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Acocella/Mission to Siam

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Jessie Hartzell arrived in Siam as the wife of a Presbyterian missionary, Jacob Lott Hartzell, in 1912. At that time, Siam was thoroughly integrated under a single monarch, and improbably independent despite the long-standing territorial ambitions of both French and English colonialists. King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910) had died two years previously. The socially conservative but politically modern Vajiravudh was now ensconced as king, surrounded by an arch-nationalist elite but eager for the recognition of European powers.

The northern region to which Jessie and Lott were assigned was no longer a complex of independent principalities (referred to locally as muang) but formed a strategically important territory within the new nation-state. Its residents were not only still accommodating themselves to the demands of the new polity, including changes in inheritance law and new forms of taxation, but they were suffering in the wake of a virulent malarial epidemic. To make matters worse, smallpox plagued them, both diseases having been further diffused and intensified by the building of roads and railways into the hinterlands.

Jessie left the country in 1928, four short years before the absolute monarchy would be toppled by proto-socialists, only to be restored as rightist elements assumed ascendancy throughout East and Southeast Asia. She witnessed, and participated in, a period of relentless tumult and transformation, and for sixteen years she wrote letters and made notes to herself about what she observed. Her remarkable, posthumously edited memoir casts unexpected new light on a period that was beset by internal contradictions and ambivalent relations with both Eastern and Western powers, a period that was absolutely determinant of future history.
An energetic and ambitious young woman, Jessie joined an expanding community of missionaries who were, it seemed, finally poised to reap the rewards of patience and hard labor. The Presbyterian mission had been established in Siam in 1840, but it suffered fitfully until 1851, when King Mongkut (Vajiravudh’s grandfather, r. 1851–1868) ascended the throne and reversed the previous monarch’s policies of suspicion and containment. Mongkut initially also believed that the missionaries were inimical to his rule. In a famous episode, he accused them of complicity with an unsympathetic press story in Singapore, one that described him (falsely, by his account) of unfairly restricting the movements of foreigners. The conflict became a matter of international concern, and rumors of oppression spread wildly through the English-language newspapers, but with the coerced signing of the Bowring Treaty, which gave Britain access to Thailand’s markets in 1855, and with Sir John Bowring’s personal interventions on behalf of the Americans, the missionaries’ fortunes began to turn. In 1858 the Reverends Daniel McGilvary and Jonathan Wilson arrived with their families to establish another new mission, which would become the Siam Presbytery. In 1861 they were joined by Samuel McFarland, and, shortly thereafter, the project of the northern missions was born. McFarland would play a crucial role in the modernization of Siamese education, establishing its first English-language school under the name of Suan Anand. McGilvary would become the patriarch of the northern mission, leaving behind an extraordinarily rich account of missionary life and an incomparable documentary history of early modernity in the north of the country. Utterly identified with the northern mission, and remembered as a hero of moderation and judiciousness, he died a year before Jessie appeared in Chiang Mai.

Such was the milieu into which Jessie inserted herself. At the end of their arduous journey, she and Lott encountered a world that appeared almost as exotic to the Siamese of Bangkok as it did to the eager young woman from Nova Scotia. For many people in Bangkok and the Central Plains of Thailand, Lampang, Phrae, Nan, and Chiang Mai—the cities to which Jessie would travel in her pur-
suit of adventure, medical experience, and opportunities for service—were cities of another world. It was a world to which they often referred with a combination of wonder and contempt, using the somewhat pejorative moniker “Lao” to express their sense of the territory’s and the people’s foreignness.

In the years that followed, the years onto which Jessie’s memoir casts its revealing light, Northern Thailand would be transformed by the forces of modernity. The “new world order” of that era arrived in the threat of conquest by British Burma and in the tariff wars over the teak that grew in the upland forests. It announced itself in the commercialization of rice production and in the incipient capitalization of the textile economy. Indeed, it seeped into every aspect of local life: overtly in the fabulous commodities that arrived in local markets from Europe and its colonies, and covertly in the practices of census-taking and in the new conceptions and divisions of territory on which the state bureaucracy was being erected.

The principalities of the North had, in fact, only recently been integrated into the newly bounded kingdom of Siam. In earlier times, these semiautonomous polities had made triennial gifts of tribute to the Siamese capital and to the centers of other imperial orders—an arrangement that allowed them to have multiple and overlapping commitments to powers that were otherwise opposed to each other. But in a world divided between commoners, debt slaves, and nobles, most individuals lived their lives within the narrower compass commanded by local aristocracies.

There have been many sentimental accounts of how the patronage relations that structured Northern Thai and other Southeast Asian lives created bonds of putatively mutual benefit. The matter was more complex and more uneven than that, however. Before the eighteenth century, populations were extremely unstable, shrinking and expanding along with the military fortunes of the city-principalities and their rulers (whom Jessie correctly identifies as *caos* in Northern Thai). The areas into which the Presbyterian missionaries first went were ones dominated by an economy still marked by violent magnanimity, where local power brokers enforced their rule by promising
protection in return for loyalty, and by threatening injury or exile if fealty was not forthcoming. In this volatile milieu, the dominant religion, Theravada Buddhism, offered cosmological explanation, a philosophy of impermanence, and an ethics of detachment. It also provided the more complex satisfactions of practical intervention: techniques for moving upward in the cycle of rebirth that included meditation and alms-giving. Yet, in Northern Thailand, as in most places, Buddhism was never observed in its most ideal forms, and the existential crises of everyday life were often addressed with more immediate tactics and were attributed to spiritual forces. Thus, although Buddhism, and especially the reformist Buddhism of King Mongkut, eschewed spirit worship, many people maintained a fierce loyalty to the hidden powers that they believed inhabited the land and that they invoked in moments of both crisis and normalcy. The Christians recognized the tension between doctrinal Buddhism and ritualist practices as one that was particularly acute in moments of historical transition, and they believed that their alternatives were more appropriate to the demands of the time. In this respect, ironically, they became allies with the Siamese of Bangkok.

From the perspective of textually oriented Buddhists, the mythically northern devotion to local spirits could appear to be a bastardization of the more scholastically interpreted teachings of the Buddha. In fact, the modernization of Theravada Buddhism in Siam produced a vigorous discourse of anti-ritualism, and as Bangkok consolidated its authority over peripheral regions, these areas, especially the North, became associated, in the minds of the elite, with supernaturalism. In its turn, supernaturalism was read as an index of the primitive and infantile status of the outlying areas. Here, as elsewhere, rifts within the sangha (the Buddhist clergy and religious institutions) over both practical and philosophical matters often mapped themselves onto regional political differences.

Throughout the nineteenth century, these already complicated oppositions were mobilized and occasionally reinforced by European and American missionaries, traders, diplomats, and aspiring imperialists. The strange and seemingly accidental correspondences that
emerged between the ideas and practices of Bangkokian Siam and the West (if such a term can still be used) effectively redoubled centrist prejudices against Northern Thailand. The Christian churches often repeated the Siamese elite’s habit of imagining the North as an area in need of moral and practical guidance. In some cases, they actually became the instruments through which the central government’s ambitions were achieved. King Chulalongkorn, for example, not only supported the Christian missionaries with land grants and orders of protection but encouraged their settlement in upland cities, such as Lampang, for the express purpose of enlightening the local population. And when the central government ultimately determined to suppress local languages, including “Lao” (now called kam muang) in the interest of a more homogeneous national community, its legislation was published via the Mission press. Occasionally the political allegiance with Bangkok took more overt forms. When a rebellion erupted in 1902, and ethnic Shans took arms against the Siamese, the Presbyterian Church supported the Siamese. Such spasms of local resistance occurred repeatedly in the first decades of the century, and in numerous episodes the missionaries took the central government’s side. From their perspective, it was the side of progress. The Siamese government, for its part, tolerated the Christians and used them when convenience demanded, but it also opposed them on occasion. When the Presbyterians sought money for relief efforts following the malaria epidemic, the Siamese government refused, apparently concerned that such relief would provide too fertile a ground for conversions. Though it wanted hospitals, schools, and modern transportation, the administration—indeed, the entire power structure—was inextricably bound up with Buddhism. Conversion, though tolerated, was decidedly undesired.

This, then, is the world that Jessie’s memoir depicts: a space of unsettled politics and physical desperation through which circulated rumors that the American Christians possessed limitless powers against disease and a ruthless willingness to use that power in the battle over souls. Jessie encountered these conflicts in mundane as well as dramatic ways, and most especially in the demands for
affiliation that were made of her, in turn, by both Northerners and Southerners. In a telling episode, she recounts how shopkeepers in Bangkok mocked her “rude” northern “accent.” Here, Jessie conveys the chasm of cultural value that separated North and South Siam. But it was also on occasions like this that she and her missionary colleagues evidenced their deepest commitment to the value of locality, sometimes unwittingly opposing that of national integration. One mark of that commitment was the Northern missionaries’ dedicated study of the local language, *kam muang.* From the very opening pages of her memoir, Jessie exhibits these ambivalences of the missionary’s position, and her devotion to the language of the area is relayed with each tale of excited learning and fatigued but persistent study. In the tradition of post-Reformation Protestantism, the American Presbyterians were insistent advocates of indigenous language instruction, and it was a domain in which they excelled—one of few, it turns out, for the Presbyterians produced fewer lasting results, and far less enduring conversions, than did the Baptist missions in Karen Burma or the Catholic missions in French Indochina.

The Presbyterian missionaries themselves were in an ambivalent position, as Jessie makes poignantly clear. They went bravely into remote areas, where malaria and other diseases were rife, to establish churches, schools, and hospitals. They planned to hand over the operation of these institutions to new Christians. But in the end, the missionaries could not, or would not, relinquish the kinds of knowledge and the decision-making authority that would allow converts to become the masters of their own churches. The training they offered to Northern Thai subjects was vocational in orientation, instrumental in intention. It did not, in general, produce theological erudition or mature leadership, though there were notable exceptions. Often, it seems, the missionaries distrusted the profundity of the conversion—we see Jessie worry about this in her remarks on “rice Christians”—and therefore would not surrender the reins.

The history of the northern missions gave reason for this suspicion, for the missionaries demanded that converts relinquish the worship of ancestral spirits. Those spirits were deemed the guard-
ians of matrilineal property and the beings from whom permission
to marry was obtained. Hence the missionary commandment effec-
tively entailed a complete severance from social relations of a non-
Christian sort. Even Daniel McGilvary, one of the church’s most re-
vered patriarchs, admitted, at the end of his career, that the failure of
the Christians to recognize the social centrality of spirits in Northern
Thailand hindered conversion. Disconnection from familial com-
munities was not the only negative incentive against conversion,
however. As Jessie recounts, the failure of converts to maintain obli-
gations to the spirits was sometimes taken as evidence of witchcraft,
or at least evil intention. Those who were suspected of this malevo-
lence could be accused by neighbors or family members and were
then subjected to an elaborate and sometimes physically violent ex-
namination by diviners. If the diviner found evidence of witchcraft,
then the body of the accused could be subject to therapeutic beatings
or other counter-magical procedures. Sometimes, the “treatment”
was barely distinguishable from revenge. More than one convert was
murdered, and the waves of witchcraft accusation that spread over
Northern Thailand during the early years of this century were per-
haps stimulated by the fact of conversions and the attendant defiance
of local authorities. Although Jessie seems to have been unaware
of the logic of witchcraft accusation, she was eminently familiar
with its passions and its excesses. The tale of Reverend McGilvary’s
murdered converts survives in her memoir, a little distorted but still
potent: an ur-story of failed correspondence and awful misunder-
standing told from the perspective of the missionary.

Even if punishment for witchcraft stopped short of murder, it of-
ten entailed loss of property (which was burned or confiscated). Occa-
sionally it involved exile. Desperate local strongmen clearly used
the atmosphere of generalized suspicion to rid themselves of poten-
tial critics and to marginalize those who, by virtue of their access to
cash, were accumulating monetary power to rival that of the wealth
obtained through corvée entitlements (labor-in-kind that all com-
moners owed to their protecting cao). In all probability, whole towns
were founded and others decimated in this moment of monetary
transformation, existential crisis, and mutual suspicion. When Jessie describes burned-out houses and vacant villages in her memoir, it is difficult to know—and perhaps the two overlapped—whether the wreckage she and Lott encountered was the residue of smallpox outbreaks (which were sometimes fought through hygienic arson) or witchcraft accusation.

Needless to say, the operations of witchcraft accusation threatened the missionaries as deeply as did any theological debates with the king. It was for this reason that the missionaries, led by McGilvary, attempted to intercede on behalf of their persecuted converts. Because the Siamese government was also invested in stability and because it was attempting to neutralize the local aristocracy, the missionaries succeeded in putting a stop to the theatrical practice (rather than mere gossip) of accusation. They secured an “Edict of Religious Tolerance” from the king, which provided legal, though not material, security. This was one of the first of many interventions that ultimately contributed to the rationalization of jural process and the marginalization of customary rule.

In truth, the conflict between the missionaries and the anti-Christians was not merely an ideological one, nor was it simply a matter of competition for souls. The missionaries paid their converts and offered stipends to students at the mission schools. They did not require conversion before they provided medical attention to the suffering, but they used the occasion of hospitalization to proselytize, as Jessie relates, and from that experience of corporeal salvation more than a few were moved to believe they had been spiritually saved as well. It was, however, through their institutional practices that the missionaries helped to convert the northern people to a market economy based on more generalized commodity relations. The wages they paid their employees and the cash with which they conducted their affairs entered into, and accelerated, the general trajectory of commercialization and capitalization that would ultimately overtake all of Siam.

These stories of historical transformation on the eve of modernity are not exclusive to Thailand. Throughout South and Southeast
Asia, in southern Africa, and in Latin America—wherever European economic imperialism was coupled with Christian missionization—one finds tales like these: of confused translations between cultural and monetary value, and of chance encounters that refract global processes and assume world-transforming proportions. Jessie’s memoir is full of references to the astonishing changes that were overwhelming people everywhere. The railway, the telephone, and the other devices of modern communication penetrate her world, and the world of Northern Thai subjects, with strange signals from afar: bearing bodies and ideas, respectively, on iron and electric lines. These technologies were utterly unprecedented in the communities that the Hartzells visited and in which they lived, and it is impossible to estimate the extent of the revolution that they facilitated. For this reason, then, it is occasionally disconcerting to encounter such advances in her text as utterly matter-of-fact, almost invisible occurrences. A certain disappearance of the historical horizon occurs in the memoir. Thus, for example, Jessie initially describes the news that the world was at war not as a cataclysm but as a telephone call. Only when German men (the same men who, along with the English teak barons, so recently made up part of the Hartzells’ expatriate community) are interned in Thailand on suspicion of sabotaging a train tunnel does the extent of the global war become legible. Yet if one sometimes feels that Jessie lacks a sense of the larger context, one needs to recall in such moments that the telephone itself was a startling intrusion. Jessie’s memoir inadvertently allows us to grasp that the impact of modernity and global geopolitics may be felt in the minutiae of everyday life as much as in the grand conflicts of the day. Indeed, part of the awe that accrued to the missionaries doubtless derived from their association with the magical devices that enabled them to communicate at a distance and traverse the globe several times within a single lifetime.

If, however, the modernization of Siam can be discerned in the institutional changes that the missionaries helped to facilitate, if it can be read in the infrastructural transformations of the landscape or the discursive reformations by which geography would displace
cosmology, it can also be seen in the new forms of gendered identity that Christian women like Jessie labored to encourage. Education, in general, was a recent and still underdeveloped part of the central government’s project. Until the latter days of the nineteenth century, education outside the monastery had been the prerogative of royalty and the nobility. In 1870 King Chulalongkorn had established a school for his siblings and the nobles in the Bodyguard Regiment of the Royal Pages Corps. Soon thereafter he pushed for instruction in Thai language rather than Pali (the language of Thai Theravada Buddhism) within the monasteries and oversaw the production of textbooks on which to ground a standardized national curriculum. Although initially well patronized, the schools quickly faltered until it became apparent that a burgeoning bureaucracy would require particular skills and that these could not be guaranteed by the mere fact of aristocratic lineage. A number of developments, including competition from Chinese language schools, provoked concern for a comparable educational initiative in the ethnically Thai community. It was to answer this need that the Thai government received the missionary schools with such welcome, and it was the joint venture with Samuel McFarland in particular that helped to turn the tide for education. The massive growth that followed these developments was concentrated in Bangkok and major urban centers, and it often fell to the missionaries to carry education into rural areas.

From the start, the Presbyterians had encouraged education for girls as well. Sophia McGilvary, Daniel’s wife, had started a girls’ school—something hitherto unheard of in Siam—in the same decade that McFarland had started his boys’ school. Beyond literacy and biblical instruction, the primary concerns of the girls’ schools were hygiene and home economics. Indeed, this model for feminine education has dominated colonial projects and neocolonial interventions—including those sponsored by development organizations—ever since. To a significant degree, the missionaries were pioneering something more profound than education for girls. They were pioneering what can rightly be called gender education: a pedagogy
based on the assumption that ideal femininity should take the form of middle-class domesticity and be guided by the values of cleanliness, charity, and domestic (which is to say unpaid) productivity. These were foreign values, and the middle-classness that the missionaries sought did not yet have a correlate in Siam. In many ways, of course, the education that girls and women received was of enormous utility. Basic training in health, in the treatment of malaria or the prevention of smallpox, and in water sanitation made the lives of mothers easier and meant that women would be less likely to suffer the grief of losing a child. Literacy opened universes. But in other regards the price of education was high. Before the advent of the missions, women in Northern Thailand had dominated the local market and exercised enormous control of household property—despite being politically disenfranchised and excluded from interregional trade. This is not to say that women enjoyed equal status with men; they clearly did not. But the relatively empowered standing of women in the north of Siam had been widely recognized ever since the first visitors to the area had begun recording their comparative observations. Some of that recognition also infuses Jessie’s sense of the place and motivates her deep respect for, and even identification with, the local women. But missionary education for girls and women did little to encourage those capacities that were historically the source of women’s political and domestic power. In the mission schools, girls learned to read, not to bargain; to obey the husband rather than to insist on knowledge of his doings. This isolated them and made them strangers in their own world, the objects of distrust and accusation.

Convinced of domesticity’s virtues, the mission continued such pedagogy for several decades. But in the early 1900s, the cause of women’s rights began to be felt even in church circles, and the missionary women also began to discuss and to organize around the question of “women’s work,” reimagining both missionary women’s roles and the scope of women’s education in general. In 1907 the Women’s Aid and Missionary Society was formed in Lampang, and in 1915, just three years after Jessie’s arrival, the Women’s Guild of
the North Siam Mission was inaugurated. The guild’s policy state-
ment asked women of the mission, who had previously been treated
as mere wives of the missionaries, to train local women for the pur-
poses of evangelization. At last women were deemed adequate to the
demands of theology and pastoral leadership. This idea of women as
agents of the church rather than recipients of its beneficence marked
a significant shift in mission philosophy.

Jessie’s own personality marks her as both an exemplary figure in
this moment and something of an exception. In her own mind, she
was clearly as central as her husband in the operations of the mis-
sion. She had more stamina and tenacity than he did, and her prac-
tical skills seem to have far exceeded his. She was conscious of her
unique position as a medical caregiver, and though at times she cedes
authority to the doctors who shuttled between the missions and out-
lying Christian clinics, elsewhere she is clearly eager to take charge.
One senses in these pages an enormous ambition, tempered and dis-
ciplined by the requirements of the mission and by a true sense
of calling. One also senses a marvelously capable mind, and an emo-
tional fortitude that is anything but “ladylike.” Such were the pos-
sibilities and the requirements for independent women of Jessie’s
moment and circumstance.

The history of missionaries’ relationship to gender is everywhere
a complex one—fraught, ironic, and contradictory. Certainly this is
true in Jessie Hartzell’s case, and one cannot but mourn the ironies
of inadequate understanding that led a woman of such strength and
will to join forces with a project that, in the end, would partly
undermine the power of local women and produce a detour on the
path toward equality whose end is only now being imagined. In her
single-minded devotion to missionary work, in her pursuit of a life
in Northern Thailand, in her language training, her acquisition of
medical training, her furious and passionate life lived far from home
and children, Jessie was already a woman of extraordinary commit-
ment and achievement. It was certainly not just any woman who
took up the life of the missionary, and Jessie’s decisions—including,
perhaps, her marriage to Lott—seem to have been even more willful
and canny than most. That she was admitted to the Livingstone School of Tropical Medicine in London is nothing short of fantastic. That she persuaded the Presbyterian Mission Board to let her go is even more so. In the end, one marvels at the stories she tells of surgeries in ill-lit rooms, of treks through darkness over treacherous terrain to help a woman with a difficult birth, of the patient but ultimately failed nursing of a child suffering the ravages of malaria. Indeed, the memoir’s ultimate turn from missionary travelogue to medical reportage testifies to the depth of her devotion and the sincerity of her commitment to caregiving.

In the midst of all this, of course, there is hubris and self-aggrandizement as well. The very range of her writing, and the honest, if terse and understated (which is to say, typically Protestant), disclosure of her motives allow for a modulated reading. There is no easy resolution to the dilemma that confronts feminist historians when they take up the lives of women like Jessie. For if the training of local women in matters of health and hygiene proved to be a boon to them, and if access to cash sometimes liberated female Christian converts from the bonds of dependency and submission within patriarchal households, it also ruptured the fabrics of local societies and generated new forms of identity around which new and sometimes violent conflicts took place. Jessie achieved her own liberation in Thailand. She was devastated by the demand that she return, and disappointed at her husband’s failure to maintain himself there in her absence. In fact, the health problems that led to the exiles of both of them from missionary work in Thailand were commonplace. More than half of the missionaries in the North ultimately had to give up their posts for reasons of tropical disease, nervous exhaustion, or death. Many of them suffered guilt and a sense of failure as a result. Others, like Jessie, grieved that their bodies were not as sturdy as their desire and their sense of duty, and fantasized a return to the country where they had engineered new lives for themselves and for those whom they indoctrinated.

For their part, the missionaries were dictated to by a mission board run from New York that advised on such intimate matters as the
timing of childbirth and the needs of children, including (in Jessie’s case) the schedule on which children should be removed from their homes and sent to North America. The board transferred missionary staff between communities with little regard to their emotional or social needs, often refusing pleas for contrary assignments or longer residences in single communities. So irrefutable was the mission board that even a strong-willed woman like Jessie Hartzell found herself obliged to abide by the decisions that seemed to demand of her a broken heart. And still, she survived. Even more, she snatched enough time from her busy days to write—in a style that is direct and edifying—about her experiences and the people whose lives were transformed by hers.

How often the liberation of Western women is achieved in this dependent manner, on the backs of those who did not ask for their own salvation and who suffered political loss as a result of it, one cannot say, but it is surely not an unusual tale. In the matter of mission-ization, a collusion between patriarchies is more often the case than not. That there was real intimacy, devotion, even tenderness in the relations that Jessie developed with the men and women who attended the church, worked in her home, cooked her food, and helped her through childbirth cannot be refuted. That there were also doubt and suspicion directed at her seems equally probable. In the end, however, one can be relatively confident that more than one Northern Siamese woman found the ability to imagine herself differently through friendship shared with Jessie Hartzell.