

DOROTHY CAREY:

**THE TRAGIC AND UNTOLD STORY OF
MRS. WILLIAM CAREY**

BY JAMES R. BECK

Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, c1992, 254p., \$13.99, pbk.

Reviewed by Dr. Thomas Dow, president of Emmanuel Bible College, Kitchener, Ontario

The Christian world recently celebrated the 200th anniversary of the founding of modern Protestant missions. Credit has been deservedly given to William Carey for spearheading this noble enterprise. Forty years of uninterrupted and distinguished service for Christ in India—utilizing great gifts in Bible translation, evangelism, publishing and education—easily earned him the right to be called the father of modern missions.

Standard biographies of Carey, such as those by Deaville Walker and J. B. Myers, allude to the great missionary's distress caused by the mental illness suffered by his wife, Dorothy, in the early years of their ministry in India. Several questions are left begging by these accounts. How early in the Careys' marriage did symptoms of Dorothy's mental stress emerge? Were the Careys so intellectually dissimilar as to make it impossible for Dorothy to be a fit partner for her husband in his determination to succeed in pioneer missionary service? Did the great work of Carey in India actually contribute to his wife's mental distress? Was there anything that could have been done by Carey or anyone else to prevent Dorothy's journey into madness? How can it be that so great a work as Carey's could be accompanied by so much suffering within his family?

James R. Beck of Denver Seminary seeks answers to these and other troubling questions in his biographical work, *Dorothy Carey: The Tragic and Untold Story of Mrs. William Carey*. Beck also seeks to use the insights gained from his research to address modern missiological practice and experience in the areas of the

psychological preparedness of missionaries and their continuing mental health concerns.

How well does Beck succeed in providing answers to the questions relating to Dorothy's developing psychosis and, in the process, providing us with a satisfactory psycho-biography of this misunderstood woman? Does this book offer constructive ideas for current mission organizational thinking? This reviewer would have to answer, "somewhat." The problem with writing a complete and comprehensive psycho-biography lies in the fact that there is simply not enough historical evidence to form a clear picture of Dorothy's personality at any point in her experience, and certainly not enough to produce a detailed or accurate psychological profile. So much of Beck's effort to understand Dorothy's ideas and motives adequately in order to identify and analyze her mental illness and its causes is thwarted by the fact there is just too little information in these areas to make this possible. What is left is a great deal of conjecture and surmising on Beck's part; often this takes the form of educated guessing, sympathetically deducing what might or must have been. We are reminded of Roland Bainton's caveat with regard to the attempts of historians to explain Martin Luther in terms of psychology: "There are, however, grave difficulties in psychoanalyzing the dead."

This is not to suggest for a moment there are no values to be gained by a study of this well-researched work. Beck has examined a tremendous amount of historical material, and as a historian he writes very well. Interesting photos and drawings of the Carey homes in England and India, and an extensive bibliography are very useful. Although much of the documentation is frustratingly lean with regard to assisting us in better understanding Dorothy's state of mind, many new facts are unearthed which give us a more detailed picture of William and his struggles, both familial and professional. For example, in an effort to show that the problem of mental illness was carried on in the Carey family through incidents in the life of son Felix, we learn more of the later experiences of this Carey boy than we do in any of the William biographies. In fact there is more information in Beck's work on all the Carey children than is available in any other single volume. One will come away from Beck's book with a much better understanding of the Careys as a complete family, and of the sympathies of the home board, especially those of Andrew Fuller, for the sufferings Carey went through with Dorothy. Details of the contemporary history of the Danish colonies Tranquebar and Serampore, the story of the granting of William Carey's honorary doctoral degree, and the statistics indicating the status of women in eighteenth century England are all chronicled here and serve

the history student well. All of this assists in contextualizing Dorothy's life, but it does not sufficiently contribute to a more adequate understanding of the heart and mind of Dorothy Carey. In spite of all efforts at rational explanation, the tragedy of her mental breakdown remains, with all of its pathetic mystery.

James Beck has tried to present enough evidence to remove the stigma attached to Dorothy Carey by writers in the past, and in this he has been successful. Dorothy has been presented by early biographers (Beck quotes many of these at length) as a stumbling block and millstone to the great William. Beck seeks to present her as a typical woman of her age and social class, a woman who possessed some exaggerated fears, a woman of very sheltered experience who was asked to take on the gargantuan task of being the partner of a workaholic genius. William Carey uprooted his family from all that was familiar and sought to settle them in one of the most unlikely and difficult (for an uneducated eighteenth century English peasant woman) cultures in the world. That Dorothy would face enormous difficulties in adjusting to all of this change was inevitable. The thesis that she failed to make the adjustment emotionally and ultimately, mentally, through no fault of her own, and that her husband seemed to be unable to help her through all of this because he just did not know what to do about it, is amply defended by Beck utilizing historical details unavailable elsewhere. Dorothy was a victim (perhaps a casualty) of the birth of modern missions. As one reads Beck, she emerges as a tragic heroine, who unwittingly gave her sanity, and ultimately her life, for Christ and His cause. She did, after all, accompany her husband to India and remained with him until the end of her increasingly unhappy life. We owe it to Beck for convincing us that, instead of history's censure, she is worthy of the Christian world's sympathetic gratitude.



Historical Perspective

A 10-days-only sale on a Christian Workers' Art Bible is advertised in a 1909 issue of the *Gospel Banner*. Its many attractive features are listed, as is the publisher's price of \$3.50.

The reduced price is \$1.63 + 25 postage, for a grand total of \$1.88. Too late for us, I'm afraid! The ad ends with the request "Please don't order this after May 9, 1909."

Gospel Banner

Vol. 32, No. 17

April 29, 1909, p. 15.

Is this book helpful to missiologists, mission executives or missionaries in general? It is here this reviewer had difficulty with Beck's style. He is a good history writer, and, apparently, a good psychologist. Trying to be both at the same time, trying to write an adequate historical biography and develop a useful case history, simultaneously applying the lessons of psychohistory to missions theory—all of this seems to stretch this book beyond the available historical evidence. Is Beck calling for greater sensitivity on the part of mission agencies in the area of psychological testing of candidates and psychosocial understanding of those on the field to avoid possible "Dorothy syndromes" in the future? This seems hardly necessary in the light of the sophistication in these areas practiced by responsible societies today. Is he raising the question of why God would allow anyone to suffer in this way, given the importance of their task in the light of the Great Commission? If so, the only answer can be that God's servants are no more immune to disease and suffering of any kind than are other human beings.

Here, perhaps, is the answer to the question of the major value of Beck's study of Dorothy Carey. We may never be able to answer all the hard questions with regard to the anomalies of Christian history (at the same time William Carey was baptizing his first Indian convert and his son Felix, his wife was forcefully confined to her room, raving with madness). But the chain of events leading to these ironic scenes must be described with integrity and historical accuracy. As a careful historian, Beck has done this, given the paucity of direct evidence with regard to Dorothy's inner world. Within these limits, he has added to the data provided by earlier writers. We read his account with increased sympathy and respect, and we read with tears, determined when finished that, anomalies notwithstanding, the grand enterprise we call world missions must advance and triumph.

Dorothy Carey's story deserves to be told. Beck has done this as well as any biographer possibly could. Having served as a thorough and thoughtful professional historian, Beck might better have engaged in his reflections regarding the psychotherapeutic and missiological implications of his work in books or articles dealing specifically and exclusively with these concerns, or at the very least have left readers to draw their own conclusions and make their own applications. That he has tried to do too much in *Dorothy Carey* somewhat limits an otherwise excellent book, which should be read by all who would profit from a study of the history of the Christian mission.