

*Letters from Chefoo: Constance Douthwaite's Life in China 1887-1896*. Sheila McClure, Ed. Little Knoll Press, 2019. [www.littleknollpress.com](http://www.littleknollpress.com) £20.00 plus p & p. v plus 316 pp, numerous b/w ill. [ISBN 978-1-9164846-0-3]

This remarkable book comprises a selection of the letters that Constance Douthwaite (née Groves), wrote weekly to her family in Bristol from Chefoo, China, where she was a missionary from 1887 to 1896. Sheila McClure, her great granddaughter, has edited the collection and supplied a very informative commentary on Constance's life and its contrasting contexts in Bristol and China, together with notably well-reproduced photographs. The book provides a vivid account of the personal and inner life of a young Bristolian struggling to come to terms with the challenging and often alien Chinese scene of the time.

Constance Groves was born in 1867 in Bristol. Her parents were members of the Open Brethren evangelical movement in Bristol, then under the dominant influence of the philanthropist and social campaigner George Müller. Constance and her sister Irene were educated at Duncan House School, founded by the Brethren in Clifton. McClure stresses how important was the Brethren 'Bethesda' community in Bristol, and its links to national networks of families and friends, in fostering its brand of biblical faith and social activism – with support for overseas missions high on its agenda. The later 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a new wave of Protestant missionary energy, much of it directed at China: the China Inland Mission (CIM) founded in 1865 by J. Hudson Taylor, soon became the largest Protestant missionary body in the world. Taylor was a close friend of George Müller, which heightened the missionary interest of the Bristol Brethren and their financial support of the CIM in particular, a commitment exemplified by Constance's businessman father Edward Groves. In 1887, aged just 19, Constance set sail to serve with the CIM, with very little preparatory training beyond prescribed courses of Bible study, some volunteer nursing service at Bristol Royal Infirmary, and Chinese language tuition begun on voyage. Her assigned location was Chefoo, the largely British-run settlement on the Shandong coast north of Shanghai, where the CIM had a school for missionaries' children and a large and expanding medical work supervised by Arthur Douthwaite, a surgeon of established and growing repute. Constance was first attached to two missionaries she had met in England, Charles and Elizabeth Judd, to

act as governess for their two children and to assist Elizabeth Judd in evangelism among Chinese women.

After two years Constance in a fraught state of mind returned to England. Before leaving for China she had entered an engagement which was now boding ill, and she had fallen in love with Arthur Douthwaite in Chefoo, whose first wife had died in 1887. The engagement broken off, she returned to Chefoo and married Douthwaite. Her remaining seven years of life were spent assisting her husband and bringing up their children: the first, a girl, lived barely a month; the two girls Pearl and Isabel survived, as did the son Harry, after whose birth in 1897 Constance herself died within days.

The letters relate vividly the major and minor perils and discomforts of sea-travel in the steam age, Constance's excitement at new and strange customs, food and dress, and the natural beauty she found in and around Chefoo. But even for the young probationer missionary there was also hard work, not only in caring for the Judd children but other missionaries too. Poverty, famine, opium addiction, cholera and dysentery were rife in China, and Constance was grateful for whatever she had learned at the Bristol Royal Infirmary. Always, too, during these years there was lurking unrest among the Chinese population, which sporadically led to violence, not to mention the 1894-95 Sino-Japanese war which all but engulfed Chefoo and piled extra burdens on the already over-worked Arthur Douthwaite, who performed outstanding work for countless Chinese casualties and was willing to treat wounded Japanese too. Constance writes: 'Arthur is still busy with his soldier patients, though they have decreased to about thirty. He is trying to get the Chinese carpenter to manufacture some wooden legs for the poor maimed creatures.' Living with uncertainty was the order of the day, as refugees from Korea and Manchuria were added to the already destitute local Chinese. 'We wonder sometimes what the next six months may bring forth, but all speculation is disturbing so I try to leave it and trust in the Lord with all my heart so that I may be safe from fear of evil.' But no pietistic excess emerges. Candour, honesty and humour prevail.

As well as conveying the preoccupations of motherhood, and reactions to news from Bristol, the letters and commentary note questions which were arising in the evangelical world. In Chefoo Arthur Douthwaite was querying aspects of Hudson Taylor's CIM recruiting policy, while in Bristol Edward Groves sat increasingly uneasy with the Brethren

ethos and George Müller's style of leadership. Movements founded in evangelical fervour were becoming large and quite complex organisations having to attune to a changing world.

Constance's own direct contact with the Chinese became largely limited to her household servants, so occupied was she with her two young girls, acting as hostess to the ceaseless trail of missionaries passing through Chefoo, and supporting her husband and his hospital work in whatever ways she could. One catches hints of wistfulness as she congratulates her sister on her preaching ministry in and around Hawkesbury Upton in Gloucestershire. There was certainly a constant inner struggle between her devotion to Chefoo, and the all-consuming love for her parents and home in Redland Park - even the familiar walk along Whiteladies Road from Clifton Down railway station. In the end, life became a sheer struggle to survive, as ill-health advanced inexorably. In June 1895 she longs 'to get rid of this dragging weariness, which I have so often now.' Death answered that longing the following year. Arthur Douthwaite, succumbing to dysentery, followed her three years later.

As one born to CIM missionaries in China nearly fifty years after Constance's death (my parents knew well several of the longer-lived personalities featured) I welcome this poignant testimony to the physical and emotional costs of the enterprise. It paved the way for the following missionary generations and is still appreciated and cherished by the church in China. It is well worth reading by any who wish to know more of what 'intercultural encounter' meant for late Victorian Bristolians who, according to their faith and their lights, in a far-off country gave utterly of themselves to those suffering disease, war, oppression, and neglect.

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