Archival Sources in Britain for the Study of Mission History: An Outline Guide and Select Bibliography

Rosemary Seton

In 1968 the Group on Records, Libraries and Information, set up by the Conference of British Missionary Societies, recommended that a survey of the archives of British missionary societies be carried out. The work was undertaken by Rosemary Keen of the Church Missionary Society, whose Survey of the Archives of Selected Missionary Societies listed in detail the archives of eighteen major societies. At the time of her survey all the archives listed were in the keeping of the societies themselves. Increasingly, however, societies were finding the task of housing records and servicing researchers too burdensome, and a trend to deposit archives in suitable libraries and repositories began. This process continued in the 1980s as a number of societies found it too costly to maintain expensive premises in central London. Several moved out of London or off-loaded non-current and bulky records. This prolonged period of dispersal has been a confusing and bewildering time for researchers and archivists alike. Particularly hard hit have been overseas visitors who have tramped familiar streets to fondly remembered doors only to be met with “gone away” notices or by new owners in occupation. During the last twenty years or so, many societies have also changed their names to ones more in keeping with the times or have merged with other societies. Both home-based and overseas scholars often have been baffled and perplexed and, on appealing to librarians and archivists, have found them unable to provide accurate and up-to-date information.

1992 Survey of Archives

In the spring of 1992, motivated by a desire to inform and enlighten would-be researchers (and ourselves!) of the present whereabouts and contents of missionary archives in the United Kingdom, David Arnold (professor of South Asian history in the University of London) and I began a project to survey the archives of as many British missionary societies as we could locate. This was planned to coincide with a workshop on missionary archives we were organizing at the School of Oriental and African Studies in July 1992. We obtained a grant from the Nuffield Foundation to finance the work and appointed a field officer (Ms. Emily Naish) to carry out the survey. Between April and June survey forms were sent to all organizations or repositories thought to contain materials, and follow-up visits were made to fourteen different locations. In other cases archivists or administrators kindly completed the forms for us or sent copies of their finding aids. We were not able to trace the present locations of all societies (particularly smaller or more specialized ones), and a tiny minority did not want to be included in the survey. By the time of the workshop, we had obtained a listing of the archives of forty-six missionary societies, which we included, with an introduction, in A Preliminary Guide to the Archives of British Missionary Societies, which was distributed to the one hundred or so participants at the workshop.

The summarized list below has been extracted from the Preliminary Guide with subsequent additions and emendations. The archives of forty-eight societies and associated organizations are listed, at twenty-eight different locations in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Many of these are still in London, a significant number having been deposited in the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies. But other have moved further afield: the immense archive of the Church Missionary Society has moved to Birmingham University Library; the archive of the Baptist Missionary Society is at the Angus Library, Regent’s Park College, Oxford; the archive of the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel is also at Oxford, at Rhodes House College; while the Bible Society’s archive has been moved to Cambridge University Library. Most of the Scottish Missionary Societies’ archives are to be found in the National Library of Scotland, while the Centre for the Study of Non-Western Christianity at New College, Edinburgh, contains a range of original and printed missionary materials.

Nature of the Sources

As in the United States, missionary papers, as distinct from archives, are scattered throughout many libraries and record offices. Papers of J. H. Oldham, for example, organizing secretary of the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910 and editor of the International Review of Missions for many years, are to be found in the Library of New College, Edinburgh; at Rhodes House Library, Oxford; and in the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. Most archives—typically the records of individual organizations—are located at one address, although where the historical archives have been deposited in a library or record office, recent records are usually kept by the society. This is the case with the Church Missionary Society, which does not deposit records until they are forty years old, and even more so with the records of the Bible Society, which has a seventy-year closure rule. In the case of most societies, records are available for consultation after thirty years from the date of creation. Some records, particularly early ones, can turn up in unexpected places. A section of the early home correspondence of the London Missionary Society, for example, is to be found in Dr. Williams’s Library, in London, while some seventeenth-century materials from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel are in Lambeth Palace Library.

Many British mission archives have been dispersed from London, creating a bewildering time for researchers.

Rosemary Seton has been a professional archivist for nearly twenty years, having previously obtained a master’s degree in history. She has been Archivist at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, since 1979. Her first publication was a guide to sources on the history of the Indian Mutiny, published in 1986. She is now chiefly concerned with work on the archives of missionary societies at SOAS, by far the largest part of the SOAS archival collections. She is also engaged in research on the work of British women missionaries.
In most cases the missionary archives that survive are the accumulated records of the sending organizations. These are, of course, a most valuable source containing, as they do, letters and reports written home to headquarters by missionaries in the field as well as documents recording the formulation and development of mission policy. However, there are often considerable gaps. Many records have been destroyed either deliberately or through negligence. Others have been lost through enemy action in wartime, others by the eternal enemies time, heat, damp, infestation, and so forth. There are some gaps due to the inherent nature of archives, which tend to consist of letters received rather than letters sent. Copies of instructions to missionaries, for example, can be hard to find. Detailed records created in the field—lists of converts and church members, the records of missionary institutions, the minutes of papers of local mission councils, particulars of itineration work, and so on—were not usually sent to the mission house. Such records, if they still exist, should still be in the mission field, though their location may be unknown and their condition questionable. Their apparent loss and other gaps in the archives can sometimes be rectified by recourse to papers prepared and collected by individual missionaries. The importance of these collections of letters, journals, photographs, and other papers cannot be overemphasized, particularly when read alongside the official records.

**Further Help**

There is little in the way of a published literature on British missionary society archives. I have included in the bibliography below such guides, catalogs, and useful articles as have come my way. I have also included general and regional guides that I think readers might find useful, though a number of these were compiled twenty or more years ago. The central agency for collecting information about manuscript sources in Britain, outside the Public Record Office, is the National Register of Archives, which is maintained by the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts at Quality House, Quality Court, Chancery Lane, London WC2A 1HP. The search room is open to the public on weekdays and has personal and subject indexes as well as catalogs, guides, and handlists of collections in many British libraries and record offices. Limited inquiries can be answered by mail. The NRA is particularly concerned with British history and may not include detailed references to overseas work, but use of its indexes and lists of sources on religious organizations is particularly recommended. Lastly, I have appended a select list of the published histories of missionary societies. These are based on varying degree on original documentation and, when used judiciously, can be a useful start to scholarly research.

In the last few years an increasing number of scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds have turned to missionary archives as a source of wide scholarly application. We hope to bring out in due course a revised and expanded version of the *Preliminary Guide*, on which the following list is based, to service this burgeoning need. To this end I am maintaining a database at SOAS and am very willing to share information. In return, I ask those who come across primary source materials not included in the list kindly to send me details.

**Archival Sources in Britain**

**Aberystwyth**
National Library of Wales
Aberystwyth Dyfed
Wales SY23 3BU
Tel. 0970 623816

**Belfast**
Public Record Office of Northern Ireland
66 Balmoral Avenue
Belfast BT9 6NY
Tel. 0232 326130

**Cambridge**
Cambridge University Library
West Road
Cambridge CB3 9DR
Tel. 0223 333150/333143

**Foreign Mission of the Presbyterian Church of Wales.**

**Qua Ibo Fellowship.**
Founded 1887. Previously known as Qua Ibo Mission. Interdenominational. Correspondence, diaries, reports, and photographs relating to the mission’s work in Nigeria, 1889-1955. Access: written application to the Mission’s Council, Room 317, 7 Donegall Square West, Belfast BT1 6J E.

**Church Missionary Society.**

**Church Missionary Society.**
Founded 1799. Anglican. Worked in Africa, Canada, China, India, Middle East, New Zealand, Pakistan, Sri Lanka. Archives, 1799–1949. Extensive series of records covering all aspects of the society’s work: personal papers, photographs. Serial publications include the *Church Missionary Intelligencer* and the *Church Missionary Examiner*.

**Loochow Naval Mission.**
Founded 1861. merged with the CMS in 1861. Records 1843-57.

**The Society for Promoting Female Education in China, India, and the East.**

**Recently scholars from many disciplinary backgrounds have turned to missionary archives as a source of wide scholarly application.**

**Notes**

2. Dr. Williams’s Library does not hold missionary archives as such. However, it is a useful recourse for the study of English nonconformity. The address is 14 Gordon Square, London WC1H OAG.

April 1994
Scottish Missionary Society. Founded in 1796 as the Edinburgh Missionary Society. Worked in the West Indies, Jamaica, and the Caucasus, but work gradually taken over by other mission boards. Correspondence, 1796–1851.

United Free Church of Scotland Foreign Missions. Founded in 1900 as a result of the union between the United Presbyterian Church and the Free Church. In 1929 the United Free Church merged with the Church of Scotland. Worked in India and Malawi. Minutes and various papers, 1900–1929. Includes minutes of the Women’s Foreign Mission Committee, 1900–1929; the Colonial Committee, 1843–1929; the Continental Committee, 1868–1929; and the Jewish Committee, 1836–1929.


New College Library Mound Place Edinburgh EH1 2LU Tel. 031 225 8400


London Africa Inland Mission International 2 Vorley Road Archway London N19 5HE Tel. 071 281 1184


BCMS Crosslinks 251, Lewisham Way London SE4 1XF Tel. 081 691 6111


Interserve 325, Kennington Road London SE1 4QH Tel. 071 735 8227

Founded in 1852. Previously known as the Indian Female Normal School and Instruction Society, the Zenana Bible and Medical Mission, the Bible and Medical Missionary Fellowship, and the BMMF Interserve. Protestant, interdenominational. Annual reports of the above, the Indian Female Evangelist, 1873; photographs, films, and slides. Access: bona fide researchers by appointment.

Lambeth Palace Library London SE1 7UL Tel. 071 928 6222


The library also holds SPG papers, dated 1701 to 1803, including archiepiscopal correspondence relating to overseas. See W. W. Manross, The SPG Papers in the Lambeth Palace Library, Calendar and Indexes (1974).

Mill Hill Fathers (St. Joseph’s Society for Foreign Missions) St. Joseph’s College Lawrence Street Mill Hill London NW7 4FX Tel. 081 959 8254


Oriental and India Office Collections 197, Blackfriars Road London SE1 8NG Tel. 071 928 9531


Quaker Peace and Service Library of the Religious Society of Friends Friends House Euston Road London NW1 2BJ Tel. 071 387 3601


Salvation Army Salvation Army International Heritage Centre 117-121, Judd Street London WC1H 9NN Tel. 071 387 1656

Founded 1865. The society has worked worldwide. The archives were not established until 1978 and are in the process of reorganization. Files are being arranged alphabetically within each continent. Access: bona fide scholars by appointment. Some restrictions.

School of Oriental and African Studies Thornhaugh Street Russell Square London WC1 5LG Tel. 071 637 2388

The library contains the archives of a number of major missionary societies as well as a considerable quantity of the papers of individual missionaries. Access: An archives ticket is available for bona fide readers with letter of recommendation. A thirty-year rule applies to most archives.

Commonwealth Missionary Society. Formerly the Colonial Missionary Society, which worked in Australia, North America, New Zealand, South Africa, and the West Indies.

Conference for World Mission.* Formerly the Conference of Missionary Societies in Great Britain and Ireland. Founded in 1912 following the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910. Minutes and papers of the Standing Committee and of the

*Available on microfiche from IDC, P.O. Box 11205, 2301 EE Leiden, The Netherlands.
Home Council and its committees, area files, files on literature and medical work, and files on contacts with other missionary bodies. Coneference of British Missionary Societies/International Missionary Council Joint Archive on Africa and India.* Relates to cooperative endeavor concerning Africa and India from 1910 to 1945. Only the files on Africa have been deposited in SOAS library. There is a microfiche copy of the files on India, the originals of which have been deposited at the offices of the World Council of Churches, Geneva. Correspondence, memoranda, pamphlets, and reports. Includes J. H. Oldham materials.

Council for World Mission.* Founded 1795. Formerly known as the London Missionary Society and from 1896 to 1803 as the Congregational Council for World Mission. The archive dates from 1795 to 1960 and concerns pioneering Protestant missionary work in the South Seas, China, and Madagascar. The society was also active in South and Southeast Asia and Southern and Central Africa and to a lesser extent in North America and the West Indies. Minutes, correspondence, reports, and biographical collections including material on J. H. Oldham materials. Also CWM (now Overseas Missionary Fellowship). The society's archives contain the surviving records of the Christian Literature Society and the Religious Tract Society. The archive is pleased to help with inquiries. Access: by request with three days' notice.

International Committee for Christian Literature for Africa. Founded in 1929 as the Christian Literature Bureau for Africa. In 1953 became part of the International Missionary Council and in 1957/58 its operations were transferred to Africa. Minutes, accounts, correspondence, and reports. Sets of the periodicals Books for Africa and Listen, and almost complete sets of titles in the Little Books for Africa and the Africa Home Library series.

Melanesian Mission. Founded in 1840 to evangelize the Melanesian Islands of the South Pacific (i.e., the Solomon, Santa Cruz, and Northern New Hebrides Islands). Minutes, correspondence, photographs dated ca. 1872 to 1963 and Southern Cross Logns, 1895–1970.

Methodist Missionary Society.* Overseas work began in 1786. The society was founded 1799 to 1950, document the work of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, the Primitive Methodist Missionary Society, and the United Methodist Society in Europe, North America, the West Indies, Australia, New Zealand, and South America. The three societies united in 1933 to form the Methodist Missionary Society. Home minutes, synod minutes, correspondence, reports, and photographs dated ca. 1804–1950; biographical collections include papers of Thomas Birch Freeman, David Hill, Samuel Pollard, and Edwin Smith. Also the library of approximately 6,500 books and pamphlets.

Overseas Missionary Fellowship. Founded in 1865 as the China Inland Mission. The archives of the British Office of the China Inland Mission, dating from 1872 to 1951, were deposited in the school's library in December 1992. Also deposited were the papers of J. Hudson Taylor, the founder of the mission. His papers contain some records of the Chinese Evangelization Society.

Presbyterian Church of England, Foreign Missions Committee and Women's Missionary Association.* The society was founded in 1847. English Presbyterian missionaries worked chiefly in mainland China and Taiwan but also in Malaysia and in what is now Bangladesh. The surviving records comprise mainly twentieth-century material: minutes, correspondence, and reports.

United Society for Christian Literature* (incorporating the Religious Tract Society). The society's archives contain the surviving records of the Religious Tract Society, founded in 1799, and the Christian Literature Society for India and Africa, founded in 1858 as the Christian Vernacular Education Society for India. Minutes, letter books, miscellaneous papers, reports. Very little original correspondence survives, and there are many gaps in publications held.


Society of Catholic Missionaries 41, Chatsworth Gardens Acton London W3 9LP Tel. 081 992 6444 Founded 1925. Also known as Medical Mission Sisters. Works worldwide. The archive includes the papers of the founder, Mother Anna Dengel, and of Dr. Agnes McLaren. The archives are in the process of being sorted and are not at present open to the public. The archivist is pleased to help with inquiries.

Society of Jesus (British Province) 114, Mount Street London W1Y 6AH Tel. 071 493 7811 The British Province of the Society of Jesus was founded in 1853. The archives contain material relating to the following countries: barbados (1853 to present), Belize (1854–94), Bengal (1830s and 1840s), Guyana (1857 to present), Jamaica (1846–94), South Africa (1894–present), United States (Mainland and Pennsylvania since 1776). Papers of Father Cary-Ewes; substantial photographic collection. Access: by appointment. A forty-year rule applies.

Trust Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel (Moravian) Moravian Church Archive and Library Moravian Church House 5-7, Muswell Hill London N10 3TJ Tel. 071 883 3409 Founded 1741. Known until 1923 as Brethren's Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel among the Heathen. Worked in Jamaica, Labrador, Tanzania, Western Himalayas. Archives date from 1768 and include minutes, accounts, some correspondence, chiefly that of C. I. Latrobe (1758–1836), secretary, SFG. The archive will shortly transfer to the John Rylands University Library, Manchester. Access: bona fide researchers by appointment only.

Newbury

Africa Evangelical Fellowship (SAGM) International Office 35, Kingfisher Court Hambridge Road Newbury Berks RG14 5SJ Founded 1889 as Cape General Mission. From 1894 to 1965 the society was known as the South Africa General Mission. Correspondence (twentieth century) of the sending councils: America, Australia, Canada, and South Africa; correspondence and papers, ca. 1896–1990, relating to the mission fields in Southern and Central Africa; films, photographs, and tapes. Access: by request with three days' notice.

Oxford

Angus Library Regent's Park College Pusey Street Oxford OX1 2LB Tel. 0235 512077


Middle East Centre St Antony's College Oxford OX2 6JF Tel. 0865 59651


Rhodes House Library South Parks Road Oxford OX1 3BG Tel. 0865 270270 Access: application in advance required; Bodleian Library rules.


United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Founded 1701. Known as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts up to 1865. Anglican. Minutes, 1702–1965; general correspondence, 1702–1985; correspondence with meetings in South, Central, and West Africa; North America; Australia and the Pacific; Borneo; Burma; Europe; Hong Kong; India; West Indies. Medical missions, 1908–68; Codrington College and estate, Barbados; Committee on Women's Work, 1866–1942. Large photographic collection. Pamphlet collection. For other USPG papers, see entry under Lambeth Palace Library. London: Rhodes House Library also holds papers of J. H. Oldham, chiefly relating to East Africa.


Tunbridge Wells

South American Missionary Society Allen Gardner House Pembury Road Tunbridge Wells Kent TN2 3QU Tel. 0892 538647 Founded 1844. Previously known as the Patagonian Missionary Society. Worked in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Peru, Portugal, Spain, and Uruguay. The archive contains papers of founder, Captain Allen Gardner; annual reports; South American Missionary Magazine, 1967–1969; photographs. Access: by application to office manager.

*Available on microfiche from IDC, P.O. Box 11205, 2301 EE Leiden, The Netherlands.
Select Bibliography

Guides to Archives


Published Histories


NEW BOOKS from WILLIAM CAREY LIBRARY

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