

The Anglican Historical Society of New Zealand

Te Rōpu Hītori o te Hāhi Mīhinare ki Aotearoa

***'I was sick and you took care of me':
missionary nurse Eunice Preece 1886-1969.***

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The English spelling of Chinese place names are shown as in contemporary texts.



For centuries China was closed to practically all foreigners, including missionaries. In the nineteenth century it was opened by force of arms in a series of so-called Opium Wars. The Nanking Treaty ended the First Opium War in 1842 and granted various trading rights while missionaries were given the right to live and work in the five coastal cities known as Treaty Ports. In 1860 the treaties ending the Second Opium War opened up the entire country to the rest of the world.

Protestant missionary activity exploded during the next few decades. From 50 missionaries in 1860 the number grew to 2,500 (counting wives and children) in 1900, the year of the Boxer Rebellion. (This was an outbreak of violence against foreigners, especially missionaries and Christian converts, many of whom were killed.)

The Revolution of 1911 replaced the 2,000-year-old imperial system with the Republic of China. Protestant missionary endeavours continued, reaching a peak in the 1920s. It was in 1923 that two young nurses from New Zealand joined the SPG mission in North China.¹ They were to remain there for almost thirty years, through decades of increasing unrest and war.

During the 1920s the country was divided in a power struggle between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Communist Party of China (CCP). The KMT had a strong base in urban areas while the CCP was stronger in rural communities. By 1928 the CCP was expelled, and China was nationalised under the KMT. Fighting resumed in 1931, causing the CCP to flee north in the Long March in 1934.

Japanese aggression against China began in 1931 and became full-blown at the beginning of World War II in July 1937. The Japanese overran northern China in the autumn, capturing Shanghai and then Nanking, followed by Canton and Hankow in 1938. They were resisted by both the Nationalist (KMT) army and Communist guerrillas. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 the Chinese campaign became engulfed in World War II. In July 1942 the Nationalist army inflicted a serious defeat on the Japanese who eventually capitulated in Nanking in September 1945.

In January 1946 the two Chinese factions resumed their power struggle, once again

reflecting an urban/rural division. By 1948 the CCP began to wage war against the KMT, gaining control of Manchuria and then moving south. On 1 October 1949 the KMT retreated to Taiwan and Mao Zedong established the People's Republic of China. Over the next few years, the government took various steps against Westerners so that by 1953 virtually none remained. China was once again closed to the world.

The SPG (Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts), founded in the Church of England in the eighteenth century, was one of the smaller mission societies active in China. Its North China Mission was founded in 1872 and in 1880 became the diocese of North China, covering the northern provinces. In 1903 the diocese was divided in two; the Province of Shantung, based in Shanghai, and the North China Diocese, based in Peking. While most of the SPG missionaries were English from 1923 on there were a few nurses and teachers from New Zealand. Of these the most well-known is undoubtedly Kathleen Hall but the longest serving was her colleague Eunice Preece who went to China with her in 1923 and left, reluctantly, in 1951.

Eunice Laura Preece was born in Coromandel on 23 September 1886, the youngest of the seven children of Alfred Azariah and Agnes Preece. Her father was the son of CMS lay missionary James Preece and Mary Ann Williams, who was also employed by the CMS. Alfred, who was involved in the timber trade and goldmining in the Thames and Coromandel areas, married Agnes Thom, daughter of Scotsman George Thom and a Maori woman named Maraea (Maria) Paituru Te Ra Rata Kautawhiti from Kawhia.

As a young woman Eunice was influenced by the Rev. Trevor Gilfillan, an Englishman who had charge of the Coromandel-Hauraki parish from 1915 until becoming an army chaplain in 1917. He joined the SPG North China in 1919. Eunice trained as a nurse at Auckland Hospital,

graduating in 1920 and then working as a Sister on a surgical ward at the hospital. She may have also had midwifery training. Kathleen Hall was in the same class, they attended Holy Sepulchre church together, and were both interested in the mission field. Together they received regular weekly spiritual instruction from Miss Alice Wilson, a former missionary in the Sudan, who was a 'Lady Visitor' for the church. She began a Guild of Nurses in the parish and it was through this that Eunice and Kathleen first came into contact with the Rev. Creighton (or Crichton) McDouall, a missionary with the SPG in North China. Originally from Oamaru, McDouall was on furlough in New Zealand, while at the same time conducting a publicity/recruiting campaign. No doubt Eunice and Kathleen were present in the parish hall in June 1922 when he gave a lecture on 'China and the Future of the Pacific'. As a result of meeting McDouall they were both accepted by the SPG for work in North China. Early in 1923, after a dismissal service at St Mary's, Parnell, and a farewell by friends, family and parishioners at Holy Sepulchre church, they sailed for Hong Kong. From there they travelled by train to Peking. With them was Miss Gibson, a teacher, the three being the first New Zealand recruits to the SPG.² The first two years were spent in Peking studying Mandarin and Chinese history and culture.

The mission had established several small hospitals in country towns which served large areas populated by small villages and without any medical services. Preece and Hall had responsibility for developing this work. Stationed in different areas they saw very little of each other for the next 30 or so years.

Preece was matron at St Andrew's hospital, opened in about 1914 in Hokien fu³, a town about 200 miles south of Peking in a region largely populated by Muslims.⁴ McDouall was head of a small mission station staffed by a Chinese priest and deacon. A journey to Peking took three days and involved travel by train,

boat, and cart. A Chinese doctor ran the hospital of 40-50 beds. It had a men's ward with three young male nurses and a newly opened women's ward with two young women nurses.⁵ There were also a large number of out-patients from nearby villages. One of Preece's most important tasks was training nurses who then went to work in other hospitals. At some time during the 1920s the hospital set up a special infirmary for opium addicts.

In 1926 Preece was in New Zealand on furlough but in 1928 wrote that she was back at St Andrew's Hospital after being very ill herself. She found it hard as times were so troublesome and 'the wounded as well as the usual flow of sick' were brought to her.⁶ The next year the SPG gave permission to the staff (two Chinese doctors, Preece and two Chinese nurses) to evacuate the hospital but they refused and lived through 'ghastly days', treating a steady stream of badly wounded soldiers and civilians, some too badly shot to recover. In temperatures of 100 degrees, they also tended patients with typhus fever and typhoid.⁷

From 1932 on there was increasing trouble with the Japanese and growing unrest in the countryside. Villages were raided and bandits carried people off for ransom. Preece carried on, doing hospital nursing, training nurses, and visiting villages accompanied by a Chinese member of the clergy. These were years of hardship and difficulty, with relief work among refugees added to the normal work. North China suffered from flood, fire, famine, and relentless war.

In 1933 Preece spent six months on furlough in England. She visited several important hospitals, gaining knowledge of many modern methods of treatment and new techniques. She also spent a good deal of time speaking about the work of the mission and about her hospital. In return she was given a number of useful instruments and other articles.

Another missionary from Hokien wrote at the same time about a trip she had made in the countryside with Dr Chang from the hospital. She described the people as 'extremely simple, extremely poor, extremely ignorant.' Their living conditions were very primitive and 'infectious diseases claim a heavy toll.'⁸ In spite of the difficulties in the next couple of years more beds were added to the hospital and two new village dispensaries were opened.

In May 1935 Mr. Britland, treasurer of the SPG mission in Peking, addressed a meeting in Wellington. He spoke of the fine work done by the New Zealanders, at the time numbering eight. He praised the contribution made by Preece and Hall to the medical work, noting that 'the difficulties in the way of employing women nurses were great' but that Miss Preece had succeeded in gaining a Government diploma for nurses she trained. 'The school [at St Andrew's] was now one of the best training establishments for nurses in the country and her candidates had conspicuous success in examinations.'⁹

In May 1936 Preece wrote of the extreme poverty and hardship caused by a drought followed by three days of torrential rain. Houses which were built of sun-dried bricks collapsed and the hospital leaked everywhere. There was an appalling amount of illness caused by poverty resulting in dirt, poor accommodation and poor nutrition. Ignorance, superstition and neglect all contributed to a high mortality rate, particularly in childbirth. The hospital was almost empty because roads were impassable, banditry deterred people from leaving their homes, and many could not afford to pay 40 cents per day – about 18 pence in NZ currency. The diocese gave 300 dollars annually for medical work, but this was not enough and although some free treatment was given the hospital could not afford to treat many patients without payment. Treatment was given to a large number of opium addicts as the government had adopted stringent

measures including execution of traffickers and addicts.

Between 1936 and 1937 Hokien was captured by the Japanese, retaken by the Chinese, then lost again, and was bombed several times. Preece wrote to a friend In October 1937 that she doubted if she would get leave in 1938-9 as there was no-one to replace her. She wrote of 'poor China', plunged unwillingly into war. 'Tientsin has been smashed up, and both it and Peking are cut off from the rest of the world... We have had no news here for a fortnight but, fortunately, we have a wireless, and so get news from Nanking, and know more or less what is happening.' Broadcasts were however sabotaged by the enemy and 'the aggression and insult to which China is subjected is more than my rebelling spirit could stand.....Our compounds are riddled with rabbit warren-like places to run to in time of air raids. At two corners flies the Red Cross and two other corners support the Union Jack'. The Chinese were hoping for peace but 'How it will all end who knows'.¹⁰

Hokien was in the line of the Japanese advance in 1938. The SPG hospitals at Hokien and Ch'i Chou were full of refugees and the wounded, and hard pressed for supplies. McDouall wrote from Peking that Hokien had been bombed but without direct hit on the hospital or Church compound. 'Miss Preece did brilliantly in holding all the staff at their jobs when unreasoning terror was sweeping the Chinese population into blind flight'.¹¹

Towards the end of 1939 Preece returned to New Zealand. She had not been back for twelve years and was on sick leave following a breakdown in health caused by work and stress. At times the hospital of 68 beds and 22 nurses had had to provide for as many as 200 wounded soldiers in addition to civilian patients.¹² The political situation in China was very unstable and early in 1940 she and her colleague Sister Dawes were cabled by the bishop who extended their

furlough by six months. The SPG 'released' its two mission hospitals from work and Preece and Dawes from service. They hoped to return to China for some other form of work and in the meantime did deputation work. For some time they were in attendance at the Missionary Court at the Centennial Exhibition in Wellington. ¹³ Preece spoke about her work at a number of meetings, recounting how in a city of approximately 20,000 people St Andrew's was the only hospital and she was the only British person in the district, also the only English speaker.

By August 1940 Preece and Dawes were on their way back, recalled by the bishop. Unable to return to Hokien, Preece went to St Barnabas' Hospital in Anguo, Hebei Province. ¹⁴ Situated just outside the city and about a mile from the nearest village, it was between the city occupied by the Japanese and villages ruled by guerrillas. According to Preece there were some 'very unpleasant incidents' as opponents from the two sides met. The hospital was operating as an outpatient/dressing station only as all the wards were closed. The only doctor had been kidnapped by guerrillas. Preece and another sister were assisted by three untrained nurses. Women patients greatly outnumbered men. Kala-azar or black fever, caused by an infection from sand fly bites which affected the internal organs, was common. Although it generally responded quickly to treatment if left untreated it was usually fatal. Serious cases of any kind needed to go 40-50 miles to the nearest hospital or about 140 miles to Peking. Such travel was often impossible as patients needed a travel pass which took days and much red tape to obtain so they usually went home to die. Women were freer than men to move about as long as they were not from a 'wanted' family and were often seen driving the family cart, taking husband, sons, and other family members to the hospital.

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Hokien hospital was about to re-open towards the end of 1940 and Preece was actually on her way there when she was recalled to Peking by the bishop. At the last minute the Japanese had refused to allow the re-opening. After that there was no news for two years. Presumably Preece was nursing in one of the hospitals in Peking but much of the world was now embroiled in war and communications were difficult.

After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour in early December 1941, they were at war with the Allies and having captured a great deal of British territory in South East Asia proceeded to intern civilians of these enemy nations. From early 1942 to the end of the war in 1945 over 9,000 civilians, mostly British, were held in makeshift camps. Civilian internees were not treated as harshly as prisoners of war: the Japanese aim was to keep them in reasonable health for the lowest possible cost.

In October 1942 the General Secretary of the New Zealand Anglican Board of Missions received a cable with news of missionaries in China. Six had been repatriated to England but Preece and three others were still in China, reportedly 'well and not interned'.¹⁶ Soon after this Preece, who was with other SPG missionaries in Shanghai, was interned, held first at the Civil Assembly Centre, Columbia Country Club, Shanghai, and later moved with others to Weihsien Civil Assembly Centre.¹⁷ The camp had 1, 800 occupants, men, women and children. Among them were the bishop and all the staff of the North China diocese. Families were allocated one room while single people slept in dormitories of 10-12. Having been allowed to take some luggage and bedding they mostly had enough warm clothing. Internal administration and the work of the camp such as cooking, cleaning, carrying water, building and stoking fires, digging trenches, disposing of rubbish, cleaning latrines, and so on, was done by the internees. The Japanese guarded the camp and provided some basic food: flour, some meat, some vegetables.

Meals were eaten together in three large dining halls, each person providing their own china and cutlery. The internees organised food distribution, medical care, sanitation, education and entertainment. There were teachers for the children and for adult classes, medical care provided by doctors and nurses, worship services including a daily eucharist for Anglicans. While the conditions were far from ideal the worst difficulties were the monotony, physical weariness, and uncertainty and anxiety about the future.

In December 1944 the British Foreign Office in London arranged to pay through the Red Cross a monthly sum of 10 pounds to each member of the SPG interned in China. Some news trickled through in Red Cross letters but none that we know of from Preece. In general, the letters suggested that all were reasonably well and 'steadfast in cheerfulness and courage'.¹⁸

Weihsien internment camp was liberated by American troops in August 1945. In December that year Preece was among 15 internees liberated from camps in Canton and Shanghai who arrived at Whenuapai, having travelled from China to Perth by ship and then flown to Sydney to connect with a plane to New Zealand.¹⁹

Early in 1947 Preece was still recuperating after her experiences during internment but was hoping to return to China. It is not known just when she did return but in February 1948, she wrote a cheerful letter to her sister. She was at Mosse Memorial Hospital, Tatung,²⁰ working with young male nurses in the men's wards and also training girls for work in the women's wards. Many of the patients were opium addicts. Medical supplies she took back had arrived safely thanks to CORSO which had also sent some clothing and tinned food. It was 'an anxious uncertain time'.²¹

In another letter from Mosse Memorial Hospital Preece reported that with her was fellow New Zealander Kathleen Porter. As the Communist

forces advanced, staff at the hospital, situated outside the city, were ordered into the city but had nowhere to go till a place was found with the Swedish branch of the China Inland Mission. There was however no transport till the next day as everyone was scrambling to get inside. The nurses were reluctant to leave their patients but had no choice. Life in the city was a 'bewildering and terrifying experience,' eight weeks without communications from outside. The situation improved when the Government troops won control. The three European nurses had opened an outpatient clinic and were looking hopefully to the future.²²

Sister Porter wrote that they had been having a fairly lean time. 'Patients were few, expenses heavy....[They] cut off the steam heating so no running water and all the sterilizers out of action.' They gave up using kerosene lamps as the cost was far above their means, using instead little dishes of oil with cotton wool wicks. There was a petrol lamp in the operating theatre, but they usually ended up using torches and oil lamps.²³

Missionaries hoped their medical work might survive in spite of increasing difficulties. Mosse Memorial Hospital closed in early 1948, and then re-opened in June, reflecting the changing political situation. Feeding of staff and patients, payment of staff, supplies of drugs, dressings and equipment were all immensely difficult. In August 1950 it was reported that the hospital at Ta Tung was carrying on nobly, with Preece and Porter hard at work.²⁴

After a period of great stress and strain in North China, by November 1950 the 'New People's Government' was firmly established and for the

first time since 1937 the situation was reasonably peaceful. In spite of an official policy of religious freedom the movements of mission workers were severely restricted. Following the outbreak of the war in Korea, which exacerbated hostility toward Westerners, the SPG decided to withdraw all its non-Chinese workers.²⁵

Preece and two others returned to New Zealand during 1951.²⁶ Preece was placed on the retired list and given a pension. It was reported that she would live in Auckland [probably with a sister] but in fact she went to work for the Maori Mission in the diocese of Waiapu. In 1954 she was appointed Superintendent of the Manutuke Mission House, situated near the Toko Toru Topu church not far from Gisborne. She was absent, possibly for health reasons, in 1955 and was welcomed back 'in harness' by the bishop in 1956. For the next five years she was responsible for a number of Sunday Schools and Bible classes in schools and was active in the Mothers' Union. In 1957 she was a delegate representing Maori women at the Mothers' Union Dominion Conference in Wellington. From August to December 1959, she was absent on sick leave, then retired in 1960. She was seventy-five years old. A few years later, in 1967, she donated five Chinese artefacts to the Hawke's Bay Museums Trust Collection. The acquisitions records state that she obtained these while serving as a missionary in China and that they had allegedly been removed from the Peking Palace during the Boxer Rebellion.²⁷

Eunice Preece died in Selwyn Village, Auckland, on 22 February 1969. At the age of eighty-three her life of service had ended.

Endnotes

¹ Western missionary nurses introduced modern nursing into China and laid the foundations for its development. See Jiang Yuhong, 'Shaping modern nursing development in China before 1949', *International Journal of Nursing Sciences*, 4:1 (2016).

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- ² Gilfillan, an Englishman, and McDouall, a New Zealander, both joined the SPG in England.
- ³ There are many spellings of this: Ho-kien (Fou), Hochien. It is now Hejian, in the eastern Hebei Province.
- ⁴ Muslims formed a significant minority population in China and are still present in Hebei province today.
- ⁵ In keeping with Chinese cultural norms women and men were segregated.
- ⁶ *Kai Tiaki: the Journal of the Nurses of New Zealand*, October 1928, p.189.
- ⁷ *The Reaper*, July 1929.
- ⁸ *Waipau Church Gazette*, December 1933, pp.9-10.
- ⁹ *Evening Post*, 14 May 1935.
- ¹⁰ *The Reaper*, May 1936.
- ¹¹ *The Reaper*, February 1938.
- ¹² *Waipawa Mail*, 6 October 1939.
- ¹³ The Centennial Exhibition ran from November 1939 to May 1940.
- ¹⁴ This hospital had been established by the SPG in 1927, with Kathleen Hall as organizer and administrator. Now known as Anguo Hospital it is a large and flourishing hospital with a strong tradition of Chinese Traditional Medicine.
- ¹⁵ *The Reaper*, February 1942.
- ¹⁶ *The Press*, 21 October 1942.
- ¹⁷ Chatterton, J. H., *Protestant Medical Missionary Experience during the war in China 1927-1945: the case of Hubei Province*, <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk>, sighted 14.09.2020
- ¹⁸ *The Reaper*, December 1944.
- ¹⁹ *New Zealand Herald*, 17 December 1945.
- ²⁰ This hospital was established as its largest hospital by the SPG in 1923. It was a memorial to the Rev. E H. Mosse, of St Paul's, Covent Garden, who was killed in an air raid in London in 1918. Tatung, now Datong, is situated in Shanxi Province, near the Mongolian border.
- ²¹ *The Reaper*, June 1948
- ²² *The Reaper*, August 1948.
- ²³ *The Reaper*, July 1948.
- ²⁴ *The Reaper*, August 1950.
- ²⁵ *The Reaper*, November 1950.
- ²⁶ By 1953 all foreign missionaries had been expelled by the Chinese government.
- ²⁷ www.mgthawkesbay.com/home/article/94/slippers-symbolise-dark-history, sighted 12.03 22.