I. INTRODUCTION

The modern missionary movement commenced in Great Britain in the last decade of the 18th century. Three great missionary societies were founded during that decade, and began to plan for overseas work. The only earlier society which continued and expanded during this period was the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), founded in 1702. But the "foreign parts" were the colonies and dependencies of Great Britain, and the primary task of its agents was to serve British subjects living abroad, although measures "toward the conversion of the Natives" were not ruled out. However, it did not make exceptions to its geographical limitations (which is why the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, the SPCK, and not the SPG, took responsibility for the Danish missionary work in South India.)

The late 18th century was a time of great change in Britain, as in the rest of Europe. It is obviously impossible to discuss the changes in detail, but some aspects must be briefly mentioned. Underlying all other changes was the movement of very large numbers of the rural population into the towns and cities. Numbers increased so rapidly that there were in many places almost total breakdowns of the systems servicing urban dwellers. Even by the lower standards then prevailing, housing, education, medical care, spiritual care, aid for the aged

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and destitute, even burial grounds, were totally inadequate. The churches and chapels could not cope. "Nothing in the cities was equipped to cope".  

The churches of Great Britain, on the whole, rose to the challenge. From the 1790s onwards one can trace an immense number of charitable agencies, closely linked to churches where not officially sponsored, which attempted to help meet the immense social, spiritual and physical needs.  

At the same time, those who were entering the teaching and medical professions were becoming better prepared, and the beginning of training for what would later be called "social work" was being introduced. In the cases of teaching and social work the early institutions were closely linked to churches in the majority of cases, and this was also true of the training of women as nurses.  

While it is impossible here to go into details, one important feature of this Christian involvement in educational and social work was the part played by women at every level. The public faces of the charitable societies, as seen at the annual "May meetings", may have been male, but the actual work was largely done by women.  

Ladies of the prosperous classes were already accustomed to taking responsibility for the aid of those close to them -- the families of their servants and tenants, and in towns and cities, for assisting the clergy in aid to the deserving poor. In this period the vision of many was widened, and they began to help in much broader circles. Much work was actually performed by ladies themselves; where this was impossible they employed others, helping to train them and supervising them. So women from less advantaged classes became directly involved in charitable work and were often helped to increase their skills as well.  

The names of a few of the women involved in this social work have been preserved for us. Elizabeth Fry, best known for her work with female prisoners, started Nightly Shelters for the Homeless Poor in 1819. She also, in 1813, started a servants' benevolent society. Baroness Burdett-Coutts worked with Lord Shaftesbury in enterprises like the Needlewomen's Institute. There were hundreds, thousands, of other women whose names are no longer remembered.  

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2 Owen Chadwick, The Victorian Church (Oxford History of the Christian Church), 325.  
3 See Kathleen Heasman, Evangelicals in action: an appraisal of their social work in the Victorian era. London: Geoffrey Bles 1962. One should, however, note that a number of societies were begun in the 18th century, especially those relating to the education of poor children and care of the sick. But from the end of the century the number of societies increased markedly and became increasingly specialised. Heasman, 8-9.