In 1934 Miss Liesching, a British missionary of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), described the district of Bulaq in Cairo as an extensive slum area, the most thickly populated, and the poorest in Cairo where infant mortality rates were extremely high. She said that crime and drug-trafficking constantly kept the police busy in this neighbourhood that was known as “The Devil’s University.” From a window in the CMS building the missionaries had a panoramic view of the slum area of Bulaq where most families lived in one room, the floor usually made of mud only, with no water supply and no sanitation. Water had to be fetched daily by the women from public taps, and it had to be paid for. Rubbish and dirty water were thrown into the streets, where they lay all day rotting and collecting masses of flies. In the houses that were lucky to possess an open mud oven for baking they left the rubbish to dry on the roof and then used it as fuel, and Miss Liesching said that the pestilent fly was then brought one stage closer to the family food and baby.

In her annual letters Miss Liesching said that ever since CMS came into this needy and neglected neighbourhood in 1923, they felt that something had to be done for their poverty stricken neighbours, and the female missionaries were particularly concerned with the welfare of mother and child. In 1927 the CMS established their second infant welfare centre in Cairo, and this was situated in Bulaq on the same preventive lines as the first and pioneering centre established in Old Cairo in 1921.

1 CMS G3 Annual Letters Marjorie C. Liesching, Bulaq, Cairo, 1926–1930.
2 Liesching, M. C. and S. A. Morrison, 1934.
The urban colonial landscape has for the most part been gendered male in much of the earlier historiography both on the Middle East and Africa. I want, as Jean Allman, Deborah Gaitskell and other historians have done on Africa,³ to devote my attention to the ways Victorian notions of domesticity and maternity were transplanted overseas, and my greatest concern is to study the meetings and relationships between European and local women.⁴ In this essay I want to explore the encounters between British missionary women and Egyptian mothers that attended the CMS Infant Welfare Centres, and attempt to probe some of the experiences of both givers and recipients of this British missionary project of modernising and improving mothering and children’s health in the Cairo slums.

Sources and Dilemmas

Missionary archives constitute the main sources used for this essay, and it is a rich material consisting of annual letters and reports, published articles and newsletters, official documents, pamphlets, photographs and documentary films produced by the missionaries. The CMS women wrote extensively, and they described and reflected about their work and to a certain extent about the responses they claimed were received directly and vocally from the mothers. In addition the women offered their own interpretations of the recipients’ actions and attitudes.

We must of course read the missionaries’ documents as expressions of how they perceived the locals, and we should consider the context of where, why and to whom these documents were written. Much of the missionary material was naturally aimed at readers back home in Britain and was intended to raise sympathy, curiosity and money for the missionary work. The dilemmas of representation of both the missionary lady and the ‘subject’ are many, as the local woman’s ‘voice’ in the material rarely is authentic. I do, however, not believe that dismissing the missionary narrative as fiction is an option. I rather seek to cross these dilemmas by using Hayden White’s depiction of writing history as an act of translation based on the historians’ questions, and Geoffrey

⁴ This is a preliminary study that is ongoing, and here I attempt to probe some research questions that will be explored further in my dissertation.