills, although descriptive rather than analytical strengths are evident in their images of the islands of Northern Australia:

We seem to be sailing through a great smooth lake. The water is not blue, but the sweetest eau-de-nil, and it shades off into all the variations of blue and green and grey and purple near the islands. All round, as far as you can see, there are islands, and they are beautiful in the morning haze of sunshine. You can see the outlines, even of those which are miles and miles away, as clearly as possible, and the colouring and shades on them are exquisite. The weather is so beautiful, too—as clear and bright as possible.<sup>53</sup>

Topsy's account was briefer:

I wish I could describe to you the sunset we saw the other night—every colour, from the deepest crimson to the pale lavender, and such glorious white clouds, and framed in by masses of indigo

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<sup>45</sup> A Melbourne journalist, named 'Rita' visited Mrs. Saunders just after the death of her daughters wrote: 'Anyone seeing the comfortable home the young ladies abandoned . . . would know that only devotion to their work would induce them to make the change. *The Weekly Times*, Melbourne, 10 August 1895.

<sup>46</sup> Many evangelicals were customers of the Mercantile Bank, managed by evangelicals, and a central element in the bank crash. See Davison, Graeme, (1988), *The Rise and Fall of Marvellous Melbourne*, Carlton, Vic, Melbourne University Press. Among those who lost their fortunes was the Hon James Balfour, a Presbyterian lay elder, a former Member of the Victorian Parliament, (a keen supporter of Chinese evangelism) and James Oddie (founder and financier of the Ballarat Chinese Mission), The evangelically owned *The Daily Telegraph*, a Melbourne daily that was a rival of *The Age* and *The Argus*, was one of the major victims. A man who benefitted from the drop in land and house values to build a substantial fortune was Cheok Hong Cheong, the lay Superintendent of the Anglican Chinese Mission. Cheong purchased a property, 'Pine Lodge' at Croydon, from Phillip Kitchen, an original member of the Victorian Council of the China Inland Mission, for one quarter of its original purchase price. Welch, Ian (1980), *Pariahs and Outcasts, Christian Missions to the Chinese in Australia*, MA, Monash University. Welch, Ian, (2003), *Alien Son: The Life and Times of Cheok Hong CHEONG, 1851-1928*, PhD, Australian National University. Cronin, Kathryn, (1982), *Colonial Casualties*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press.

<sup>47</sup> C R Walsh, Secretary, Church Missionary Association of New South Wales, cited in *the Age*, Melbourne, 6 August 1895.

<sup>48</sup> *The Weekly Times*, Melbourne, 10 August 1895.

<sup>49</sup> Berry, Digby Marsh, (1895), *The Sister Martyrs of Ku Cheng Memoir and letters of Eleanor and Elizabeth Saunders*, Melbourne, Melville, Mullen and Slade.

<sup>50</sup> Personal communication from Dr Robin Ryan, Historian, St James' Anglican Church, Caulfield, 17 June 2004.

<sup>51</sup> *Church Missionary Intelligencer*, London, September 1895, p 140.

<sup>52</sup> *The Weekly Times*, Melbourne, 10 August 1895.

<sup>53</sup> Nellie Saunders, October 1893, Berry (London Edition), p 7

green clouds; and sea was all one mass of gold. I never saw anything so beautiful; just like a little bit of the glory not yet revealed.<sup>54</sup>

Berry reported that after consultation with Stock and Stewart the Church Missionary Association decided that the sisters must undertake a course of preparation for their missionary work. The program Topsy and Nellie undertook included private classes in 'Christian evidences and Church History' with the Rev. Digby Berry, a canon of St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne, and a former Acting Principal of Trinity College, an Anglican theological and residential college associated with the University of Melbourne. Berry's specialty was eschatology and he took the sisters through the Book of Revelation with its visions of things that were to come, not least the Second Coming of Jesus Christ to establish the millennium, the thousand years of divine rule on earth.

Berry later wrote that the Saunders Sisters had 'learnt to believe fervently in the near Second Coming of Christ, and that they must — to use their own phrase — 'hurry up' in order to witness for Him to the world before His coming'.<sup>55</sup> Belief in the imminent return of Christ was not in any way a uniquely Australian preoccupation. In a comment in a letter to her father Elsie Marshall mentions the return of the Jews to Palestine as one of the signs of Christ's imminent return, 'Many things lately have come together to make us believe HOME is not very far distant for all of us. Many things seem to point that Christ is very soon coming'.<sup>56</sup>

The two women took their theological studies with Canon Stuart Chase, a retired minister who had previously been the vicar of St John's Church, Latrobe Street, Melbourne.<sup>57</sup> Canon Chase was a long-standing supporter of missionary work among the Chinese in Victoria, serving for many years on the Board of Management of the Church Missionary Society of Victoria (CMSV), a voluntary association of the Diocese of Melbourne named after, but with no connection to, the Church Missionary Society of England (CMSE). First formed as a Diocesan Board of Mission in 1851, it had a variety of forms until established as a voluntary body in 1859. In various forms, it has survived a checkered history as the Anglican Chinese Mission of the Epiphany.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to their studies with Berry and Chase, the Saunders sisters undertook some elementary medical training at the Melbourne (Queen Victoria) Hospital, Melbourne. Mrs. Saunders told a journalist: 'My eldest daughter spent six months in the Melbourne Hospital gaining medical knowledge, which has been invaluable to her'.<sup>59</sup> Later in the same interview she said that Nellie and Topsy had taken further study under Dr James Gregory, the American Methodist Episcopal Church medical missionary in Gutian. Nellie and Topsy's letters do not describe anything structured about their 'studies' under Gregory's direction although they assisted with nursing functions, especially during an illness of the English CEZMS missionary, Flora Codrington.<sup>60</sup> Nellie and Topsy's letters confirm the limited extent of their medical

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<sup>54</sup> Topsy Saunders, October 1893, Berry (London Edition), p 7.

<sup>55</sup> Berry, D M (c1901), *The Sister Martyrs of Gutian, Memoirs and Letters of Eleanor and Elizabeth Saunders*, London, James Nisbet, p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> Marshall, Elsie, (c c1896), *'For His Sake', A Record of a Life consecrated to God and devoted to China*, London, The Religious Tract Society, p 130. See also pp 165: 196-198.

<sup>57</sup> The church was demolished after the Second World War. The name survives in the Anglican social welfare organization in Victoria:— The Mission of St James and St John.

<sup>58</sup> Welch, Ian (1980), *Pariahs and Outcasts, Christian Missions to the Chinese in Australia*, MA, Monash University. See also Welch, Ian, (2003), *Alien Son: The Life and Times of Cheok Hong CHEONG, 1851-1928*, PhD, Australian National University.

<sup>59</sup> Mrs. Stewart interview with 'Rita,' in *The Weekly Times*, Melbourne, 10 August 1895.

<sup>60</sup> Florence Codrington was wounded at Huasang and was the only survivor. She returned to work with the CEZMS in Fujian Province in 1897 and authored several books. Perhaps the best known is Codrington, F I, (c 1910), *Hot-Hearted: Some Women Builders of the Chinese Church*, London, Church of England Zenana Missionary Society.

activities.<sup>61</sup> Mrs. Saunders described basic first aid and simple bedside caring rather than professional medical care.

From 6 to 12 daily she received patients, dressed their limbs, and prescribed for them. Then after lunch she went out with Miss Elsie Marshall, a friend of hers Miss Marshall used to preach, and my daughter to prescribe for the listeners. By this means they got hold of the people.<sup>62</sup>

Nellie was the more robust of the two women, telling her mother that ‘they always observe on you as you go past, and the remark invariably made about me is — ‘Very tall’— the Chinese women are all so very little’.<sup>63</sup> Nellie had a socializing streak coupled with a good sense of humour that frequently emerged in her descriptions of the idiosyncrasies of the male missionaries.<sup>64</sup> Two examples will suffice.

I never finished telling you about yesterday. After the prayer-meeting, we sallied outside, at least I and the children, and played croquet. Presently, when all the people had gone, Mr. Stewart came to play, and we had rather a nice game till it began to get dark, and then, you never saw such a thing; every time that man moved, he caught his leg in one of the hoops, and carried it nearly to the other end of the place.<sup>65</sup>

and

He (Robert Stewart) is a dear old thing; he parades round the place in a huge pith helmet, and after meals you hear the melodious sound of his cornet, playing hymn tunes, and occasionally he and Mrs. Stewart have concerts. There was a terrible concert going on this afternoon when I came into the Bannister’s drawing room: Mr. Bannister with his violin and Mr. Stewart with his cornet. I told them the police were coming!<sup>66</sup>

Topsy was a more introspective personality with a preference for few but close friendships. Elsie Marshall, her best friend and close companion who died with her at Huasang, described her in the following note to her father, an evangelical clergyman in London:

I do love to see how happy Topsy is! She has so much of lying by and doing nothing, and not being able to go amongst the people, which she longs to do, but I am always glad when she is able to do anything like this. When she is feeling a little better this is just the sort of work that does her good, because her whole heart is in it, and itinerating is the kind of missionary work she has longed for.<sup>67</sup>

Nellie was a gifted pianist with some prospects of becoming a public performer. Berry stated that she used to practice four or five hours a day until her conversion at age sixteen but after her conversion she decided never to play secular music again.<sup>68</sup> When Topsy and Nellie left for China, they took a foot-pumped harmonium with them and mention using it several times in their letters. Nellie later wrote during her first stay at Huasang:

Mr. and Mrs. Stewart arrived on Friday, and on Sunday some of the Hua Sang people came to our service and had a look at the harmonium. Some of them had never seen one before, and were greatly

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<sup>61</sup> Topsy’s attendance at the Melbourne Hospital is mentioned in *The Weekly Times*, Melbourne, 10 August 1895, in a passing reference to the sisters’ participation in the Gutian mission.

<sup>62</sup> *The Weekly times*, Melbourne, 10 August 1895

<sup>63</sup> Nellie Saunders, Berry (London Edition), p 70.

<sup>64</sup> Nellie gave some wonderful pen pictures of Robert Stewart, and other missionaries, including an unnamed Irish doctor, the Rev. William Banister, and the Rev. L H F Star, an eccentric Anglo-Irish clergyman. Banister and Star were keen photographers. Both girls provide wonderful written images of some of the Chinese whom they met in Gutian and elsewhere. Both had a good sense of the ridiculous and were inclined, with caution, to prick the bubble of people they thought pretentious.

<sup>65</sup> Nellie Stewart in Berry (London Edition), p 98.

<sup>66</sup> Nellie Saunders in Berry (London Edition), p 39.

<sup>67</sup> Marshall, Elsie, (c c1896), *‘For His Sake’, A Record of a Life consecrated to God and devoted to China*, London, The Religious Tract Society, p 139.

<sup>68</sup> Berry (London Edition), p 3.

interested and delighted at seeing it, and said I was very clever to be able to play it. I heard them telling each other that I played it with feet and hands, and that you couldn't do it with hands only. They all came and admired it.<sup>69</sup>

Nellie gave a number of examples of its use for hymn singing sessions on the S.S. *Menmuir* during their journey from Australia to Hong Kong. Voluntary religious services conducted by missionaries were commonplace on ships in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>70</sup> Hymn singing was great success with European passengers used to singing with organs in church but was more problematic during a Chinese church service in Gutian in February 1895:

Mr. Stewart stopped the playing of the organ because it was not with the people, but about a mile ahead and putting every one out, I just asked him whether he would like me to play the hymns or not, and he said he would. I was rather afraid to try, so he told me to try how I got on, and if it was not all right then we would not have any playing afterwards. So I played and we succeeded beautifully, the congregation and I arriving at the end of every line quite together. I think much the best way is to listen to their singing, and accompany them, of course keeping time, as they always do very well.<sup>71</sup>

The women progressed differently in learning Chinese.

They both applied themselves with such diligence in the study of the Chinese language that they made wonderful progress, and in six months Miss Nellie Saunders had outstripped all the other pupils . . . and had obtained a proficiency not usually gained by less than twelve months of hard study. Her sister, though not so apt, made rapid strides. . . On May 30, 1894, Mr Wilcox, Missionary, Methodist Episcopal Mission, certified that he had thoroughly examined Miss Eleanor Saunders in the required course of Chinese studies at the second year, and found her work entirely satisfactory. This meant that Miss Saunders was then declared competent for responsible work, and ready for the duty of an itinerant missionary.<sup>72</sup>

Passing the Chinese language examination proved to be a mixed blessing. Nellie told her mother, with a tone of chagrin:

There was a ladies' station committee meeting later on the same afternoon. All the Kuniongs [single women missionaries] collected in the Stewarts' front room to discuss any fresh business in hand, and to make any new resolutions and plans that might be thought advisable. At the beginning of the meeting a book was handed to me, with the remark that as I was the 'tail', I had better keep it. I did not know what this meant, but I subsequently discovered that the one who has just passed a language examination has to act as secretary to the station committee. So I had to take notes of all the things that were passed as resolutions, and write them afterwards in a book which is kept to for recording meetings of the Ku Cheng station committee.<sup>73</sup>

Nellie had decided that gaining the language in both written and spoken forms was her highest priority.<sup>74</sup> She told the Rev. E J 'Joss' Barnett, Principal of Caulfield Grammar School and Honorary Secretary of the Church Missionary Association of Victoria, that about a week after returning from the temporary sanctuary of Foochow in April-June 1895 during the Vegetarian attack on Gutian: 'I had my second

<sup>69</sup> Nellie Saunders, Berry (London Edition), p 129

<sup>70</sup> Watson, Mary E, (1896), *Robert and Louisa Stewart In Life and in Death*, London, Marshall Brothers. Frank Burden, a South Australian who was in the first party of Australians who went with Hudson Taylor after his first Australian deputation to join the China Inland Mission in 1891, wrote to family: 'We had many opportunities of speaking a word for The Lord during the voyage both on board and ashore and in many cases with visible good results.' Frank Burden to 'Lou' (sister) 6 February 1891. (Courtesy Mr Frank Burden, grandson). The ship was the *Menmuir*, the same vessel in which the Saunders Sisters travelled to China.

<sup>71</sup> Nellie Sanders, February 1895, Berry (London Edition), p 195.

<sup>72</sup> *The Weekly Times*, Melbourne, 10 August 1895.

<sup>73</sup> Nellie Sanders, 6 February 1895, Berry (London Edition), p 194

<sup>74</sup> The early letters of Frank Burden, of the China Inland Mission, written in 1891-1892, show a similar commitment to language study as the foundation skill. (Letters courtesy Frank Burden, grandson).

language examination, and since then . . . have been free to do what I so much wanted to—namely, to be able to visit more in the villages near here’.<sup>75</sup> The difference in the time taken to learn Chinese was due to their different personalities and their views of their work as missionaries. Although both lived in the Stewart’s house, Nellie pursued the opportunity to study to the full:

I passed my first examination in six months from the time I began to read, but it should be understood that not learning character does not prevent me learning to talk.<sup>76</sup>

Topsy focussed on evangelistic activity and was less keen on language learning. She told her mother:

Of course, the character is a bother to to learn in some ways, and if one is at all weak it’s trying; but then one can go slowly with the reading and learn to talk from the people.<sup>77</sup>

In June 1895 she wrote:

Fringey (my teacher) says that I should finish the work in about four months, but I very much doubt it, as I get only on average of an hour and a half a day, and not always that straight ahead, but I couldn’t leave the other work just for reading.<sup>78</sup>

Topsy’s attitude reflected her belief that Christ would return before she had ‘completed’ her missionary task. She may have been influenced by the possibility that her health might force her to leave. Dr Gregory thought that Topsy was better suited for active work than for study and on his recommendation she was sent to assist Elsie Marshall at Sek Chek Du.<sup>79</sup> Topsy was impatient and confused about ends and means:

Today there is nothing specially Chinese to do, there is more room for aches than at Sek Chek Du, where I have no time for them. There is an ache to go to Sek Chek Du, and an ache for Hua Sang, and an ache to stop here; and larger than usual, the never-ending desire, beyond an ache, to have you. And yet, above all, is the peace of God that passeth all understanding; and there is another longing too, dear Petsy, and that is to put aside this burden of flesh, and go into the calmness of the *long Life*—‘With long life will I satisfy them.’<sup>80</sup>

She described her hope of opening a women’s school in Sek Chek Du:

It seems we can have the women’s school [station-class] much sooner than we first hoped, and so perhaps after all I will give up the hope of having my examination. The women are the first importance; I can’t take the time from them. God didn’t send me here to pass examinations, when there are such oceans to be done, and Elsie [Elsie Marshall CEZMS] can’t have those women at Sek Chek Du unless I take them, she has so much itinerating work to do. Of course, some people would say I was very wrong to be taking a three month’s school like that instead of studying, but God is giving it to me and the Stewarts approve. They always tell me that when I do get through my examinations I shall be younger than any of the others were at starting. So I must be content to go slowly. Mrs. Stewart says that if I hadn’t given up studying last year, she is certain I would have been sent home.<sup>81</sup>

Nellie rarely mentions illness while in China.<sup>82</sup> Topsy, on the other hand, took much longer to acclimatize. Dr. Gregory, despite his support for her active role at Sek Chek Du, continued to keep a very close watch

<sup>75</sup> Nellie Saunders to Rev. E J Barnett, from Hwa Sang, 24 June 1895, in *the Weekly Times*, Melbourne, 10 August 1895.

<sup>76</sup> Topsy Saunders, Hwa Sang, 11 July 1894, Berry (London edition).

<sup>77</sup> Topsy Saunders, January 1895, Berry (London Edition), p 181.

<sup>78</sup> Topsy Sanders, June 1895, Berry (London Edition), p 267.

<sup>79</sup> Berry (London Edition), pp 92-93

<sup>80</sup> Topsy Saunders, c January 1895, Berry (London Edition), p 202.

<sup>81</sup> Topsy Saunders. January 1895, Berry (London Edition), p 202

<sup>82</sup> Among the people Nellie and Topsy Saunders met when they arrived in Hong Kong was Dr Rigg and his wife, medical missionaries. ‘He has been very ill, and so has his wife, but she is recovering now, and when she is all right they are going back to England. It is uncertain whether they will ever come back.’ Nelly Saunders,

on her and insisted that she take regular breaks.<sup>83</sup> Just a few weeks before the massacre, Nellie wrote to a friend in Victoria:

Topsy was with great difficulty at last persuaded by the consensus of general opinion, and the orders of the doctor, to come in from her beloved Du [Sek Chek Du] and rest. She came in on Monday, the 1st July, and we came up here two days alter. The reaction from hard work to comparative inactivity is having its usual effect: she is dead tired out, and stays in bed every morning for breakfast and scarcely reads any Chinese at all.<sup>84</sup>

Health problems among the missionary workforce in China were not unusual but paralleled that of people of similar background at home. Foreigners found living and working in China demanding emotionally as well as physically and stress related illnesses were common.<sup>85</sup> Many had to return home after just a few years.<sup>86</sup> Missionaries fell into two broad categories for length of missionary service in China. About half stayed less than ten years, and the rest much longer, up to forty or more years.<sup>87</sup> Robert Stewart had at least two terms of extended home leave through illness. In November 1895 a China-based missionary periodical published an *In Memoriam* notice that stated: 'After an illness that brought him close to death's door he went home, and had a long tedious recovery.' The article went on to mention Stewart's second bout of sickness: Had Robert Stewart been married to a lesser woman than Louisa he might have left mission work.

Mrs. Saunders referred to Annie Gordon as having originally wanted to work with the CEZMS in India but went to China instead after assessing the comparative risks to her health.<sup>88</sup> After nearly eighteen months in China, Nellie wrote to her mother about the health issues facing missionaries.

So many of the best workers have either been invalided home, perhaps never to come back, through persisting in going on with their work during July and August. I think it is one of the trials that we must take as Hobson's choice, that we must leave at that time. The sun seems to affect your head if it can shine on your back even! It is so funny. The other day I was travelling into the country (in the end of June this was) and as I was riding along I felt myself getting very sick, and a deadly sleepy feeling creeping over me. I couldn't think what was the matter with me, and hoped I should be all right by the time we reached the place where I should have to talk to the women. At last I thought, 'I believe it must be the sun shining in through some place in my quilt!' So the next resting place, I got out, and sure enough they had fastened up the quilt so badly across the back of my chair that the sun

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13 December 1893, Berry (London Edition), p 5. The leading field missionary in the evangelisation of the Chinese in 19<sup>th</sup> Victoria, between 1855 and 1872 was the 'Rev' William Young, His wife became ill several times when they served in Xiamen (Amoy) with the English Presbyterian Mission. They eventually (1854) took leave in Australia but soon realised that Mrs. Young would never be well enough to return to missionary service in Asia. They had a child in 1858 but Mrs. Young died after the birth. Welch, Ian (1980), *Pariahs and Outcasts, Christian Missions to the Chinese in Australia*, MA, Monash University.

<sup>83</sup> Topsy Saunders, January 1895, Berry (London Edition), p 202. Topsy said that Mrs. Stewart had told her that if she had not given up studying Chinese in 1894, due to health problems, she would have been sent home to Australia.

<sup>84</sup> Nellie Saunders, 13 July 1895, Berry (London Edition), p 281,

<sup>85</sup> Detailed statistics on this have proved difficult to find. Brotchie calculated that 20% of Australian CIM missionaries returned home due to ill health and a similar number cut short their terms for other reasons. Half of all Australian CIM missionaries stayed less than 10 years in China, a period comparable to the other Protestant missionary societies. Brotchie, Phillip, (2003), *The Importance of the contribution of Australians to the penetration of China by the China Inland Mission in the period 1888-1953*, pp 44-46, p 178. The most detailed study, on American Protestants, is that of Lennox, William G, (1933), *The Health and Turnover of Missionaries*, New York, The Foreign Missions Committee.

<sup>86</sup> Hunter, Jane, (1984), *The Gospel of Gentility: American Women Missionaries in turn-of-the-century China*, New Haven, Yale University Press. See also Lennox, William G, (1933), *The Health and Turnover of Missionaries*, New York, The Foreign Missions Committee.

<sup>87</sup> Lennox, William G, (1933), *The Health and Turnover of Missionaries*, New York, The Foreign Missions Committee.

<sup>88</sup> Mrs. Stewart interview with 'Rita,' in *The Weekly Times*, Melbourne, 10 August 1895.

could shine in, but only on my back—it could not shine on my head—but all the same it seemed to have just the same effect. Was not that strange?<sup>89</sup>

Berry's introductory chapter points to the two women, as children, being very active physically. Climbing trees was one of their enjoyments and a flagpole was numbered among their achievements.<sup>90</sup> They also enjoyed balance-walking along the top of the post and rail fence that separated their garden from the paddocks that stretched to a horizon dominated by the distant mass of Mount Macedon, to the north of Melbourne. Berry notes that the neighbours knew them as 'the paddock girls' because they preferred to spend their time out of doors.<sup>91</sup> Mercer said of them:

Their characters, before the spiritual crisis in their lives, partook much of the Australian type; they were just happy, careless, buoyant girls, full of life, somewhat wayward and difficult to control, fond of all worldly amusements, much in request for music, dancing and lawn-tennis.<sup>92</sup>

Topsy described a recreational break at the mouth of the Min River, below Foochow, where the British Anglican and the American Methodists had holiday houses similar to those maintained at Huasang. It reflects her direct approach to life:

You know Sharp Peak is an island of rock, with a few pine trees on it at the mouth of the river Min. The three sanatoriums and the telegraph house are the only habitations, except for a little fishing village down at the landing. The only walks are narrow paths cut round the sides of the hills out of the rocks. As you turn round the points from where the American house stands, you see on the opposite hill the Church Missionary Society house, looking just about one hundred yards away, if you could walk straight there, but the hill is very steep, and below is a beach of high sand hillocks, and then a tough climb the other side, so no one ever goes that way, but follows the path around the hill for about half-an-hour. Now I never believe in going a long way round when there is a short way; so I made up my mind to crawl down that hill across the sand and get to the Church Missionary Society house that way; they told me not to attempt it, but that only added a little more desire to do it. So yesterday I went and did it in a quarter of an hour, and back in twenty minutes, which was '*a have*' for the folks who said I could not do it; so you see I have not improved much in that respect, but I hate being tied down to doing things in ordinary ways; it is much nicer to invent a way for yourself.<sup>93</sup>

The Australian women were an unknown quantity as far as the British missionaries in China were concerned. Even before they left Hong Kong to proceed to Foochow in November 1893, Topsy wrote home that the: 'good people at the [CMS] Mission are very kind to us. I think they consider us rather too independent, but being Australian accounts for everything.'<sup>94</sup> In the early days of their selection and dispatch to China, there were concerns among the CMS and CEZMS about the suitability of the two young Australians for work as missionaries. Before they actually arrived, the Rev. H M Eyton-Jones was warned about them. Topsy wrote to her mother:

I think they had a most queer idea of what we were like. Mr. Eyton Jones, one of the Fuh Ning missionaries, told us that he got a letter . . . saying that there were two ladies coming from Australia who would not work at all unless they could do it on their own lines.<sup>95</sup>

Eyton-Jones changed his views once he had met the girls. He wrote to London that:

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<sup>89</sup> Nellie Saunders, Berry (London Edition), pp 292-292.

<sup>90</sup> Berry, D M (c1901), *The Sister Martyrs of Gutian, Memoirs and Letters of Eleanor and Elizabeth Saunders*, London, James Nisbet, Ch 1. Although there is an earlier edition, published in Melbourne in 1895, the references in this paper have been made to the London edition, and cited as Berry (London Edition), etc.

<sup>91</sup> Topsy Saunders, Berry (London Edition), p 2.

<sup>92</sup> *Church Missionary Intelligencer*, London, September 1895, p 140.

<sup>93</sup> Topsy Saunders in Berry (London Edition), p 107.

<sup>94</sup> Topsy Saunders, Berry (London Edition), p 3.

<sup>95</sup> Topsy Saunders, Berry (London Edition), p 25.

The Misses Saunders are indeed an acquisition for the work and the Mission. Spiritual, yet endowed with common sense. I think, dear Mr Venn, that your informant must have been mistaken in his or her judgment of these ladies character. So far from coming with a priori theories of work, and views . . . they energetically renounce any such ideas, and declare their perfect willingness to reserve their judgment till experience is gained and will gladly fall into any work that may await them.<sup>96</sup>

Robert Stewart had no hesitation in asking the Victorian Church Missionary Association to send more missionaries like Nellie and Topsy Saunders: He wrote to Barnett:

Your two ladies have their hands full of work. Miss Nellie has daily two classes of charming little boys, aged from 12 to 16, picked out from the whole district as giving special promise of future usefulness. They will be teachers of five or ten years hence. She also has a fine lot of women on Sunday mornings and a day school on Saturday afternoons, and also a village visiting every week. Miss Topsy is chiefly located a place called Sek-Chek-Du, about 12 miles north of this, with a Miss Marshall. Here they are in charge of the women's work, covering an immense area of about 300 square miles. She has women's classes, girls' and boys' schools, a little dispensary and any amount of visiting; people coming to her and she going to them. They are both very happy, and we only wish and hope you may send us some more like them.<sup>97</sup>

The story of how the girls adapted to their Chinese environment and the kind of work they undertook is the substance of the next part of their story.<sup>98</sup> Their ministry, such as it was, was short. Just twenty-one months after their arrival in Foochow they were dead, murdered in an attack which attracted wide notice in Australia and overseas. The attack on the 'English' missionaries at Huasang on 1 August 1895 was part of a complicated series of anti-dynastic, anti-authority and anti-foreign issues in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that was to climax in the Boxer Rebellion in 1900 in which hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Chinese Christians lost their lives and some 200, mostly British, foreign missionaries and their families were killed.

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<sup>96</sup> Rev. Hugh M Eyton-Jones, 9 December 1893, CMS Archives, Birmingham (photocopy)

<sup>97</sup> Rev. Robert Stewart to Rev. E J Barnett, 18 June 1895, *The Age, Melbourne*, 7 August 1895.

<sup>98</sup> See Women's Work for Women— <http://anglicanhistory.org/asia/china/welch2005.pdf>