CHAPTER FOUR

THE MAKING OF A DOMESTIC ADVENTURER—
FRANS AUGUST LARSON, 1870–1957

Then a couple of fellows I knew said they were going to Stockholm as one of them had to return to the Army, he was in the service. I did not know anything about Stockholm except I had a married sister there. So one fine morning we 3 boarded a small steamer and went to Stockholm. We took a look at the city walking the streets up and down, then went to a café on the outskirts of the city to get something to eat and drink. At a table near to us were 3 fellows drinking and we noticed they were talking very loud, and after a few minutes 2 of them came over to our table and asked where we came from. I suppose we looked like outsiders. Then they said if we gave them some drink they would show us the city. We said we did not need them. One finally knocked my teacup over. I did not get angry but my newly trained muscles itched a bit. When he finally knocked down a chair I got him by the neck and the seat of his pants and threw him on the window. Whether I was a little too strong or the window too rotten or both, the whole window frame went with the man out on the street. I told my friends to scoot, put on my hat and walked out down the street. By that time several café people were out yelling for the police. I met one cop running and pointed over my shoulder and said, there is a fight at the café. When I got around the corner, I hurried on and jumped into a little steamboat that runs around in the bay of Stockholm. The boat was full of people talking and laughing and I felt safe and in good company.¹

Undoubtedly quite a few readers will be surprised to learn that this short narration is found in the manuscript autobiography of a former missionary, Frans August Larson, from 1892 until 1900 IMA/C&MA missionary in Northern China and Inner Mongolia, and from 1903 until 1913 representative of the BFBS in Mongolia. Although missionary biographies oft en contain instances of perilous experiences, and borrow narrative patterns from contemporary adventurer novels, expressions of violence (on the part of the missionary that is) and of robust masculinity, are rare to say the least. Frans August, however, in

his various attempts at self-writing, willingly explored his own physical manhood. In all likelihood he was not the only missionary who had had experiences of bar fights (particularly among those drawn from the environment of working-class adolescents), yet his decision to include this episode indicates that he abandoned the generic rules guarding missionary biography in order to include literary components that were much more likely to be found in pulp magazines. Yet, this story points not only at the blending of genres, but also at the various ways in which male identities could combine in the missionary world. In Frans August’s three books, all of which contain fragments of autobiography, the reader is confronted with a man of working-class origin, who got interested in missionary work and followed his calling to far-away lands. Once settled in Asia he combined his religious endeavours with adventures, diplomacy, gold mining, ranch life and lucrative business. This was a man who could wear several hats at the same time and make them all fit—or at least that is how he wanted it to appear. To be sure, Frans August Larson was a remarkable man who lived an unusual life—he was the self-made man par preference among Franson’s recruits.

Frans August’s career forces us to consider anew our own conception of the relationship between domestic missionary manhood and the type of manhood frequently to be found among Western explorers and adventurers. Many observers lacking an over-all commitment to Christian missions have been prone to presuppose a remarkable degree of conformity—sometimes without due consideration as to the possibilities of differences—between missionaries and other agents of Western expansion. Yet, when we look at the relationship between missionary men and other men entering colonial arenas towards the end of the nineteenth century, we may call into question the reasonableness of such an assumption. A decade ago British historian John Tosh argued that towards the end of the nineteenth century colonial arenas were seen as providing an escape for domesticated Western
