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Fishers of Men: the missionary influence of an extended family in Central Africa

Pauline Summerton

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Pauline Summerton's book is a concise biography of Walter and Anna Fisher. By comparison with his colleagues F.S. Arnot and Dan Crawford, Fisher has been poorly served by biographers. Thus *Fishers of Men* is a very valuable contribution to our understanding of the lives and sacrifices of these pioneer missionaries in Africa. Summerton has based this account very largely on Walter Fisher's letters, and the journal of J.S. Darling—Anna's father—and she makes excellent use of these resources to give us a valuable and, at times, poignant insight on the immense cost of the Fishers' service.

Much of this cost came from the need for the Fishers to be absent from their children and each other for considerable periods. This aspect of missionary work, especially before the advent of easy travel, is often disregarded by works of biography. This book is particularly to be praised for its sensitive and able handling of a difficult issue. Missionaries' children have been deprived of contact with their parents, resulting in considerable bitterness and alienation. The return of the Fishers' children to Africa and, in some cases, to the mission field is unusual, and the attention given to the missionary activities of other members of the family adds a valuable dimension to this book.

Walter Fisher had been a gifted medical student, and he enthusiastically grasped the opportunity to commend the gospel by the practise of medicine. Summerton provides a very helpful discussion of the relationship between this work and missionary labour—an analysis more useful given the extent to which issues like this have arisen in relation to Brethren missionaries. Some of Fisher's medical exploits were remarkable—such as his experimental bone-graft on his son Singleton (pp.40-1). Fisher 'asked God to provide a dead baboon.' The operation was successful. Summerton also deals with the educational side of the Fishers' work, which provided initial contact

with the African villages. This work also led to the founding of Sakeji School, which allowed missionaries' children to be educated in Africa.

Perhaps the most valuable sections of *Fishers of Men* are those dealing with the Fishers' approach to evangelisation and missiology. Summerton provides a detailed account of the consistently evangelical focus of the Fishers' work. She also provides an interesting consideration of the tensions between mission stations and itinerant preaching, which beset many of the Brethren missionaries in Africa. Those who have read J.H. Brown's *Missionary in the Making* may, however, have reason to question her conclusion that the use of mission stations was unavoidable. Her discussion of the dynamics of the relationship between evangelisation and the imposition of western culture is of particular relevance to much current work on missionary activity. This section of the book is, therefore, most welcome, as is Summerton's conclusion that, insofar as it was possible, the Fishers sought to bring a 'culture-free' gospel to Africa.

There are a number of minor problems with this book, which it seems almost ungenerous to mention. While Summerton's first chapter provides a reliable overview of Brethren beliefs, it is unfortunate that she seems a little unsure as to their teaching on the imminence of the Rapture. To be fair some uncertainty is observable in the views of some of these early missionaries. However, given that Elizabeth Isichei gets this wrong in *A History of Christianity in Africa*, it seems regrettable that this chance to set the record straight has been missed. There is also a question mark over the conclusion (p.6) that Brethren missionary practise gave an 'impetus to the use of societies unconnected with denominations.' Nonetheless, this book is a significant and helpful contribution to an important area of study.

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